

TRANSATLANTIC ROUTES AND ENCOUNTERS.
EUROPEAN ANTI-FASCISTS IN MEXICO, 1939-1945

ENRICO ACCIAI *

ABSTRACT

Once the Spanish Civil War ended in 1939, thousands of anti-fascist exiles began to move to Latin America; Mexico, in particular, welcomed several thousand Europeans. We will follow the trajectories of some anti-fascists who had participated in the conflict, and who later decided to cross the ocean and settle in Mexico. While the existence of intra-European anti-fascist exiles is well known (e.g., Italian anti-fascists who exiled to France between the 1920s and 1930), those of transatlantic origins are much less apparent in history, with the remarkable exception of the Spanish fleeing Francoism after 1939. Since history's recent 'global turn', the concept of 'networks' has been particularly adept at enabling historians to see the reciprocal connections between local, regional and global actors and to bridge the increasingly artificial divide among national and international spaces. The case we will discuss in this article represents a paradigmatic example of the utility of this approach. Studying anti-fascist exiles and their networks after 1939 on a global scale will allow us to see the flows of people and ideas between Europe and the American continent.

Keywords: Anti-Fascism, Exile, Spanish Civil War, Mexico, Global History.

INTRODUCTION

Chalco is small-town south of Mexico City. Between 1955 and 1956, on a farm just outside the city centre, a group of Cuban exiles trained militarily for a few months. The leader of the group was Fidel Castro, a young lawyer who had been exiled to Mexico for a few months after having al-

* Università di Roma Tor Vergata. Address for correspondence: enrico.acciai@gmail.com.

ready spent years in prison in his home country. Among those who were training there, there was also a young Argentinian doctor named Ernesto Guevara de la Serna. A few months later, those men would unleash one of the most famous revolutions of the second half of the 20th century; Fidel Castro would become a world-famous leader, and Ernesto Guevara would become the most renowned guerrilla fighter of his time. During the weeks spent at Chalco, the Cuban revolutionaries were trained by the professional soldier Alberto Bayo, who was “an expert in guerrilla warfare, a veteran of the Spanish military campaign against Moorish guerrillas in the twenties and a Loyalist general during the Spanish civil war” (Balfour 1995: 46). Bayo was a transnational fighter with Cuban origins, and he had gained a great deal of experience with guerrilla warfare in Spain. After the end of the civil war, Alberto Bayo took refuge in France like tens of thousands of Republican fighters. From here, he had managed to return to Latin America, finding refuge in Mexico (Suero 1979: 28). In 1955, Bayo published a short book “on how to be an insurgent and run an insurgency” (Er 2017: 146). Ernesto Guevara referred to Colonel Bayo “as his master, the only one he ever recognized” (Dosal 2010: 49). Generally, most of the success of the insurgents against the Batista army “is claimed to have been due to Bayo’s tactical teachings” (Er 2017: 146).

This episode demonstrates the importance of the transmission of knowledge between different generations of transnational fighters. At the same time, and this will be the subject of this article, what emerges is that the movement of people is a central element to fully understanding the years between the 1940s and 1950s on a global scale. Why did Alberto Bayo end up in Mexico after the end of the Spanish Civil War? Was his story isolated, or is it part of a broader phenomenon? We will try to answer these questions by looking at the case of Italian, Spanish and German exiles in Latin America. We will follow the trajectories of some anti-fascists who had participated in the Spanish Civil War, and who later decided to cross the ocean and settle in Mexico. While the existence of intra-European anti-fascist exiles is well known (e.g., Italian anti-fascists who exiled to France between the 1920s and 1930), those of transatlantic origins are much less apparent in history, with the remarkable exception of the Spanish fleeing Francoism after 1939.¹

This article is intended to offer a reflection on how (a part of) the European exile, particularly in the immediate pre-World War II period, took on a transatlantic and cosmopolitan character.² To do this, we will start with

¹ Cf. ALTED VIGIL 2005; GUIXÉ I COROMINAS 2012; HADZELEK 2010; SOO 2013.

² Cf. SEIDMAN 2018; CANNISTRATO 1996; FEATHERSTONE 2013; LEVY 2011.

a new group of exiles who appeared in Europe in the first weeks of 1939: those who left Spain as a result of the end of the civil war. European who moved to Mexico after 1939 shared language (most of them spoke Spanish) and a commitment to anti-fascism: this made possible the birth of a transnational and cosmopolitan community based in Mexico City. The main aim of this article is to contribute to reflections on the experience of exiles in the interwar period. To what extent and when we can define the exile as a cosmopolitan experience?³ In recent years there has been much debate about the cosmopolitan nature of the anti-fascist movement in Europe and beyond (Graham 2012 and Featherstone 2013).⁴ The case of Mexico City, as we will see, offers an interesting case study. Actually, as we will see in the next pages, we are convinced that the cosmopolitan dimension, that is undeniable, had to coexist with the persistence of strong national characters. We will briefly discuss this in the conclusions.

1. LEAVING SPAIN: 1939-1940

During the last stages of the Spanish Civil War, more and more civilians were fleeing to France. These were men, women and children escaping the Francoist army. The rebels' gradual occupation of republican Spain had pushed several waves of refugees towards France even before the first weeks of 1939, including 15 000 in September 1936 as the Basque country was occupied; another 120 000 as the nationalists completed their northern campaign during the summer and autumn of 1937, and a further 25 000 in the spring of the following year with the nationalist victory in Aragón (Soo 2013: 33).

During the early days of 1939, more and more people crossed the border. In the space of a few days in February 1939, around 465 000 people sought refuge in metropolitan France, and a further 15 000 attempted to resettle in French-controlled North Africa (Soo 2013: 38). This was an unprecedented exodus in modern European history. It had never happened in the last century that almost half a million people were forced to cross a border in a few days: this was an exceptional event. What happened to the exiles from Spain when the Pyrenees passed? They were interned in some camps issued by the French authorities in the southern part of the Country. At the end of March, the most crowded camps were those of Argeles-Sur-Mer with 77 000 internees, that of Saint-Cyprien with 90 000 'guests' and

³ Cf. TRAVERSO 2002.

⁴ Cf. GARCÍA, YUSTA, TABET and CLIMACO 2016; SLUGA 2009.

that of Prats-de-Mollo with about 50 000 captives.⁵ To these must be added a large number of smaller camps where the number of internees could range from a few hundred to a few thousand. Some of these men and women would, in the following months, end up overseas.

We want to start our reflection by providing an overview of these exiles. They were mostly Spaniards who were leaving Spain because they were directly or indirectly identifiable with the Republican front. To these, we have to add a few thousand foreign fighters, mostly men, who had fought in the ranks of the International Brigades, men and woman who had served as nurses or doctors following the Spanish Republican army or journalists who had followed the Spanish conflict.⁶ Not only men of military age or veterans of the conflict fled to France, but also older people, women and children, who gave the exodus an almost biblical character. Therefore, this exile represented a slightly varied universe. The first question that naturally arises is why this mass escape took place. Why were so many people afraid of the impending Spanish post-war period? Those who had lived in Spain during the previous two years were well aware of the degree of violence exerted on those defeated by the insurgent troops. Francisco Franco not only wanted to win the conflict, but he aimed, as has been amply demonstrated on a historiographical level, to eradicate that part of the country that opposed him. Indiscriminate and widespread violence thus became the figure of everyday life in Francoist Spain (Rodrigo 2008). Therefore, fleeing was the only option for many.

Among those fleeing Spain were many non-Spaniards, mainly European and North American anti-fascists who had fought in International Brigades. After the dismantlement of the International Brigades in autumn 1938, international veterans were grouped in special camps by the Spanish authorities, where they were disarmed, divided by nationality, and wherever possible, prepared for repatriation. Veterans were informed that those who could not return to their country of origin would be hosted by third countries; this was the case of veterans proceeding from fascist states (e.g. Italy and Germany) (Skoutelsky 2006: 389-412). Most international veterans who were unable to leave Spain in late 1938 crossed the Franco-Catalan border between 6 and 9 February 1939 (Acciai and Cansella 2017: 53-63). After initially placing them in the so-called sand camps, particularly Argelès and Saint-Cyprien, from late spring 1939, French authorities transferred the veterans to the camp in Gurs, further north along the Franco-Spanish border in the western Pyrenees area, just before the Basque Country.

⁵ Cf. DREYFUS-ARMAND 1995; GRYNBERG 1993; PESCHANSKI 2002.

⁶ Cf. BAXELL 2004; BAXELL 2012; SKOUTELSKY 2003; SKOUTELSKY 2006.

In the Gurs camp, which would officially take the name of the Semi-repressive camp of Gurs from October 1940, about 20 000 exiles were interned, mostly veterans of the International Brigades and the Spanish Republican Army. Living conditions here were particularly harsh. Once the 'Spanish' issue had been resolved, Gurs would be used by the Vichy authorities to intern foreign Jews before handing them over to the Germans. Between the end of 1940 and the beginning of 1941, for example, some 6 000 German Jews from the Lower Palatinate region were interned in the camp (Laharie 1993: 42-43).⁷ As stated above, life in the French camps – both for the Spanish and the foreigners – was extremely hard. The French authorities maintained strict discipline, and the weather conditions were often adverse. France was no longer the country that had welcomed tens of thousands of anti-fascists in the previous decade (Acciai and Cansella 2017, 64-77). For this reason, many began to consider moving elsewhere. Between 1939 and 1940, Europe could offer no safe destination. While many Spaniards chose to retrace their steps and return to Spain, others decided to try to leave Europe. In the summer of 1940, there were still about 150 000 Spanish exiles on French soil. A significant part of them tried to leave the European continent.

The case of the International Brigades Veterans is emblematic. From the last stages of the Spanish Civil War, there was a plan to send some of them to Mexico, especially those who could not go back to their country. On 6 January 1939, the French Communist André Marty wrote a long letter to the Central Committee of the Mexican Communist Party shortly before leaving Spain. The project was to send about 1 300 veterans over the Atlantic. Marty stated that the Poles, Italians, Germans, Czechs and Austrians should leave because "they come from fascist countries or from countries where conservative forces are in power, where they cannot return".⁸ This project was never carried out, but its existence seems indicative of the Communist leaders' willingness to exploit transoceanic routes. Thus, most of those veterans were imprisoned in French camps. Some of them managed to participate in European resistance in the following years after escaping from the same camps.⁹

The post-Spanish civil war exile was distinguished as representing a mixed and plural world, a world to which both Spaniards and foreigners belonged. Concerning the latter, we think it is useful to refer to the reflections of the English historian Helen Graham; talking about the departure

⁷ See also: BADIA 1979; MOTULSKY 2018.

⁸ RGASPI 545.6.616. Letter by André Marty, 06 January 1939.

⁹ Cf. ACCIAI 2019; GERWARTH and GILDEA 2018: 175-182; KRUIZINGA 2019; MARCO 2018.

from Spain of the veterans of the International Brigades, she underlined how, often unconsciously, they represented a cosmopolitan world opposite to the Francoist one and how they were the living symbol of the diasporas Europeans had been experiencing since the end of the First World War (Graham 2012: 82-83). According to Graham, those volunteers were protagonists of cultural and existential exiles, of real uprooting, and these experiences contributed to making them exemplary protagonists of European history between the two world wars. We think these reflections can be extended to most of those who left Spain in 1939. Therefore, in the following years, the biographies of many Spaniards could have represented a cosmopolitan world opposite that of fascism.

Before moving on to the 'Mexican chapter' of this article, we consider that a broad reflection is needed. During the interwar period, many cities on the American continent became transnational centres where political exiles and economic emigrants met. Cities across the Americas became hubs in transnational networks that linked radicals and revolutionaries of all kinds. Anarchists, Socialists, Communists, political and racial exiles and avant-garde intellectuals from all over the world gave rise to global universes in cities like New York, Tampa, New Orleans or Havana (Featherstone 2013).¹⁰ The Mexican capital is one of the most interesting examples. Speaking about anti-fascism, the Spanish historian Hugo Garcia recently recalled the existence of a real culture of exile that developed and took shape between the two world wars thanks to the presence of large transnational metropolises like Berlin – at least until Hitler took power, Paris, Moscow, Barcelona, London or New York.¹¹ It seems to us that Mexico City should be added to this list because of what happened there during the early 1940s.

2. CROSSING THE ATLANTIC

In 1934, Lázaro Cárdenas was elected the president of Mexico. After a brilliant army career, Cárdenas emerged during the mid-1920s as a famous politician at the national level. His rise to power “made it possible to implement a number of the [Mexican] revolution’s aim concerning workers’ rights, agrarian reform and nationalization of Mexico’s natural resources” (Acle-Kreysing 2016b: 671). During Cárdenas’ presidency, the Mexican government first supported the Republican government during

¹⁰ See also: JOYEUX-PRUNEL 2019: 295-322.

¹¹ Cf. GARCÍA 2015: 15; GARCÍA 2016: 562-572.

the Spanish Civil War and then welcomed several hundred European exiles (Ojeda 2005). In the post-1939 chaos, Mexico became a safe destination for many European anti-fascists: After the end of the Spanish Civil War and the first moments of the Second World War, fascism seemed to be the ideology that was to become established throughout Europe. For many, fleeing was the only solution. Historically, at least until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, many economic migrants followed this trajectory. At the end of the 1930s, these routes became active again (Lida 2009: 21-64).¹² Therefore, it should come as no surprise that, in a short space of time, the transatlantic route to Mexico became one of the most popular ones. For many Spanish exiles, the Mexican option was the most viable – or often the only one. In the summer of 1939, between May and August, President Cárdenas decided to welcome Spanish exiles; a series of ships (the first three being the *Sinaia*, *Ipanema* and *Mexique*) left Europe to bring the first thousands of refugees to the American continent (Ojeda 2005: 260-264). During those same weeks, Mexican diplomats took action to facilitate the exit from French camps of those who would be received overseas and provide them with all the necessary documents (Guixé i Corominas 2012: 122-172).¹³

Overseas, numerous committees were set up to raise funds for Spanish exiles and veterans of the International Brigades. Two Spanish associations became particularly active in those months – the Servicio de Evacuación de Refugiados Españoles (SERE) and the Junta de Auxilio a los Republicanos Españoles (JARE) (Alted 2005: 53). These two associations helped many Spanish exiles move overseas. From the summer of 1940, partly due to the evolution of the war conflict in Europe, taking the transoceanic routes became the priority of most exiles: The United States and Latin America were considered safe places.

After the German attack on France, the conditions for Spanish refugees in France worsened. While many Spaniards were handed over to the Francoist authorities, many foreigners were sent to their countries of origin by the Vichy government (Guixé i Corominas 2012: 250-256).¹⁴ This was the case, for example, for many Italian veterans from Spain, who were handed over to Italy and then ended up in confinement (Poerio 2016). Crossing the Atlantic then became even more urgent. In late 1940, several categories

¹² See also: MATEOS 2004: 405-443.

¹³ See also: DREYFUS-ARMAND 1999; PESCHANSKI 1997.

¹⁴ The most typical case is perhaps that of Luis Companys, ex-president of the Generalitat of Catalonia, who was shot in Barcelona, but there was also the case of the anarchist leader Juan Peirò, who suffered the same fate. See also: ACCIAI and CANSSELLA 2017; DREYFUS-ARMAND 1995.

of 'fugitives' met in the south of France. About two million citizens from the Netherlands, Belgium and other parts of France arrived in the area as a result of the German attack on France; among them were several thousand Jews in search of an escape route from Europe. It is not surprising that they tried, and in many cases managed, to blend in with the Spanish on their way to Mexico. Usually, the exit route that was followed started from Marseille and included a stop in North Africa (Oran or Casablanca) before crossing the ocean. Between 1940 and 1941, Marseille became one of the nodal centres of the Spanish exile, and here, the trajectories of many of those who would then take to Mexico intersected; it is estimated that between 10 000 and 20 000 Spaniards gravitated to the area of the port of Marseille, hoping to board one of the ships leaving for Mexico (Herrerín López 2012: 10-12).¹⁵ This should come as no surprise. In the years between the two wars, Marseilles welcomed thousands of European exiles. Networks of solidarity were created in the city, which came in handy after 1939 and the end of the Spanish Civil War.

The Marseille-Casablanca route became the most popular route taken by ships carrying exiles to Mexico. In 1942 – in the middle of the conflict – about 3 000 people left Casablanca. A general clarification about mobility of people during World War Two is needed. As recently underlined in an excellent volume by Megan Koreman, the routes travelled by the refugees, the escape lines, were a central theme of Europe in the war, holding together the subject of the anti-fascist struggle and that of the escape of the persecuted minorities (Koreman 2018: 3-27). Looking at the other side of the Atlantic, it is estimated that around 20 000 refugees from Spain (Spanish and foreigners) moved to Mexico between 1938 and the end of the Second World War (Lida 2009: 29-31).¹⁶ This is why Mexico City became one of the world centres of anti-fascism during the Second World War (Pla Brugat 2009: 63-80). In an article published in *Memoria e Ricerca* in 2009, Sebastiaan Faber talked about the city as one of the main political and geographical spaces of a transatlantic anti-fascism (Faber 2009: 63-80). The murder of Trotsky in the summer of 1940, which may be the most symbolic event in the early 1940s in Mexico, clearly shows us how Mexico City had become one of the world capitals of the anti-fascist movement. The attitude of the US authorities favoured all these arrivals in Mexico. In anticipation of massive arrivals of refugees from Europe, the US government had introduced stricter immigration regulations. Therefore, once they crossed the Atlantic, many exiles from Europe were refused entry into the United States, so the

¹⁵ See also: TÉMIME and ATTARD-MARIANICHI 1990 and VELÁZQUEZ-HERNÁNDEZ 2019.

¹⁶ See also: CAUDET ROCA 2005.

steamships often continued their journey to Mexico (Brackhausen-Canale 2017: 132). For those who had already been exiled to Europe in previous years, it was the beginning of a sort of second exile, more dramatic than the previous one because of its extra-European character. In just a few months, thousands of Europeans arrived in Mexico, and most of them settled in the country's capital. The Mexican years, as we shall see, were years of great turmoil, as well as a newfound peace of mind. The Italian Francesco Frola wrote that, in Mexico, he finally had the chance to live as a free citizen after feeling persecuted for almost two decades (Frola 1950: 216).

The example of German communist exiles is striking; as Jeffrey Herf pointed out and as we will see more clearly in our reflections below, during the Second World War, Mexico City became one of the largest centres of German communist emigration in the world (Herf 1997). In 1943, there were around 15 000 Europeans living in the city, mostly Spanish. We must also mention at least 3 000 Germans (Jacinto 2014). Most of them were Jews fleeing persecution, but there were also at least 100 communists, including writers, political activists and journalists (Anna Seghers, László Radványi, Egon Erwin Kisch, André Simone, Bodo Uhse and Ludwig Renn); Communist Party bureaucrats (Paul Merker and Alexander Abusch); and prominent figures in the field of culture (Gertrude Duby and Paul Westheim) (Acle-Kreysing 2016a: 591).¹⁷ Many of the German communists managed to arrive in Mexico pretending to be writers or intellectuals. Among the exiles who arrived in the country were also a few hundred veterans of the International Brigades (Zogbaum 2005). Alberto Bayo, mentioned above, was only one of them.

The artist Tina Modotti and the communist leader Vittorio Vidali were among the Italians who arrived in Mexico from Europe. How did the Italians reach Mexico? They usually followed the 'Spanish trajectories'. A paradigmatic example is that of the anarchist Pio Turrone, a veteran of the Spanish Civil War. After escaping from a French camp, Turrone managed to embark on a steamship with Leo Valiani in Marseille (Valiani 1983: 27-28). Once in Algeria, Turrone passed some weeks in Oran before moving to Casablanca; to make this possible, the contribution of some anarchists living in North Africa was crucial. Once in Casablanca, Turrone left for the American continent in the company of other Italian anti-fascists (Garretto 1943: 39-45). Randolfo Pacciardi and his wife, the widow of Mario Angeloni, and twenty other Italians were part of that same group (Franchini Angeloni 1978: 50). Francesco Frola, already resident in Mexico, arranged for the Italian anti-fascists to be welcomed by the local authorities (Frola

¹⁷ See also: LABAHN 1986.

1950: 245-247). The group disembarked in Veracruz in December 1941. Turrone spent the next two years in Mexico collaborating with local anarchists and Italian and Spanish exiles, as well as working as a builder. Turrone encountered “the few survivors of the French revolutionary socialist left, the many products of Spanish emigration and the tiny German anti-communist fraction” (Mercier Vega 1978: 45). Gaiele Angeloni was the widow of the Republican Mario Angeloni and a veteran of the Spanish civil war and French camps. In her memoirs, she recalled how happy she was to find “many Spanish friends there [in Mexico], this comforted me and gave me the feeling of not being in a foreign country” (Franchini Angeloni 1978: 51). Angeloni would remember with pleasure the years spent in Mexico: “Among us Italians, we saw each other often, I remember how we followed with enthusiasm the events of the war” (Franchini Angeloni 1978: 51). From the memories of Mario Angeloni’s widow emerges a multinational world.

On the night of New Year’s Eve, 1942, many dozens of European exiles gathered in the house of the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda. “We were about a hundred guests, most of us political emigrants, who had been away from our homelands for three, seven, ten and even twenty years. Many of us were veterans of the Spanish Civil War”, wrote the communist Vittorio Vidali, confirming the existence of a tightly knit transnational community (Vidali 1982: 58-59). Tina Modotti intertwined social (and political) relations with friends ‘from Mexico, Spain, Italy and other countries’ (Vidali 1982: 52).¹⁸ Her comments emerged from the memories of her partner, Vidali. He underlined the existence of a varied transnational community established in Mexico City to which Spanish, Italians and Germans belonged, most of them veterans of the Spanish Civil War.

We had an intense social life’, wrote Vidali, ‘we often had Mexican and foreign guests [...], or we went to the home of Constanza de la Mora and her very nice husband Hidalgo de Cisneros, or with the welcoming family of Mantecón, former governor of Aragon, by Pablo Neruda, Hannes Mayer, the American Gene Whitacker, Mario Montagnana, Rafael Carrillo, Miguel Velasquez, Luis Torres and many others (Vidali 1982: 56).

These memories speak not only of spaces of sociability but also politics. When we talk about exiles, we should always recall that it is precisely (also) in these private spaces that political activity develops and flourishes. “We never felt lonely, and we were always happy to attend meetings, trips, picnics, small family parties and cultural gatherings”, wrote Vidali about the years spent in Mexico City with Modotti (Vidali 1982: 52). The Spanish

¹⁸ See also: ALBERS 2002.

poetess Concha Méndez remembered a big party organized by German exiles when the news of the liberation of France reached Mexico (Reimann 2018: 205). The existence of this transnational community was favoured by a non-trivial element: many of the European anti-fascists living in Mexico City spoke Spanish well. Who had fought in the International Brigades or who had spent months in Spain during the Civil War usually spoke a fluent Spanish (Marco and Thomas 2019). Moreover, European exiles often lived in the same neighbourhoods, the same streets or even the same buildings. Czech writer Lenka Reinerová wrote in her memoirs how her neighbours included Spaniards, Hungarians, Poles, Italians and Germans. "Little by little we brought all these people together to play our small part in the fight against fascism" (Reimann 2018: 200).

A representative example is that of Mario Montagnana. Let us briefly follow his exile. Montagnana was a prominent Italian communist who had been imprisoned in French camps. In May 1941, he was released thanks to the intervention of an international committee of writers. A few days later, he embarked for the other side of the Atlantic with his wife, Annamaria Favero. The couple was supposed to settle in the United States, but that proved impossible, and the two were stuck in Mexico. Shortly after his arrival in Mexico City, Montagnana became one of the leaders of the Italian anti-fascist community in the city (Fanesi 1992: 1-2). Montagnana was a well-known communist, and it was not difficult for him to reach this leading role. Montagnana's progression was facilitated by the eruption of hostilities between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union: The outbreak of Operation Barbarossa caused the Communists to become part of the anti-fascist line up again. The other leaders of the Italian anti-fascist community in the city were the socialist Francesco Frola, in Mexico since 1938, and the communist Vidali.

During his first months in Mexico, Montagnana seemed to be lost: "It's nice here, but we want to leave! We live waiting for the day when we can get on an airplane to go to Europe, or at least to a point in the world where there are Italians with whom we can continue our fight against Fascism".¹⁹ As time went by, Montagnana adapted to Mexican life and became acquainted with the community of European exiles. As mentioned above, in the city, there was a large community of Jewish refugees fleeing racial persecution in Europe (Gleizer Salzman 2014: 259-302). Montagnana established relationships with them, especially the Italian ones. In December 1941, a few months after his arrival, Montagnana wrote that

¹⁹ AFG, Fondo Palmiro Togliatti, Carte "Botteghe Oscure", Documenti personali e corrispondenza familiare, b. 16. Letter by Mario Montagnana, 25 August 1941.

he had founded an association named after Giuseppe Garibaldi (*Alleanza Internazionale Giuseppe Garibaldi per la libertà dell'Italia*, in Italian) in a letter to his relatives in Italy: The members of the association were mostly Italians (especially veterans of the Spanish Civil War), and the former Mexican President Cárdenas supported it.²⁰ “Elements from all the political parties enrolled in the Garibaldi Association [...]. Among its members there were elements of many different nationalities”, wrote Frola in his memoirs (Frola 1905: 291). In the first issue of the publication of the Garibaldi Association, Montagnana explained the aims of the anti-fascist group: “Today we have only one aim: to defeat fascism and Nazism. We will support and adhere to everything that will broaden and strengthen the unity of the anti-fascist forces and contribute to this goal” (Fanesi 1992). The association had about one hundred members in Mexico City. It was clear that Montagnana, at this stage and a few months after his arrival, had well-established political and social relations both with Mexicans and exile communities.

The case of Montagnana was not an exception: The national communities of exiles intermingled with each other. Vicente Lombardo Toledano was essential for all this happening; he worked to ensure the different communities of exiles could come into contact and collaborate. Lombardo Toledano was a well-known union leader of communist orientation who was born in 1894. Under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, Lombardo Toledano had become one of the most notorious union leaders in the country. During the years of the Spanish Civil War, he founded the so-called Workers' University of Mexico, and many exiles would participate in its activity. During the late 1930s, Lombardo Toledano worked on the project of the *Confederación de Trabajadores de América Latina* (CTAL), a federation of all Latin American workers' forces (Acle-Kreysing 2016a: 589-591).²¹ Lombardo Toledano was universally known as one of the leading figures in the anti-fascist movement in Mexico. Therefore, many refugees contacted him as soon as they arrived in Mexico City: Toledano helped many exiles, especially the communist ones, to obtain visas or to find a job (Acle-Kreysing 2016a: 593). One of Toledano's main characteristics was his will to seek integration between the Mexican left and the European anti-fascist movements. This project became a reality mainly during the Second World War years and thanks to the many anti-fascists who moved to Mexico (Acle-Kreysing 2016a: 591).

²⁰ AFG, Fondo Palmiro Togliatti, Carte “Botteghe Oscure”, Documenti personali e corrispondenza familiare, b. 16. Letter by Mario Montagnana, 20 December 1941.

²¹ See also: VON MENTZ, PEREZ MONFORT and RADKAU 1984.

An experience like that of the periodical *Freies Deutschland - Alemania Libre* owed much to Lombardo Toledano's initiative. In 1941, this German-language publication had a circulation of between 3 500 and 4 000 copies, and its editorial staff-maintained contacts with German exiles in New York and London, testifying to the existence of an active global network despite the uncertainties of the war. This is not surprising. During the Second World War, Mexico City became the second largest centre, after Moscow, of German communist exile. What made the Mexican group so outstanding "was its unusual concentration of journalistic and organizational talent. Bruno Frei and Rudolf Feistmann were experienced editors and writers; Egon Erwin Kish was Central Europe's most famous journalist; Otto Katz [...] had run the Agence Espagne in Paris" (Zogbaum 2005: 9). Thus, the German communist exiles from Mexico City maintained contacts with other communities abroad, becoming a sort of international hub for German refugees. Toledano helped with the establishment of this transnational network. In 1943, under the patronage of President Avila Camacho, Toledano and the German exiles promoted what would be the most ambitious propaganda effort of *Alemania Libre* – the publication of 10 000 copies of *El libro negro del terror nazi en Europa: testimonio de escritores y artistas de 16 naciones* (Acle-Kreysing 2016a: 597). As Zogbaum commented 'Lombardo had called the President's attention to the book and after a Spanish translation was completed, an edition of 10,000 was printed, financed by the Mexican government. This extraordinarily large edition sold out in three months, many of the copies given away by government agencies' (Zogbaum 2005: 15). What emerges clearly in the debate that was generated around Lombardo Toledano is how the theme of the Holocaust was central to the campaigns that he promoted together with the German exiles. Lombardo Toledano also collaborated with Italian refugees, particularly the previously mentioned Garibaldi Association. Vittorio Vidali worked for Toledano's newspaper, *El Popular* (Brackhausen-Canale 2017: 135). Thanks to Toledano, Vidali and Montagnana collaborated closely with the Mexican Communist Party; occasionally, they were even invited to meetings of its Political Bureau (Pappagallo 2017: 39). Tina Modotti also collaborated with Lombardo Toledano, translating letters and articles into Spanish for him (Vidali 1982: 56).

The transnational community was not free of conflicts. There were moments of tension among the exiles in the city. In Mexico City, as elsewhere, rivalries and different political visions divided the anti-fascist community. In the Mexican case, the presence of Trotsky in the city generated a confrontation which often degenerated into violence. His assassination, in the summer of 1940, divided the exiled communities in the city, not on a national but on a political basis: "The ongoing conflict between the

Communists and their anti-Stalinist detractors was poisoning the political climate among the transnational Left in the city' (Reimann 2017: 9). In January 1942, the communist paper *Voz de México* published a caricature that has become notorious: The picture showed the rotting head of Trotsky, out of which grew a tree covered in swastikas with snakes for branches, labelled with the names of Victor Serge, Marceau Pivert, Gustav Regler, Grandizo Munis and Julian Gorkin – all of whom were exiled in Mexico. The internal divisions within the anti-fascist movement, generated mainly by Stalinist sectarianism, also produced tearing divisions in Mexico. The Italian anarchist Pio Turroni, for example, had no contact with his communist countrymen. In March 1943, the Communists interrupted a meeting organised by a group of Polish Jewish socialists to remember Henryck Erlich and Victor Alter, two Polish socialists executed in the Soviet Union. The organisers' decision to stop the event meant that there were no more serious consequences for the participants (Reimann 2017). The greatest tensions between the anti-fascist exiles were therefore produced on a political basis rather than on a national basis. The recent conflict between anarchists and communists that broke out in Spain during the civil war, as well as the Molotov Ribbentrop Pact of 1939, were elements that weighed heavily on the lives of European anti-fascist exiles in Mexico. It was therefore the political divisions that deeply divided the European community living in the country: it was impossible that Mexico could remain immune to the division between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists (Reimann 2017).

We want to close this article with a last biographical example, that of the German Paul Merker. Merker was born in 1894 and was a communist; he distinguished himself for having always been an enthusiastic party member who followed political directives. At the outbreak of the Second World War, he was in France, in Paris, where in previous years he had worked in the enlistment office of the International Brigades. Merker was interned in the French camps. At the end of 1941, Merker escaped from the Vernet camp, and thanks to contacts with the Mexican consulate in Marseille, he obtained a visa for the Central American country. Merker lived in Mexico City from 1942 to 1946, when he returned to the Soviet occupation zone of Germany and was one of the founders of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). As Herf pointed out.

From the fall of 1942 to December 1945, he regularly contributed to *Freies Deutschland* the bi-weekly journal of the German Communists in Mexico City, assumed responsibility for its general political line, and kept up an extensive correspondence with such leading figures of the German anti-Nazi emigration as Ernst Bloch, Thomas Mann, and, above all, Heinrich Mann (Herf 1994: 12).

From Merker's political writings, starting precisely from 1942 and from his moving to Mexico, emerges the presence of the racial question and the centrality of anti-Semitism in the analysis of German National Socialism. Back in Germany in the late 1940s, Merker emerged as the one and only member of the German Communist Party's Politburo "who put the Jewish question at the centre of his concerns as a Communist" (Herf 1994: 11).²²

Years later, Merker would admit that this sensitivity towards the Jewish question was as much the fruit of his political activity and his life in Mexico. Merker revealed that he was marked by his encounter in Mexico City with a varied world of exiles, including many Jews fleeing Europe (Herf 1997: 46-47). Encounters like these gave a cosmopolitan character to the years spent in Mexico by many European exiles. Merker was not an exception: Mexico City's distance from Moscow, the experience of the Popular Front years in Paris, the beginnings of Jewish persecutions in Europe, and the large European Jewish refugees created the preconditions for the most extensive discussion of the Jewish question in the history of German Communism (Herf 1997: 40). In February 1944, at a banquet to celebrate the fiftieth birthday of Merker, Lombardo Toledano pointed out that, during the previous years in Mexico City, there were exiles from all over Europe. These were political or racial exiles who, according to Lombardo Toledano, had become united with the Mexican anti-fascists, a joint family: "This war had the great benefit that it has made us travel from one part of the world to another, [through personal contacts] we have more brothers [than] ever with one another" (Herf 1997: 57). In his response to Toledano, Merker expressed his gratitude to both his Mexican and international friends.

CONCLUSIONS

In the last few years, scholars have become increasingly interested in the transnational dimension of European anti-fascist movements (García 2016). As Alix Heiniger wrote in 2015.

The recent debates on the transnational approach allow us a renewal of our paradigms by focusing on practices and the circulation of actors beyond national dimensions and thus allowing us to go beyond a narrative focused on parties or the International (Heiniger 2015: 37).

To do this, and as we have done in this article, it seems to us fruitful to use the biographical approach. As emerges from the most recent studies

²² See also: MENDES 2003: 16-18.

on the anarchist movement, it is precisely through biographies, including group biographies, that transnationalism is captured in the most tangible way possible; individuals are like hubs in networks, and that is why biographies allow us to reconstruct this same networks (Altena and Bantman 2015: 4). The biographies and trajectories of Turrone, Montagnana or Merker seem emblematic in this sense. Since history's recent 'global turn', the concept of 'networks' has been particularly adept at enabling historians to see the reciprocal connections between local, regional and global actors and to bridge the increasingly artificial divide among national and international spaces. The case we discussed in this article represents a paradigmatic example of the utility of this approach. Studying anti-fascist exiles and their networks after 1939 on a global scale allowed us to see the flows of people and ideas between Europe and the American continent.

During the last decade, transnationalism has illustrated that national histories can be rigid 'iron' cages for researchers. The value of transnationalism, as Patricia Clavin noted, "lies in its openness as a historical concept. Transnational history allows us to reflect on, while at the same time going beyond, the confines of the nation" (Clavin 2005: 438).²³ Making transnational and global history means crossing many borders, both physical and symbolic. The lives and trajectories of the exiles generated by the Spanish Civil War are an essential reminder for us in that sense. Transnationalism is also about people: the social space they inhabit, the networks they form, the political thoughts they spread, the experiences they are influenced by and the ideas they exchange. Those lives demonstrated to us the building of a real and extended transnational community within a global context. It is precisely in this direction that the global events of the Spanish exile after 1939, which we have only sketched out here, must be studied. Therefore, bearing in mind the existence of a transatlantic dimension overlooked by the historiography for many decades and still to be investigated.

The political horizon of reference for exiles in Mexico City, as in the case of any exile, was that of the motherland, as demonstrated by the example of Merker. Everything was naturally accelerated by the events of the Second World War and the hope that once it was over, every exile could quickly return home. This was true for the Italians and for the Germans, as well as for the Spanish, who hoped that the collapse of the Franco regime would follow a defeat of the Axis. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the exiles tended to collaborate among their fellow countrymen with a mind always turned to Europe; the case of the Garibaldi Association is emblematic. This group was born with the idea of supporting the war ef-

²³ See also: CLAVIN 2010.

fort of the only Italian anti-fascist forces (Frola 1950: 322-323). Its manifesto said.

The Garibaldi Association is a movement, made up of groups and individuals, particularly Italians who have emigrated, naturalised or are descendants of Italian parents. Deeply unitarian and widely popular, the Alliance seeks the support of all those who wish to help the Italian people in their struggle for liberation against the Nazi invasion and the Mussolinian tyranny (Fanesi 1992).

Nevertheless, as we have seen, anti-fascists of all nationalities participated in the activities and initiatives of the association. Therefore, we should remember that essential relations had developed between the different national groups in Mexico City between 1939 and 1945. As Sebastiaan Faber pointed out, in these communities of exiles, there was a tension between transnational and national alliances that never resolved. As we have seen also in the case of the Italian and German exiles it was indeed so. A national dimension and a more cosmopolitan one cohabited in Mexico City. This was perhaps one of the added values of anti-fascist movements on a global scale in the period between the wars. Something that could not exist in the opposite camp, the fascist one (Graham 2012: 81-85).

Belonging to the anti-fascist camp necessarily starts from a national dimension that can also be overcome, as happens, for example, in the case of those who experience the exile. In the history of anti-fascism during the interwar period there were events, such as the Spanish Civil War, which helped to reinforce the idea of being part of the same transnational front. Who had been in Spain between 1936 and 1939 and had supported the fight against Francoism was familiar with transnational practices and ideas (Reimann 2018: 200). For these men and women, it was easier to establish a cosmopolitan community. Given these premises, it will be easy to understand why the example of Mexico City seemed exemplary to us. If Edward Said was right when he pointed out that there is a close connection between exile and nationalism, at the same time he stressed the existence of cosmopolitan elements within the same experience of exile: "Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience" (Said 2000: 185). We believe that the example of the European anti-fascists in Mexico City only confirms this reflection by the Palestinian scholar on the nature of the exile: (under certain circumstances) nationalism and cosmopolitanism can coexist. Going back to the example of Alberto Bayo mentioned at the beginning of this article, what happened in Mexico between 1939 and 1945 not only had a global impact in the short term but also generated processes that would characterise the Cold War years. These are processes that, for the most part, have yet to be studied in international historiography.

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