

VOICES OF THE VANQUISHED: Spanish Women on the Left between Franco and Hitler

by Gina Herrmann, Associate Professor of Spanish, Romance Languages

On April 14, 1945, the very day the Allied troops liberated the Ravensbrück Nazi camp for women, inmate 43225, Mercedes Núñez Targa (1911-1986), had been slated for transport to the camp gas chamber. Núñez Targa's route to Ravensbrück had begun in 1931 with the declaration of Spain's progressive Second Republic. Mobilized in youth organizations along with hundreds of thousands of women who supported the Republic, Núñez Targa eventually took up a post as the head of the Spanish Communist Party in her native region of Galicia. After the defeat of the Republic in 1939, she was arrested by the Francoist police. Released from the infamous Ventas prison in Madrid three years later on a clerical error, Targa



fled to France where she joined a Spanish unit of the French Resistance in Carcassonne serving as a clandestine agent providing false papers for the underground. Captured and tortured in 1944 by the Gestapo, Núñez Targa was deported along with her female comrades to Ravensbrück. Like thousands of other Spaniards and Catalans liberated from Nazi camps, she remained in exile in France, unable to return to her Spanish homeland where Franco would remain in power until 1975.

Scholars still know relatively little about the lives of left-wing Spanish women—mainly communist, mainly working class—who followed the dangerous routes of European anti-fascism in the 1930s and '40s. With the support of a faculty grant from the Center for the Study of Women in Society I was able to travel to archives at various locations in Europe in order to discover what more might be known about the thousands of Spanish women who fled Franco's Spain and continued the struggle against Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco by joining the French Resistance.

In addition to exploring the work of Spanish women in Resistance units, I sought further information about the small number of Spanish women deported to the main Nazi concentration camp for women, Ravensbrück, known as the “hell for women,” located a short train ride from Berlin. Today the former camp is an official memorial site and archive of the state of Brandenburg. Of the total of approximately 132,000 women and children imprisoned in the camp, some 20 percent were Jewish. The others were political prisoners (some of whom were also Jewish), Jehovah's Witnesses, and the so-called “asocials,” as well as Sinti Roma and lesbians. Most deportees entered a slave labor force that included heavy outdoor physical labor, mobile construction units, textile fabrication, munitions production, and even building V-2 rocket parts for the Siemens Electric Company. In addition to incarcerating and punishing female prisoners, Ravensbrück was a training site for Nazi women guards.

Women at Ravensbrück died from myriad causes: exposure, starvation, disease, poisoning, medical experiments, torture, floggings, attacks by dogs, shootings, hangings, and death by gassing. An exact accounting of those murdered is impossible, primarily because the Nazis destroyed the camp records. But the orders of magnitude are apparent: 5,000-6,000



Left: Neus Català in her Ravensbrück prison uniform / Bibliothèque Documentation Internationale Contemporaine, Nanterre, France • Above right: Tití (L) and Neus Català, after their liberation from the Nazi camp at Ravensbrück / BDIC.

died in a gas chamber hastily built in late 1944 when Auschwitz stopped taking new arrivals. Today it is estimated that 30,000 and 50,000 women were murdered at Ravensbrück and its sub-camps.

My research represents an effort to correct the neglect of the Spanish and Catalan survivor group within the literature, historiography, and commemorative practices of Ravensbrück. For example, Sarah Helm's acclaimed and widely-reviewed 2015 book on the camp places the Spanish and Catalan presence at the camp under total erasure. The oversight is inexcusable (or disingenuous), particularly when we consider the Spanish civil war, Interbrigadista, and transnational pedigree of so many political deportees to the Nazi camps.

What I discovered in the archives in Paris, Barcelona, and Ravensbrück proved rather disappointing: there were no un-mined lists or deportation records of Spanish women. I have come to the conclusion that the sixteen existing published testimonies of Spanish women deportees remain the sum total of first-person accounts of the Spanish presence at Ravensbrück. Where the archival work proved quite fruitful, however, was in the materials that helped me contextualize the Spanish deportation within the larger history of the French Resistance and International communist anti-fascism during World War II.

Undoubtedly, Spanish women constituted a tiny group of camp inmates—probably no more than two or three hundred at all Nazi camps—and the Ravensbrück memorial today puts the number at about 170 Spanish women who passed through the camp gates. Arrested with their French women comrades, and thus possessing French papers, many Spanish and Catalan women may well have gone to the gas chamber or were worked to death without having had their Spanish identities ever registered.

My faculty grant from CSWS also allowed me to meet and interview a Spanish Ravensbrück survivor, Neus Català, who turned 100 in October 2015. In the late 1970s and in response to the silence surrounding the history of Spanish women in the French Resistance and in the Nazi camps, Català embarked on a remarkable oral history project, locating and

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interviewing other Spanish women exiles who had fought against the Occupation of France and who had survived the terror of Ravensbrück and slave labor in one of its many satellite camps. In Català's own testimony, as well as in those she collected and published, women tend to emphasize—above and beyond descriptions of their immense physical and psychic sufferings—their efforts to sabotage slave labor on assembly lines and in factories making war material for the Nazis. This trope of sabotage appears frequently in the memoirs of men and women communist political prisoners who survived incarceration under the Nazis and stands as proof of the heroism and solidarity characteristic of communist resisters. In this regard, the testimonies of Spanish women echo themes of resistance and survival that distinguish accounts from communists from various European nations. Through stories of sabotage, Spanish women long to demonstrate their belonging to a transnational, heroic communist collective of survivors. However, at the same time their testimonies highlight how their subject positions as Spaniards garnered them special consideration among their comrades who held them in high esteem as members of the vanguard of European anti-fascism, for it was in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) that Europe first faced down the Fascist enemy. A final attribute of the Spanish women's stories merits mention, and this is the will to distinguish themselves as Spanish or Catalan from among the many more numerous French women deportees alongside whom the Spanish women were detained and deported. It is quite probable that many Spanish women met their deaths in Ravensbrück registered under French aliases and will therefore never be recuperated for history as part of the thousands of Spaniards who fought the Nazis in Spain, and then in France, and then in the barracks and slave labor camps of the Nazi concentrationary system.

The support of the Center for the Study of Women and Society allowed me to continue to work on the book, *Voices of the Vanquished: Spanish Women on the Left between Franco and Hitler*, of which the study of Ravensbrück forms a part. I have been awarded a National Endowment of the Humanities Fellowship for 2017-18 during which I will complete the monograph. ■

—Gina Herrmann is the author of *Written in Red: The Communist Memoir in Spain* (U Illinois Press, 2010). An associate professor of Spanish in the UO Department of Romance Languages, she is also an affiliated faculty member in both *Judaic Studies* and *Cinema Studies*.

MORE ABOUT THE BOOK *VOICES OF THE VANQUISHED*

Voices of the Vanquished is a book about Spanish and Catalan women's oral histories that recount and grapple with their participation in anti-fascist movements in Spain during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), their fight against the dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-1975), their involvement in the French Resistance during World War II (1940-45), and for some, their survival of Nazism. The book contributes to four areas of inquiry: the history of anti-totalitarian women's movements in Europe; gendered violence against women political prisoners; oral history; and studies of identity as developed in response to intensely lived ideological affiliations.

By placing Spanish women's histories within a transnational frame of European militancy in the 1930s and 1940s, my study contests the tendency of existing research to examine these junctures as distinctly "Spanish" episodes. Additionally, this study challenges the perception of Spanish exiles as self-contained communities during the years of banishment in France.

As Spanish women who were released from Nazi camps could not return to Spain, their accounts of themselves, contemplated and crafted in exile, rely on celebratory French models that emphasize valor and virtue often at the expense of more nuanced and ambivalent depictions of how people managed to survive the war. With respect to oral history, my research represents a second point of departure from existing methods. Influenced by the writings of oral historian and literary scholar Alessandro Portelli, I regard oral accounts as crafted narratives that share traits with literature, but which also evince shifting meanings and reconstruction in response to life changes and ideological turns. Many of the women narrators told their accounts over decades, and for various audiences. Therefore, a full appreciation of their narratives must attend to the performative and identity-conferring qualities of oral histories per se, but also to filmic works that incorporate interviews as well as autobiographical writing that retain oral remnants in their rhetoric or style. My book thus offers interpretative innovations to a growing body of writing about autobiographies and oral testimonies of politically committed people, especially communists, whose self-conceptions respond to deep and often stifling relationships to political parties and the state.

Voices of the Vanquished is comprised of chapters that take readers from the revolutionary early days of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), to the period of the clandestine armed resistance to Franco (1939-1950s), and then on to the French Resistance (1940-45). The study ends with an analysis of oral testimonies of how Spanish, Catalan and French women survived Ravensbrück. These chapters build on one another, illustrating various manifestations of oral history's afterlives. Oral histories have become the materia prima of myriad forms of cultural products that circulate in part to stimulate memory about past atrocities. Beyond the oral histories I myself recorded, my book engages with traces of orality as they inhere in a variety of texts: published collections of oral histories, documentary films that feature audiovisual interviews, archival holdings, journalistic writings, and orally-inflected memoirs written by survivors. ■