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The *Retirada* refers to the exodus of the Spanish Republican forces after their defeat in 1939 by the Francoist Nationalist regime at the end of the Spanish Civil War. The term covers the idea of retreat in the military sense of the word and the exodus of a whole population.

#### A real exodus

The fall of the Catalan front and the capture of Catalonia by Nationalist troops on 26 January 1939 led to the collapse of the Republican forces. Soldiers and civilians flocked to the French border which they crossed on 27 January 1939. In 3 days, 140,000 men, women and children passed into France. A wave of half a million refugees followed over the next few days. From Bourg Madame to Cerbère, via Prats de Mollo, Las Illas, and Le Perthus, the *Retirada* spread over all of northern Catalonia.

#### Hastily set up camps

France had to face the humanitarian drama of this massive influx and find quick solutions to deal with security, food and health issues in the middle of the very harsh winter of 1939. The lack of preparation (despite a warning note from a diplomat in Spain) and the scale of the exodus resulted in the panicked detention of the incoming population, something that was a very frequent response to such crises at the time.

Reception or 'sorting' camps were set up in the open countryside at Le Boulou and Bourg-Madame. Other regrouping camps - concentration centres in the true sense of the word - were set up in haste on the region's beaches: Argelès plage, Saint-Cyprien plage, Barcarès plage. The living conditions in these camps were atrocious with no sanitary facilities. Saint-Cyprien was even officially declared a 'malaria zone'.

Between February and July 1939, some 15,000 people died of disease and dysentery. In April 1939, there were 43,000 refugees in Argelès, 70,000 in Barcarès, 30,000 in Saint-Cyprien. At the beginning of spring 1939, other camps were built on the outer fringes of the Pyrénées-Orientales, notably in Bram (Aude) and Age (Hérault).

Living conditions in the camps were precarious with attempted escapes, dysentery, inadequate healthcare and a lack of medications. Moreover, internees were put to forced labour as foreign workers and, in the absence of manpower due to mobilisation, were also marshalled into agricultural work to save crops and handle natural disasters such as the major floods of 1940 ('L'Aiguat'). While some internees joined the French Resistance, others were dispersed in 70 departments of France. Later, after the end of hostilities, a significant proportion of the refugees decided to settle in the Pyrénées-Orientales and made an important contribution to the local economy and culture. Famous names include Pau Casals, Antoni Clavé, Manolo Valiente, and Paco Ibañez.

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## PYRÉNÉES MÉDITERRANÉE EN PAYS CATALAN

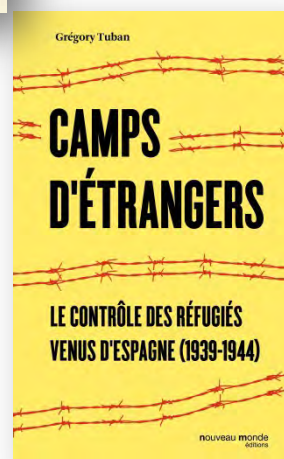
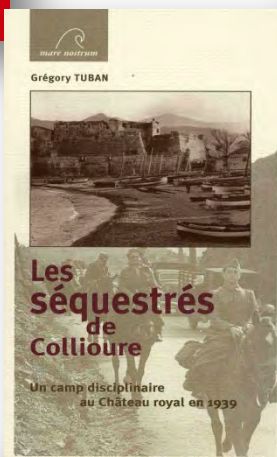
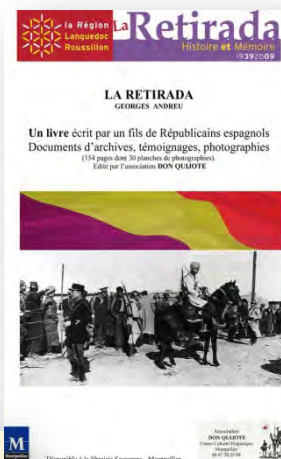
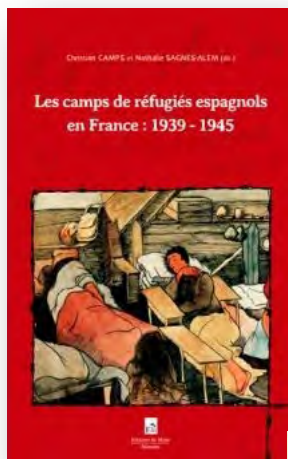
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