



**Guadalupe Adámez Castro**, *Gritos de papel: las cartas de súplica del exilio español (1939–1945)* (Granada: Comares, 2017, 323 pp., ISBN 9788490454916).

**Fabien Deshayes and Axel Pohn-Weidinger**, *L'Amour en Guerre: Sur les traces d'une correspondance Paris-Algérie, 1960–1962* (Paris, Bayard, 2017, 280 pp., ISBN 9782227489486).

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Wars are earthquakes which have generated *tsunamis* of writing, much of it composed by inexperienced and untutored authors. The enforced separation of loved ones and family members creates an urgent desire to remain connected through writing. Through writing, soldiers attempt to stay in control of their affairs at home and to assert their social identity while absent from the very environment which gives it meaning. In the twentieth century, conscripted soldiers, wartime evacuees and displaced persons generated a huge documentary flow in which thousands have expressed their fears, desperation and sense of loss.

Two recent works illustrate, in very different ways, how wartime writings can give us privileged glimpses of otherwise hidden lives. The extraordinary circumstances of war throw up both personal and bureaucratic writings which open windows onto the experiences of ordinary people under exceptional pressure. Apart from retrospective war memoirs, we already have some astonishing epistolary exchanges between loving couples separated by war. Martha Hanna studied a corpus of more than 2,000 letters exchanged by a French peasant couple during the First World War (Hanna). As in other similar corpuses, they wrote of their everyday concerns revealing intimate secrets of sexual practices, contraception and childbirth. The postal silence of one correspondent could create anguish in the other, the woman afraid that her husband had been killed, the man haunted by the fear that his wife might be unfaithful during his long absence at the front. Romantic love and sensuality also infused

the prolific correspondence of Guerrino Botteri, an elementary Italian schoolteacher, and his young wife Selma Onghari, who was training as a postal official, during the same war. They were educated people, but from modest social origins, and but for the war they would have remained entirely unknown to us. Their intimate writing functioned as a kind of sexual safety valve, using a strong religious charge to channel the erotic chemistry which simmered through their letters (Dondeynaz; and see Lyons 2013, ch. 9). A new work by Fabien Deshayes and Axel Pohn-Weidinger belongs in this company, although this time the war in question was the French-Algerian conflict, and it will be discussed in the second part of this article.

Personal writings in time of war take on a different tone depending on who is the addressee. Letters to spouses and lovers may be honest and frank. Letters to parents, on the other hand, which might often be read aloud *en famille*, were careful to avoid shocking revelations. They usually underplayed the dangers facing the soldier, because their primary purpose was to console and re-assure. The first work under discussion here, in which Guadalupe Adámez Castro analyses the writings of Spanish Civil War refugees, deals with texts which were not at all discreet about war-time suffering. On the contrary, when refugees petitioned relief organisations for assistance, they paraded their suffering as a demonstration of their sincerity and a justification of their urgent needs. I turn first to this example and its context.

In 1937, General Franco's motley nationalist coalition of Falangists, right-wing Catholics, Islamic Moroccan troops and Italian fascist soldiers defeated republican forces on the northern Spanish front. In January 1939, they delivered the final blow to the Spanish Republic when their armies swept across Catalonia. The Catalans, including anarchists, socialists, communists and liberals had fought for a Spanish republic which would bring equality and social justice; at the same time they had fought for a Spain which would recognise the independent culture and language of their rich province. These dreams of provincial autonomy were now in ruins, and they would not be resurrected until after the death of Franco in 1975. In 1939, the last bastions of republicanism were crumbling. The Catalan capital Barcelona itself, once the headquarters of European anarchism, fell at the end of January. Fearing reprisals, thousands of Catalan republicans, socialists and anarchists fled over the border to France. Franco's imminent victory sparked off a mass exodus of the desperate and defeated. Their subsequent petitions for assistance from various relief organisations form the raw material of Guadalupe Adámez's book.

In 1936, the nationalists had closed off the western Pyrenean frontier at Irún, so that when their armies entered the Basque country in 1937, refugees were forced to escape by sea, from the ports of Bilbao, San Sebastián and Santander. Some went to Mexico — the only country, then under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas, to welcome Spanish refugees who were elsewhere identified as dangerous ‘reds,’ *los rojos*. Others were helped by charitable and left-wing organisations to find refuge in France, the Soviet Union, Britain, Belgium, Denmark or Switzerland. In 1939, however, Franco had ordered a blockade of the ports and escape by sea was not an available option. When Catalonia fell, somewhere between 350,000 and a half a million people sought to flee into France by walking north and crossing the Pyrenean frontier, in a huge displacement of people known as *La Retirada* (Ripol). Others fled by sea to North Africa. Many were later repatriated to Spain, others were to join the French resistance or the French Foreign Legion, but not before they had suffered for months in makeshift camps in south-west France, sleeping on wind-swept beaches until barracks and sanitary facilities were improvised for them. The history of these waves of refugees can be rescued from their writings in exile. Their individual memoirs of the French concentration camps—which is what the French called them—defined a collective experience, preserved their political identity in exile and turned the camps of Argelès, Collioure and elsewhere into sites of republican memory.

Guadalupe Adámez focuses on another form of self-writing: letters of petition to aid organisations, sometimes written to try to locate family members and loved ones from whom the refugees had become separated in their rapid and chaotic exodus. Later, they wrote to relief organisations asking to be placed on an emigrant ship to Mexico: an appeal which demanded writing skill (usually in Castilian Spanish) and constructing a justificatory narrative of their life. Three organisations in particular left archives which Guadalupe Adámez has effectively analysed: SERE, the *Servicio de Evacuación a los Republicanos Españoles*, a republican organisation which selected quotas from different political formations to fill the boats destined for Mexico; the UGT, the *Unión General de Trabajadores*, a trade union associated with the Spanish Socialist Party with an office in exile in Paris, which recommended its own candidates to SERE; and the CTARE, the *Comité Técnico de Ayuda a los Republicanos Españoles*, in Mexico itself. These were not the only organisations which assisted the Spanish refugees, but their different ideological persuasions reflected the conflicts which subsisted within the republican camp. While the UGT selected its own candidates for evacuation, SERE made the final choice, giving priority to applicants whose petitions had been channelled through recognised parties and trade unions. It follows that political affiliations were important criteria for selection, and this explains why many

petitions became autobiographies which emphasised the writer's commitment to the republican cause.

Behind every letter, Adámez argues, lay a family tragedy, a story of defeat and separation (Adámez Castro, 104). Most petitions were written by men, not surprisingly since the majority of those interned in French camps were male, and moreover aid organisations specifically asked that applications be submitted by the head of the family. Writers soon learned the rules of the game, and adopted the most effective strategies of self-representation to achieve their goals. Their petitions deployed common rhetorical devices. They presented themselves, for example, as active militants, listing the various positions of responsibility they had held in the party or union apparatus. They stressed the longevity of their deep commitment to the republican cause. If they were applying through the UGT, they paid homage to the union itself, suggesting that both the applicant and the reader of the petition were united in the same anti-fascist struggle. In addition, they developed a discourse of suffering, relating their own ill-health, and the history of family members, perhaps imprisoned, shot or even raped by nationalist forces (Adámez Castro, 127). In all these appeals for help, the writer's individual life story was submerged in his or her appeal to a collective identity, as a unionist, republican soldier and a victim of the civil war. The writer's role in the activity of the group was a vital part of his or her autobiography (Adámez Castro, 128).

Historians have for some time been aware that welfare petitions embody autobiographies which potentially contribute to a 'history from below.' They are a form of writing which in order to succeed has to conform to administrative imperatives and follow bureaucratic rules but, even within these constraints, they suggest an autobiographical core on which a narrative of poverty or exile can take shape (Sokoll; Gestrich et al.; Earner-Byrne).

'Deference, Demands, Supplication'—this was how Camillo Zadra and Gianluigi Fait summarised their collection of studies on writing to the powerful. Writers addressing letters to authorities usually adopted a deferential tone which recognised their own inferior status, they often sought some personal advantage and sometimes they did so in begging or grovelling language. But this was not always the case, and Zadra and Fait's title was too short to encompass the wide range of possible attitudes expressed in the genre of 'Writing Upwards,' a label which describes the multiple ways in which poor, desperate or indignant people addressed their superiors (Lyons 2015). Writings to the powerful might be abusive or obsequious, or they could denounce neighbours, traitors and corrupt officials. Sometimes the writer assumed a network of reciprocal obligations

and reminded a superior authority of its duty to fulfil earlier promises. The underlying condition of all writing upwards was social or political inequality between the correspondents. For poor people addressing powerful forces, it was wise to be deferential and cautious.

Studies of Russian petitions and denunciations in the twentieth century have also highlighted the importance of flattering officials as well as appealing to their consciences, and they have suggested that certain paternalistic aspects of Tsarist rule were also present under the Soviet system (Pyle; Fitzpatrick 1996, 1997). Letters to eminent leaders have also provided a fruitful source for historians. Marten van Ginderachter analysed thousands of letters sent between 1865 and 1934 to the Belgian royal family. Most asked for some assistance, and normally the monarch obliged by sending a small gift, which showed that the strategy could be productive.

The petitions of Spanish Civil War refugees were a little different. These were after all Spanish republicans, some of them anarchists, who had fought for an ideal of social equality. It went against the grain for them to adopt a deferential tone or to treat the recipient of their petitioning letter as a superior. As Guadalupe Adámez Castro shows, her petitioners presented their life-stories for self-evaluation not as humble subordinates but as comrades. 'Apreciable camarada'—respected comrade—was a common form of address, and forms of farewell made similar references to the anti-fascist cause in which writer and addressee stood side by side, such as this signing-off flourish: 'salud y democracia, lucharemos hasta morir'—salvation and democracy, we will struggle till we die (Adámez Castro, 129–131). The collective discourse of these autobiographers was rooted in a sense of fraternal solidarity in the fate of the defeated republic.

The literacy competence shown by many writers was poor, and a few had barely mastered what Susan Whyman called the art of 'epistolary literacy,' which is not surprising in a country with a literacy rate of between thirty and forty per cent. Thirty per cent of writers either used excessive punctuation or none at all, and either hypo- or hyper-segmentation of words was very common in their letters. They related their life-history as unionists and/or soldiers as though it was a curriculum vitae, and their autobiographies sometimes resembled responses to the administrative forms which they were also required to put on file. For this reason, Adámez Castro speaks of the 'bureaucratisation of autobiographical practice' (129–131). But none of this prevented them from framing an autobiography which would further their chances of being selected for evacuation to Mexico, where a new life could begin. They wrote on blank paper or lined paper, paper with a formal letterhead or pages torn from exercise

books, and the urgency of their need overcame any hesitancy or lack of letter-writing expertise. In June 1939, SERE was overwhelmed by the demand, as it received a thousand petitions daily (Adámez Castro, 173). In all, 35,000 Spanish refugees reached the Americas, most of them finding their way to Mexico.

Guadalupe Adámez is clear that selecting refugees for a place on the boat to Mexico was a political choice. The organisations she discusses wanted to maintain a culture of anti-fascist resistance, and tried to reconstruct in exile the republican community they had represented in Spain. She is less clear, however, about the divisions between the various strands of Spanish republicanism—liberal, socialist, communist or anarchist. She focuses in part on the UGT, which was a socialist union with a strong base in Madrid; presumably the Catalan anarcho-syndicalists who filled the French concentration camps had to seek assistance elsewhere. She has illuminated, however, part of the lost history of the defeated in the Spanish Civil War, and fully demonstrated the maxim of Argentinian writer Juan Martini which opens her study: ‘Writing is the first form of exile.’

Serendipity plays a role in life-writing scholarship, as both examples under discussion illustrate. The archive of SERE, mentioned above, was long thought to have been lost, until it recently surfaced again in the cellar of a house in the Avenue Marceau in Paris. Here the Francoists had assembled papers confiscated from various enemy organisations in exile.<sup>1</sup> The archive remained there unnoticed after the end of the Spanish Civil War, until Basque nationalists who had occupied the house since 1944 became aware of what archival treasures lay beneath their floor. The papers were eventually ‘returned’ to Bilbao (Adámez Castro, xxi). In my second example of recent European work, another accidental discovery inspired the entire research project.

In 2009, the authors, who were then doctoral students in Paris working on different aspects of ordinary writings, made an unexpected discovery. In a bric-à-brac shop (*brocante*) near the Père Lachaise cemetery, amongst the remains of an apartment clearance, they stumbled across an abandoned cache of letters. Most of them were exchanged between Bernard Garigue, a schoolteacher away on military service in Algeria in 1960–1962, and his black, Guadeloupian wife Aimée, also a schoolteacher expecting their first child. In addition, the bundle included letters they received from close family members, especially from Gilberte, the wife of Bernard’s brother Jean. The authors use their discovery to present an accidental window into the private life of an unknown couple against the backdrop of the violent conclusion to the Algerian war.

The letters are interesting in their own right, as I will explain, but equally interesting is the authors' search for information outside their corpus which would help to locate and contextualize the correspondents. Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger invite the reader to share in the progress of their research, and their reflections on what they found. The historian will appreciate their efforts, first to locate the apartment in the 15<sup>th</sup> arrondissement where the couple lived, and the solicitor (*notaire*) responsible for its sale by auction, and then to track down surviving family members, notably Bernard's brother Jean. In a sense the researchers were lucky that Bernard and Aimée were both functionaries of the French state, which is inclined to leave abundant paper trails of its multifarious activities. So they could trace Bernard's school reports, which suggested mediocre academic results and a rebellious temperament at the lycée Voltaire; his father's career file on his employment with the French state railways; and school inspectors' reports on the teaching of both Bernard (lacking discipline in class) and Aimée (charged with incompetence). They also used Bernard's army passbook (*livret militaire*), giving at least some minimal information on his successive postings in the Kabylia region of northern Algeria. This relative profusion of detail contrasts with the lack of data about Bernard's mother who, as a housewife educated in a private school, left hardly any documentary trace.

The search is fascinating, but the archival sources are both scattered and fragmentary. The letters have to be read for their silences and lacunae. The authors provide the sociological context (and occasionally this is rather laboured), but they are frequently forced to resort to speculation and assumptions, imagining how Bernard and Aimée might have chosen their apartment, guessing what their views on contraception might have been (Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 78, 116–9). As George Perec said, it is hard to know 'what is happening when nothing is happening' (cited Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 305).

Their task resembles Alain Corbin's attempt—in *Le Monde retrouvé de Louis-François Pinagot: sur les traces d'un inconnu, 1798–1876*—to compile the biography of an unknown nineteenth-century French peasant, and their sub-title is a deliberate echo of this work. Corbin set out to reconstruct the life story of a nobody, an anonymous peasant who left only a vestigial archival presence. His attempt only partially succeeded. Corbin has expert knowledge of the context of nineteenth-century rural France, but instead of producing a biography, which the sources did not permit, he guessed at the *possibilities* of a life, the might-have-beens, the likelihoods of this or that happening, the supposed reactions of his elusive subject. So too, much of Bernard and Aimée's lives are hidden from view; but at least their correspondence has accidentally survived.

Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger want to present the letters as testimony. They tell us little, however, about the Algerian war itself. Bernard, like the vast majority of soldiers in all modern wars, was very reticent about his combat activities. He wrote reassuring banalities to his wife, such as: 'The countryside seems calm, my health is good and morale is excellent' (Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 226–7). In this he echoed the comforting messages to loved ones often written by men in danger. We learn that army life challenged Bernard's sense of identity. He did not identify with other conscripts, their dirty jokes or their racial prejudices. As a school-teacher, he stood apart as an intellectual amongst the majority of those called up for the war. And he liked to imagine himself as a rebel against authority. At the very end of the war, which ended in a bloodbath, Bernard appears to have a bad conscience about what he was ordered to do. He referred to his bad memories, and he confessed to Aimée that he had become embittered and disillusioned, without being explicit about what had provoked this (perhaps burning villages or shooting civilians?) (Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 228, 231).

Although the letters between Bernard and Aimée tell us little that we did not already know about the experience of the Algerian war, they illuminate other subjects. The authors exploit them to cast light on the experience of pregnancy and childbirth circa 1960, as well as the tendency of the medical profession to over-medicate (in which patients were usually complicit) for Aimée's illnesses and lack of sleep, at a time, the authors remind us, exactly contemporaneous with the emergence of the thalidomide scandal.

The letters allow the authors to probe the problems of a mixed-race relationship. Bernard and Aimée were not an 'ordinary' couple. Aimée's Guadeloupian origins made her an anomaly in Parisian classrooms. She experienced racial prejudice at school, where white parents made official complaints about her behind her back, and perhaps in the clinic where she gave birth, where medical staff appear to have been less than assiduous in their care for her. Even Bernard's mother opposed their marriage, and the family kept her in the dark about the exact date of the wedding so that she would not attend.

The letters are testimony to something else to which the authors neglect to pay close attention. They tell us something about the nature of love-letters themselves, their intimate codes and social grammar. Like all separated lovers, for instance, Bernard and Aimée very precisely counted down the days until they would see each other again. Aimée wrote to Bernard of her dreams, in which she imagined him on guard duty or in his barracks, and dreamed that they were both doing their military service together (Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 214–18). Writing sustained the

intimate life of a very loving couple, and what they reveal is very much the life story of a couple, rather than of two individuals. Bernard wrote to Aimée in a finely crafted, and remarkably literary style, thus in July 1960:

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I want you to be close to me, when night touches us and brings its long procession of anxieties. I want you to be close to me when the triumphant sun climbs the sky and chases away our bad dreams. Aimée, may the same shadows envelop us, may the same sun bathe us in its golden light. Aimée you are the deep blue sea, and I am the ship foundering in it with all hands lost. I am the wave and you are the shore; may our lips, our minds, our bodies join together so that our two beings, united in the crucible of our love, may form a unique crystal of pure happiness.

Aimée, I kiss you on the neck and behind your ear.

(Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 63. All translations are my own.)

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If they could not maintain a close dialogue in person, they still could enjoy 'cette communion fervente de la lettre' (Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 239).

Even intimate love letters are subject to self-censorship, and Bernard and Aimée's correspondence was no exception. When Aimée was removed from school because of parental complaints and put on extended sick leave, she did not explain the situation fully to Bernard in order not to worry him. Bernard, too, as already noted, did not write in detail of his war experiences. Both Bernard and Aimée sometimes wrote rough drafts which they revised, and composed letters which were never sent. Aimée explicitly advertised her own censorship, telling Bernard 'I started a letter to you which was so sad (*mélancolique*) that I had to destroy it' (Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 174–5). Some of their drafts are included in the corpus, so that it is possible to follow how the exchanges between them were managed and controlled. In the spring of 1962, Bernard wrote commenting on the shooting in the rue d'Isly in Algiers, when soldiers killed about 80 French civilians demonstrating in favour of the OAS (the *Organisation armée secrète*, in favour of keeping Algeria French). In his first draft, he expressed some understanding of the soldiers' predicament. He knew they were reacting to the recent shooting of six conscripts by the OAS in Bab El Oued. But then he thought better of it, and left out any mention of the event from his letter to Aimée (Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, 242).

The last months of French Algeria, it should be noted, were atrociously violent, both in Algiers and Paris. In October 1961, the Parisian police, under Maurice Papon, opened fire on a large pro-FLN (*Front de Libération nationale*) demonstration, killing somewhere between 50 and 200 Algerians and throwing many corpses into the Seine. In the winter of

1961–1962, the OAS terrorised Paris with a series of plastic bombs. In February 1962, police shot demonstrators protesting against the OAS at the Charonne metro station. Nine were killed, all of them French Communist Party members. But none of this surfaced in Aimée’s letters. Their view of the war expressed no clear political viewpoint. Instead, their attitude was personal and pragmatic. They were concerned only with the implementation of the ceasefire, because this, they hoped, would bring Bernard home sooner. And that was the main thing.

Like Deshayes and Pohn-Weidinger, I have hidden the brutal conclusion of the correspondence until the end. In April 1962, Aimée gave birth to a stillborn daughter and, about twenty-four hours later, she herself died in hospital. Using the exiguous documentary sources available, the authors conduct a historical post-mortem examination. They suspect medical negligence and conclude that Aimée may have died from eclampsia. For Bernard, the demobilisation they had both longed for so much now signified only loss and loneliness. The promise of happiness with Aimée was cruelly crushed. The reader has by now been drawn so far into the texture of the couple’s life that he or she will find this a harrowing ending. This is a tribute both to the rich intimacy of the letters and to the skilful presentation and self-reflective analysis conducted by the authors of this book. But historians should not have to go looking for their materials in junk shops. Epistolary collections like this one should be in archives specifically dedicated to their preservation.

The two recent works considered here are very different, but they both demonstrate the significance of wartime situations in producing personal documentation. The life-writing of love-letters like those of Bernard and Aimée is sometimes intimate, but it follows its own conventions which require moments of reticence, when self-censorship imposes taboos on certain areas of the couple’s life. The life-writing of relief petitions, on the other hand, follows certain bureaucratic norms, but in this case it chronicled histories of political activism. The petitions studied by Guadalupe Adámez were strategically directed, but their egalitarian authors refused to be obsequious, addressing their correspondents as equals. Historians have imaginatively expanded the archive of life-writing to encompass not just traditional genres like memoirs and autobiographies, but also other autobiographical forms like travel writing, writing under orders (for instance as therapy) and welfare petitions. Even apparently impersonal bureaucratic procedures can bring forth personal stories.

One recurrent problem with wartime writing is that it very rarely extends beyond the timespan of the war itself. Thus although in Adámez’s study we can follow some petitioners as far as Mexico, we know very little

of what they made of their life there afterwards. The correspondence of Bernard and Aimée was of course cut tragically short by Aimée's death, but if she had lived, the exchange of letters between them would presumably have ended with Bernard's demobilisation. We know little of what subsequently became of Bernard, except that he went back to teaching, and remarried, although the couple remained childless. War writings, especially the correspondence between lovers and spouses, are snapshots with no sequel.

There is room, to add a final remark, for a linguistic analysis of the life-writing corpus. The brief analysis conducted by Guadalupe Adámez illuminates the handwriting of the petitioning letters, to show the graphic confidence of those familiar with the act of writing, or perhaps the opposite, in hesitant letters betrayed by a trembling hand, poorly-formed characters and wandering lines. She is able to measure the incidence of unorthodox spelling, shaky word separation and the recurrence of dialect or phonetic forms of prose. Writing was, for many, a very unfamiliar and a challenging experience. We should never underestimate the intimidating power of the blank page.

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## NOTE

- 1 Franco’s ‘Recovery Committee’ seized all property held in France by republican organisations. The house in the Avenue Marceau had been the seat of the Basque government in exile.