

Image Politics: U.S. Aid to the Spanish Republic and its Refugees

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ABSTRACT:

The Spanish Civil War marks an important chapter in the development of non-governmental refugee aid as we know it. But studying the case of U.S. aid for Spanish Republican refugees also brings into focus some of the tensions and contradictions associated with the concept of humanitarianism, including the role played by documentary images. What were the ideals that moved those who fought against fascism or aided antifascist refugees in the 1930s and '40s? Were they properly political, or did they transcend politics, becoming humanitarian? The distinction is crucial to understanding the efforts undertaken to aid Spanish Civil War refugees and the obstacles that these efforts faced.

1. A Doctor Jailed

In June 1950, the Federal Reformatory in Petersburg, Virginia opened its doors to doctor Edward Barsky, the man who had saved thousands of lives during the Spanish Civil War, working as a surgeon and director of medical services, and who in the years after had provided support to thousands of Republican refugees in France and Mexico (Deery 2009).¹ Joining Barsky's fate, albeit in different prisons, were an additional ten members of the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee (JAFRC). They were accused of anti-American activities, having refused to hand over their organization's archive—which included long

lists of Spanish refugees in France—to the U.S. Congress. Soon after, Barsky even lost his medical license (Carroll, 1994: 286; Deery, 2009; Deery, 2014).

The JAFRC had worked closely with the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC), then still named Unitarian Service Committee (USC), which itself became a target of a congressional investigation. In a letter from 2009, Charles Clements, the then director of the UUSC, criticized the way the United States had treated its own pioneers of humanitarian aid. "Though UUSC was never prosecuted," he wrote, "many individuals and

¹ This article takes up some of the arguments outlined in Faber (2010, 2011, 2012).

the organization suffered the consequences of our involvement in Spain and with Spanish Civil War refugees ...” But, he added, “there are no regrets. It was the right thing to do.”² In the editorial that opened the first issue of the *Anales del Hospital Varsovia*, a hospital journal published in the summer of 1948, very similar sentiments were voiced. The Varsovia Hospital had been founded in Toulouse, in Southern France, by Spanish refugee doctors after the Republic’s defeat in the Spanish Civil War, in order to meet their fellow refugees’ medical needs. It functioned, and survived World War II, in large part thanks to strong support from abroad, including the JAFRC and the Unitarians. Why, the editorial wondered, were the very people who had been allies and benefactors through these difficult years now targeted for persecution in their own country?³ “It is with deep emotion that we receive the news that the board of the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee in New York has been imprisoned for the ‘horrendous crime’ of being antifascist ...” Barsky and his partners, the editors stated, did not commit any other crime than “staying true to the ideals for which thousands of people fought and died in the past war, and coming to the aid of those who were hurt in that fight” (*Anales*, 1948: 1). But what precisely were the ideals that the authors of the editorial were referring to? In our pragmatic, post-ideological times, idealism perhaps no longer has the positive connotation it had then. After all, how does one distinguish between an idealist, an extremist, and a fundamentalist? But the question is relevant nonetheless. What were the ideals that moved those who fought against fascism or aided antifascist refugees in the 1930s and ‘40s? Were they properly political, or did they transcend

politics, becoming humanitarian? The distinction is not merely academic. It is crucial to understand the efforts undertaken to aid Spanish Civil War refugees and the obstacles that these efforts faced.

For legal and fiscal purposes, refugee aid is generally considered a humanitarian activity as opposed to direct political intervention. But there is something strange about that distinction. Most of the massive displacements that we have seen in the 20th and 21st centuries have responded to profoundly political causes. Displacement, after all, is often the result of some form of expulsion that occurs when a national community refuses to tolerate particular groups in its midst. But this also means that expressions of solidarity with the displaced, and any attempt to aid them, are at bottom political. This has indeed been the view of many involved in refugee aid over the past eighty years—and it was shared by the likes of U.S. Senator McCarthy or the members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC). McCarthy, HUAC and others devoted themselves for decades to persecuting U.S. citizens who tried to alleviate the suffering of the Spanish Republicans for whom returning to Franco’s Spain would have been tantamount to suicide.

2. The Republic’s Visual Propaganda

From the moment the Spanish Civil War broke out in July 1936, both Republicans and Nationalists invested a great amount of effort in campaigns meant to rally international public opinion to their side. Visual communication was central to this effort (García 2010). Among the Republic’s strengths in the struggle for international support was

2 Charles Clements, Letter to Àlvar Martínez Vidal, 15 September 2009.

3 According to Pike, the Joint Anti-Fascist Refugee Committee sent some 370,000 Francs per month to the hospital through the Unitarian Service Committee (Pike, 1984 : 175).

not only the fact that it could count on the help of large groups of talented visual artists and designers. Key, too, was the Republic's ability to frame the Spanish Civil War as much more than a political cause. From very early on, the Republican authorities managed to solidify a simple but powerful message: supporting the Republic was a *humanitarian* imperative. The fact that the rebels were massively targeting regular citizens made this argument both realistic and convincing. As a result, the most iconic images of the Spanish Civil War involve not soldiers but civilians.

As it happened, leading the Republic's international propaganda effort was the very man who fifteen years earlier had discovered the mobilizing potential of humanitarian causes: Willi Münzenberg. Münzenberg had started working with the Communist International in the late 1910s. In 1921, at Lenin's suggestion, he had founded his first large public-relations enterprise, the Internationale Arbeiter-Hilfe (Workers' International Relief; IAH or WIR). Set up to bring relief to the famine-stricken Volga region, the IAH was a tremendous success. It contained the seed of much of what would later follow (Cuevas-Wolf, 2009: 187). "Münzenberg had hit on a new technique in mass propaganda, based on a simple observation," wrote the Hungarian writer Arthur Koestler, who worked closely with Münzenberg in Paris during the years of the Spanish Civil War:

if a person gives money to a cause, he becomes emotionally involved in that cause. The greater the sacrifice, the stronger the bond; provided, of course, that the cause for which you are asked to make the sacrifice is brought to life in a vivid and imaginative manner—and that was Willy's specialty. He did not, for instance, ask the workers for charitable alms; he asked them to donate one

day's wages "as an act of solidarity with the Russian people." "Solidarity" instead of "charity" became the keyword of his campaign, and the key-slogan of the IWA. Contributors were given IWA stamps, badges, medals, pictures of life in the U.S.S.R., busts of Marx and Lenin—each donation was forged into a link. Willy had found the pattern which he was to repeat in founding the "World Committee for the Relief of the Victims of German Fascism" and in his various Chinese, Spanish and other relief campaigns: charity as a vehicle for political action. (Koestler, 1969: 252)

Through the IAH, which quickly turned into an all-purpose relief organization, Münzenberg came to understand the mobilizing power of the written and visual media. In the years following he assumed an increasingly central role as the founder and director of newspapers and journals, film production and distribution companies, as well as illustrated magazines (Cuevas-Wolf, 2009: 190). Thanks to Münzenberg and his assistants, the public discourse of the left throughout the 1930s—as materialized in newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, demonstrations, associations and campaigns—achieved an unprecedented level of sophistication, exposure and message control, helping the causes he championed attain high levels of support among the general public. Münzenberg was "ahead of both the American and Soviet governments when it came to influencing public opinion, especially in Western Europe," Koestler's biographer Michael Scammell writes. "He, more than any other single person, might be said to be the original father of the cultural cold war, pioneering, with his committees, his congresses, his front magazines, and his international petitions, methods that were to become commonplace during the post-World

War II conflict between the CIA and the KGB” (Scammell 2005).

Yet even Münzenberg’s genius could not quell the tensions undermining the broad anti-fascist alliance that the Popular Front was meant to foster—tensions that the Spanish Civil War brought sharply to the fore. They were philosophical and political, and concerned both strategy and tactics. Was the left to primarily advocate pacifism, or armed resistance and struggle? Was it to glorify some forms of violence, accept them as unfortunate but necessary, or condemn them outright? Was it to limit its internationalist commitment to social and humanitarian aid, or include political and military intervention? In what follows I will formulate two main arguments. First, the Spanish Civil War marks an important chapter in the development of non-governmental refugee aid as we know it. Second, studying the case of U.S. aid for Spanish Republican refugees brings into focus some of the tensions and contradictions associated with the concept of humanitarianism, including the role played by *documentary images*, particularly photographs of victims.

Given the nature of the war in Spain and Münzenberg’s central role in shaping its narrative, the documentary legacy of the Spanish Civil War is, among other things, a visual archive of civilian hardship. It documents the lives of the thousands of women, children and elderly who died in the urban bombing campaigns (Guernica, Barcelona, Valencia, Madrid), and the hundreds of thousands of Spaniards who were driven from their homes—and eventually their country—by the advance of Franco’s forces. And if this was the first time that magazine and newspaper readers got to see a major armed conflict up close, it was also the first time the modern visual media documented the tragic fate of the displaced (Sontag, 2003: 21).

Images we are now used and perhaps numb to—long columns of civilians on foot carrying as much as they humanly can; throngs of people bottlenecked at a border post; emaciated but combative men herded into makeshift camps; anonymous victims looking into the camera from behind a barbed-wire fence—first reached the global public’s eyes in 1936-1939.

As I’ve argued elsewhere, the Spanish Civil War saw the visual birth of the modern refugee (Faber 2011). But the humanitarian legacy of the Spanish Civil War goes beyond images. The visual media coverage of the Spanish displacement crisis helped spark a humanitarian impulse that gave rise to governmental and non-governmental agencies focused primarily on refugee aid—and which, in turn, were quick to realize the power of visual media to move the public to action. Using this public support, in the years following the Spanish Civil War these agencies saved thousands of lives and helped establish the organizational infrastructure and legal framework that still exist today. But the difficulties and contradictions that some of these pioneering initiatives ran into, both during and after the war in Spain, are also a necessary part of this story.

The photographers covering the Spanish Civil War shot many images of displaced civilians that caused great distress among readers and viewers elsewhere in the world. Scenes that by now have become familiar were anything but in the 1930s. As I wrote in the catalog of the exhibit *The Mexican Suitcase*, which gathers more than 4,000 photographic images of the Spanish Civil War shot by Robert Capa, Gerda Taro, and David Seymour:

The first analogies that came to mind were biblical. In February 1939, the editors of the *Picture Post*, at a loss for words, compare the images of this “greatest mass flight in modern

history” to the Old Testament or a “painting by one of the old masters.” *Life* magazine’s headlines talk about “the greatest mass exodus of modern times,” a “heroically tragic epic”: “Rarely have so much despair and physical misery been seen in one place in the history of the world” (*Life*, 1939: 28). To be sure, this was not the first large-scale refugee crisis of the twentieth century—the aftermath of World War I had seen mass displacements, too. But, as said, it *was* the first to be widely covered by the visual media. We might say that Capa, Taro and Chim played a key role in establishing the iconography of twentieth-century displacement. (Faber 2011)

From the beginning, this iconography manifested an unresolved tension. On the one hand, the Spanish people—men, women, and children—were depicted in posters, newsreel footage, documentaries, and photographs as deeply politicized heroes bravely fighting on the frontline of the struggle against world fascism. On the other hand, they were portrayed as defenseless victims in need of protection and aid.

3. The Politics of Humanitarianism

A very similar tension was built in the refugee laws and policies, as well as the organizational infrastructures for refugee aid which began to emerge on a broad, international scale around this very same time. At the heart of this tension between the refugee as agent and as victim is the distinction between the humanitarian and the political. Should mass displacements due to causes other than natural disasters be classified as a humanitarian or a political phenomenon—and do they call for humanitarian or political solutions? Hannah Arendt famously pushed for the latter. The statelessness of refugees, she argued in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, in effect leaves them without rights; and the ability of states to

simply expel whole communities of unwanted is a perverse byproduct of the doctrine of state sovereignty (Arendt, 1973: 271-90). “The popular idea that the world refugee problem is somehow independent of politics is certainly touching,” Roger Rosenblatt wrote more recently a propos of the war in Kosovo; “But it is also stupid and dangerous. The confusion works to the great advantage of the world’s more malevolent leaders [...] because the preoccupation with suffering, any suffering, diverts attention from what produced that suffering in the first place” (Rosenblatt, 1999: 18-19).

But if the distinction between politics and humanitarianism in matters of refugee aid is arguable, it was nevertheless crucial to the thousands of U.S. citizens who felt deeply affected by the events in Spain and compelled to do something to help. The distinction was especially important to the fundraising efforts on behalf of Republican Spain during and after the conflict. The neutrality laws that the U.S. Congress had adopted in 1935, 1936 and 1937 expressly prohibited any contribution to the military effort, and barely left a legal loophole for collections aimed at “purely” humanitarian objectives. Once the Republic had been defeated, the same legal and fiscal limitation applied to the many organizations dedicated to refugee aid. Ironically, however, the legal framework that made the aid possible in the first place ended up being the source of its demise. The mere suspicion that entities like that headed up by Barsky had political motives was enough to paralyze them almost completely. In fact, the House Un-American Activities Committee justified its investigation of Barsky c.s. by alleging that they were involved in subversive political propaganda instead of humanitarian work. J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, for his part, believed that the

veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade—the U.S. volunteers who had fought in the Spanish Civil War—had been trained as the military vanguard to be deployed for a Communist revolution in the United States, and that this enterprise was being financed in part with the funds that the JAFRC was raising (Deery, 2009: 174-176).

Sadly, the fate of Barsky and his partners was representative of the work done in the United States on behalf of the Spanish Republican refugees. Their effort was important and valiant, but it ran into two important obstacles: attempts at sabotage from reactionary corners and, as we will see in a moment, increasing internal divisions that were also political in nature. Perhaps not surprisingly, these divisions tended to center on the organizational role and aspirations (public or secret, real or suspected) of the Communists. The truth is that, in the United States, the Cold War began in the 1920s, with a slight respite between 1935 and 1945, although it never retreated completely. Even at the height of Popular-Front collaboration in support of the Spanish Republic, there were mutual suspicions, especially between Socialists and Communists, and between Stalinists and anti-Stalinists (Smith, 2009: 145).

4. U.S. Support of the Spanish Republic

If the 1930s in the United States were years of misery, social tension and economic crisis, they also saw an unprecedented level of civic mobilization and solidarity, sparking the constant, feverish creation of associations, leagues, alliances, clubs, groups and unions, all with their own abbreviations, meetings, national and local committees, and newsletters and magazines. All this organizational energy responded to fear, and a need for mutual protection, but also to a utopian drive. The

outbreak of the war in Spain served, among other things, to intensify and justify those fears while at the same time fueling the political hopes and aspirations of the U.S. population and its leaders. This explains why, almost immediately after the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, the country saw the emergence of hundreds of organizations identified with the Republican side (Rey García, 1997; Smith, 2013). The story of the almost 3,000 U.S. volunteers who participated in the Spanish Civil War is well known. But in reality tens of thousands of U.S. citizens saw their lives marked, for at least three years, by a deep and genuine concern over Spain.

The most important of the pro-Republican organizations in the United States was the North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy (NACASD o NAC). Founded in October 1936 at the initiative of the American Friends of Spanish Democracy and other allied groups, it was directed by the Methodist bishop Francis McConnell and the reverend Herman Reissig. The American Friends also created the Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy (MBASD), headed by Dr. Barsky (Rey García, 1997: 89,100), which merged with the North American Committee in January 1938 (Smith 2009). Both organizations were “Popular-Frontist” in nature, in the sense that they served to bring together around the cause of antifascism people from a broad range of political backgrounds, from pacifists and liberal progressives to Communists and Socialists—the kind of broad unity in the face of fascism that Georgi Dimitrov, head of the Communist International, had called for in the summer of 1935. Like many of the organizations inspired by Dimitrov’s appeal, the NAC and MBASD benefited by the presence, expertise and organizational capacity of the Communists, without necessarily ceding all institutional control to them. (Eric Smith,

who has investigated the organizational dynamic of refugee aid groups, concludes that the Communist Party made important contributions to the refugee organizations but was never able to take full control of their leadership [2009, 138, 145, 164-65]; see also Rey García, 1997: 87-112.)

Between 1936 and 1939, the NAC and MBASD undertook a series of successful publicity campaigns that attracted broad media attention and allowed them to raise an important amount of funds. By January 1938, for instance, the Medical Bureau declared it had raised more than 150,000 dollars (Rey García, 1997: 92).⁴ These funds allowed the Bureau to send medical personnel, drugs, ambulances and other goods to Republican Spain, where Barsky was doing an extraordinary job organizing the Republican army's medical services and hospital installations (Deery, 2009: 171). But pro-Republican organizations in the United States did not limit themselves to medical and humanitarian aid. They also applied pressure to the Roosevelt administration to abandon neutrality, lift the arms embargo on Spain, and intercede on behalf of Spain's democratically elected government. The three years of intense concern and dedication are an important chapter in the collective memory of the American Left (Carroll & Fernández 2007).

6. Refugee Aid and Visual Media

It is not hard to imagine the psychological and political impact on this community of the news that Franco had finally won the war. Still,

the Republican cause did not die. More Spaniards than ever were in need of aid, although the nature of the aid they needed had changed. In the face of these developments, several pro-Republican organizations decided to dissolve or turned themselves into nonprofits exclusively devoted to aid to prisoners and refugees. In the three or four years following, a large number of organizations of this type emerged—dozens in the United States alone, where the most important at the national level were the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee, already mentioned, along with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), the Unitarian Service Committee (USC), the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign (SRRC), the International Relief Association, and the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), which would later merge with the International Rescue Committee (IRC). Although all these organizations defined their mission as exclusively humanitarian, and although several worked together, their job was soon hampered by tensions and conflicts of a political nature. In April 1939, the NAC/MBASD transformed itself into the Spanish Refugee Relief Campaign (SRRC), with a purely humanitarian profile and with “no connection with any political group.”⁵ The decision to minimize the political profile of the old NAC was both tactical and pragmatic. The half million Spanish refugees in southern France posed a tremendous humanitarian challenge, whose solution demanded an unprecedented fundraising effort. More than ever it was necessary to appeal to the broadest possible

⁴ Smith cites the official numbers from the U.S. government, which state that the NAC and MBASD together raised \$805,799.78 (Smith, 2009: 153).

⁵ “Questions and answers on the Spanish refugees. A supplement to the Pilot manual”; “Resolution No. 1. Adopted at the Executive Board Meeting of the Medical Bureau and North American Committee to Aid Spanish Democracy. April 18, 1939”, Spanish Refugee Relief archives, Columbia University, Part L, Box 2.

segment of the U.S. population. No one doubted that clear political affiliations would prove counterproductive for this effort, especially among the various religious communities. Similarly, it was necessary to depoliticize the organization in order to make it eligible for the increasingly generous funds that the U.S. administration and other governments were setting aside for refugee aid in Europe through the National War Fund (1943-47) and the War Refugee Board (1944-45).

The SRRC's main task was to maintain the American public interest for the Spanish problem, to convince it that the suffering of hundreds of thousands of Spanish refugees in the south of France was unjust and unacceptable, and persuade it of the fact that the urgency of the situation transcended any kind of particular political interest. With those goals in mind, the SRRC developed several visual media campaigns. This made sense; after all, as we have seen, photography and film had already been central to media coverage of the war, as well as in both camps' efforts to secure international support.

In fact, the refugee crisis only intensified the role of photojournalism. The images of the thousands of desperate refugees who starting in January tried to cross the Spanish-French border were more dramatic than ever. But these pictures did not only appear in magazines and newspapers. Capa and other photographers allowed the SRRC and other refugee organizations to use them for their awareness and fundraising campaigns, trying to turn the public's indignation into a philanthropic impulse (Faber 2009). In the course of 1939, the New York office of the SRRC and its more than 100 delegations across the United States undertook a large number of projects. The most ambitious among these was a fundraising campaign around a 30-minute

documentary film on the French concentration camps in which the hundreds of thousands of Republican refugees languished. Entitled *Refuge*, it was a dubbed and shortened version of the French film *Un peuple attend* (A People in Waiting), directed that same year by Jean-Paul LeChanois (also known as Jean-Paul Dreyfus). It included newsreel footage but also original takes of life in the camps, shot with a camera hidden in a grocery bag (Crusells 2006).

7. Unitarians Under Fire

The *Refuge* campaign was the SRRC's last large project. As many other Popular-Front organizations, it did not survive the consequences of the German-Soviet non-aggression pact of August 1939. In March of the following year, a conflict between Communists and non-Communists led to the departure of Barsky and his allies. (Barsky had joined the CPUSA in 1935 [Deery, 2009: 170].) Those who left formed their own independent organization, devoted primarily to a "Rescue Ship Mission"—a boat that would transport Spanish refugees to Latin America—but that project, too, ran aground due to internal conflicts and barriers that the U.S. government put up. In March 1942, the United American Spanish Aid Committee, the Rescue Ship Mission and the American Committee to Save Refugees merged to form the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee. Directed once more by Eddie Barsky, it poured all its energies in a new campaign: the "Spanish Refugee Appeal". (The remaining members of the SRRC, meanwhile, ended up joining the Emergency Rescue Committee (ERC), directed from France by Varian Fry, who famously helped save dozens of artists and intellectuals, including Hannah Arendt, Marc Chagall, and Anna Seghers.) Because the JAFRC did not have a license to dispense humanitarian aid in

Europe, however, Barsky's committee allied itself from the start with the Unitarian Service Committee (USC). It was the USC which distributed the funds raised by the JAFRC, under specific conditions set by Barsky's group. This is how we come back to the Varsovia Hospital, which was one of the main collaborative projects between the Joint Antifascists and the Unitarians.

The Unitarian Service Committee, established in 1940 by the American Unitarian Association (AUA), was one of the largest and most important U.S. refugee organizations. It played a decisive role saving thousands of displaced Europeans before, during, and after World War II. At the height of its activity, the USC managed an annual budget of over a million dollars. These funds came from different sources: not only the National War Fund, the War Refugee Board and the Intergovernmental Committee on Refugees, but also from Barsky's Spanish Refugee Appeal, which over its various years of operation ended up contributing some 300,000 dollars (DiFiglia 1990).

To understand this alliance between the U.S. radical Left and a religious organization like the Unitarian Church, it's worth recalling the prominent presence of several Protestant congregations among the organizations that rallied behind the Spanish Republic from the beginning of the Civil War. Although the American Unitarian Association itself did not have a clearly defined political profile, the Service Committee—as well as the organization's monthly magazine, *The Christian Register*—attracted intellectuals whose antifascist commitment had drawn them to the radical Left. Under the editorship of Stephen

Fritchman, for instance, the *Register* opened its pages to Communists and fellow travelers like Howard Fast, W.E.B. DuBois, Earl Browder, and Paul Robeson. Shortly after the end of World War II, the Unitarians' refugee work suffered a major blow, thanks in large part to its collaboration with Barsky's Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee. In late 1945, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)—created in 1938 and directed at that time by Representatives Wood and Rankin—turned its eyes to the JAFRC. As mentioned above, HUAC suspected that the Committee was a Communist front organization, which would disqualify it for its federal license as a charitable, tax-exempt organization. (From its very founding, HUAC had been keenly interested in groups and individuals in solidarity with the Spanish Republic, including the veterans and friends of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, as the group of U.S. volunteers in Spain became known.) HUAC's investigations of the Joint Antifascist led it to the offices of the Unitarian Service Committee, which after all was the recipient of the funds Barsky and his people raised.

In October 1946, a seven-member Unitarian delegation appeared before Wood and Rankin to prove that the USC was a purely American and humanitarian organization—that is, apolitical and not subservient to foreign interests (Faber, 2012:50-52). In a closed session, the Unitarians declared that their Service Committee dispensed aid to all refugees in need of it, independent of their political affiliation, and “as long as there was no attempt to make use of the relief for political purposes”.⁶ At the same time, however, they had to admit that the USC had

6 Testimony of Howard Lee Brooks before the Committee on Un-American Activities. House, 21 October 1946, p. 164, *Lexis Nexis Congressional*, Hearing ID HRG-1946-UAH-0012, CIS-NO: 79 HUn-T.17, <http://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t29.d30.hrg-1946-uah-0012?accountid=12933>.

no specific mechanisms in place to prevent the presence of Communists in its ranks. The case attracted a fair amount of media attention. It stained the Unitarians' reputation and sparked political conflicts within the Association, while tensing the relations with other refugee aid organizations. Throwing more fuel on the fire, that same year a representative of the rival International Rescue Committee wrote a letter to the Unitarian leadership to complain that two of the USC's central operatives in Europe, Herta (Jo) Tempi and Noel Field, were giving preferential treatment to Communist refugees, were themselves Communist Party members, and even worked for the Soviet secret police. Around the same time, similar charges surfaced in Toulouse, where several non-Communist organizations alleged that the recipients of USC funds were discriminating against non-Communists. This included the Varsovia Hospital, which in the U.S. was known as the Walter B. Cannon Memorial, named for a well-known surgeon from Boston who had died in 1945. In light of these accusations, Cannon's widow asked the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee in 1948 to stop using her late husband's name. The JAFRC ignored the request (Schlesinger, 2000: 403). By then, however, the Unitarians had already withdrawn from the hospital project. Although the charges of discrimination were exaggerated, they held a kernel of truth. The two main USC operatives in Europe, Jo Tempi and Noel Field, were Communists, as were many of the refugees who received the Unitarians' aid (Barth, Schweizer & Grimm 2005; Pike, 1984: 174). This should not come as a surprise, given the high percentage of Communists among the refugee population as a whole. Still, the American Unitarian Association was alarmed by the accusations and sent an investigative committee to Europe.

Its report concluded that there was no evidence to support the charges (Christian Register, 1946: 501-523). Nevertheless, the episode prompted a purge among the Unitarian ranks that led to the departure of Fritchman (editor of the *Register*), of both Tempi and Field, and of Charles Joy, who had directed the USC's European operations (Pike, 1984: 175).

8. Images to the Rescue

It was in the context of growing doubt and suspicion that the USC and the JAFRC decided to undertake another publicity campaign that, once again, put visuals front and center. In 1946, the USC and JAFRC commissioned the filmmaker Paul Falkenberg to produce the documentary *Spain in Exile*,⁷ and in the spring of that same year, the USC hired Walter Rosenblum, a young Jewish photographer from New York, to spend several months in Europe to document the Committee's extensive work with refugees.

"It is certain that you will dislike the shameful truth that this picture is about to reveal," Quentin Reynolds, a well-known war correspondent, tells the viewers in his introduction to *Spain in Exile*. "The picture is the story of a debt—a debt that we owe, a debt that is still on the books. It is an old debt. It was incurred eight years ago, long before Hitler marched into Poland." The film, 20 minutes in length, combines newsreel footage of the Spanish Republican exodus in early 1939 with newly shot scenes documenting the lives of the thousands of Spanish refugees remaining in France. The narration links the Spanish Civil War directly to World War II. "We didn't know then what we know now," Reynolds' voice booms over the heart-wrenching newsreel images of the Spaniards' border crossing and

7 Born in Germany in 1903, Falkenberg had emigrated to the United States in 1938.

their lives in the French refugee camps. “This is what total war looks like. The first experiment in total war and already half a million refugees ...” The film goes on to highlight the Spaniards’ role in the fight against the Nazis, their use as forced labor, and their passage through camps like Mauthausen, Dachau, and Bergen-Belsen. The film also contrasts their heroism in the struggle against international fascism with their precarious existence in postwar France—“They are underfed, poorly clad,” Reynolds says; “they wear the same clothing winter and summer”—which is scandalously similar to their life during the war. At the same time, *Spain in Exile* highlights the good work done by the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee through the Unitarian Service Committee at the Varsovia Hospital and elsewhere. After the film’s closing scene, Reynolds reappears on the screen with a final appeal to the viewers:

You have just seen the truth about the first victims of total war. It is not enough just to stand appalled. Our job is to see that the heroic men and women who struck the first blows against Hitler and Franco do not remain the forgotten fighters of World War II. The children you have seen in this picture are the hope of Spanish democracy. Boys and girls who were baptized in the blood of their fathers fighting in Spain are the chief concern of the Committee. I hope they are your concern, too.

While *Spain in Exile* was likely circulated among the Unitarian community, Rosenblum’s touching refugee portraits taken alongside the film crew reached a much wider audience. Rosenblum was a young progressive: born in 1919 into a poor Jewish immigrant family living on New York’s Lower East Side, he had

begun to photograph his neighborhood as a teenager, using a borrowed camera. In 1937 he joined the Photo League, a vibrant community of New York photographers, where he met Lewis Hine, Berenice Abbott and Elizabeth McCausland, and studied with Paul Strand. When the USC hired him, he had just been discharged from the U.S. armed forces, where he had photographed and filmed the invasion of Normandy and the liberation of the Dachau concentration camp (Faber 2008). In the fall of 1946, Rosenblum’s photographs of Spanish refugees began to appear in the U.S. media—not merely in the Unitarian’s magazine *The Christian Register* but also in high-circulation venues like the *New York Times*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, the paper *PM*, and the popular weekly *Liberty*.

Unlike Capa’s, Rosenblum’s refugee images were almost all posed. Showing the refugees in a dignified manner, they had great dramatic power. In a March 1947 reportage in *Liberty* magazine, Rosenblum’s photographs transmitted a clear aesthetic and political purpose. But while the captions mentioned the Spaniards’ role in the anti-Nazi resistance, the images themselves avoided the association of the Republicans with political militancy or armed struggle. Instead, they emphasized the Spaniards’ material needs and social respectability.⁸ The reportage opened with a full-page print of two refugee boys showering. The other photographs showed one-armed men stitching espadrilles (“Badly disabled exiles, like these who lost arms fighting the Nazis, will do any kind of work to keep their self-respect”); happy children eating, playing, and receiving donated clothes; Spanish surgeons administering a spinal puncture; and a perfectly composed image of a father-like doctor in a pinstripe suit (he “served with the

⁸ Only a few of Rosenblum’s 1946 photos made it into the press at the time. A fuller collection is held by the Tamiment Library at New York University.

Maquis, then returned to help his fellow exiles”) giving friendly advice to a four-year-old girl—an image more resonant of an advertisement than of news photography (Rosenblum, 19).

Yet even this successful campaign involving film and photography did not serve to stem the negative effects of the HUAC investigation. As fundraising dwindled—both among the Unitarian congregations and the general public—government funds dried up as well. By 1948, the USC had cut its number of programs in half. By early 1949, Noel Field, who had left the USC in December 1947, mysteriously disappeared. In the course of the next three years, his name came up prominently in several spy trials in Hungary, East Germany, and Czechoslovakia. (It later transpired that he had been abducted by secret police.) In the early 1950s, two prominent American Trotskyites, Nancy and Dwight MacDonald founded the Spanish Refugee Aid (SRA), devoted exclusively to aiding non-Communist refugees, whose fate, the MacDonalds felt, had been neglected for years. Dr. Barsky’s fate, meanwhile, had taken a turn for the worse. He had founded the American Medical Bureau to Aid Spanish Democracy. He had been one of the first Americans to leave for Spain, where he founded and managed seven hospitals, and reached the rank of major by October 1938. He had helped found the Joint Antifascist Refugee Committee in 1942, which among other things sponsored the transport of Spanish refugees to Mexico, where the Barsky Sanatorium was created in 1945 (Deery, 2009: 173)⁹. But by the following January, the Committee was forced to appear before HUAC, marking the beginning of a costly legal process that would take ten years (prompting its own fundraising campaigns) and would absorb much of the surgeon’s

prodigious energy. When he was released from jail in November 1950 and reunited with his wife and two-year-old daughter, he had lost more than twenty pounds and suffered from ulcers. He withdrew from the direction of the JAFRC in January. In 1955 a series of economic and legal setbacks forced the JAFRC to dissolve (Deery, 2009: 192). Barsky continued to be involved in progressive causes. In 1964 he was a founding member of the Medical Committee for Human Rights, which gave medical help to activists who dared to join in the violent struggles for civil rights for African-Americans in the US South. Later, he protested the war in Vietnam. He did not live to see the end of the dictatorship in Spain; he died nine months before Francisco Franco.

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⁹ In 1944 he wrote a 300-page memoir that still remains unpublished

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