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ARTICLE

Women's Transnational Networks of Humanitarian Support in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s: Commission d'Aide aux Enfants Espagnols Réfugiés en France (CAEERF)

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This article contends that the humanitarianism that developed in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s and, in particular, because of the Spanish Civil War, was shaped by a transnational network that was fundamentally female. Within this network, women with diverse political experiences converged; however, suffragism, pacifism and anti-fascism occupied a central place. Humanitarianism became for them a favourable space from which to intervene politically. To demonstrate this, we focus on the CAEERF, an aid organisation formed in 1939 in response to the arrival of Spanish refugees in France. It was created, led by and composed mainly of women from different backgrounds. The first part of this article concerns anti-fascist and humanitarian women's networks that emerged during the Spanish Civil War. The second traces the journey of the British Quaker Edith Mary Pye, the driving force behind the CAEERF. The third and fourth parts discuss its creation and the work that it carried out on the ground.

Introduction: Transnational Humanitarianism in Gendered Perspective

Europe witnessed an unprecedented rise in transnational humanitarianism in the 1930s and 1940s, occasioned in no small part by the so-called refugee crisis. A crucial moment in this development was the Spanish Civil War and the resulting exile of hundreds of thousands of people in 1939. The conflict brought together women and men from very different backgrounds, all of whom resolved to assist the civilian population suffering the ravages of war and forced displacement. Many international aid organisations operated in Spain, whether belonging to the activist sphere of workers' internationalism, like the International Red Aid, or considered to be 'neutral', like the International Committee of the Red Cross or the humanitarian networks built by religious organisations.[1] Their activities are well known, and so are those of some of the organisations that emerged in France in response to the arrival of Spanish refugees, occasionally as a direct continuation of the earlier groups.[2] However, although the presence of women at the heart of these organisations was very significant, there are still few

[1]Farah Mendlesohn, *Quaker Relief Work in the Spanish Civil War* (Madison: Edwin Mellen Press, 2002); Gabriel Pretus, *Humanitarian Relief in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013); Laura Branciforte, *El Socorro Rojo Internacional en España (1923–1939): Relatos de la solidaridad antifascista* (Madrid: Biblioteca Nueva, 2011); Francisco Alía Miranda, *La otra cara de la guerra: Solidaridad y humanitarismo en la España republicana durante la guerra civil, 1936–1939* (Madrid: Sílex, 2020).

[2]Célia Keren, "Négocier l'aide humanitaire: Les évacuations d'enfants espagnols vers la France pendant la guerre civile (1936–1939)", *Revue d'histoire de l'enfance 'irrégulière': Le Temps de l'histoire* 15 (2013): 167–83; Aurelio Velázquez Hernández,

studies devoted to exploring this phenomenon from a gendered perspective, while simultaneously placing it within the international context to which it belongs.[3] Moreover, most studies on women's work in humanitarian aid, especially in the case of the Spanish Civil War and refugee aid, approach the subject from an individual perspective, focusing on the careers of certain women who are presented as exceptional.[4] Insisting on these individual trajectories as the privileged narrative of women's humanitarian intervention does not allow us to see that many of these women knew each other and were linked by previous militant and activist networks, often transnational.

In this article we develop a twofold hypothesis. On the one hand, we argue that women's involvement in humanitarian aid in the inter-war period, particularly in the crisis triggered by the Spanish Civil War, was partly based on earlier women's networks and was often the result of a collective strategy based on strong commitments to pacifism, feminism or anti-fascism. On the other hand, we argue that their humanitarian activism was a way of engaging politically in different contexts, both 'from above' with the authorities and 'from below' with those likely to receive aid. Our case study is an organisation, the CAEERF (Commission d'Aide aux Enfants Espagnols Réfugiés en France), that was formed in response to the humanitarian crisis occasioned by the arrival of almost half a million refugees in France during the Spanish Civil War, principally those who had fled from the advance of the Francoist army through Catalonia. The CAEERF was created at the initiative of a British Quaker woman, Edith Mary Pye, who had significant experience of transnational humanitarian work. Pye gathered around her women from diverse geographic origins, ideological leanings and religious beliefs. Indeed, the CAEERF would become an organisation composed of, managed and led by almost exclusively women.[5] It emerged from pre-existing suffragist, pacifist and anti-fascist networks created during the inter-war period and in the context of the Spanish Civil War.

Scholarship on the humanitarian support offered to Spanish refugees at the start of their exile in France is relatively new. It has largely concentrated on the aid provided by Spanish organisations themselves – mainly the Spanish Refugee Evacuation Service (Servicio de Evacuación de Refugiados Españoles; SERE) and the Board of Assistance to Spanish Republicans (Junta de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles; JARE) – as well as the International Committee of the Red Cross, and much more recently the work of Quaker organisations.[6] The work of the CAEERF is largely absent from such studies; when it does appear, it is treated as a marginal organisation. Nonetheless, analysis of the letters received by the organisation tells us that the CAEERF was at the centre of a relatively dense and complex web of organisations and individuals, and it can be seen as an extraordinarily effective means of transmission between distinct aid organisations operating on the ground. These primarily involved Quakers, the French authorities (whether several ministries, local mayors or prefects) and the exile organisations themselves, such as the SERE, with which the CAEERF collaborated extensively.

'El «Comité international de coordination et d'information pour l'aide à l'Espagne républicaine» (CICIAER) y la red frentepopulista de organismos de ayuda', *Pasado y memoria: Revista de historia contemporánea* 28 (2024): 89–114.

[3] Édouard Sill, ed., *¡Solidarias! L'engagement féminin international et l'action des étrangères dans la guerre d'Espagne* (Rennes: PUR, 2022); Allison Taillot, *Les intellectuelles européennes et la guerre d'Espagne: De l'engagement personnel à la défense de la République espagnole* (Nanterre: Presses Universitaires de Paris-Ouest, 2016).

[4] See for instance Angela Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War* (London: Routledge, 2002); Siân Roberts, *Place, Life Histories and the Politics of Relief: Episodes in the Life of Francesca Wilson, Humanitarian Educator Activist* (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 2010); Joy Damousi, 'Humanitarianism and Child Refugee Sponsorship: The Spanish Civil War and Esmee Odgers' in *The Humanitarians: Child War Refugees and Australian Humanitarianism in a Transnational World, 1919–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 85–107.

[5] It was created and run exclusively by women. We only know of two men, Domingo Ricart and Casimiro Mahou, as members of the working team.

[6] Aurelio Velázquez Hernandez, "La labor de solidaridad del gobierno de Negrín en el exilio: El SERE (1939–1940)", *Ayer* 97 (2015): 141–68; Luiza Iordache Cârstea, "The Humanitarian Aid of the Joint Relief Commission of the International Red Cross in France to the Civil Population: Children, Women and Internees (1940–1946)", *Culture & History Digital Journal* 8, no. 2 (2019): 59–73; Linda Palfreeman, "La ayuda cuáquera británica a los exiliados republicanos en los campos de concentración del sur de Francia (1939–1940)", *Dynamis* 40, no. 1 (2020): 23–47.

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It is now widely accepted that historians have not paid sufficient attention to the fact that many of the people involved in humanitarian initiatives – an increasingly professionalised activity from the end of the nineteenth century – were women. Our purpose is to reflect on the motivations and consequences of this female involvement from a gendered perspective in a period when 'structures and ideologies of gender largely excluded them from (or at least discriminated against them in) the sphere of politics'.[7] This involves questioning the frequently essentialised relationship between Western characteristics of femininity in the late nineteenth/early twentieth centuries (centred around virtues such as caring for others) and female participation in the birth of humanitarianism. Drawing from the work of scholars who have studied the social actions of European women from this perspective, this article contends that the participation of women in humanitarian work from the end of the nineteenth century until the Second World War is frequently linked to their emergence as modern social subjects. In certain cases, it is also linked to the struggle for female emancipation.[8]

After the end of the First World War, the inter-war period saw a reconfiguration of gender relations in most European countries, as well as the emergence of transnational women's and feminist organisations. With regard to women's activism, Leila Rupp has even spoken of this period as 'the high tide of internationalism'.[9] At both a national and international level, pacifism guided the actions of some of the most important women's organisations in the inter-war period, such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF).[10] Moreover, as Glenda Sluga has pointed out, in the inter-war period the newly created League of Nations was seen by many feminists as an opportunity to advance the feminist agenda and open up women's participation in global governance, in particular on issues concerning pacifism, the living conditions of women and children or the fight against human trafficking.[11] Delphine Diaz, among others, has proved the involvement of relevant French feminists in humanitarian relief since the First World War: from the winter of 1914 onwards, the feminist organisation National Council of French Women, chaired by Julie Puaux-Siegfried, carried out research among civilians and collected information on children separated from their parents as a result of the conflict and the exodus, playing a decisive role in the consideration of refugee children in wartime.[12] Indeed, two of the women who founded and led the CAEERF, Germaine Malaterre-Sellier and Edith Pye, had in common both the experience of caring during the First World War and suffragist activism.[13]

The growing presence of women in activities related to pacifism, solidarity or humanitarianism, which were traditionally associated with typically feminine characteristics, should thus be reimagined

[7]Esther Möller, Johannes Paulmann and Katharina Stornig, eds., *Gendering Global Humanitarianism in the Twentieth Century: Practice, Politics and the Power of Representation* (London: Springer Nature, 2020), 7–8. See also Dolores Martín-Moruno et al., "Feminist Perspectives on the History of Humanitarian Relief (1870–1945)", *Medicine, Conflict and Survival* 36, no. 1 (2020): 2–18; and the recent book, Dolores Martín-Moruno, *Beyond Compassion: Gender and Humanitarian Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

[8]Annemieke van Drenth and Francisca de Haan, *The Rise of Caring Power: Elizabeth Fry and Josephine Butler in Britain and the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999); Michelle A. Perkins, 'Between Public and Private: Women's Social Action in France from 1934 to 1944' (PhD diss., University of Southampton, 2008).

[9]Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of the International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 34. See also Ingrid Sharp and Matthew Stibbe, "Women's International Activism during the Inter-War Period, 1919–1939", *Women's History Review* 26, no. 2 (2017): 163–72; Marie Sandell, *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: Identity and Sisterhood Between the World Wars* (London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2012).

[10]Laura Beers, 'Feminism, Internationalism and the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom', *History and Policy* (2015), www.historyandpolicy.org/dialogues/discussions/women-peace-and-transnational-activism-a-century-on (last visited 24 Apr. 2024).

[11]Glenda Sluga, "Women, Feminisms, and Twentieth-Century Internationalisms", in *Internationalisms: A Twentieth-Century History*, ed. Glenda Sluga and Patricia Clavin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 68.

[12]Delphine Diaz, "Réunir les familles dispersées-Julie Puaux-Siegfried et la question des enfants réfugiés", *Rencontres* (2024): 395–409.

[13]Sandrine Wierzbicki, 'Germaine Malaterre Sellier: un destin aux croisées du féminisme et du pacifisme (1889–1967)' (Mémoire de maîtrise, Université Paris I, 2001).

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as an effective way of undertaking public action within the narrowly defined margins afforded to female activity in inter-war European societies.[14] This humanitarian activism complemented other actions more specifically aimed at pushing claims for women's rights, and as we will see, the same women frequently took part in both kinds of mobilisation. The significant involvement of women in solidarity with the Second Spanish Republic and their activities in relation to humanitarian support, both inside and outside of Spain, can thus be seen as a continuation of women's progressive involvement in public affairs, and in some cases as an alternative form of politicisation, which goes beyond ideology or membership of political organisations.[15]

The article is divided into four parts. The first concerns anti-fascist and humanitarian women's networks that emerged in response to the Spanish Civil War. The second traces the journey of the British Quaker Edith Mary Pye, the driving force behind the CAEERF, to uncover the suffragist, pacifist and anti-fascist roots of the organisation. The third and fourth parts discuss the creation of the CAEERF and the work it carried out on the ground respectively, paying special attention to the forms of political action: negotiating 'from above' to set the organisation in motion, and 'from below' in their day-to-day relationship with refugees, particularly women and children.

Women's Networks in the Spanish Civil War: Between Anti-Fascist Solidarity and Humanitarianism

The war in Spain – the first large-scale conflict on European soil since the First World War – served as a crucible where international solidarity movements, originating from various political organisations, converged. Often, these movements were linked to workers' anti-fascist movements, as well as a nascent humanitarian movement that was at this time in the process of becoming professionalised. Recent studies have suggested that women's presence in these anti-fascist and humanitarian organisations was considerable, to such an extent that historian Jim Fyrth refers to support for the Republican camp as a 'women's movement'.[16] Two women's groups stand out for the importance of their activity and their commitment to humanitarian aid to the Republican camp: the Quaker and the anti-fascist women, in particular those who took part in the international organisation Women against War and Fascism.[17] After the civil war, women from both groups were involved in CAEERF.

The rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s prompted a parallel rise of anti-fascism on an international scale, as exhibited by the formation of the World Committee against War and Fascism (Comité Mondial contre la Guerre et le Fascisme), also known as the Amsterdam–Pleyel movement, between 1932 and 1933. In 1934, this organisation founded a women's branch, the World Committee of Women Against War and Fascism (Comité Mondial des Femmes contre la Guerre et le Fascisme; CMF), commonly known as Rassemblement Mondial des Femmes.[18] This organisation was established by the Communist International (Comintern), but it brought together women from diverse political backgrounds. Its president was Gabrielle Duchêne, who was also president of the French

[14]Perkins, 'Between Public and Private'.

[15]Karine Bergès and Mercedes Yusta, "Introduction: Femmes et politique, le genre de l'engagement" in *Résistantes, militantes, citoyennes. L'engagement politique des femmes aux XXe et XXIe siècles*, ed. Karine Bergès et al. (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 7–15.

[16]Jim Fyrth and Sally Alexander, eds., *Women's Voices from the Spanish Civil War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1991), 14, cit. in Joy Damousi, *The Humanitarians: Child War Refugees and Australian Humanitarianism in a Transnational World, 1919–1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 87. See also Sill, *¡Solidarias!*; 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; Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*.

[17]Siân Roberts, "Quaker Women in Humanitarian and Social Action: Faith, Learning and the Authority of Experience" in *Everyday Welfare in Modern British History: Palgrave Studies in the History of Experience*, ed. C. Beaumont, E. Colpus and R. Davidson (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), 27–48; Sandra Blasco, "El Comité Mundial de Mujeres contra la Guerra y el Fascismo y sus relaciones con España", *Historia y Política* 51 (2024): 277–303.

[18]Jasmine Calver, *Anti-Fascism, Gender, and International Communism: The Comité Mondial des Femmes contre la Guerre et le Fascisme, 1934–1941* (London: Routledge, 2022).

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section of the WILPF, although the true driving force behind the organisation was the communist and syndicalist leader Bernadette Cattanéo. The organisation also included important feminist figures such as Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, who was a progressive Catholic feminist, the general secretary of the French Union for Women's Suffrage (Union Française pour le Suffrage des Femmes; UFSF) and a member of the Human Rights League (Ligue des Droits de l'Homme; LDH). She was also the only woman to form part of the French delegation to the League of Nations and would later become president of the CAEERF.[19]

The Spanish branch of the CMF held its first conference in July 1934. It was coordinated by women from the women's commission of the Spanish Communist Party (Partido Comunista de España; PCE) and led by Dolores Ibarruri (widely known as *La Pasionaria*). Like its French counterpart, it brought together women with diverse political viewpoints, united in their opposition to fascism.[20] The principal activities of these organisations included expressing solidarity with persecuted anti-fascists in different European countries and denouncing the rise of fascism, with special attention given to the situations in Germany, Italy, Austria and Abyssinia (now Ethiopia).

Spain appears on the map of transnational anti-fascist mobilisations from 1934 onwards, following the October revolution in Asturias and the repression that followed it. Although on a small scale, the Asturian revolution marked the first 'refugee crisis' in twentieth-century Spain and presaged certain dynamics that would be seen after 1936. It is here that we can pinpoint the origins of anti-fascist solidarity networks in both Spain and France, which primarily involved the International Red Aid and the World Committee against War and Fascism. As far as this article is concerned, 1934 is also the starting point for the construction of women's networks of solidarity as it is when Spanish anti-fascists started to be repressed by the government on a national and transnational level. In both cases, these networks were linked to anti-fascist organisations.[21] On one side of the Pyrenees, French anti-fascist women conducted propaganda campaigns and organised collections on behalf of anti-fascist refugees. On the other, Spanish anti-fascist women launched humanitarian initiatives in support of the civilian population after the revolution in October 1934.

This mobilisation of women in humanitarian initiatives would continue after the military coup of 18 July 1936 and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. The war prompted a wave of female participation, with women being assigned tasks on the republican home front. Unsurprisingly, the republican government soon considered institutionalising this female activity and established the Women's Aid Commission (Comisión de Auxilio Femenino) by prime ministerial decree on 29 August 1936. This gesture merely gave the Anti-Fascist Women's Group (Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas) official responsibility for mobilising women in the republican camp in coordination with the government.[22] A myriad of organisations and committees, primarily in France and the United Kingdom, emerged in solidarity with republican Spain after the outbreak of the civil war – and in part as a response to

[19]Emmanuelle Carle, "Gabrielle Duchêne et la recherche d'une autre route: Entre le pacifisme féministe et l'antifascisme" (PhD diss., McGill University, 2005); Alicia León y Barella and Rossana Vaccaro, "Construire/Déconstruire/Reconstruire la mémoire de Bernadette Cattanéo", in *Genre de l'archive: Constitution et transmission des mémoires militantes*, ed. Françoise Blum (Paris: Codhos, 2017), 39–58; www.maitron.fr/spip.php?article247043; Anne Mathieu, 'MALATERRE-SELLIER Germaine [née SELLIER Germaine Renée Suzanne]', Le Dictionnaire Biographique Maitron, (2024, online). (last visited 24 Apr. 2024).

[20]Comité de mujeres contra la guerra y el fascismo, undated (1935?), Archivo Histórico del Partido Comunista de España (AHPCE), Documentos del PCE, Film XIV, apartado 173; 'Clausura de los Congresos contra la guerra y el fascismo', *Ahora* (17 July 1934); Mercedes Yusta Rodrigo, "Comunismo y antifascismo en femenino: De Mujeres Antifascistas a la Unión de Mujeres Españolas", in *Un siglo de comunismo en España II: Presencia social y experiencias militantes*, ed. Francisco Egido (Madrid: Akal, 2022), 285–312; Sandra Blasco, "El comité mundial de mujeres contra la guerra y el fascismo y sus relaciones con España", *Historia y Política* 51 (2022): 277–303.

[21]'Avec les Espagnols: Contre le fascisme, aide et droit d'asile', *Les femmes dans l'action mondiale* 3 (Nov. 1934). See also Claire Besné, 'Le Comité Mondial des femmes contre la guerre et le fascisme (1934–1939): Un mouvement de femmes communiste' (master's thesis, Université de Paris 8, 2005); Hugo García, "¿Antifascismo o ferrerada?: La izquierda francesa y el octubre español de 1934", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velázquez: Nouvelle série* 42, no. 2 (2012): 225–47.

[22]'Decreto del 29 de agosto creando el Comité de Auxilio Femenino', *Gaceta de Madrid* (29 Aug. 1936).

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the policy of non-intervention. Among these, one body that stood out for its early emergence and significant humanitarian work was the International Committee of Coordination and Information for Aid to Republican Spain (Comité International de Coordination et d'Information pour l'Aide à l'Espagne Républicaine; CICIAER). It was founded at a conference held in Paris by the World Committee against War and Fascism on 13 August 1936 and comprised over twenty national branches of the committee. Led by Victor Basch, the president of the LDH, and the physicist Paul Langevin, CICIAER was the main channel for the delivery of material aid to Spain, collected through international solidarity campaigns. The committee, whose secretary was the communist Madeleine Braun, was clearly a transposition of the so-called popular front strategy into the realm of solidarity initiatives and represented an explicitly political form of solidarity. Its principal activities soon came to centre around assisting civilian refugees, including children.

Children were also a primary focus for other international committees and organisations, which, unlike CICIAER, emphasised the neutrality of their efforts – although at times, this claimed neutrality was open to question. One such organisation was the International Aid to Women and Children of the Spanish Republicans (Secours international aux femmes et aux enfants des républicains espagnols; SIFERE), studied by Célia Keren,[23] and it is pertinent to this article for two reasons. First, similarly to the CAEERF, the organisation was exclusively composed of women. Second, it was one of the organisations that represented a continuity in international solidarity and humanitarian work from the inter-war period into the years of the Second World War. In fact, as we shall see, when Edith Pye considered creating the CAEERF in 1939, she first approached some of the women in SIFERE. It was therefore an explicit precedent for the CAEERF, albeit with very limited influence and activity.

SIFERE was founded in December 1936 and was mainly engaged in organising camps of evacuated children in the south of France. It represented the overlap of various networks, social classes and transnational spheres. This organisation was composed primarily of upper middle class French and British women with anti-fascist leanings. Some of these women were very well known in their own countries, and some even held positions of power, such as Katharine Marjory Stewart-Murray, Duchess of Atholl (a British Conservative MP who supported the Spanish Republic, in contrast to the official line of her party), Dorothy Mary Paget (Lady Gladstone) and Germaine Malaterre-Sellier (both of whom were vice presidents of the International Union of Associations of the League of Nations) and Renée de Monbrison, a well-known aristocrat who would later become the general secretary of the CAEERF. There were also other members of SIFERE who did not belong to the upper middle class but who were involved in the pacifist or anti-fascist movements, such as secondary school teachers.[24]

Beyond SIFERE, Quaker organisations were another important source of humanitarian aid in wartime Spain, particularly in the republican zone. From the 1920s onwards, Quakers were specialising in humanitarian work, especially in support of the victims of conflicts, as a means of honouring their Christian and deeply pacifist beliefs. Two Quaker organisations intervened in response to the Spanish Civil War, each with very different chronologies, objectives and areas of activity: the (British) Friends Service Council and the American Friends Service Committee. The Friends Service Council was coordinated by the husband-and-wife team of Alfred and Norma Jacob, both of whom had been labour militants before their religious conversion. Their main aim in Spain was to provide material aid – particularly food aid – to the refugee population arriving into the Republican zone from the areas occupied by Francoist troops, which by 1938 had reached almost one million individuals in Catalonia. The American Friends Service Committee was coordinated by Howard Kershner and, unlike the British group, was prepared to send aid to Francoist Spain as part of its intervention during the civil war. To fulfil its work, the Friends Service Council sent various representatives to Spain, the

[23]Célia Keren, 'L'évacuation et l'accueil des enfants espagnols en France: Cartographie d'une mobilisation transnationale, 1936–1940' (PhD diss., École des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, 2014).

[24]Keren, 'L'évacuation', 148–57.

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majority of whom were certainly women. The organisation also 'recruited' local collaborators, both male and female, who were already involved in activist networks, particularly pacifist, or feminist in the case of women. For example, one of the more important organisers of Quaker relief in Barcelona was Domingo Ricart, a protestant and pacifist, who became the right-hand man of Alfred Jacob and would later become part of the CAEERF. Two other noteworthy individuals were Margalida Comas and Jacinta Landa. Comas, a biologist, geneticist and university professor, became involved with the Quakers through the WILPF and worked alongside them in Barcelona. Landa was a pedagogist and the sister of Matilde Landa, a very well-known communist leader and chief of the Red Aid in Spain.[25]

What is most interesting about the Quakers is the important role that women played in leading and coordinating humanitarian work, and the implications of this work at an international level. In fact, women were present in all the organisations described above, and in some cases, such as SIFERE or the Quaker organisations, they were the real driving force behind humanitarian action. These actions provided them with both an activist and militant apprenticeship that was reactivated to face the refugee crisis of 1939. As we shall see, the creation of CAEERF, the main organisation that took charge of helping Spanish refugee women and children in France, was possible thanks to the crossover between the previous experience of SIFERE and that of the Quaker women. In the development and coordination of the work of the British Quakers, one woman above all proved to be essential: Edith Mary Pye.

The Pacifist, Suffragist and Anti-fascist Roots of the CAEERF: The Case of Edith Mary Pye

Tracing the history of the CAEERF through the humanitarian career of Edith Mary Pye offers a clear explanation of the political transversality of the organisation and demonstrates the centrality of women's humanitarian networks during these years. It also highlights the organisation's transnational dimension and its activity in the years after the Spanish Civil War. Although Pye never occupied a position of authority within humanitarian organisations, she appears constantly in the surviving records of different bodies and seems to have received an enormous number of letters and reports. She was someone from whom everyone seemed to seek opinions and advice, and who therefore held an impressive degree of moral authority.[26] Pye was the 'backbone' of a set of circulations, connections and transnational relations arising from pacifism, suffragism and anti-fascism that led to the creation of the CAEERF. She was a 'creator of regimes'; in the field of humanitarianism, she was able to form 'durable structures for human life and action, opposed to or superimposed onto national structures'.[27]

Pye was born in London in 1876, the eldest of the eight children born to William Arthur Pye, wine merchant, and Margaret Thompson. A nurse and midwife by profession, she was a district superintendent of nurses in London by 1907. In 1929, and for twenty years thereafter, she was president of the British Midwives' Institute (later renamed the Royal College of Midwives), and from 1934 to 1936 she was president of the International Confederation of Midwives. In 1907, Pye met Hilda Clark, who was at that time studying medicine and who would become her life companion. It was through Clark and her family that Pye joined the Quakers the following year. Although we do not know whether Pye participated in suffragist circles at that time, we do know that Clark and her aunt, Alice Clark, among many other British Quakers, were already active in these circles. It seems likely that Pye would have begun to establish contact with them from this point as well. In 1912, Alice Clark founded the Friends League for Women's Suffrage, which Edith Pye joined on the eve of the First World War.

[25] *Quaker Service in Spain, 1936–1940* (undated, Jan. 1941?) and Notes for Spanish report 1936–1940, undated, p. 3, Library of the Society of Friends (LSF), FSC R SP 5. On Margalida Comas, see María Ángeles Delgado Martínez, ed., *Margarida Comas Camps (1892–1972): Científica i pedagoga* (Barcelona: Conselleria de Innovación, Interior y Justicia, 2010).

[26] Despite her important life story, there is still no biography of Edith Pye. Nor is there a personal archive left behind that contains all the material that she generated during her lifetime. This prevents us from knowing more about her social background, among other issues of interest. To reconstruct this part of her story, we have called upon archives from various countries and varied source materials.

[27] Pierre-Yves Saunier, *La historia transnacional* (Zaragoza: Prensas Universitarias de Zaragoza, 2021), 142–3.

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As Katherine Storr has stated, 'women's duty to relieve suffering formed the spiritual aspect of the [suffragist] movement and fulfilment of that duty would lead to citizenship'. Once the First World War had broken out, this idea strongly united suffragists and Quakers in the campaigns for suffrage and humanitarian relief and was reflected in the refugee support initiatives that Pye led during these years.[28] Pye's suffragist and humanitarian commitment was therefore not exceptional but was very much in keeping with a long tradition of Quaker women committed to helping vulnerable people and fighting for women's suffrage.[29]

Pye likely gained the experience and authority needed to create the CAEERF in a mission carried out by the Friends War Victims Relief Committee (FWVRC) in France, between September 1914 and August 1915. More specifically, it took place in Châlons-sur-Marne, where the group established a maternity unit just fifteen miles behind the front to assist refugee mothers and children. The initiative was proposed by Hilda Clark at the Meeting for Sufferings that the Friends held in the first week of September due to the escalation of the situation at the front. Pye and Clark – who by then were living together in a small apartment in Bloomsbury – would prove equally moved by the conflict from the start. Their worries over the consequences of war for civilians (particularly for women and children forced to leave their homes) were shared by the executive committee of the Society of Friends, which accordingly approved the creation of the FWVRC.

As would be the case many years later with the CAEERF, Pye was entrusted to travel to Paris and seek authorisation from the government for the Quakers to enter the warzone and proceed with humanitarian aid. This authorisation was granted shortly thereafter. From December 1914, Pye was in France and working in a maternity unit, which was forced to evacuate at the end of August 1915 due to the advance of German troops. Pye's work in rescuing children from bombings led to her receiving the *Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur* in 1919, making her one of the select few women to have received the honour. It is likely that such an honour worked in her favour twenty years later, when she sought permission from the French government for CAEERF workers to enter the internment camps that were housing Spanish women and children.[30]

During the inter-war years, Pye did not abandon her commitment to the Quakers and to humanitarianism, but her story took on a more internationalist and transnational dimension when she assumed a leading role in the WILPF as vice chairperson of the British section. The contacts and experience she acquired there would later prove crucial in the organisation of aid campaigns for the Spanish refugees in France. At the end of the First World War, the central headquarters of the WILPF moved from the Netherlands to Switzerland, setting up in Geneva with the aim of working more closely with the League of Nations.[31] It is more than likely that the social circuit in Geneva allowed Pye to establish direct contact with many of the women who would go on to spearhead the CAEERF alongside her. This includes Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, already mentioned above, who had been named 'technical advisor' to the French delegation at the thirteenth assembly of the League of Nations in 1932.[32] The French feminist Lucy Chevalley, president of the Social Service for Aid to Emigrants (Service Social d'Aide aux Emigrants; SSAE) was also present in Geneva, as was the Spanish feminist

[28]Sybil Oldfield, 'Pye, Edith Mary (1876–1965)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Bibliography* (23 Sept. 2006); Jackson, *British Women and the Spanish Civil War*, 232–3; Edith Mary Pye, ed., *War and Its Aftermath: Letters from Hilda Clark from France, Austria and the Near East, 1914–1924* (London: Friends Book Centre, 1956), 5–6; Katherine Storr, *Excluded from the Record: Women, Refugees and Relief, 1914–1929* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), 7.

[29]Sandra Stanley Holton, "From Anti-Slavery to Suffrage Militancy. The Bright Circle, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and the British Women's Movement" in *Suffrage and Beyond: International Feminist Perspectives*, ed. C. Daley and M. Nolan (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1994), 213–33; Sandra Stanley Holton, *Quaker Women: Personal Life, Memory and Radicalism in the Lives of Women Friends, 1800–1920* (London: Routledge, 2007).

[30]Undated report on the creation and work of the FWVRC during the First World War, LSF, TEMP MSS 102/4 – 'Histories of Friends Emergency and War Victims Relief Committee', 1–9; Pye, *War and Its Aftermath*, 15–7; Storr, *Excluded,* 137–43.

[31]Jo Vellacott, "A Place for Pacifism and Transnationalism in Feminist Theory: The Early Work of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom", *Women's History Review*, 2, 1 (1993), 23–56.

[32]www.maitron.fr/spip.php?article247043 (last visited 24 Apr. 2024).

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and anti-fascist Matilde Huici, who would be active in the evacuation of children to France during the Spanish Civil War as a member of the High Council for the Protection of Minors and who had represented Spain in the League of Nations Child Welfare Committee in Geneva.[33]

Pye's transnational orbit was not limited to Geneva, however. We know, for example, that she was also in Austria, India, Indo-China and China, where she was sent by the WILPF to learn about the experiences of women.[34] In 1925, along with Hilda Clark, Pye took part in the Universal Peace Congress in Paris. The event was organised by the International Peace Bureau (*Bureau International pour la Paix*; BIP), and it is perhaps here that Pye met the woman who would become the general secretary of the CAEERF, Renée de Monbrison. De Monbrison was a French Jew and a member of the upper middle class without any known political affiliation; however, she was married to Hubert de Monbrison, a high-ranking and progressive protestant aristocrat involved in various pacifist associations, such as the International Peace Campaign (*Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix*).[35] Pye was part of a deeply internationalist feminine sociability, and one with a clear political dimension: these women's networks brought together anti-fascist, pacifist and suffragist women, all of them advocates of a system of international conflict regulation embodied in the spirit of the League of Nations. This was the background of the activist mobility of a generation of women whose commitments converged into humanitarian activism during the crises of the 1930s and 1940s. Recognising this allows us to break with the essentialised explanations that have traditionally been used to account for the relationship between women and humanitarianism.

Pye's involvement in the Spanish Civil War began very swiftly. It was a cause to which she devoted almost all her efforts and energy, obliging her to put her other responsibilities to one side. In December 1936, in a letter to the president of the WILPF, Emily Balch, she explained:

> I write now because next week I think it is likely that I shall be very much occupied as I am getting off to Spain at the end of it for . . . three weeks to give advice about the distribution of food and clothing to the refugee children, for which Friends and Save the Children Fund are making a joint effort. This is, of course, only as always some kind of a patch on a garment that is full of awful holes, but at least it is something and is in itself a protest against the power of violence that seems to be so widespread.[36]

In addition to coordinating aid on the ground, Pye took advantage of the transnational networks she had been weaving for years, her experience negotiating with various authorities and her contacts and influence in Geneva to mobilise the resources of the League of Nations in support of Spanish refugees. She was one of the leading forces behind the creation of the International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees in 1937. The organisation's initial objective was the coordination of aid for Spanish refugee children in both Spain and France; however, it expanded its activities after September 1939 and the invasion of France in the following year, working with French refugees displaced to the south and east of the country.[37] Two years after the letter correspondence between Pye and Balch, Hilda Clark excused the absence of her friend to the president of the WILPF and

[33]Diane Galbaud du Fort, *Comment devient-on Juste? Lucie Chevalley-Sabatier, 1882–1979* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2023); María Nieves San Martín Montilla, *Matilde Huici Navaz: La tercera mujer* (Madrid: Narcea Ediciones, 2009); Ángel García-Sanz Marcotegui, *Matilde Huici (1890–1965): Una 'intelectual moderna' socialista* (Pamplona: Universidad Pública de Navarra, 2010).

[34]Edith Pye's accounts of her visit to China, Women's Library (London School of Economics), WILPF/4/16.

[35]2 septembre 1925, XXIVe Congrès Universel de la Paix à la Sorbonne, photographie de presse (Agenge Rol), Hilda Clark, Conciller Waller y Edith Pye, Gallica, Bibliothèque nationale de France (BNF).

[36]Letter from Edith Pye to Emily Greene Balch, 11 Dec. 1936, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Emily Greene Balch Papers, DG6 – Serie II, Box 11 – Correspondence 1936–June 1938, Folder Dec. 1936. See also Report on visit to Spain, Dec. 1936–Jan. 1937, by Edith M. Pye, LSF, FSC Pam 3:45.

[37]Report of the International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees, undated, LSF, FSC R SP 5 – Notes for Spanish report 1936–1940. See also Gabriel Petrus, *La ayuda humanitaria en la Guerra Civil española (1936–1939)* (Granada: Comares, 2015), 163–4.

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assured her that she was entirely absorbed in the work for the International Commission for feeding child refugees in Spain. She spent most of June there and is now in Geneva settling the final arrangements. The reports of the increasing under-nourishment rapidly approaching starvation are very disquieting.[38]

It is worth asking why Edith Pye was so involved in working to support Spanish civilians. Outside of official reports and some letters sent to Hilda Clark and other colleagues at the WILPF, Pye did not leave any personal accounts of her time in Spain. We do know, however, that as a radical pacifist she was opposed to foreign military intervention in the conflict from the outset. We also know that the magnitude of the war and its consequences for refugee women and children in particular would have moved her deeply, given her previous humanitarian experience.[39] Nonetheless, although we have already suggested that anti-fascism might provide some explanation as to women's involvement in humanitarian work in Spain, we might also point to feminism as a possible motivator, given the life stories of women such as Pye herself. The historian Sally Alexander claimed many years ago that 'in Britain Spain was never a feminist issue, but a democratic and humanitarian one'. She nevertheless added that 'the Aid Spain movement drew a lot of support from both women's organisations and individual feminists. Selina Cooper, for instance, a Lancashire radical suffragist, aged 72 in 1936, argued with Sylvia Pankhurst and others that fascism meant "back to the kitchen sink for women"'.[40] As Kevin Passmore has shown, despite the attraction that fascist ideology generated among some sections of women, it also became source of great concern for activists – what they described as a very 'inhospitable' place.[41] Although there are no surviving written words to show as much, it is highly probable that Pye, as a suffragist, would have been aware of the advances that Spanish women had made under the Second Republic and that all of this was at stake should Franco win the war.

The Creation of the CAEERF

The direct antecedent to the CAEERF was the International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees. It was made up of committees from more than twenty countries, and although it was not a Quaker organisation, a third of its membership was Quaker. The commission's president was the Norwegian judge Michael Hansson, who was simultaneously the president of the Nansen International Office for Refugees. The vice president and director of the International Commission was Howard Kershner, who was responsible for the work of the American Friends in Europe. Among the commission's members were Edith Pye, Hilda Clark and other Quakers who would work in Spain. Also included were Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, who we have noted was a member of SIFERE, and Lucy Chevalley, who at that time was responsible for the French association SSAE.[42]

In practice, the International Commission was created as a neutral organisation and in some respects as an opponent to the CICIAER, which had clearly anti-fascist leanings and which, as the preferred interlocutor of the Republican government, operated something close to a monopoly on the management of international humanitarian aid to the Second Spanish Republic. The commission's members sought to avoid the 'anti-fascist' label; however, the involvement of Malaterre-Sellier, a member of the Comité Mondial des Femmes contre la Guerre et le Fascisme, and the anarchist May Picqueray, an administrative worker for the commission, shows us that the organisation housed

[38]Letter from Hilda Clark to Emily Greene Balch, 13 July 1938, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Emily Greene Balch Papers, DG6 – Serie II, Box 12 – Correspondence July 1938–1942, Folder July–Dec. 1938. See also Pye, *War and Its Aftermath*, 117.

[39]See, for example, Letter from Edith Pye to Emily Greene Balch, 11 Dec. 1936, Swarthmore College Peace Collection, Emily Greene Balch Papers, DG6 – Serie II, Box 11 – Correspondence 1936–June 1938, Folder Dec. 1936.

[40]Fyrth and Alexander, *Women's Voices*, 20.

[41]Kevin Passmore, ed., *Women, Gender and Fascism in Europe, 1919–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 265–8.

[42]International Commission for the Assistance of Child Refugees in Spain, undated; Section française. Comité d'aide aux enfants réfugiés en France. Section Espagnole, Apr. 1940, LSF, FSC R SP 5.

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a fairly broad range of ideologies and sympathies. It is perhaps more useful to see the International Commission as a transnational space that brought together women from diverse backgrounds, both ideological and geographic. Their involvement dates back in some cases to the pacifist and feminist struggles of the 1920s and would extend beyond the Spanish Civil War and into the Second World War, particularly with regard to aiding displaced and vulnerable people.

At the end of the Spanish Civil War, and more specifically between February and March 1939, close to half a million Spaniards decided to cross the French frontier to escape the advance of Francoist troops. Women and children made up around 40 per cent of the total number of refugees. The chaos, desperation and uncertainty that consumed all those involved has been well documented. 'The immensity of the tragedy of the flight from Spain must have been seen at first hand to be believed', wrote Edith Pye in a report in February 1939, when she reached the French border to give assistance to the refugees. 'It takes on the character of a natural cataclysm such a typhoon or an earthquake when the numbers involved and the rapidity with which events followed each other are concerned, but it is, alas, a definite product of a policy conceived and executed by men', she lamented.[43] The reception policy implemented by the French government involved the separation of families, interning men on the one hand, and women, children and the elderly on the other. For the refugees, this was an incomprehensible and devastating decision. It deprived them of access to their family members, on whom they relied to cope with exile, from both an emotional and a material point of view.[44] 'I seem to slip right back into 1914–15–16', Pye wrote in a letter to Hilda Clark in early February 1939.[45]

In light of this situation, Pye persuaded the International Commission to extend its work to France in order to continue providing humanitarian assistance to Spanish refugees. These included men of military age, housed in internment camps in the south of the country, and women, children and the elderly, housed in various centres scattered throughout France. The International Commission set up an office in Perpignan that took charge of the camps in the south-west, such as in Argelès, Saint-Cyprien and Bacarès, and later Rivesaltes and Gurs. These camps principally served as internment spaces for men. In respect of women, children and the elderly, Pye made use of her networks in France and contacted Renée de Monbrison, Germaine Malaterre-Sellier and Lucy Chevalley, the latter two of whom were already involved with the International Commission, to create a 'special committee for the purpose of looking after Spanish refugee children in France'.[46] The new committee took the name of Commission d'Aide aux Enfants Espagnols Réfugiés en France (CAEERF) and was unusual in the fact that it was led and managed exclusively by women. One factor that held together this network of women from different backgrounds who successfully launched CAEERF was undoubtedly their commitment to humanitarian aid for Spanish refugees, but perhaps also aspects such as the prestige Edith Pye enjoyed in the field of humanitarianism explain an element that, in our opinion, is key to keeping a network together: trust.

As she had done in 1914, Pye met with officials at the French Ministry of the Interior – this time alongside Malaterre-Sellier – to negotiate the creation of the CAEERF and to ensure that the new organisation had free access to all departments that housed centres and camps with Spanish child refugees. The help of Chevalley also proved crucial in this regard. As president of the SSAE, Chevalley was 'in touch with the inspectors in various Departments and [could] set them to work

[43]Report by Edith M. Pye, 16 Feb. 1939, LSF, FSC R SP 4, 99.

[44]Geneviève Dreyfus-Armand, *L'exil des républicains espagnols en France: De la Guerre civile à la mort de Franco* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999); Scott Soo, *The Routes to Exile: France and the Spanish Civil War Refugees, 1939–2009* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017); Alba Martínez, *Nosotras, las refugiadas: Género, identidades y experiencias de las españolas refugiadas en Francia (1939–1978)* (Granada: Comares, 2024).

[45]Pye, *War and Its Aftermath*, 119.

[46]Edith Pye to Audrey Russell, 17 Feb. 1939, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), American Friends Service Committee Records Relating to Humanitarian Work in France (AFSCR), 1933–1950, RG-67.007 M, Series I Perpignan Office, Sub-series: Correspondence, Box 9, Folder 1 of 134.

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straight away to find out the needs amongst the children.'[47] Leadership of the new organisation would fall to Malaterre-Sellier (as president) and de Monbrison (as general secretary). While waiting for the authorisation from the French government, Pye exchanged numerous letters with the Quaker Audrey Russell, who had also crossed the frontier from Spain in 1939. As a member of the International Commission, Russell had set up in Perpignan, where she cared for the male refugees housed in internment camps. There she also began to select people who might work for the organisation on the ground. She quickly decided that they should be women with a mastery of French and Spanish, who had gained experience in offering support to children during the civil war. Jacinta Landa, Barbara Wood, Kanty Cooper and Lucy Palser were some of the names mentioned.[48] The socialist and feminist Matilde Huici was also highly commended, and it did not take long for her to join and work closely with the new organisation. 'Did you ever meet Matilde Huici?' Pye asked Russell in March 1939. 'I think she could be valuable in the new French Commission, certainly could not have any one better. She is a charming and courageous person with a great knowledge of all children's affairs.'[49] As far as we know, seventeen women and two men (none of whom held leadership positions) collaborated with CAEERF.

The statutes of the CAEERF date its creation to 18 February 1939, although we know that it did not assume operations until a few weeks after this date. Its central headquarters was located at 102 Rue de l'Université in the 7th arrondissement in Paris, and it was considered a 'neutral [commission] from every point of view and outside any political or confessional consideration.'[50] Although it was about helping Republican refugees, as Daniel Maul has studied, the question of neutrality for Quakers (many of those who made up the CAEERF) was central.[51] Moreover, in the context of a highly politicised war and humanitarian emergency, and of a highly polarised France with regard to the Spanish conflict, it was essential to project the organisation as 'neutral' in order to obtain as many sources of funding as possible and to accommodate the heterogenous leanings of the women involved. However, as we have seen, the members had long histories of feminist, pacifist and anti-fascist political and humanitarian commitments. The CAEERF is thus representative of the emergence of a public sphere occupied by women who fashioned their own means of political engagement through humanitarian action. These women decided to take advantage of the activist resources and experiences they had gained and utilise them in support of refugees.

[47]Edith Pye to Audrey Russell, 17 Feb. 1939, USHMM, AFSCR, 1933–1950, RG-67.007 M, Series I Perpignan Office, Sub-series: Correspondence, Box 9, Folder 1 of 134.

[48]Edith Pye to Audrey Russell, 17, 20, 22 and 25 Feb. 1939, USHMM, AFSCR, 1933–1950, RG-67.007 M, Series I Perpignan Office, Sub-series: Correspondence, Box 9, Folder 1 of 134. Jacinta Landa was a Spanish teacher. During the Spanish Civil War, she worked in the Council for Evacuated Children, a body dependent on the Spanish Ministry of Public Instruction. She went into exile in 1939 and spent a few months in France, during which time she collaborated with the CAEERF, before settling permanently in Mexico, where she died in 1993. Kanty Cooper was a British sculptor, a pupil of Henry Moore. In 1937 she abandoned sculpture and began to collaborate in the reception of Basque refugee children in England. From then on, she began to work with the Friends Service Council in humanitarian aid for children, becoming responsible for the organisation of canteens for refugees in Barcelona. At the end of the Spanish Civil War, she collaborated with the CAEERF in France, and after the German invasion of France, her work was extended to French refugees. At the end of the Second World War, she continued her humanitarian work in countries such as Greece, Germany and Jordan. She is the author of a memoir: *The Uprooted: Agony and Triumph Among the Debris of War* (London: Quarter Books Limited, 1981). All we know about Lucy Palser and Barbara Wood is that before joining CAEERF, they worked with the Friends Service Council during the Spanish Civil War. (See Marta López, Mercedes Yusta and Alba Martínez, *Nuestros humildes renglones: Cartas del exilio republicano español en Francia, 1939–1940* (Zaragoza: Institución Fernando el Católico, 2023), 281–91).

[49]Edith Pye to Audrey Russell, 6 Mar. 1939, USHMM, AFSCR, 1933–1950, RG-67.007 M, Series I Perpignan Office, Sub-series: Correspondence, Box 9, Folder 1 of 134.

[50]Rapport de la Commission d'aide aux enfants espagnols réfugiés en France, July 1939, Archives Nationales de France (ANF), 20,010,221/1,003,005.

[51]Daniel Maul, "The Politics of Neutrality: The American Friends Service Committee and the Spanish Civil War", *European Review of History* 23 (2016): 82–100.

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Working on the Ground

The political commitment of CAEERF women was manifested not only 'from above' in their negotiations and strategies to implement the organisation but also 'from below' in their action on the ground and their day-to-day relations with refugees. As its statutes made clear, the CAEERF was created with three principal objectives, namely 'to gather all necessary information relating to the needs of Spanish women and children refugees in France', 'to coordinate the efforts of the various French or foreign organisations or individuals seeking to contribute to the aid of the refugees' and 'to supervise the equitable distribution of support in the various refugee centres'.[52]

From February 1939 until June 1940 (when the occupation of France forced the organisation to cease its work), the CAEERF, in collaboration with the International Commission (its main source of funding), developed an impressive record of humanitarian aid coordination. This aid was provided to more than 1,500 shelters and reception centres in which Spanish women and children were interned. Around 3,000 letters, now held in the French National Archives, testify to this work; the majority were written by Spanish female refugees, who recognised the organisation as the primary body from which they could request material assistance, aid in locating lost relatives and subsistence while in exile.[53] In fact, the organisation summarised its main actions in eight points: searching for children, repatriating them through regular and legalised demands, guaranteeing food for the babies, sending clothes and shoes for both mothers and children, visiting the centres and gathering information on their needs, maintaining permanent contact with the prefectures to find out about changes in the location of the centres, placing female labour and, finally, family reunification.[54]

The daily interactions that the CAEERF maintained with the Spanish refugees occurred through two main means: site visits and letters of request. From April 1939, the French Ministry of the Interior gave authorisation for humanitarian operatives to enter the camps and shelters, allowing them to learn first-hand the material and emotional conditions of the women and children in exile. These visits generated a huge quantity of reports that today constitute an important source of information. According to these documents, as of 1 May 1939, France was housing 'more than 35,000 children and 65,000 women divided over 1,557 sites'.[55]

Despite the organisation's 'neutrality', relief workers did not hesitate to denounce in their reports situations that they considered to be unjust. For example, the reports regularly spoke of the degrading and harsh treatment of refugees by many of the *gendarmes* who controlled these spaces, as well as the lack of interest on the part of the French authorities. Barbara Wood and Kanty Cooper, on behalf of the CAEERF, were sent to visit the centres located in the Haute Alpes department, and in their report to the leaders of the organisation they observed the following:

> The behaviour of the functionaries of the Prefecture . . . did not leave a very favourable impression. There was, unfortunately, a complete lack of understanding of the Spanish character and mentality, and of the tragic situation these refugees find themselves in. Unnecessary suffering was inflicted upon them owing to a quite narrow limitation of their freedom of movement, based, we fear, upon an exaggerated and not entirely sincere concern for their safety and well-being. We had the impression that the concentration of refugees in one large camp and the tightening of discipline were intended to induce them to return to Spain, which could be understood as a means of putting pressure on them to that end.[56]

[52] Declaración y estatutos, May 1939, ANF, 20,010,221/1,003,005, Box 1, Folder 2.

[53] Copies of these letters are reproduced in López, Yusta and Martínez, *Nuestros humildes renglones*. The entirety of the letters will be available in digitised and transcribed form on the open-access platform CAREXIL-FR, available at http://carexil.huma-num.fr/. Some 600 letters are already accessible.

[54] Rapport de la Commission d'aide aux enfants espagnols réfugiés en France. Les points les plus importants de l'activité de la Commission depuis septembre 1939, undated, ANF, 20,010,221/1,003,023.

[55] Rapport de la Commission d'aide aux enfants espagnols réfugiés en France, July 1939, ANF, 20,010,221/1,003,005.

[56] Reports of Barbara Wood, ANF, 20,010,221/1, Folder 392, B. Wood; Folder 58, Hautes-Alpes.

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The operatives of the CAEERF, who knew the reality of the lives of these women and children from their time in Spain, also showed a special sensitivity to gender in their reports. They denounced the specific pressure that the French authorities imposed upon refugee women to push them to return to Spain. As prior research has highlighted, repatriation had a particular impact upon women and their children, especially once the Spanish Civil War had ended. French authorities regarded these refugees as apolitical subjects who were temporarily fleeing a conflict, thus assuming that they had nothing to fear under the new Spanish regime and could return to Spain without further problems. This logic, arising from gender prejudices, saw refugee women subjected to myriad pressures. This was especially the case for 'single' women (unmarried, widowed or whose husbands remained in Spain or could not be located), who according to the French authorities had even fewer reasons to remain in France.[57] As a result, in February 1940, the minister of the interior, Albert Sarraut, stated in a circular that 'exceptionally those refugees whose return could involve a genuinely serious risk could stay in France'. He also advised prefects that 'they must be very strict in their judgement, particularly when dealing with women who, save for extremely rare exceptions, run no risk if they return to their country'.[58] It has now been amply demonstrated that the reprisals conducted by the Franco regime were not limited to those who had individual 'political responsibilities', as evidenced by the experiences of many women during the civil war. Many reports would highlight this fact, including one by Barbara Wood on 10 December 1939:

> Many women who could not prove they had any of their menfolk in France were reduced to a state of abject terror at the prospect of being forced to return to Spain. One mother of four children whose husband had been shot in Asturias, was a complete nervous wreck at the prospect of returning, and could not even express herself coherently, bursting into tears at every fresh sentence . . . Another woman in much the same condition was distracted by a letter recently received from Spain telling of the 'sudden death' of a close relative who with three other women had been forcibly repatriated from a centre at Ponance within three days of her arrival in Spain, two of her companions being prisoners. The only reason being that she was a known Socialist and was a sister to the Governor of Santander. It is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated by the authorities that in many cases reprisals are taken against the womenfolk of a marked man on whom the Spanish authorities cannot lay their hands.[59]

The refugees' treatment and the deplorable living conditions in the shelters led to many protests by the refugees themselves, some of which were also mentioned in CAEERF reports.[60] Accordingly, after their visits, CAEERF operatives highlighted the 'absolute demoralisation of the refugees',[61] noting that 'the best centres [were] not necessarily those with the best material provisions, but those where refugees [were] treated with love'.[62] Site visits offered the CAEERF an overview of the state of the refugees, which proved very useful in adapting the assistance provided to meet their needs. It was also a time for relief workers to give moral support to the refugees. However, humanitarian workers were often required to operate quickly and were left with little time to talk to the refugees. 'We generally saw the refugees *en masse* with no time to sort out individual problems', lamented Kanty Cooper in her memoir.[63]

[57] Maëlle Maugendre, *Femmes en exil: Les refugiées espagnoles en France, 1939–1942* (Tours: PUFR, 2019), 240–60; Alba Martínez, "Mujeres «solas» en el exilio: Vulnerabilidades, violencias y resistencias de las refugiadas españolas en Francia (1939–1978)", *Ayer* 128, no. 4 (2022): 159–84.

[58] Circular from the Minister of the Interior to prefects, 7 Feb. 1940, ANF, 19,940,500/138, Folder 2137-X.

[59] Report of Barbara Wood, Dijon, 10 Dec. 1939, LSF, FSC R SP 4, 40.

[60] Report on refugee camp for Spaniards in Grenoble, Mar. 1939, ANF, 20,010,221/4, Folder 384, Isère.

[61] Report of Casimiro Mahou on camps in the Gironde, Apr. 1939, ANF, 20,010,221/4, Folder 107.

[62] Rapport de la Commission d'aide aux enfants espagnols réfugiés en France, July 1939, ANF, 20,010,221/1,003,005.

[63] Kanty Cooper, *The Uprooted* (London: Quartet, 1979), 49.

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To some extent, the letters of supplication that the refugees sent to the CAEERF filled this gap. Women and children used them mainly to ask for clothes and shoes, food for their youngest children and help in finding paid work and news of their relatives. However, the letters not only served as a means to ask for support but also offered the refugees a space to vent their feelings, whether by recounting their experiences, showing their indignation or sharing their suffering. Through their writing the refugees also reasserted their dignity, having suffered humiliation after the defeat of the republic and over the conditions of their reception in France. They thus moved beyond a position of mere victimhood and demonstrated agency in these extraordinary circumstances.[64]

Most of the letters were answered by Germaine Malaterre-Sellier, Renée de Monbrison and Matilde Huici, and their responses, together with the content of the reports, tell us that the practice of CAEERF relief workers did not tend to treat refugees as 'speechless emissaries', in Liisa Malkki's words.[65] Despite resource and time constraints, CAEERF women demonstrated a keen awareness of the realities of women and children, and a sensitivity to gender that, in our view, was not unrelated to their previous political commitments. This, beyond immediate humanitarian action, could also be a way of acting politically insofar as it could transform power relations and the way people related to each other.[66]

In 1940, faced with the imminent occupation of France by Nazi troops, the CAEERF had no alternative but to close its offices. 'When the Germans arrived in Paris', recalled Renée de Monbrison afterwards, 'my office was taken and ransacked, and all the documents were taken away'. She regretted that she had 'no means of finding these wonderful women' with whom she had worked so intensively for years. We now know that some of these women, such as Kanty Cooper, Edith Pye, Germaine Malaterre-Sellier and Lucy Chevalley, continued to engage in humanitarian work with various levels of responsibility during the Second World War. Some moved to different locations, such as Eastern Europe or Asia. Others, such as the Spaniards Jacinta Landa and Matilde Huici, emigrated once again, in their cases to Mexico and Chile respectively. As de Monbrison would recall, they were all witnesses to 'the horror of those refugee camps, which are a stain on France, as our historians now acknowledge'.[67]

Conclusion

In 2007, Philip Marfleet pointed out that the history of refugees has been largely ignored because it 'disrupts' national narratives and the bonds of the nation state.[68] Today we can state that scholarship on this subject is very extensive, a literature that has indeed shown that refugee crisis and the political and humanitarian responses afforded to it are a history of negotiations, circuits, bonds and relationships that, through the people involved, operated on a transnational scale. However, as we have shown in this article, the 1939 refugee crisis must also be framed within a transnational history of women, without which it is not possible to understand, among other things, the responses that were articulated to deal with it. The humanitarian crisis that the Spanish Civil War unleashed called to women from different geographic origins, with diverse activist experiences, ideologies and religious beliefs. They saw in humanitarianism a transnational public sphere from which they could intervene in, and in turn influence, politics.

[64] See Guadalupe Adámez, *Gritos de papel: Las cartas de súplica del exilio español, 1936–1945* (Granada: Comares, 2017). From a gender perspective: Alba Martínez, Nosotras, las refugiadas. Género, identidades y experiencias de las españolas refugiadas en Francia (1939-1978), (Granada: Comares, 2024), 27–56.

[65] Liisa H. Malkki, "Speechless Emmisaires: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization", *Cultural Anthropology* 11, no. 3 (1996): 377–404. Responses to the refugees' letters are deposited at: PSOE- CE/Documentación e informes, Archivo de la Fundación Pablo Iglesias, AH-66-3.

[66] This humanitarian practice is very much a Quaker practice; 'the Quaker way', as Ilana Feldman has pointed out. See Ilana Feldman, "The Quaker Way: Ethical Labor and Humanitarian relief", *American Ethnologist* 34, no. 4 (2007): 689–705.

[67] Renée de Monbrison's diary, USHMM.

[68] Philip Marfleet, "Refugees and History: Why We Must Address the Past", *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2007): 136–48.

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The research conducted on Edith Pye's trajectory and the work of the CAEERF allows us to draw several conclusions. On the one hand, it reveals the porous boundary between political solidarity and 'neutral' humanitarianism: CAEERF brought together women with diverse backgrounds and commitments, ranging from anti-fascism to Christian pacifism and feminism. Edith Pye herself was involved in a feminist and pacifist organisation, the WILPF, which came to play a significant role in articulating female anti-fascism. Furthermore, the Spanish refugee cause was not politically neutral. The Spanish Republican exile was clearly an anti-fascist one, understood and denounced as such in France by the conservative and far-right press. The testimonies of humanitarian workers clearly reflect their commitment and solidarity with the refugees – especially women – and their condemnation of the conditions of internment.

On the other hand, the activities of the CAEERF and of Edith Pye demonstrate women's agency in a context of political and humanitarian crisis. They show how women mobilised the resources available to them – most notably, pre-existing networks of influence developed through their involvement in League of Nations circles and feminist organisations – to act on behalf of a vulnerable population, effectively stepping in to replace a state that was either powerless or indifferent. Ultimately, unearthing these connections allows us to see that far from being a mere extension of the caring work historically performed by women, humanitarianism was a means for women of diverse backgrounds to engage in politics, attain positions of authority and improve, through negotiations with governments and their day-to-day relations with refugees, the lives of those most devastated by European conflicts in the mid-twentieth century.

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