

## Jungle

The image of vessels anchored in the bay has remained practically unaltered with the passing of time. It has been captured in tactical navy drawings, romantic compositions of an ideal past and in subsequent photographs of the industrial boom and colonial expansion. That image is a recurring metaphor that helps invoke the long agrarian period that began with the arrival of ships to the island and lasted for centuries.

Everything seems to return to that image, bringing home its meaning. Something invisible but evocative lies within, a kind of impassivity and an absence of the concern that always accompanies these vessels. It is an apathetic indifference, a mute quietism, which contrasts with the enormous suppressed anguish that they reflect, sidestepping the suffering of countless generations of islanders during the agrarian period. A period of stability that gave the impression of being eternal for those who lived off the land.

The dense domain of the seasons, the exhausting repetition of harvests that degraded the colonial Utopia, the inflexibility and radical polarization of the social structure, the harsh living conditions, the enslaving work and the arduous exploitation of resources drove two clearly differentiated societies, two enemy communities of opposing ideologies, macerated throughout that long period.

While the colonial mirage lasted, escape existed, even as a mere possibility. A craving for the south, the trace of a constant exodus towards Latin America. The knowledge and experiences of Cuba awoke the social expectations of many who on their return began to tear at the thick veil of illiteracy and ignorance to which they had been subjected.

This drove a first wave of enlightened workers, prepared to demand conditions, refute arguments and reveal the fallacy of a contented order.

Nothing could remain unchanged. It is as if all reconstruction demanded a setting that would self-dissolve. The lengthy agrarian period produced enormous mounting tensions between the social classes and a few dared call for equilibrium and dignity until the tension exploded into civil war.

But it was an autonomous war, an own way of exacting revenge, which projected the blackness of the world at that time onto the islands.

The jungle drew nearer beneath the aspect of a quiet provincial town, with a thriving commerce and a somewhat rancid bourgeoisie, a naïve and changing society that was both over pious and humble, but devoid of wickedness. Production increased and landowners smiled under the sun in the ports, while intellectuals contended between a well-to-do old school and an avant-garde younger generation. Nothing pointed to what was approaching in that apparent tranquillity, and in the space of a few days, an unsuspected repression was unleashed.

## Black Boats

*Absolute islands do not have coasts,  
but outside walls and on all sides.<sup>1</sup>*

### I

Several ships played a sinister role in the repression unleashed after the military rebellion against the constitutional government of the Second Spanish Republic. With hopes dashed of a swift blow that would bring down the republic in a few days, the military rebels decided to consolidate their positions in Africa and the Canary Islands, thus ensuring the rearguard for an eventual withdrawal. The machine of repression pulled out all the stops in a territory where it met with little resistance. After several days, public offices were overflowing with detainees. In the province of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, the provincial prison, the small fort of Paso Alto, the cavalry barracks stables, the law courts basement and Añaza Masonic lodge were all requisitioned and turned into the general headquarters of the Fascist paramilitary force. Other places that had also been requisitioned included the premises of numerous workers' federations, barracks, theatres, secondary schools and municipal stores dotted all over the province.

Despite this deployment of means, settling and keeping watch over the detainees and placing them before the perverse machine of justice became a problem that exceeded all expectations. This led to the fitting out of several vessels from the local coastal fleet for use as floating prisons. Soon afterwards, the English exporting company, Fyffes, ceded three huts that had been used until then for storing the island's three main products: bunches of bananas, crates of tomatoes and bags of *bonito* potatoes.

Today the collusion of the fruit exporting companies with the power élite of the time is irrefutable. Their desire to obtain advantages with the new power and to maintain the traditional situation of pseudo-slavery for the workers drove them to unscrupulous collaboration. The companies aided the insurgents in their repressive actions and kindly assigned part of their assets to the cause for the duration of inactivity resulting from the conditions of war.

Thus, in addition to Fyffes' premises where a large concentration camp was set up, Pedro Déniz, the manufacturer of baskets and crates for tomato exports, made over several warehouses for a temporary jail. Mr. Bellamy, agent for the Elder Company in Tenerife and Consul of Sweden, transferred gratis twenty-three roles of barbed wire for the new concentration camp. José Peña Hernández, owner of a coastal trading flotilla dedicated to transporting fruit, assigned the vessel,

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Sloterdijk, *Esfemas III* (Spheres), Siruela, Madrid, 2006, p. 244.

*Adeje*. The Trasmediterránea Company, owned by Juan March, an entrepreneur who financed the coup, handed over the steamship, the *Gomera*. Shipowner and fruit producer Álvaro Rodríguez López supported the rebellion by assigning two coastal traders, *Santa Rosa de Lima* and *Santa Elena Mártir*. These four vessels linked by gangways comprised the first floating prison, also known by local people as the “phantom archipelago”.<sup>2</sup>

In the years that the war lasted, several of these ships were replaced by others, according to the shipowners’ needs. Hence, in early 1937, the steamships *Santa Ana Mártir* and *Isora*,<sup>3</sup> owned by Álvaro Rodríguez López and José Peña Hernández, respectively, were incorporated as prison ships. In late 1937, they were joined by a large pontoon, the *Porto Pi*,<sup>4</sup> brought from the Puerto de La Luz, in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, and fitted out for use as a prison vessel until December 1938. In March 1939, they were considered unsafe and most prisoners were sent to Lazareto de Gando concentration camp in Gran Canaria.

*We were escorted under guard and taken in the tender to the boats anchored and moored at the third buoy. There were four of them. From outside they looked dreadful. Falling apart and dirty, the lack of care and hygiene gave a gloomy air of abandon to any foreigner arriving—and indeed they did come—at the port.*

*There were four boats. The first, the Santa Elena, was closest to the quay and was used to get aboard the Santa Rosa de Lima, the Gomera and finally, the Adeje. I was sent to that one. So I had to pass from one to the other, crossing fated gangplanks, over the first three boats until I reached my compulsory future home. From my elevated position as I crossed, I could see the “guests” who had preceded me since the early days of the uprising, down below on the decks and further still way down into the holds [...] Up to four hundred on four ships.<sup>5</sup>*

## II

This “penal archipelago”, to quote Ramiro Rivas (perhaps a play on words for the horrific *Gulag Archipelago* by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, another tale of repression), was an offshoot of another crammed concentration camp, the Costa Sur military prison, known as Fyffes<sup>6</sup> by local people, located half a mile from the coast, above San Antonio beach.

Absolute insularity, according to Sloterdijk’s wish: the prototype of an extreme, cloistered world of introversion redounding on the island. It is this kind of fatality that alerts us to the illusory and remote island out of sight and forgotten,

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<sup>2</sup> Ramiro Rivas, “La Guerra Civil en Tenerife”, in *La Guerra Civil en Canarias*, Francisco Lemus Editor, La Laguna, 2000, p. 68. The *phantom archipelago*, the name given by local people to the group of boats that acted as a floating prison, housed more than 500 prisoners.

<sup>3</sup> cf. Ricardo García Luis, “Antonio Montelongo Morales: La ley del saco”, in *Crónica de vencidos. Canarias: resistentes de la guerra civil*, La marea ed. Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2003., p. 177-192.

<sup>4</sup> cf. Néstor Hernández López, *Crispiniano de Paz González. Ciencia y política, pasión y prisión*, Centro de la cultura popular Canaria, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2009, p. 261.

<sup>5</sup> Manuel Bethencourt del Río, *Diarios y cartas de la cárcel*, José Vicente González Bethencourt ed., Ediciones Idea, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2008, p. 83-84.

<sup>6</sup> Ramiro Rivas, “La Guerra Civil en Tenerife”, “A principio de diciembre [1936], 1500 reclusos moraban en Fyffes”, p.70.

in the midst of a war, of that or any other; this is the germ of an original experiment that unleashes the potential dangers lurking within, particularly an intolerant Utopianism in the guise of political island dreams.

If we understand the mode of conduct on the island, this replica must repeat all the basic features by coinciding point by point. This “phantom archipelago” is then a condensed image of the other, an extraction that through homeopathic distillation contains, radicalizes and reveals greater power of representation than the original source. Any image of the island must necessarily contain this other.

We have before us the meticulous, cartographic application of a kind of imaginary and disproportionate archetype. That dreamt world spills into reality and though it may not fit in the anticipated mould, the limits are stretched and the distortions justified, all to ensure the ultimate objective of representing that other counterfeit and idealizing image, which is beyond question.

Hundreds of men spent time in these boats, in unhealthy conditions, deprived of food, beset by illness and torture, and for many, these were their final moments. But it was not only an abnormal situation for them: their families and friends forged strong links with group of vessels anchored off the city. Some of these relatives would stroll along San Antonio beach and the road to San Andrés in an attempt to see their kin; they would wear a specific garment because it was so difficult to distinguish features from such a distance.

The presence of the ships near the city with their fragile, tragic cargo must have been a demonstration of terror and a display of exterminating power able to stifle any sympathy or feeling of solidarity. For some, that repeated, daily view must have gradually made the prison invisible, a presence with no meaning. For others it must have represented the opposite, a daily reminder of the nightmare in which they were all caught up.

*...he shuddered. It was like watching maggots on torn flesh.*

*Some two hundred political prisoners were packed into the hold of the merchant ship under the dim light of two lanterns. They dozed.*

*Several armed soldiers did the rounds of the store rooms. They were slightly higher up than the deep enclosure that contained the crush of prisoners.*

*The stench that rose could not be swept away by the sea breeze. The stench of excrement, sweat, stale food, rancid oils...<sup>7</sup>*

Such circumstances must have seemed uncommon even for those who sympathized with the infant regime. Given the fascination that the maritime traffic held for amateur photographers both before and after these events, and the great variety of shots documenting the port's history as an exportation centre and a stopover for ships en route to Africa and Latin America, the difficulty of finding images of the port and the floating prison is surprising and covers a period of three years. There are no images at the Centro de Fotografía Isla de Tenerife for the

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<sup>7</sup> Pedro V. Debrigode Dugi, *Luchar por algo digno I. El barco borracho*. Ediciones Idea, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2005, p. 94. This novel is based on events experienced by the author while he was second lieutenant in Santa Cruz de Tenerife in 1936.

years 1936, 1937, 1938 and 1939. There is no entry under “Civil War” as a category in the Archivo de Fotografía Histórica de Canarias, FEDAC (photographic archives), in Gran Canaria. When searching for dates or key words related to that time, the only images thrown up show peaceful islanders going about their daily tasks, and apart from the odd Falangist uniform, there are no further references to the critical moment they were living.

This is a premeditated vacuum, an *absence* that shows the zeal that went into trying to prevent any record of that exceptional situation. A deeply entrenched policy that persists even today—you only have to go through the historical and commemorative publications of the Autoridad Portuaria de Santa Cruz de Tenerife (port authority), which are empty of images or explicit references to the war and until now have merely reproduced nostalgic praise of the merchant navy’s heroic past and embellished the history of tourism, paying no heed to other circumstances.

It is true that such conscientiousness regarding past photos is equally meticulous even today in the administration of military and civilian registry offices, where the circumstances of repression during the civil war are concerned. Taking photographs, however, aside from those recorded by the authorities for statistical and documentary purposes, is open to individual choice, which supposes the existence of images not on file but subject to the small-minded control of collective memory.

*One day, an ocean-going ship carrying English passengers was anchored in the port and we saw a tender carrying two or three men and a woman, most likely foreigners, who were making towards us from west to east, intending to pass us astern. And this they did, moving in the direction of a coal ship moored at the buoy to the east of us. But halfway, that is almost exactly half the distance between us and the coal ship, the tender went about and slowly turned south between two steamships. Meanwhile, the only lady on board, who was standing in the middle of the tender like the men, whipped out a camera and with admirable speed took several photographs of the ships and of us, who, kitted out as if to take the sun, had all stood up to see what would happen. It was done so swiftly and with such daring—bearing in mind the danger involved in approaching us—that we assumed the sentries had not realized or did not attach too much importance to it.<sup>8</sup>*

Little by little images of this tragedy began to appear, particularly portraits, because the need to honour people was pressing. But there is another need; we must uncover the circumstances, places and facts, and any image is essential for this task. Photography plays a fundamental part, especially after Franco’s regime set earnestly about removing all physical traces.

While Auschwitz and Mauthausen stand as memorials to the victims of Nazi genocide, Franco attempted to dispose of every vestige that connected him to the genocide in the Canaries. The rebels did away with the lives of one thousand six hundred people in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, mostly by dumping them still alive and

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<sup>8</sup> Diarios y cartas de la cárcel, *Op cit*, p. 54.

tied up in stone-laden sacks into the sea. into the so-called San Andrés *Fosa* or grave and into an unknown number of hidden graves located away from the coast in a calculated clean-up operation of terror.

But this is not the only case. Some time after the Second World War, thousands of tons of rubble and stones were thrown between the six hundred disappeared and those responsible for their deaths, in an attempt to block off forever Sima Jinámar (volcanic lava tube), in Gran Canaria. Other shafts suffered the same fate in the area around Arucas, Gran Canaria.

This occurred after the laying down of the Nuremburg Principles (guidelines for the Nuremburg Trials to determine what constitutes a war crime), which stated that the genocidal responsibilities of European Fascism would not go unpunished. The Canary Islands is a painful and ongoing exception to this agreement. Injustice and horror had no historical memory or punishment here.

### III. The Ships<sup>9</sup>

1. Cargo ship, the *Santa Rosa de Lima*, 446 tons, built on the slipway of Corcho & Sons shipyard, in Santander. Launched on 11 September 1919, under the name of *Sotileza*. On 28 March 1924, she was bought by Compañía Marítima Canaria, a subsidiary of Elder & Fyffes, whose head offices were in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. When the ship register was changed, the name was also changed to the *Guanche*. In 1934, the *Compañía Marítima Canaria* was merged with the Álvaro Rodríguez López fleet, and this vessel was then registered as the *Santa Rosa de Lima*. This was the first ship anchored for the purpose of housing the growing number of detainees from 20 July 1936. The other three ships were then moored alongside and formed the floating military prison in the port of Santa Cruz de Tenerife. This vessel was the largest and was positioned in second place in the prison set-up and was accessed from the *Santa Elena Mártir*, along several gangplanks between the boats. The hold housed around 150 men, who were only allowed on deck to relieve themselves. Poor food, unhealthy conditions, hardship and humiliation soon undermined the health of the prison population, resulting in several deaths. In 1939, at the end of the civil war, the vessel was sold to Luis Otero, a shipowner from Bilbao, and renamed the *Tercio San Miguel*. In 1940, she

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<sup>9</sup> This list has been drawn up using information from the following: Archivo *Tráfico Marítimo Puerto de Corme*, [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://www.jrvarela.net/cormebarcostrafico.htm>>. Archivo *Navieras y barcos españoles*, [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <[http://www.buques.org/Navieras/Navieras\\_E.htm](http://www.buques.org/Navieras/Navieras_E.htm)>. Archivo *Astilleros de Cadiz*, [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://astilleroscadiz.buques.org/Construcciones/Echevarrieta/ConstruccionesEchevarrieta.htm>>. *John H. Marsh Maritime Research Centre*, Capetown, South Africa, [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://rapidhttp.co.za/museum/jmmrc.html>>. “*Sotileza*”, *Vida Marítima*, [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://www.vidamaritima.com/2008/07/sotileza.html>>. Juan Carlos Díaz Lorenzo, *Al resguardo de Anaga. De los correillos al “fast ferry”*, Ed. Puertos de Tenerife, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2004. Juan Carlos Díaz Lorenzo, *Al resguardo de Anaga. De la mar y los barcos*, Ed. Puertos de Tenerife, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 2004. Historiales de los buques en el *Miramar Ship Index* [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://www.miramarshipindex.org.nz/>>.

ran aground off the French coast, but was successfully refloated. In 1945, the ship was sold again to Vicente Suárez, a shipowner from Vigo, and renamed the *Conchita Suárez*. The vessel was used as a coastal trader between ports in the north of Spain until she was scrapped in Zumaya, the Basque Country, in 1975.

2. Cargo ship, the *Santa Elena Mártir*, 370 tons, built by Smith's Dock in North Shields, Great Britain. Launched on 19 July 1909 and named the *Quaysider*. In 1913, she was acquired by the Compañía Marítima Canaria and renamed the *Tacoronte*. In 1934, the vessel was incorporated into the fleet of Álvaro Rodríguez López and renamed the *Santa Elena Mártir*, one of the "saints" as these ships were known locally.<sup>10</sup> Around 150 men lived in cramped conditions and food was scarce and unwholesome. Although the convicts pumped salt water to keep the vessel as clean as possible, hygiene was dreadful and the risk of epidemic was so evident that the military authorities opened Fyffes concentration camp where many of the detainees were taken. Despite the transfer of prisoners, the floating prison remained. At the end of the civil war, the vessel worked between ports in North Africa and southern Spain. In 1949, the vessel was purchased by Naviera Valenciana and renamed the *Rada de Barcelona*, and in 1956 was acquired by Naviera Astur and reregistered under the name of the *Bahía de Cádiz*. The vessel was scrapped in 1973.

3. Passenger and cargo ship, the *Gomera*, 447 tons, built by the shipyards of Caledon Ship and Eng. Co. Ltd, Dundee, Scotland, for the Compañía Vapores Correos Interinsulares Canarias, a subsidiary of Elder Dempster & Co., and delivered on 8 March 1912, under the name the *Gomera-Hierro*. The ship was one of three small identical mail boats, working alongside the coastal steamships the *Lanzarote* and the *Fuerteventura*, which covered the company's secondary lines. The rest of the fleet consisted of three larger vessels that could travel greater distances: *Viera y Clavijo*, *León y Castillo* and *La Palma*. The six vessels were a landmark development for communications between the Canary Islands, also aiding the internal communications of each island and connections with the African provinces of Cape Juby, Río de Oro and La Güera. In 1929, the company purchased the steamship *Vojvodina* from the Yugoslavian shipyard Boka Brod. The vessel was renamed *Hierro*, which resulted in the *Gomera-Hierro* being called the *Gomera*. In 1930, the Compañía Vapores Correos Interinsulares Canarias was merged with Compañía Trasmediterránea and the vessels kept their names and crews. On 23 July 1936, this vessel was taken from Tenerife to San Sebastián de la Gomera to the infantry and Civil Guard, who were facing Republican resistance, popularly known as *El Fogueo*, in Vallehermoso. Days later, the ship joined the group of four vessels that made up the first part of the floating prison. The new circumstances contrasted sharply with the image of "social service" traditionally

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<sup>10</sup> Ricardo García Luís, Juan Manuel Torres Vera, *Vallehermoso. El Fogueo*, Gobierno de Canarias, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 2000, p.98. "They came in those old boats—after that everything was different, the black ships [alluding to the colour of the hulls] *León y Castillo*, *La Palma*; then came the 'saints', you know?—in *El Águila*, the *Sancho*, coastal traders; a boat would leave Santa Cruz at 9 at night and usually arrived here at 12 or one o'clock in the afternoon".

associated with the mail boats. Some one hundred men were packed into the holds. The first cases of typhus fever were not long in appearing. After the war, the vessel continued operating between the Canaries and the Spanish Sahara. In 1965, the ship ran aground on a sandbank eight miles to the south of El Ayoun. Repairs were considered unfeasible and the vessel was sold for scrap in Barcelona.

4. Cargo ship, the *Adeje*, 253 tons, built in 1918 by Fernández de Beraza & Co., in Bilbao. The original name, *Aingeruzar*, was changed in 1922 to *Pablo de Azpitarte*, when the vessel was acquired by Sociedad Olazábal y Azpitarte. José Peña Hernández purchased the ship in 1924 for his company Cabotajes Insulares and reregistered her in Santa Cruz de Tenerife as the *Adeje*. Along with the motorized sailing ship, the *San Miguel*, and the cargo vessel, the *Isora*, also owned by José Peña Hernández, the *Adeje* formed part of the coastal fruit trade between south Tenerife, Puerto de la Cruz, Santa Cruz de La Palma, Tazacorte, San Sebastián de la Gomera and Santa Cruz de Tenerife. In 1936, she became part of the floating prison. This was the last of the first group of four ships and also the smallest. In 1938, she was sold to shipowner Álvaro Rodríguez López, although she remained as part of the floating prison until the end of the civil war. The cargo ship never returned to the coastal trade and was involved in events of the Second World War.

5. Cargo ship, the *Santa Ana Mártir*, 549 tons, built in Cadiz at the shipyard of Echevarrieta & Larrinaga, in 1919. Named *Amir*, she was incorporated to the fleet of the Compañía Marítima Canaria of Elder & Fyffes and sailed under the same name until being added to the fleet of Álvaro Rodríguez López in 1934, when she was renamed the *Santa Ana Mártir*. In early 1937, the vessel was anchored in Santa Cruz bay as a part of the floating prison. In the last days of January, she became the terrifying setting of a mass *saca* or “removal” of “government”<sup>11</sup> prisoners, possibly the only one for which there is documentary evidence. A group of prisoners was transferred to the ship from Fyffes concentration camp and sent down to the hold through the aft hatchway in the middle of strict security. The other prisoners on board, who were confined to the forward holds, thought the boat was about to sink until they managed to establish contact with the new group by tapping in Morse code against the hull. They discovered that there were thirteen men and hurriedly scribbled their names on scraps of paper then jealously hidden in order to record the event. They were sure of what was about to happen. That was the last contact between them. Four were removed on the first night and the others over three nights. Only one escaped: a Falangist arrested by mistake. Among them was the poet Domingo López Torres.<sup>12</sup> In 1939, the vessel was sold to shipowners Otero &

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<sup>11</sup> Ramiro Rivas, “La Guerra Civil en Tenerife”, p.70. The captives were divided into three categories: those who were serving a sentence, those who were standing trial because of the ongoing court-martials (both were in the minority and usually unaffected by the frequent *sacas* or removals) and those classified as “government” prisoners, who were not accused of any specific crime and were being held at the disposal of the military authorities. They are the ones who figured among the disappeared; the number amounted to more than a thousand in February 1937.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Ricardo García Luís, *Crónica de vencidos*, p.177-192.



Cardenal and renamed the *Tercio de Montejurra*, and in the following years was used for another tragic purpose.

6. Cargo ship, the *Isora*, 316 tons, built in the estuary of Bilbao at the workshops of Mutiozabal & Fernández, in 1920. Originally named the *Axpe*, in 1922, she was acquired by José Peña Hernández for his firm Cabotajes Insulares and reregistered in Santa Cruz de Tenerife as the *Isora*. For fourteen years, the vessel carried fruit between the islands in the province, highly intense work that helped make up for the lack of infrastructure for land transport to and from the islands' plantations and Santa Cruz port. In June 1937, she was moored up as a floating prison. In 1938, the vessel was sold to Álvaro Rodríguez López. This and other ships belonging to the same fleet went on to play a singular role, though it is difficult to imagine the terrible situation experienced by these vessels during the civil war. Linked to a company backed by German capital, Sofindus, an important consortium through which 53 ships flying under the Spanish flag were managed by front men, the vessels' combined capacity of 55 000 tons was of immense strategic importance during the war that was on the point of breaking out and swelled the ranks of the most terrifying merchant navy in the Canaries.

7. Another ship involved with the fate of a group of prisoners from the floating prison, though not actually part of it, was the *Viera y Clavijo*. The story of this steamship crosses over with that of the victims of repression and with the transfer and subsequent escape of several deportees to other parts of Spanish colonial Africa in this vessel. The *Viera y Clavijo* was an 826-ton cargo and passenger ship, and the first of six mail boats belonging to Compañía Vapores Correos Interinsulares Canarios, a subsidiary of Elder Dempster & Co., manufactured in 1911 by the shipyards of Caledon Ship & Eng. Co. Ltd., Dundee, Scotland. As we have already seen in the history of another mail boat, the *Gomera*, the *Viera y Clavijo* was part of a fleet of steamships that was instrumental in bringing about the economic boom of the Canaries and the connection with Africa from the early 1920s.

On 17 August 1936, thirty-seven detainees from the floating prison were assembled on the cargo ship, the *Adeje*. Picked by an assessment committee as the most dangerous, they were to be deported to Río de Oro and La Güera, colonies of Spanish Africa. No legal action had been taken against these prisoners but they were loyal to the Republic and were therefore considered agitators. Among them was the poet, Pedro García Cabrera, who wrote his *Romancero Cautivo*<sup>13</sup> (1937), based on his experiences of repression and subsequent deportation, and José Rial Vázquez, who, under the pseudonym José Sahareño, would publish his book *Villa Cisneros. Deportación y Fuga de un grupo de antifascistas*,<sup>14</sup> in Valencia, in 1937. Both books relate a stimulating experience of one of the few cases of tenacity accompanied by luck, an adventure that would bring a breath of fresh air to moral resistance for republicans in the Canaries and all over Spain.

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<sup>13</sup> Pedro García Cabrera, "Romancero Cautivo" (1936-1940), *Obras Completas*, Vol. I, Gobierno de Canarias, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1987, p.127-164.

<sup>14</sup> José Rial Vázquez, *Villa Cisneros. Deportación y fuga de un grupo de antifascistas* (1937), Tierra de fuego ed. La Laguna, 2007.

That very night, they were transferred to the steamship, the *Viera y Clavijo*, which regularly covered the route along with the *León y Castillo* and *La Palma*, putting into Puerto de La Luz, in Gran Canaria, Puerto Cabras, in Fuerteventura, and Cabo Juby, Río de Oro and La Güera in the Sahara. After a brief stopover in Gran Canaria and Fuerteventura during which they realized the state of generalized repression endured by local people, several disembarked in Río de Oro and the rest continued practically to the frontier with Mauritania, heading for La Güera.

The deportees were handed over to the custody of the *Mia* or Moroccan guard. For seven months they were put to hard labour, building roads in the peninsula of Río de Oro. During that time, several deportees were called back to Tenerife to stand trial.

One of the key points of this story is that the detainees received news that those who returned to the islands were shot. Though returning was not the only way to get executed. Several of those who were confined in La Güera would be shot or declared "missing" in that remotest of all the colonies in the Spanish Sahara.

For the first few weeks, the mail boat was the bearer of good tidings, mostly in the form of letters and packages from the family, but the return voyage transported the panic and lamentations of the detainees.

The troops and some of the non-commissioned officers developed closed bonds with the prisoners, largely brought on by compassion at seeing the forced labour of those subjugated and exiled men. The situation became unbearable; the troops and deportees rebelled, swore loyalty to the republic and attacked Villa Cisneros fort, with the ensuing deaths of the second lieutenant, who governed the garrison, and a soldier.

The only chance of freedom was to seize the steamship because, without a ship, only the unknown awaited them: a desert crossing without the right equipment, the prospect of facing an unknown land of tribal peoples or of combat with the *Mia*—well armed, mounted and acquainted with the location of wells.

The *Viera y Clavijo* was the ship bound up with the fate of the deportees. No sooner had the vessel appeared in the gulf, they boarded her in a swift manoeuvre. Many of the crew threw their lot in with the rebels. On 17 March 1937, after three days at sea, the faint outline of the coast of Senegal was glimpsed.

Deportation and subsequent flight meant that some of the initial thirty-seven deportees managed to escape the certain death that awaited them if they had remained on board the floating prison in Tenerife.

The period between July 1936 and February 1937 was a time of intense activity in the sad history of the so-called *sacas* or "removals" perpetrated in Tenerife, in which "government" prisoners were systematically disappeared. Although several of the men deported to African colonies were called back to stand trial in Tenerife and subsequently executed, had the rest, like those who escaped

from La Güera, not been protected at perilous moments by an officer, in all likelihood they would have been the victims of a totally unbridled process of ideological purging.

A sinister “clean-up” orchestrated by an inquisitorial group of military men, priests and bourgeois families, who decided on a spate of revenge and a systematic desire to erase all manner of opposition. Spurred on by a war, inspired by Nazism and isolated on an island in the middle of the ocean, the sea serving as a defensive wall and moat behind which to hide the horror, they attempted to refound a made-to-measure society, in which, for a long time, there was no other moral code than that of those who were guilty of social murder.

### **La Habanera**

*La Habanera* (1937) by German film director Detlef Sierck, later known as Douglas Sirk<sup>15</sup> in his American period, was an interesting document for Nazi propaganda. In addition to being a tool for propaganda and indoctrination of the German people, and a fine example of Aryan culture for the world, the film, which was shot in Tenerife in late 1936 and early 1937, thanks to good relations between Hitler and Franco, contains images of the island in one of its darkest periods.

In contrast to the inevitable landscapes that would act as a counterpoint to the snowy landscapes of northern Europe, there are shots of places and situations of great historical value, given the paucity of documents of the time. The fictional wedding of the big boss landowner was held at San Francisco Church, in Santa Cruz de Tenerife. The camera sweeps down the tower and the front of the adjacent law courts, which at that precise moment in time were playing a heinous role in the Fascist repression. The law courts had been turned into a torture chamber and numerous prisoners from all the detention centres passed through. It was the place where humiliation led to legal accusations against political prisoners. Everything points to extreme brutality, to the extent that there are records of several “suicides” from the balconies. A grotesque image for anyone who could witness the whole scenario, prisoners manhandled in the cellars and offices of the law courts, while Goebbels’ Nazi propaganda machine shot a street scene for a film of racist

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<sup>15</sup> Everything points to the fact that Douglas Sirk was forced to work on this film for the UFA, a Manichean propaganda film so far removed from his aesthetic intentions, a poisoned commission that must have convinced him of the need to flee. The other reason for fleeing was even more pressing: his wife was a Jew, and Nazi politics frowned upon mixed marriages. In 1937, the same year as *La Habanera* was filmed, after considerable difficulties trying to leave the country, Sirk managed to escape from Germany, moving to Holland, then France and later going into exile in the United States, where he began the best known part of his work as a film director. One of his first American films denounced Nazism and was entitled *Hitler’s Madman* (1943). Today he is considered one of the great masters of classic melodrama. His influence was fundamental, enabling Fassbinder to find the tone of his best films. Sirk was a cultivated, pacific man, who knew Kafka, was a friend of Max Brod, worked with Max Reinhardt and, in his early years, directed theatrical works by Brecht, Ibsen and Büchner.

undertones, produced to subliminally prevent the German people from making contact with the Spanish.

All these elements come together in this scene: the untouchable religion that protects the landowner, distorted justice that conceals in its entrails all manner of injustice, totalitarian and racial propaganda, a disintegrating reality disguised on film—fiction superimposed on reality.

Yet the most interesting scene from a documentary perspective is the settling of scores between the protagonists, filmed opposite the cargo ship, the *Adeje*, moored in the port with the city serving as a backdrop. From *Diarios y cartas de la cárcel* by Manuel Bethencourt del Río, a permanent inmate of the prison ship,<sup>16</sup> we know that all the occupants of the *Adeje* were disembarked on 10 September 1936 until 1 February 1937 and taken to Fyffes concentration camp, where they spent almost five months. At some stage during those five months, the following scene was filmed: the prison boat anchored in a port still packed with sacks of potatoes and crates of tomatoes. As the leading actor strolled around the port, the camera also alighted on another vessel, the *Ario* (Aryan), belonging to the shipping line, Naviera Pinillos, a glimpse of the craze for all things German of the time. This apparently harmless tropical setting for the Nazi propaganda machine takes on an extreme meaning for local society. Such a meaning could only be appreciated in the light of what was happening on the island at that time. That hidden reality acts as a third subtext beneath the natural narrative of the plot, to which Nazi propaganda had added a subliminal layer of racist undertones; a third level that presents a scenario of persecution, suffering and annihilation in the figure of the prison ship, the *Adeje*, and in the image of the city oppressed by itself.

We are looking at one of those crystal-images in which time takes on a plastic quality. To anyone who knows how to look, the scene shows that the collusion between the big boss landowner and the seductive Aryan is based on a setting of social terror that would eventually be confirmed on a global scale in the following years.

Most historians seem to agree that the cinema became a tool of the utmost importance for Nazi propaganda; an instrument to lecture and control the population with whom they intermingled, by handling techniques such as parallel editing, debasement or mythification of characters, an ideological encyclopedia whose function was to immerse the onlooker in an unquestionable reality of mythical roots and perpetual horizons. A truth was shown that could not be questioned and in which everyone who attempted to question was portrayed as an unworthy, evil and immoral being. The Nazi programme left nothing to chance: from anti-Semitism to anti-Slavism, from using the economy and hatred as propaganda to strict informational censorship and anti-Marxist purges, social Darwinism, later converted into hygienism, the regeneration of art, localist nationalism as a flagship (remember the Nazi presence at popular festivities, thus establishing the connection between tradition and ideology) and above all the

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<sup>16</sup> Manuel Bethencourt del Río, *Diarios y cartas de la cárcel*, from August 9, 1936, to 11 March, 1939, p.22.

public use of rumour and falsehoods repeated until they were accepted as the truth.

An interesting hypothesis about the subliminal content of the film, *La Habanera*, is that exotic metaphor “seeks to indoctrinate German youth about the dangers of being contaminated, particularly by passionate and mysterious, dark Italians and Spaniards, who had become the cultural and diplomatic allies of the Aryans of that time. [...] To warn soldiers and members of German cultural and social organizations not to allow themselves be trapped by the erotic and romantic exoticism of these natives, thus avoiding a new kind of racial demographic catastrophe and more generations of mixed-race Germans”.<sup>17</sup>

To avoid damaging Franco’s smooth relations with the German government, the Universum Film A.G.(UFA) chose to create a clumsy metaphor of the Spanish with all its clichés: mantillas, flounces, fans, bullfighters, Flamenco dancers and guitars, transplanted to Puerto Rico. A way of showing all things Spanish without doing so directly but through the non-specific trappings of the Latins. Tenerife was an easy geographical solution, located midway between the two. Yet the mixture in the script of the Spanish and the clichés of a West Indian island, without meaning to, succeeds in revealing the stifling political atmosphere of the real island that served as a backdrop to the film.

As if in a parody of itself, we observe how a powerful island landowner wields the apparatus of repression and control, in all probability a faithful likeness and almost a documentary reconstruction of what island life had been like until then. But the scientific power, central European rationality, equanimity and the values of freedom and justice with which the Germans aimed to portray themselves in this film are very far removed from reality. If, in addition to contributing to rescuing their own people, the Aryans’ objective in this film is to hinder their happiness at the hands of the crafty and dirty darkies, they were also aiming to contribute to social justice and confronting the despotic apparatus of the oligarchy. The reality was completely different. As we know, the Nazis on the island were a source of inspiration and support for the dominating classes in the oppression of the working-class population and the annihilation of their representatives.

The dogged insistence of depicting the typical Scandinavian landscape as a counterpoint to that of the dusty, stifling tropical island is particularly noticeable. The leading character—“the blonde Swede who has been punished for rebelling against her natural ‘habitat’, for disowning her homeland and for allowing herself to be pulled along by the lure of the forbidden, an inferior race”,<sup>18</sup>—melancholically and nostalgically recalls Sweden, the untouched purity of the snow, the cotton-wool, dream-like winter landscapes, playing with “magical” snow, sleigh-riding, all

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<sup>17</sup> Sandra Pujals, “Gérmenes, trópico y sudor: La Habanera de Detlef Sierck (Sirk) y Puerto Rico como metáfora racista en la visión cinematográfica nazi, 1937”, *Revista Baquiana*, no. 41-42, Miami, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

allusions to the superiority of the representative features of the culture and life of the northern territories. These panoramas were underpinned by Nazism as characteristic of the best of all worlds.

The use of such iconography demonstrates how efficient landscape is for producing abstract images of identity and culture, placed at the service of a regime of power and ideal for use as subliminal tools in a system of totalitarian control.

The movie ends at the quay where the *Adeje* is moored, but this time they did not bother to film a new shot: they used the same one as at the beginning of the story. Since the shot has even been rotated, both are like closed brackets in the middle of which a sordid tale has been told. Loaded with multiple layers of interpretation, despite the perverse machine that composed and directed it, the film ends by meaning something more real and by recounting the tragic situation that was unfolding on the subtropical island that served as a backdrop.

It is an example of how hidden reality eventually seeps through and reveals itself even though the intention was to eliminate it completely.

## Crystallized

“It is as though the island had pushed its desert outside. What is deserted is the ocean around it”.<sup>19</sup>

### I

One of the most eloquent traces of the polarization of political convictions within the confined space of the island in the years preceding the civil war has been pointed out by CB Morris and Andrés Sánchez Robayna in the field of literature:

Within the microcosm of Tenerife, in 1929, Manuel Verdugo felt obliged to resort to the word *suppression* in order to respond in verse to the question put to him by *La Tarde*, “What is your opinion of young people today?”:<sup>20</sup>

I would say to the young of today,  
at the risk of sounding reckless:  
“Don’t embitter my existence so cruelly;  
put an end to the cause of my afflictions!”  
[...]  
The effective remedy is as follows:  
Fewer kicks; fewer athletics  
and the complete suppression of ‘the avant-garde’”.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Causas y razones de las islas desiertas”, en *La isla desierta y otros textos* (Desert Islands and other texts) p.18.

<sup>20</sup> C. B. Morris and Andrés Sánchez Robayna, *Domingo López Torres, Obras Completas*, ACT Cabildo de Tenerife, Santa Cruz de Tenerife, 1993, p.22.

Historical events have sadly underscored the last verse, which, despite being expressed in a kind of code in the years leading up to the civil war, was certainly uttered within the reflexive framework of poetry where the value of words is measured with exactitude. These verses are part of the staging of the social schism in literary circles, a reflection of a general ideological polarization, here centred on a group of elderly intellectuals and another of young avant-garde who convulsed the straitlaced society with their audacious proposals. Later events confirm the emergence of a reactionary crusade for the total suppression of social and cultural “avant-gardism”.

It is extremely important to understand the autonomous direction taken by the Spanish Civil War in the Canaries, avoided in early historical research to the point of denial, due to a non-existent war front. This circumstance has helped weave a veil of silence and oblivion in an attempt to mask events that occurred in the islands.

It is obvious that the war in the Canaries was closely linked to the development of the war in the rest of the country. Proof of this are the 60 000 men recruited in the Canaries<sup>22</sup> and transferred to the war fronts on the mainland, as well as the exhaustion of local resources in order to maintain the war machine, which led to the ruin of the archipelago. However, there are clear overtones of the civil war in the Canaries that reveal a panorama influenced by their condition as African islands, by their remoteness, which acted as a barrier preventing access to information and solidarity, and the social structure organized around a firmly rooted island oligarchy.

The main feature of the war in the Canaries is apparent and well-known: genocide. The inevitable consequences of this reality are repression, ignorance of the truth and widespread fear.

Attempts have been made to attenuate this circumstance by including the disappeared Canary Islanders in the general disapproval of the outrages committed by both sides and merely attributing them to acts of war. This is the same as saying that the genocide of the Jews during World War Two or the Armenian genocide in the Great War were the result of military conflict and not a premeditated decision to exterminate civilians.

The fact that 2211 victims<sup>23</sup> disappeared in an isolated rearguard where there was never a war front, nor victims or rebels, at the hands of a repressive structure focussed on exterminating a progressive social group cannot but be considered a crime against humanity.

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<sup>21</sup> “¿Qué opina usted de los jóvenes actuales? Manuel Verdugo, el poeta elegante e inspirado, no quiere que le hablen de vanguardismo ni en broma” *La Tarde*, 26 de febrero de 1929.

<sup>22</sup> *La Guerra Civil en Canarias*, p.42.

<sup>23</sup> According to the calculations of Canary Islander victims presented by Plataforma de Víctimas de Desapariciones Forzadas por el Franquismo (platform of the victims of forced disappearances under Franco) before the courts of law.

Neither can we ignore that almost three quarters of all war victims in the Canaries are a result of repression in the province of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, without minimizing the 600 deaths and disappeared in similar circumstances in the province of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. This fact discloses the brutality and efficiency of the clean-up machine in ousting dissidents gathered by force at Costa Sur or Fyffes military prison and the floating military prison, while terrorizing the rest of the population. Tenerife eventually deserved its nickname coined in antiquity: *hell island*.

In La Laguna, Tenerife, a board, presided over by Commander-in-Chief Dolla and composed of members of the clergy and influential aristocratic and bourgeois families from the island, decided the ultimate fate of hundreds of prisoners. The mission of the board consisted of choosing those who should be sacrificed, those who were a nuisance or those who were distinguished by courage, intelligence or their ideas. It is difficult to imagine those men gathered together under the protection of the cross, many of them representatives of Christian morality, acting like gods, granting life or death.

Their sentences were always the result of a meditated act whose pursuit was to remodel the social web to meet the stipulations of the local oligarchy. The objective was to mete out terror and bureaucratize murder, by acting against individuals of a certain social importance.

“The visits paid by General Dolla, the new military commander, to the prison brought fatal consequences for the inmates”.<sup>24</sup> Action was usually taken in the early hours of the morning. A patrol would appear at the prison with a list of persons about whom nothing would later be known. At other times, “government” prisoners, who had no charges against them, would be set free and the *dawn patrols* would await them at the exit and lead them to boats from which they would then be thrown into the sea, enclosed in sacks full of stones.

The sophistication of the repressive machine in Tenerife resorted to the technique known as *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog), perfected by the Nazis in Germany. “It largely consists of stealthily eliminating any trace of persons destined for execution, by sending them to different prisons until the time is right. At the same time, a mixture of misleading news, terror, torture and suffering in the small hours was spread to confuse and paralyze family reaction and public feeling”.<sup>25</sup>

This procedure to eliminate any person resulting “strange” for the new regime was stealthy, unforeseeable and faceless. At the same time, it was a relentless coercive procedure with barely any cracks. And through these tiny cracks the only news that filtered was conducive to fear: the disappearance of relatives, friends and neighbours. Such news would then be buried in silence. Bodies did not appear, unlike what occurred in other parts of Spain.

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<sup>24</sup> *La Guerra Civil en Canarias*, p.70.

<sup>25</sup> Leopoldo O’Shanahan, *Horror, errores y falacias sobre la Guerra Civil en Canarias*, Ediciones Baile del Sol, Tenerife, 2004, p.16. Concerning the disappearances of the Member of Parliament Luís Rodríguez Figueroa and Guetón Rodríguez de la Sierra-Melo.



The local contribution to this system of annihilation was making convicts disappear at sea. Several “removals” in the north of the island “failed” as disappearances because the corpses were washed back to the coast. The system was perfected, however, by using the channel between the islands of Tenerife and Gran Canaria. The Gulf Stream flowed through at this point and, in all likelihood, would carry off anything that floated to the surface. The place chosen to drown convicts was San Andrés bay, also known as the San Andrés *Fosa* or grave.

*The boat.*

*The hull, black and pot-bellied, permanently still, half a mile distant from the main jetty.*

*The rumour went round that many a morning the undertow would throw up full sacks onto El Cabo embankments— sacks that drifted towards this southern neighbourhood of the capital.*

*They said that the bundles contained the lifeless bodies of people executed without trial, in unchecked “removals” by squadrons of blue-uniformed individuals.*

*The material for stuffing the sacks came from the ship’s holds.<sup>26</sup>*

The number of victims drowned at sea is vague because part of the operation of terror was to spread contradictory information.<sup>27</sup> Though it is known that the majority went missing at sea and only a few went into graves inland, no bodies were ever found of either case. Others who suffered reprisals, victims of unjust lawsuits, were condemned to death and shot, then buried “legally” in cemeteries.

This “disappearance” of the victims indicates the extent of the extermination of the population that did not fit into the Utopia. One of the mottos of General Mola, mastermind and instigator of the uprising, was to finish off all those who did not think the same. But murdering them was not enough; their bodies had to be removed from the island, all trace of their lives lost forever. A new beginning was to be created—a year zero. Nothing happened before and if it happened, it no longer exists because there is no memory of that “before”.

It was a way of exorcising any hint of social modernization that might endanger their empires, personifying ideas and annihilating bodies, while establishing a reign of terror that would paralyze the rest of the population for generations.

The anonymity to which the disappeared were condemned forced the population to hang on to the few sketchy identities they knew of among the

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<sup>26</sup> Pedro V. Debrigode Dugi, *Luchar por algo digno I. El barco borracho*, p.82.

<sup>27</sup> During the dictatorship, a bitter story went round about a group of Falangists who would sing a song in some dive of a bar in the city during the war, a sinister song in which they boasted of killing a young man by the name of Saturnino González Falcón: “*Where is Nino Falcón? Tralalala, Where is Nino Falcón? Tralalala, At the bottom of the sea, tralalalalee, at the bottom of the sea, tralalalalee*”. New investigations, however, locate the body in a common grave in San Juan cemetery, in La Laguna.

purged. Somewhere between proof and legend, these identities acted as threads that helped keep alive the memory of relatives and friends about whom nothing was known except the certainty of their absence.

## II

The first reference to the victims of “removals” that I can remember is when I was still a child and Franco was still alive. Somebody was narrating the feat of strong and noble Guetón at the moment of his execution. Current research places the remains of Guetón Rodríguez de la Sierra-Melo in a common grave yet to be excavated in San Juan cemetery, in La Laguna, alongside ten other disappeared. Yet the story I heard in my childhood tells of Guetón about to be thrown into the sea, stones already tied to his feet, clinging onto one of his Falangist executioners and sinking with him forever, thus avenging the vile act committed against him and his family. As the years went by and the regime disappeared after Franco’s death, we were able to recover the image of Guetón as an actor in the 1927 film, *El ladrón de los guantes blancos* (The Thief in the White Gloves), next to moviemaker Rivero, and later in photographs of a bohemian life of high culture with Óscar Domínguez, a couple of dissolute young members of the middle classes, living the years of surrealist Paris to the full. Then I understood the logic of compensation in the account of his annihilation.

The image of that creative, happy and engaged generation contrasts with the darkness and terror that befell them, an injustice that we still have not been able to right. Their ghosts form part of a society that cannot seem to face up to its responsibility, preferring to avoid what has undoubtedly been its greatest tragedy, incapable of looking to the past, of analyzing what happened and drawing conclusions, which is the only way to give it a new meaning and to learn from such madness. Hence the determination to keep the symbols of the regime for so many years, hanging on to that brief moment of provincial prominence in an imaginary leading role at the outbreak of that war, shown over and over again in an attempt to outshine that other much more sordid and shameful history, a history so heartrending that it seems impossible to accept.

The constant tribute to the Fascist hordes, while an entire generation, committed and supportive like no other, is kept in oblivion only serves to sustain the impossibility of achieving a complete society.

*Encristalados* or crystallized is a metaphor used by the disappeared poet Domingo López Torres, who seems to have anticipated the state in which the bodies and biographies of the missing would be trapped, initially due to the repressive regime and then to the continuing acquiescence of the post-Franco regime. Everything about Domingo López Torres is anticipatory: his naïve hope in a new world, his insistence on a social bias towards the arts, his way of understanding the subversive power of culture, and the feeling of being suspended, up in the air, inside a disaster.

Even the brutal manner of his death, like *déjà vu*, assigned him the very place he had foreseen. In 1930, in Santa Cruz bay, an unfortunate sailing accident forebode the annihilation of hope on an oceanic island. The poets Julio Antonio de la Rosa and José Antonio Rojas<sup>28</sup> were drowned in a boating accident; López Torres, who was with them, managed to save himself. Seven years later in the same place, Domingo López Torres was murdered by drowning, along with hundreds more disappeared.

Generations have past in front of their invisible tomb, smiling and playing, but without seeing it. The future has kept them *Encristalados*, which is why they are still here, among us, waiting.

### ***Etapendienst-a Service Network***

Despite the apparent isolation and remoteness of the Canaries from the moment the civil war was declared because of how defenceless the inhabitants must have felt, exposed to the outrages of the rebels, and the *de facto* closure of the ports, now a war zone, a few must have sensed that they were now part of a game-board being set up on an international scale. Naturally this impression was reserved almost exclusively to a few German residents on the islands, aware of the strategic role that would be assigned to the Canaries in a more than likely future conflict.

Indeed, several of the events that took place during the civil war foreshadowed situations that would arise later within the context of the Second World War. However, during the Spanish Civil War, the military who received German support for their insurrection were unaware of the motives of the German consulates in the Canaries. Apart from the ideological embrace and common dislikes shared by Falangism and Nazism, the sympathies of the leaders of the German colony in the Canaries were fuelled by a particular interest, which was still secret at that time.

Some mention of the role played by Hispano-German relations during those years may help us to complete the picture we are trying to piece together. A tragic image of isolation and humiliation reflected in the prison ships anchored over a sea of corpses. An image that can now be completed by adding that of a group of Nazis fully integrated into island society who were at last able to deploy their secret mission: to feed a shoal of *U-boots*<sup>29</sup> or U-boats submerged in the same sea, lying in wait for Allied convoys crossing the Atlantic.

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<sup>28</sup> Julio Antonio de la Rosa and José Antonio Rojas, along with Domingo López Torres, Juan Ismael, Pedro García Cabrera, Guillermo Cruz and Andrés de Lorenzo-Cáceres created the short-lived poetic project *Cartones* (1930), an avant-garde journal thwarted by this accident.

<sup>29</sup> *U-boot*, from the German *untersee-boot*, submarine.

The information that finalizes this picture, though in a somewhat baroque and almost grotesque manner because of its excessiveness and unpredictability, is the logistic use made by the Germans of the very same ships that had served as floating prisons in Tenerife during the civil war. Their new life was no less bleak, now sent to the eastern Mediterranean and North Africa to supply Rommel's *Deutsches Afrika Korps*.

Though Spain had declared neutrality at the outbreak of the Second World War, it was secretly aligned with the Axis Powers. Indeed, Spanish neutrality was a German strategic proposal, whose intention was to use this status for the benefit of the Nazi regime.

Other fears, such as defencelessness in the event of a naval attack on the Canary Islands by the Allies, forced Franco to repress his military aspirations to extend and consolidate his colonial influence in North Africa. The instruction was to reserve Spanish neutrality until the war had been decided in favour of the Germans, when Spain would then align with the combatants.

The possible supply of German navy submarines and surface vessels in Spanish waters, as had successfully occurred during the First World War, had formed part of the German naval strategy since 1919, in preparation for what seemed an inevitable future confrontation with France and Great Britain. From 1934 on, the German Naval High Command organized a sophisticated global supply network for its units, the *Etappendienst*.

The friendly neutrality of Spain played a very important role in this network, especially in the Canary Islands. Everything points to the fact that the archipelago would be used as a platform for establishing the hypothetical colonial empire that Hitler hoped to set up in central Africa, from where he planned to extract raw materials to fuel his war machine.

"The Canaries would be one of the bases destined to protect communications between the future colonies and the Third Reich against North American attack".<sup>30</sup>

When the *Etappendienst* dispersed its funds to prevent them being frozen by British or French banks in the event of war, one and a half million marks were sent to Spain and another million to the Canary Islands to provide fuel and victuals for the crews of the units on this side of the Atlantic in case of war.<sup>31</sup> The budget assigned to the Canarias was entrusted to Jacob Ahlers, honorary German Consul in Santa Cruz de Tenerife and an influential businessman who had already lent his services to his country's navy in the First World War. Another important member of the *Etappendienst* in the islands was Otto Bertran, in Gran Canaria, an ex-lieutenant of the *Kriegsmarine* or German Navy and responsible for air communications in Lufthansa in the South Atlantic.

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<sup>30</sup> Juan José Díaz Benítez, *La Armada española y la defensa de Canarias durante la II Guerra Mundial*, Anroart Ediciones, 2008, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, p.11.

<sup>31</sup> cf. Manuel Ros Agudo, *La guerra secreta de Franco*, Crítica, Barcelona, 2002, p. 81.

The Spanish Civil War was a setback for the introduction of the *Etappendienst*. The commanders of the *Kriegsmarine* would have preferred a stable Spain with sufficient resources to mask their operations. However, the new situation provided a favourable setting, though supply points would need to be ensured to palliate the foreseeable lack of fuel and victuals after the Spanish war. In this context, the *Abwehr*, German intelligence unit, the *Etappendienst* and the Spanish section of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs wove a web of interests in which Jacob Ahlers played a decisive part.

In 1938, Nazi infiltration of the only oil refinery (CEPSA) in Spain, located in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, was ventured when Jacob Ahlers attempted to purchase a considerable amount of company shares through Spanish financier Juan March, a great benefactor of all Fascist causes. The sole aim of this acquisition was to guarantee fuel supply to German submarines; this plan shows just how far the Germans were prepared to go with their idea of meticulously preparing a future global war.<sup>32</sup>

Jacob Ahlers, honorary German Consul in Tenerife, and Guillermo Rahn, vice-Consul, were National Socialists: convinced Nazis.<sup>33</sup> At the beginning of August 1936, Jacob Ahlers supplied German components for weapons manufacture to the rebels under the command of General Lu s Orgaz Yoldi in Tenerife. In those early days of the rebellion, the arrival in Puerto de la Cruz of shiny new Italian weapons on board an English ship was another striking event. A consignment was sent by a ship belonging to  lvaro Rodr guez L pez to a group of Falangists in La Gomera where some resistance was expected.<sup>34</sup>

The European Fascist powers knew of the military rebellion before 18 July. It was all decided: on the one hand, Jacob Ahlers and his supporters were sitting on one million marks, funds for the *Etappendienst* in Tenerife, ready for an inevitable, desired and approaching world war, and on the other, the Spanish military and Fascists could count on a certain rearguard in the islands. Finally, the Canary Islands oligarchy could happily carry out their plan to get rid of the “undesirables” who were undermining their power and stability.

*18 July 1936 arrived (...) praise was showered on the local Germans and the marvellous spectacle of the German Consulate at the heart and soul of the movement. It was humiliating to see the spectacle of the consulate turned into a seething mass of soldiers and Fascists receiving and giving orders, and all the Germans enthusiastically raising their arms in salute!*<sup>35</sup>

Supporters of the cause included Walter Sauermann, consul in Gran Canaria, the aforementioned Otto Bertram, representative of Lufthansa, Edmund Nieman, shipping agent, and Walter Vogel, manager of W ormann, the German shipping

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.84-86.

<sup>33</sup> Leopoldo O'Shanahan, *Horror, errores y falacias sobre la Guerra Civil en Canarias*, p.99.

<sup>34</sup> Ricardo Garc a Luis, Juan Manuel Torres Vera, *Vallehermoso. El fogueo*, p.140.

<sup>35</sup> Description by Leopoldo O'Shanahan y Bravo de Laguna in a letter sent in 1945 concerning Nazi enthusiasm on the day of the Fascist rebellion, p.100.

company for the entire South Atlantic, based in Puerto de La Luz, in Gran Canaria.<sup>36</sup> The mission entrusted to the consulates in the Canaries called for totally trustworthy leaders, chosen from the most fanatical supporters, individuals who would respond without hesitation to the dictates of Berlin.

*Members of the consulate and their respective spouses were investigated as to their purity of blood. (...) To that end, there was a visit from Berlin of members of the Reichssicherheit-shauptamt, the Reich main security office, belonging to the AMT VI SD-Ausland section, responsible for external security, directed by Reinhard Heydrich, Chief of Security Police and the Gestapo since 1936. This fact underlines the unusual importance of the German consulates in the Canaries.<sup>37</sup>*

Despite the favourable setting for German interests, it was not possible to satisfy the demand for exclusive supply bases, infrastructures that were in the sights of the German Naval High Command in the years leading up to World War II. Nazi demands were considerable and included a direct request from Hitler to install a base on the island of Gran Canaria in which he requested that Franco transfer sovereignty to Germany; and covert operations, organized by Marshal Goering in August 1938, under the guise of a commercial fishing expedition contracted by Gustav Winter, a German entrepreneur based in Fuerteventura. This reconnaissance task explored the coasts of the Canary Islands and the Spanish colonies of Río de Oro and La Güera, in search of suitable places for secret supply operations.

When the Second World War broke out, all these initiatives were reduced to the tacit support of the regime, whose attitude was incompatible with Spanish neutrality because of the backup given to operations through shipping companies run by Spanish front men. These port logistics were fully tolerated by the authorities and escort was even provided by Spanish Navy ships.

*"The Spanish authorities were favourable to fulfilling German wishes through their own conviction and there was no need for outside pressure. (...) The regime displayed unfeigned feelings of admiration for Germany, ideological sympathy and gratitude for past help".<sup>38</sup>*

Throughout 1940 and for the first six months of 1941, Meyer-Döhner, naval attaché in Madrid, negotiated with the Spanish authorities to trade oil from German tankers sheltering in Spanish ports in exchange for the diesel fuel required by their submarines. Initially, he requested the Spanish government consider the possibility of diesel being supplied in Tenerife using CAMPSA as a safe store, but the cost overrun of the German conditions resulted in the failure of this operation, and a new agreement was proposed with CEPESA, also in Tenerife. The Spanish authorities knew that this fuel was destined to supply future U-boat missions in Gran Canaria.

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<sup>36</sup> cf. Juan José Díaz Benítez, "La Armada española llevó tripulaciones submarinas nazis y torpedos a Canarias", diario *La Provincia*, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, 06.6.2010.

<sup>37</sup> *Horror, errores y falacias sobre la Guerra Civil en Canarias*, p.100-101.

<sup>38</sup> Manuel Ros Agudo, *La guerra secreta de Franco*, p.81.

In the summer of 1940, Hitler decided to step up the submarine campaign in the Atlantic in order to place a stranglehold on Great Britain, before launching an invasion anticipated to be the riskiest of all the campaigns undertaken until then. The *Etappendienst* organization in the Canaries provided fuel and torpedoes to the German units operating in the Atlantic, thus avoiding a long and dangerous voyage to the North Sea for victualling. "At this stage, the star role was played by the oil tanker, *Corrientes*, anchored in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. It succeeded in refuelling no fewer than six submersibles between March and July 1941 without being discovered by the British".<sup>39</sup> These six submersibles, registered with the *Kriegsmarine* as U-124, U-105, U-106, U-123, U-69 and U-103, sank forty-two Allied ships in the weeks following supply in the Canaries, destroying 221 243 tons transported off Western and Equatorial Africa.<sup>40</sup>

These operations would have been impossible without the specific support of the Ministry of the Navy, which regularly informed naval command in the Canaries on the eve of operations. Although Spanish collaboration was not restricted to permitting these activities in Spanish ports, on numerous occasions Spanish Navy ships were used to transport German torpedoes and provisions.

*On 29 October [1941] the general commander of Cadiz received a radio message in connection with food transport for these submarines: 'German consul will deliver you one hundred thousand boxes of provisions to load onto the Marte [minelayer], consigned to the German consul in Las Palmas'. The German consular authority in Spain was frequently used by the Etappen organization to camouflage the final destination of food transport. The Spanish Navy happily did the rest of the work.*<sup>41</sup>

### Iron Head

We have yet to discover the destination of several vessels used as floating prisons, whose subsequent use is somewhat confusing when the military authorities decided to dispense with them because they did not meet the requirements for restraining prisoners who might mutiny and seize the ship, or escape and take other boats in the port.

After the war, some of the prisoners were sent to Gando concentration camp, in Gran Canaria, and others, along with several hundred prisoners from Fyffes, were deported to work gangs in Morocco. The ships were left moored and at the disposal of their owners, but everything had changed. The economic conditions in the islands were very different to those before the civil war.

We have anticipated the Nazi infiltration in the Canaries and the plot to include the region in the *Etappendienst*, a plot whose ramifications now extended

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.102.

<sup>40</sup> Juan José Díaz Benítez, *La Armada española y la defensa de Canarias durante la II Guerra Mundial*, details shown in charts 4 and 5, p.101.

<sup>41</sup> *La guerra secreta de Franco*, p.103.

towards the Spanish merchant navy, which also participated in covert operations to assist the strategic needs of the Axis.

In the spring of 1941, Erwin Rommel had launched his offensive against Egypt: the operations of the *Afrika korps* needed provisions from Italian and German convoys that the British intercepted from Malta. The German Naval High Command considered using small Spanish merchant vessels flying under a neutral flag to complete supplies to German troops in Libya.

They used Sofindus, a conglomerate of German firms in Spain, through which they founded a new entrepreneurial structure. This new venture, called Comercial Marítima de Transportes-Transcomar, enabled them to overcome the limitations of Spanish legislation in relation to foreign capital. The firm was registered under the names of Spanish front men who concealed the identity of the rightful owner: the German government.

*The boats—always flying under the Spanish flag—would remain at the disposal of the German Naval Command. Their final destination was to transport victuals, weapons and munitions in the area between Brindisi, the Piraeus, the Aegean and Tripoli.*<sup>42</sup>

They acquired ten small coastal traders that were sent to the Eastern Mediterranean as part of Operation Hetze; at first, the vessels sailed under the Spanish flag, supplying Rommel's *Afrika korps* and the garrisons stationed on the Greek Islands, effectively contradicting the neutrality declared by the Spanish government. "In just ten months, they carried 125 000 tons of supplies to North Africa. These voyages were initially undertaken with a mixed crew, though subsequently they were German crews".<sup>43</sup>

These first boats included in Operation Hetze were the *Alma, Celsius, Isora, Reaumur, María Amalia, Ostia, San Juan II, San Isidro Labrador, San Eduardo* and the *Vicente*.<sup>44</sup> All are old acquaintances and there is no surprise in revealing their names and their obscure past. Several of these vessels had been used as floating prisons in Tenerife. Five of the ten ships in Operation Hetze belonged to the coastal fleet of Álvaro Rodríguez López, the most important shipowner in the Canaries at that time. If the fact that the *Etappendienst* in the Canaries provided an important logistics base comes as no surprise, this is not so where the supposed dispersal of these vessels after the civil war is concerned. The facts indicate that they were sold to shipowners on the Spanish mainland and continued coastal trading, since the autarchical measures adopted by the regime and the period of deep crisis that kicked in after the war had crippled the economic interests of the local bourgeoisie. Only now do we know a very different truth.

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121.

<sup>43</sup> José Ángel del Río, *Al servicio de Alemania I*, [online]. World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://www.vidamaritima.com/2009/08/al-servicio-de-alemania-1.html>>

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*



These vessels were silent witnesses to two wars: they were used as prisons in the civil war and then to feed the military dementia of Nazism. It is easy to imagine them sailing towards a sombre end, bearing destruction and death, signs of a dark period and a sinister merchant navy.

The cargo ship, the *Alma*, is none other than that known as the *Adeje* by many prisoners in Tenerife, the name of the vessel painted on the port side, thus identifying her as a neutral merchant navy ship in World War II. The funnel still bears the logo of the owner, Rodríguez López. Months after being chartered by Transcomar, the vessel was registered by the German government under the name *Nikolajew*. She was called *Alma* when she sank off Naxos, in the Aegean Sea on 22 November 1943, blown up by a mine launched from a British submersible, *HMS Torbay*.

The *Isora* (after belonging to José Peña Hernández's Cabotajes Insulares fleet, and then passing over to Álvaro Rodríguez López's company, while still being used as a floating prison) was chartered by the Germans, who named her *Cherson* and then *Isis* (a reference to Nazi theosophy that recalled the vessel's original name of *Isora*, a terrible reminder for the survivors and families of the disappeared in Tenerife). From June 1942, the ship travelled between Crete and Tobruk. On 23 February 1944, she was torpedoed by the British submarine *HMS Unsparring*, three miles off Navarion (now Pylos), in the Ionian Sea, and was subsequently finished off by Allied planes.

The *Reaumur* was also closely linked to the floating prison. Registered as the *Amir* while part of the fleet of Elder & Fyffes' Compañía Marítima Canaria, the vessel then became the property of Álvaro Rodríguez López and was named the *Santa Ana Mártir*. It was under this premonitory name that hundreds of men were tortured in the port of Tenerife. Later the name was changed to *Tercio de Montejurra* in Bilbao. Acquired by Transcomar, renamed *Rigel* and later *Sewastopol*, the vessel came under attack in Skiathos Channel from the Greek submersible, *Katsonis*, on 29 May 1943, but did not sink. Chartered by the German Ministry of Transport and renamed *Reamur*, the ship was hit by two artefacts launched from the British submarine *HMS Sickle*, which sank her on 6 June 1944 in the Aegean.

The 552-ton cargo ship, *San Juan II*, was built in Cadiz at the shipyard of Echevarrieta & Larrinaga, in 1919. Named the *Gadir* for the Naviera Vasco-Valencia in 1934, the vessel was later acquired by Álvaro Rodríguez López and renamed *Santa Úrsula*. Shortly afterwards, the name was changed again to *San Juan II*, though the vessel continued in the same fleet. Purchased by Transcomar in 1943, the ship underwent two more name changes, first to *Feodosia* and, a few months later, to *Suzanne*. On 14 July 1944, she was torpedoed by the British submarine, *HMS Vivid*, in Livadia Bay off the island of Tilos, in the Aegean Sea.

The 257-ton cargo ship, the *San Isidro Labrador*, was built in 1904 by Williamson & Co., in Workington (UK) for Compañía Marítima Canaria, a subsidiary

company of Elder & Fyffes. The vessel was named the *Guanche*. The ship later worked as a small coastal fruit trader between the coasts of Tenerife, La Palma and La Gomera, transporting fruit to the island capital for Hamilton & Co., under the name of *Carmen*. The vessel's name was subsequently changed to *San Sebastián* and in 1922 she was acquired under the name of *San Isidro Labrador* by the fleet of Álvaro Rodríguez López. Purchased by Transcomar, the vessel was torpedoed on 5 April 1943 by the Greek submarine, *Katsonis*, off the Greek island of Kythnos, when undertaking a voyage for the German Ministry of Transport.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> This list has been drawn up using information from the following: José Ángel del Río, *Al servicio de Alemania I*, [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://www.vidamaritima.com/2009/08/al-servicio-de-alemania-1.html>>. *Barcos españoles hundidos en la SGM*, [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://www.webmar.com>>. Ships' records in the *Miramar Ship Index* [online], World Wide Web Document, URL: <<http://www.miramarshipindex.org.nz/>>.

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