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“Not knowing why and how long this difficult situation would last”: Polish exiles and refugee regime in Spain during the Second World War

The outbreak of the Second World War triggered population movements of unprecedented scale, amounting to more than forty million displaced people in Europe alone. The few neutral European states became the most coveted destinations for those attempting to flee the Nazi-occupied part of the continent, with Spain as one of the top transit countries for migrants headed to safe, overseas destinations, such as South America or the United States. The Spanish regime led by gen. Francisco Franco initially allowed them to transit through the country without significant obstacles, but its stance hardened as potential destination countries restricted the applicants' access to visas after the French defeat against the Germans in June 1940. Many people stranded in France attempted to cross the border without the necessary documents and in secret and were often detained as illegal immigrants and imprisoned during their stay on the Spanish territory.

The subject of my research project is Polish refugees, both ethnic Polish and Polish Jews, detained in Spain during the Second World War by the Francoist authorities. The study concentrates on the period ranging from 1940, when the first exiles from Poland were arrested, to the end of the war in May 1945, and is based on an extensive investigation of two main types of historical records preserved in 11 archives in five different countries. Firstly, they are documents composed by Spanish and Polish state institutions and international aid organizations, and secondly, various writings and personal testimonies of the refugees, for example, letters, memoirs, and recorded interviews. These historical records will allow me, among others, to establish the number of Polish migrants detained in Spain during the war and to determine who they were, what was their religion or profession, and whether it had any influence on their situation. I will describe the efforts of various international relief organizations and the Polish government-in-exile to help Polish refugees as well as the stance of other involved countries, e.g. Spain, Great Britain, the United States, and the Third Reich, in favor or against Polish exiles. To challenge the still widely present representation of refugees as a faceless mass of passive, hapless victims, I will pay special attention to their own perspective, explaining how they perceived their situation, what emotions it provoked, and what they did to improve it.

The expected effect of the project is a Ph.D. dissertation and a series of research papers. They will shed light on the episode that, although focused on exiles from Poland, constitutes an essential part of not only Polish history but also of the European history of 20th-century mass population movements. It can also be seen as an essential link in the chain of events leading to the development of contemporary institutions responding to the struggle of millions of displaced people all over the world. The experience of Polish refugees in Spain demonstrates universal challenges faced by wartime exiles at any given time and place and puts in a historical perspective a phenomenon still impacting millions of lives today.