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**TITLE:** “Nuestro querido padre Stalin.” Letters of War and Exile in Emma Riverola’s *Cartas desde la ausencia*

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**ABSTRACT:** Emma Riverola’s 2008 novel, *Cartas desde la ausencia*, juxtaposes the Franco and Stalin regimes and employs the epistolary mode to situate children at the center of an ideological battle between left and right authoritarian regimes. I explore how two dictators come together in the unique psychic space of children’s correspondence, exposing an addressee that is simultaneously the family and the State. The seventy-year trajectory of *Cartas* speaks to the enduring personal and collective legacy of children’s exile and suggests a need to consider the war in transnational and transgenerational terms.

**KEYWORDS:** Spanish Civil War, USSR, exile, children, epistolary novel

**RESUMEN:** En su novela *Cartas desde la ausencia*, Emma Riverola yuxtapone los regímenes franquista y estalinista, empleando el modo epistolar para ubicar a los niños al centro de una lucha ideológica entre los regímenes autoritarios de izquierdas y de derechas. Investigo cómo se unen dos dictadores dentro del espacio psíquico de la correspondencia epistolar de los niños, revelando un interlocutor que es simultáneamente la familia y el Estado. La trayectoria de setenta años de *Cartas* nos habla del legado personal y colectivo del exilio de los niños de la guerra, sugiriendo la necesidad de considerar la guerra en términos transnacionales y transgeneracionales.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Guerra Civil española, URSS, exilio, niños, novela epistolar

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# “Nuestro querido padre Stalin:” Letters of War and Exile in Emma Riverola’s *Cartas desde la ausencia*

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Spaniards, according to Michael Ugarte, have been “bound together”—from the time of the Cid to the 20th century—by “the mechanisms of expulsion” (10).<sup>1</sup> The Spanish Civil War, which led to the exile of an estimated 500,000 at the end of the conflict in 1939, has figured prominently in Peninsular literary and cultural production of the past decade. Some of the most successful recent films about the war and subsequent dictatorship of Francisco Franco (1939-75) involve children, many of whom have been “expelled” or symbolically exiled from childhood, forced to bear the weight of historical traumas and become adults before their time.<sup>2</sup> During the Spanish Civil War, 33,000 children were evacuated to France, England, Belgium, the USSR, Mexico, Switzerland and Denmark. While many of those taken in by European nations were repatriated shortly after the end of the war, or even before, the Mexican and Soviet governments, citing opposition to the Franco regime, did not immediately agree to their return. In the USSR, repatriations were especially belated, not occurring until 1956. This delayed possibility of return, together with the Stalinist education of the children and the outbreak of World War II makes the case of the USSR arguably the most complex of the receiving countries.

While the Spanish Civil War and Franco dictatorship have dominated cultural production in Spain and the scholarly landscape of Peninsular Studies over the last decade, the study of exile and its aftermath has also gained prominence in recent years.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless,

interest in *children’s* exile—and exile to the USSR in particular—has remained relatively marginalized within the broader context of the contemporary discourse on “historical memory.” Perhaps, this is a long-term effect of the Francoist narrative of the Spanish Civil War, where the enemy came not from within, but appeared as a foreign body, one especially tainted by communism and the Soviet Union, as Paloma Aguilar notes: “el enemigo es un antiespañol, un traidor a la patria que se ha confabulado con la mayor potencia comunista, la URSS, para instaurar la dictadura del proletariado en España” (132). Emma Riverola’s 2008 epistolary novel *Cartas desde la ausencia* takes up the question of children exiled to the USSR, situating them at the center of an ideological battle between left and right authoritarian regimes. The author’s decision to employ the epistolary mode enables readers to peer deeply into the unique psychic space of children’s correspondence, which is doubly marked—injected with Stalinist rhetoric in the USSR, and censored or confiscated on its way to Spain. As I argue, Riverola’s use of the letter form compels readers to establish parallels between Spain and the USSR, while her emphasis on children’s narration and the construction of childhood problematizes Communism on a transnational and transgenerational level. Ultimately, the “post-political” territory that *Cartas* posits as a space of reconciliation and freedom from exhausted ideological paradigms requires the renunciation of collective political projects and, perhaps, effective political agency itself.

*Cartas desde la ausencia* is a loosely chronological depiction of the war, evacuation and subsequent exile of children to the USSR and the consequences of their repatriation and serial emigration.<sup>4</sup> Via letters, telegrams and e-mail, *Cartas* narrates seventy years of Spanish history, while emphasizing the transnational reach of the war and its aftermath with letters originating from Spain, the USSR, France and Cuba. The novel opens when Jaime Martí, just days after the outbreak of the war, leaves behind Carmen, his pregnant wife, and two sons, Andreu and Víctor, to fight the fascist troops. Several months later, having moved with her children from Barcelona to Bilbao, Carmen makes the painful decision to send them to safety in the Soviet Union.<sup>5</sup> Although we might think of *Cartas* as a choral novel, the focal point of the narrative is really Andreu's evolution from boy to man in Stalinist Russia. Contending with the death of his father Jaime and his mother's absence, Andreu responds to the call of Stalin, a surrogate father; eventually, Andreu's political militancy in the Communist Party leads him to shun his family and reject a permanent repatriation to Spain. Settling in Cuba, he dies in 2006 after reflecting critically on his past and awaiting a visit from Paula, the Spanish daughter he has never met.

In *Cartas*, the child's—and later, the adult's—autobiographical experience continually interact with an overarching collective project. Much like the Franco regime, the Soviet government manipulated “childhood” itself, privileging the Spanish children in order to advance a distinct political project. In a sense, in the USSR, the Spanish children must negotiate between the memory of a past that is no more, and the knowledge that they embody the memory of a future yet to be. The letter becomes one of the primary places for children to work through their experiences of war and exile, functioning as a tool with which to shape and transform their memories of home and family. Letters from Spanish children also work to help the Stalin regime generate support for its cause, in the USSR

and abroad. In Spain, the Republic's officials touted Russian asylum as an escape from the war and an opportunity for education in “el país del socialismo” (Sierra 155), while the Stalin regime used the arrival of the youth for domestic propaganda. Young pioneers met the expeditions with flowers, song and dance, leaving a great impression on the children who were indebted to their host country for the food, shelter and clothing unavailable in wartime Spain (Sierra 175). However, the effusive welcome they encountered was not due to humanitarian interests alone, but was also fed by the knowledge that the Spanish children shared an ideological background—albeit by virtue of their parents—with the Soviets. As Verónica Sierra affirms, the children's arrival almost immediately became a propaganda tool:

La infancia sirvió como arma propagandística y la llegada de las diferentes expediciones de niños evacuados (así como el retorno de los mismos) ocupó en muchas ocasiones las primeras planas de los periódicos y las pantallas en los cines. (176)

Clearly, this favorable treatment had direct implications for the children's perception of their surroundings, their memories of Spain and involvement in educational projects aimed at transforming them into future pioneers of the Soviet Union.

In those letters home to which we have access—many never received by their intended addressees—Spanish children write vibrantly of food, clothing, classes and games in the USSR and request news from home. However, we often perceive the presence of other (adult) voices in the children's allusions to Stalin and the Communist Party and in statements about their determination to return to Spain and destroy fascism. As Sierra writes, speaking of a series of such letters,

eran, en realidad, un mensaje colectivo que buscaba transmitir a España la ‘grandeza moral y material’ del país

que los acogía [...]. La carga ideológica, la claridad expresiva y la concisión de la narración [...] nos hacen sospechar de su autoría real. (186)

In a manner similar to the one Sierra describes, in *Cartas*, Andreu's letters call our attention to the particular dimensions of children's memory and narration, while compelling us to investigate how politics appeals to "childhood" and intervenes in Andreu's experience and correspondence throughout his life. Riverola's decision to feature a young child's voice early in the novel moves the narrative in a particular direction.

For example, when Andreu begins his writing home, he is still a young child unable to analyze or interpret what is happening to him. Thus, his letters reflect a child's understanding of the exilic situation; that is, the reality of his surroundings is obscured from himself, his addressees and us. As Susan Rubin Suleiman notes of the "1.5 generation"—or child survivors of the Holocaust,

[c]hildren under the age of eleven have a different way of understanding what is happening to them than those who are older: the older child possesses the capacity to think hypothetically, to use abstract words appropriately and with understanding, as well as a vocabulary to name the experience that the younger child lacks. (282)

Taken alongside his age, Andreu's ideological programming means that his letters reflect a child's unformed, uncritical experience, even when he is an adult.

Just two months after his arrival in the USSR, Andreu begins to embrace a distinctly partisan tone, signing his letters home with "Viva Rusia," "Viva el comunismo" (78) or "Salud que venceremos" (80).<sup>6</sup> Readers leap from the simplicity of Andreu's reflections to his mother—"Algunas veces lloramos" (71)—to the explicit political interference and advanced linguistic register present in a

letter seeking the whereabouts of his family in Spain:

Ustedes del Gobierno pueden estar satisfechos por lo bien que nos trata nuestra patria hermana, la URSS. Aquí nos estamos preparando con las mejores armas, que son los libros, para cuando seamos mayores reconstruir nuestra querida patria España, que está quedando destruida por la criminal aviación alemana e italiana, y las baterías escupiendo metralla por su boca criminal. (84)

Andreu's letters, though he writes them, do not necessarily emanate from his own subjective space, but as part of a larger pedagogical and political apparatus. His "confessions" to his mother ultimately speak less to her and the mother-child relationship than to the invisible but ever-present figure of Stalin waiting in the wings. Adult voices shape Andreu's words, tempering a child's desperate request to locate his family with the suggestion that another family, that of the *patria*—in this case, referred to as a *sister nation*—has taken him in.

The insertion of politics into Andreu's personal letters to his family becomes especially clear when he begins to refer directly to Stalin as "nuestro acogedor camarada Stalin" (84) and "nuestro querido padre Stalin" (89). As Andreu's letters grow more propagandistic in tone, it appears he is no longer writing for one reader but multiple ones. His voice reflects a consciousness that his mother is not the sole recipient of his messages. Once he begins to face the absence of a response from home, Andreu incorporates substitute father figures into his letters, as if to fill the void left by the lack of an answer. Thus, we see him balancing "escasos recuerdos de padre" (191) with the understanding that he still must fulfill an obligation to another father. Here and elsewhere, Riverola appeals to "epistolarity," or "the use of a letter's formal properties to create meaning" (Altman 4). As Altman writes, one of the characteristics of epistolary discourse is the

[p]articularity of the I-you, the *I* [...] always having as its (implicit or explicit) partner a specific *you* that stands in unique relationship to the *I*. In letter language [...] the addressee plays a role; he is able, and is expected, to initiate his own utterance. Such reciprocity whereby the original *you* becomes the *I* of a new utterance is essential to the maintenance of the epistolary exchange. (117)

Riverola appears to use the letter form to signal the *absence* of a response from the *you* to whom Andreu addresses himself. Although Andreu continues to address Stalin in his letters, reciprocity or a new utterance can only be imagined, laying bare Andreu's manipulation as a child orphaned of family and nation.

For the Spanish children evacuated to the USSR, letter-writing was a carefully-orchestrated and regulated enterprise (Sierra 289). Adult readers, checking for spelling and grammatical errors and correct address labels in Russian and Spanish, took pains to ensure that the letters maintained a positive tone. While not officially censored, children's letters from the USSR often underwent significant changes prior to being sent:

En el caso de que los niños hubieran escrito algo considerado indecoroso o impropio, los encargados de revisar las cartas les hacían sustituirlo o desmentirlo líneas después, interviniendo en el texto y censurando la espontaneidad infantil. (289)

Children's letters had a therapeutic purpose, but also provided ripe locations for Stalinist rhetoric to thrive, promoting an image of the USSR that served the regime on a domestic and international front (Kowalsky par. 57). Finally, children's letters unwittingly aided the Franco regime by providing State officials with incriminating evidence about Republican parents.

Riverola utilizes Andreu's letters to reveal interference. We have already seen several instances in which politics overwhelms private correspondence, such as when Stalin intrudes

on Andreu's memories of his father, or when an adult linguistic register occupies his writing. It is precisely this sort of invasion of children's writing that compels Verónica Sierra to speak of the letters written by Spanish children in the USSR as "una serie de mensajes-tipo, visibles sobre todo en las fórmulas ideológicas" (280). If the *content* of the children's letters is subject to ideological operations, and the struggle for linguistic control is an attempt at refashioning the author's discourse, a secondary procedure is also performed on the child's writing in terms of the re-shaping of the letter's symbolic recipient. This reconfiguration of the addressee for Andreu means that although he may be writing to his mother, he composes his thoughts under the shadow of an imaginary male gaze—that of Stalin. Therefore, Andreu's words undergo another process of revision, as his correspondence with his mother becomes colored by his awareness that he is part of a collective, or another kind of family: "todos los niños y profesores formamos una gran familia" (166-67). As Andreu's search for a surrogate father permeates his letters home, his mother becomes less important as an intended addressee. As Riverola depicts Andreu's substitution of one family for another, she feeds the reader's understanding of the character as an eternal child unable to sever himself from the filial position.

The majority of Andreu's correspondence, though sent to his mother, reaffirms his commitment to the collective Soviet Family and helps solidify an ideal of traditional masculinity. These letters enforce a loyalty to what John Borneman calls the "patricentric" regime, whose "leader appropriates for himself all forms of paternal authority" and insists on a "subjective identification with the father" (3-4). Thus, even when Andreu is technically no longer a "child," he continues to conceive of himself as such—either through his identification with the collective unit of the Spanish "children," or as one of Stalin's own. On the one hand, Andreu's extended "childhood" speaks to the manner in which his evacuation and subsequent exile abruptly ended that period of his life. However,

the persistence of the “child” figure also reflects Andreu’s subjection under the Stalin regime.

Although Andreu’s letters have certainly reflected and supported his Soviet upbringing, *explicit* State interference has not played a role in their delivery. Shortly after the end of World War II, when Andreu reaches the working age of eighteen, his letters to Carmen begin to suffer the effects of censorship. While readers have experienced a briefly censored correspondence between Jaume and his brother Ramon earlier in the novel, those letters did not equip us with the redacted words and phrases, thereby exposing us to the same partial message as the fictional characters who received them. However, when Andreu’s correspondence undergoes the first mark of the censors in 1948, Riverola grants us access to the original letter and the censored components, which she underlines. As Altman comments, “epistolary is primarily a frame for reading” (4). Here, we read the Franco regime’s use of censorship alongside the Stalinist propaganda that permeates Andreu’s correspondence.

Riverola appears to be juxtaposing Stalin with the Francoist state apparatus and highlighting the way the Franco regime views the child. While in the USSR, the child is equipped to promote the Stalinist agenda, in Spain he is under surveillance, a productive source of information. Interestingly, information about the child’s surrogate family is now retained and kept from his family of origin, suggesting that the child no longer belongs to his parent, but to the Francoist State itself. Indeed, the censored letters situate Andreu squarely at the center of two regimes, helping us draw unmistakable parallels between Stalin and Franco, despite their opposite place on the political spectrum. The letters serve as a vehicle of propaganda and coercion, and perhaps most importantly, they demonstrate a similar manipulation of the “child” (whether actual or symbolic) and childhood itself by each regime, albeit for different ends.

While the juxtaposition of the dictators no doubt reveals much about the chil-

dren’s treatment, there seems to be another unacknowledged presence as Riverola links the regimes. Perhaps, she is unintentionally speaking to Hannah Arendt’s infamous paradigm for understanding totalitarianism. In *On Totalitarianism*, Arendt drew unmistakable parallels between Stalin and Hitler as she formulated her analysis of totalitarian movements of the extreme ideological left and right. In fact, on the first page of the book, where Arendt references Stalin, Lenin and Hitler, she writes, “[n]othing is more characteristic of the totalitarian movements in general and of the quality of fame of their leaders in particular than the startling swiftness with which they are forgotten and the startling ease with which they can be replaced” (3). As Stanley comments, Arendt’s critics dislike her “tendency to lump together regimes of varying stripes under a single category while ignoring or paying insufficient attention to the specific historical circumstances from which these regimes emerge” (189).<sup>7</sup> In *Cartas*, perhaps due to the epistolary format of the novel, readers are not so much encouraged to understand Francoism or Stalinism in the historical context, but to examine dictatorial Spain in light of the Soviet Union (or vice-versa). Although there are certainly similarities between each regime’s manipulation and appropriation of the Spanish children, as readers, we recognize these points in common long before Andreu does. This type of relationship creates what Michael André Bernstein calls “backshadowing,” a practice that “endows the past with the coherence of an inevitable and linear unfolding” or a “retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events as *though they too should have known what was to come*” (16). Clearly, here, the letters allow readers to experience a knowledge Andreu does not yet have, as he is still fully committed to the Stalinist ideal.

In 1953, upon Stalin’s sudden death, Andreu writes Carmen and confesses that the news has devastated the Spanish children (209). In

his half-censored letter, he reminds his mother of the paternal role the dictator has played in his own life, and in that of other exiles:

Él ha sido mi padre en la Unión Soviética. Mi protector, mi guía. Gracias a su generosidad, he disfrutado de un hogar, de educación, de sanidad y [...] me ha dado amor y cariño. En esta segunda patria hemos vivido como reyes [...] sintiéndonos queridos por un pueblo que nos adoraba [...]. Durante la guerra, nos trataron mejor que a sus propios hijos [...]. (209)

Although we can ascertain that Andreu's reflections go unread by Carmen, it is significant that the censor singles out these particular words for removal. As Andreu attempts to communicate with his mother, his observations on his surrogate family are redacted and incorporated into the archives of another State apparatus that privileges a particular type of family model. This letter is illustrative of a transfer of power—reading himself as orphaned for a second time, Andreu now becomes Franco's symbolic property. Despite the fact that Andreu signs his letter “un fuerte abrazo de tu hijo” (210), it is evident that he addresses himself very little to Carmen as her son and does not appear to recognize her as his interlocutor, but as a passive recipient of his account. Ironically, Andreu's dedication to Stalin ends up making him an unwitting pawn in the Franco regime, which also values children as a political device.

It would be easy to assert that the Spanish children enjoyed a privileged status in the USSR, while being stigmatized in Spain, but the children's identity is highly unstable, and fluctuates according to each regime's needs and demands at any given moment. For example, as Daniel Kowalsky has noted in the case of the USSR, as part of a “cause célèbre,”

from 1937 to late 1938 those Spanish children evacuated to the Soviet Union enjoyed a standard of living that far exceeded that experienced by

the children they left behind in Spain, as well as nearly all the children living in the Soviet Union. (par. 74)

However, the “onset of World War II brought about the conclusive end not only to the Spanish children's position of prestige” (par. 81). In a similar vein, the Franco regime also adopted a chameleon-like approach when dealing with the Spanish children, both upon their evacuation to the Soviet Union in 1937 and during subsequent attempts to repatriate them.

Andreu's letters indicate the presence of an increasingly militant voice as he passes from childhood to young adulthood. Yet intervening in the novel is also a series of “official” documents regarding the repatriation of the Spanish children. The censored letters offer clues about which aspects of Soviet life are of particular interest to the Franco regime. However, no commentary accompanies these letters or reveals how they may be put to use. On the other hand, several letters addressed to Phalangist leaders can offer insight into the interests the regime has in repatriating those children evacuated to the USSR. In essence, in a fashion typical of fascist culture, the children will become props in a carefully-orchestrated performance designed to highlight the regime's good will and humanitarian intentions, much as we saw occur after the children's arrival in the Soviet Union. Finally, the words “niños,” “menores” and “patria” in these documents underscore once again how the regime intends to deploy children at the State's behest.

It was not until the death of Stalin in 1953 that Spanish and Soviet leaders began discussing the return of the children to Spanish soil, with the first return expeditions not occurring until 1956.<sup>8</sup> In *Cartas desde la ausencia*, two letters written in 1954 and 1955 and addressed to Phalangist delegates reflect these discussions. In the first, an official in charge of the “Protection of Minors” forwards an article written by Federico de Urrutia, a well-known Phalangist poet and writer.<sup>9</sup> The quoted portion of the article in

the letter signals the Falange's direct involvement with the repatriation process. Here, we find a similar portrayal of the children to that the Nationalists employed during the war. On the one hand, Urrutia regards the children as helpless victims, but he also characterizes them as distinctly foreign and defective:

Especial atención merecen los niños que fueron a Rusia, pues dada la inhumana educación recibida, ya habrán dejado de ser criaturas humanas, para convertirse en desalmados entes soviéticos. Niños educados para el activismo [...]. Niños corrompidos por el comunismo [...]. (219)

As this letter and others reveal, the Phalangists exculpate the regime from any wrongdoing, while effectively blaming Soviet authorities for converting the children into godless, communist youth. Of course, the accusation of indoctrination is highly ironic, considering children's similar programming in Spain under the National Catholic model. The insistence on using the terms "niños" and "menores" highlights the manner in which Francoist delegates keep the exiled youth in a subordinate position, even though, as in the case of Andreu and his brother Víctor, a majority of the children are now young adults in their twenties.<sup>10</sup> Finally, these official letters also detail the inner workings of the censorship machine, alluding to the interception of parent-child correspondence and illuminating once again the disciplinary nature of the epistolary form in *Cartas desde la ausencia*:

Esa Jefatura Nacional bien sabe que esta comunicación se ha venido realizando a través de países extranjeros y por mediación de personas de la familia o amistades. Todas estas cartas son leídas detenidamente y las consideradas de interés remitidas a esa Nacional. (226)

Indirectly, such commentary draws our attention back to the censored letters we have just read, but again, readers obtain privileged

information that Andreu is unable to acquire.

When the opportunity for official repatriation at last arrives, Andreu returns to Spain with Víctor. In the USSR, they foresee many of the challenges they will encounter, but the experience of return is particularly taxing for Andreu, who is unable to tolerate the sense of exclusion and hyper-vigilance to which he and others are now subject. If censorship and surveillance accompany Andreu's private correspondence with Carmen, then his decision to accept repatriation and *be* in Spain provoke even greater monitoring. Now, in the absence of letters from the USSR, the Franco regime subjects the repatriates to similar interventions; faced with weekly interrogations and equipped with special "documentation," returning exiles are aliens in their native land.<sup>11</sup> And, once again, Andreu's allegiance to communist ideology intervenes negatively in his family ties and intimate relationships. During his time in Spain, Andreu begins an intimate relationship with Beatriz, one of his childhood companions. Earlier, Andreu infused his letters to Carmen with professions of love to Stalin and the Soviet Union, and now, he utilizes love letters to Beatriz as a place to feature his vision of "el proyecto que ha de dirigir el mundo" (246). Urging his lover to follow him back to the USSR, he promises they can help "construir el gran sueño colectivo" (246). The two initiate an intermittent correspondence that lasts over several decades, and although they occasionally meet in secret, their love for one another is marked largely by absence and a series of geographic displacements.

When Beatriz refuses to accompany Andreu to the Soviet Union, they meet years later for a brief affair in France. After Andreu moves to Cuba to be a part of the Revolution, he again attempts to persuade her to follow him out of Spain. If this sense of statelessness constitutes Andreu's identity throughout his life, it is worth noting that it is in his letters to women that he attempts to articulate his stake in constructing the nation, however utopian a landscape that might be. We first observed



the pervasiveness of ideology in Andreu's letters to Carmen, and now, much the same occurs in his letters to Beatriz. As Andreu strives to define himself before the shifting motivations and goals of the party, he uses his relationships with his mother and lover to propagate different visions for the communist future—first in Stalinist Russia, and then, in Fidel Castro's Cuba. And, he does so assuming that the women in his life will not only tolerate, but support his beliefs. In fact, the more entrenched Andreu becomes in party dogma, the less he considers Carmen and Beatriz as individuals, viewing them instead as comrades in a communist crusade. In a letter from Beatriz to Andreu, sent after a clandestine encounter in Paris, the former confesses that Andreu's insistence on inculcating her in party doctrine is causing their relationship to fracture: "tú, con el ímpetu de un mesías, te apresuraste a llenar el vacío, colmándolo con otra doctrina que a mí se me antoja tan estricta y severa como la anterior" (245). Referring obliquely to Cuba and post-Stalinist Russia, Beatriz implies what Andreu is unable to see—that for her, very little distinguishes allegiance to one system from the other: "el primero me convierte en viajera de segunda con destino a un paraíso que, como mínimo, ahora me cuestiono. El segundo me exhorta a construir un sueño colectivo a costa de frustrar los propios" (245).

Beatriz is not the only one in Andreu's circle to criticize him for privileging politics over people. After Andreu exorcises Víctor for his choice of a wife, someone the former deems a "beata boba" (251), Víctor responds by contesting indoctrination itself:

la tachas de beata y fanática católica, pero tú no sabes que ella, igual que yo mismo, tratamos de vivir sin el recuerdo permanente de lo aprendido. Me he pasado la vida batallando por estar a la altura de unas exigencias que no comprendía [...] obedeciendo en silencio [...]. (252)

Finally, Carmen, desperate to repair the broken bond between her sons, tells Andreu that

"las ideas ya han destrozado bastante a esta familia" (256). The "ideas" that have penetrated and distorted these human relationships speak as much to the present as they do the weight of the past.

From the first moment of evacuation to the eventual repatriation of the exiles from the USSR, the "niños de la guerra" endure a constant reconfiguration depending on the demands of a particular regime at a particular time.<sup>12</sup> In both the USSR and Spain, the appeal to the "children" as a collective social group capable of transforming the nation for better or worse has a significant impact on Andreu's perception of his place and purpose later in life. He conceives of himself mainly in relation to larger institutional matrices; in fact, he falls prey to a kind of self-isolation fostered, paradoxically, by his sense of collective identity. The initial social unit of Andreu's formative years continues to shape him, as do the diverse geographic landscapes he traverses. As Devillard, Pazos, Castillo and Medina remind us, there are a myriad of factors to consider with regard to the unit of children exiled to the USSR:

Hablamos, primero, de un colectivo con una notable movilidad (geográfica y social), compuesto por personas que han sufrido una o dos evacuaciones, [...] repatriaciones y regresos, movilidad internacional (al menos entre España, la URSS y Cuba) [...]. Si, además, se recuerda que cada uno de los Estados por los que se han movido, y las instituciones de las que han dependido esos desplazamientos, han cambiado históricamente, se entenderá que las relaciones con las instituciones políticas no hayan sido precisamente claras y estables. (152-53)

Reflecting this transnational mobility of the *niños*, Emma Riverola describes *Cartas* in an interview as "un viaje por la historia del comunismo del siglo XX marcado por tres momentos y lugares cruciales, la España de la guerra civil [...] la URSS y la revolución cubana (Korcheck)." Whereas earlier, Riverola has revealed points of contact between the Francoist

and Stalinist treatment of Andreu, the author now implies, by extension, that Cuba also sees the political potential of the Spanish children. For Andreu, the transnational movement between Spain-USSR-Spain does not end with repatriation in 1956, and represents only one phase of his complex life story. After a short stay in the USSR, in 1962, he re-establishes himself as a Soviet envoy in post-revolutionary Cuba.<sup>13</sup> As Riverola reflects, for Andreu, “el sueño de la revolución se ha convertido en su único hogar, desarraigándole de cualquier lugar del mundo” (Korcheck).

For the brief remainder of the novel, which takes us through such critical moments in 1970s Spanish history as the death of Franco and the legalization of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), Andreu’s correspondence originates from Havana. Unlike his earlier messages to Carmen and Beatriz, which he used as platforms to exhibit his party loyalty, the Havana letters are of two general types—love letters sent to Beatriz, and political letters addressed to a Cuban “comrade.” This apparent division, as we shall see, suggests an evolution in Andreu’s sense of commitment to political institutions. In fact, Andreu’s time in Cuba ultimately provokes a critical reflection on his entire life, consisting of a bitter evaluation of the demands of paternal icons such as Stalin and Fidel; an assessment of memory and forgetting, particularly in relation to Spain and his family of origin; and a confession of a murder committed in Stalinist Russia. Perhaps the most significant element of Andreu’s Cuban correspondence is the introduction of an intergenerational figure into the epistolary narrative, when Andreu learns he is the father of Beatriz’s daughter Paula. Paula provokes a radical re-consideration of his subject position; however, readers do not learn of Andreu’s transformation in the exchange of letters between father and daughter, but in a lengthy, stream-of-consciousness diatribe that Andreu directs simultaneously to Stalin, Paula and most importantly, himself.

In an epistolary novel spanning seventy years, the middle section, “La derrota,”

dated March 19, 2006, stands out for several reasons. As the first two sections of *Cartas* take place from 1936-1940, “La derrota” presents readers with a substantial temporal leap, and may also be disorienting on a formal level, due to the fact that the single letter enclosed here contains no explicit salutation or signature. That is, unlike the letters elsewhere, here, it remains unclear at first who the author and addressee are or even, in fact, whether the document is actually a letter at all. “La derrota” is also unique because it precedes the bulk of correspondence between Andreu, Carmen and Beatriz, appearing earlier in the novel than the sections covering World War II, repatriation to Spain and emigration to Cuba. Thus, “La derrota” facilitates a non-linear reading of the story of the “niños de la guerra,” providing us with a framework with which to read the past. For example, we learn how Andreu views and interprets his childhood and adolescence before we read his letters written from that vantage point. The crossed correspondence between Paula and Andreu that ends the novel, written on March 21, 2006 and March 19, 2006, respectively, also inspires a re-reading of “La derrota,” as we connect Andreu’s final letter with his earlier reflections. Most importantly, the documents written in 2006 concern the nature of intergenerational transmission of the war and exile, and suggest a new reading of the “father” figure put forth in Andreu’s other letters and a revision of his identity as a “niño de la guerra.”

“La derrota” usually refers to the end of the Spanish Civil War in 1939, and the profound defeat experienced by those who lost. But more than just a “loss,” the noun also signals the sense of failure that loss produced. In titling the section as such, Riverola seems to indicate the belated nature of processing, or mourning that loss. Indeed, a central theme here is the broken parent-child relationship as Andreu visualizes himself, for the first time, as the child that others have constructed. Consequently, a considerable portion of “La derrota” also deals with Andreu’s assessment of a series of diverse

fathers, from Stalin to himself. The document defies definition, reading, on the one hand, much like a diary entry, while also mimicking, in some parts, the structure of a letter. Using a stream-of-consciousness style, which incorporates several instances of interior dialogue, we can locate a wide range of addressees—variously, Stalin, Paula and Andreu—and forms of address. In sharp contrast with Andreu's Soviet letters of the 1950s, this seething denunciation represents the one moment in the novel where his voice flows completely free of ideological constraints. Ri-verola's stylistic decisions speak to a desire to free Andreu from the burden of the collective political projects of which he has always been a part. In fact, "La derrota" may also reflect the defeat or the recognition of the failure of the ideological project to which Andreu has subscribed for the majority of his life.

In an interview, Riverola has made it clear that *Cartas* "es una novela crítica con la historia del comunismo, pero a la vez, reivindicativa de su esencia" (Korcheck). In the author's view, the novel denounces the lies built up around the Stalinist ideal, while at the same time, seeks to reclaim the essence of "el sueño en el que creyeron millones de personas, la ilusión de crear un mundo mejor y más justo." This sense of passionate investment and subsequent disillusionment in the Communist project was a very real experience for some Republican exiles. In *Written in Red*, Gina Herrmann reveals the various ways that Spanish communists attempted to assess (or not) the failings of Communism via memoir. As Herrmann notes, while some writers

strike us for their silence about the deformation of Soviet-style socialism," others "present the inverse phenomenon: an obsession with the errors of Stalinism and an exploration of the complicity with the repressive practices of the regime (166).

Jaime Camino's 2001 documentary, *Los niños de Rusia*, reflects a similar tension, when the testimony of one woman fondly recalling Stalin is followed by another denouncing him.<sup>14</sup>

It is only at the end of the novel that *Cartas* reveals Andreu to be engaged in a radical denunciation of his symbolic father.

Andreu's first order of business is Stalin, whom he cites for creating the illusion of a happy childhood, but also for destroying his illusions of who the leader was:

¡Gracias, camarada Stalin, por nuestra feliz infancia! Muchas gracias, compañero [...]. Lástima que me cayeras tan bajo, con la veneración que yo te profesaba. ¡Un dios! Eso es lo que me parecías. (125)<sup>15</sup>

These words are particularly meaningful considered alongside some of the many letters Andreu sent to Carmen, declaring his loyalty to Stalin, the guide and father. Further dismantling his idol, Andreu reserves special criticism for the education he received, which taught him to see himself as a part of Spain's revolutionary future:

A los siete años volví a nacer, ahí llegó el reinado de la niñez [...] fuimos educados para la nueva patria, la que nacería con la derrota de Franco [...]. Sí, Joseph, crecí idolatrándote. Tú fuiste el dios del bien y del mal, todopoderoso en la tierra. (140)

Once again, Andreu's words now indicate his awareness of how the regime developed party loyalty in the children by appealing to their sense of debt and gratitude and threatening them with reminders of how they would be treated in Spain. It should not go unnoticed that the pedagogical programming of the sort Andreu describes—questions with rote answers and textbooks with photographs and pages removed (141)—was commonplace in Franco's Spain. Thus, as Andreu tackles Stalin, he makes implicit connections with other regimes as he attempts to illustrate how "belief" or loyalty to idols provokes people to murder (145).

Murder is, indeed, one of the topics Andreu addresses at length in "La derrota." First,

he deconstructs the idea of “revolution,” looking back to his father Jaume’s departure for war and a conversation the two exchanged. In Jaume’s estimation, “la revolución somos todos [...]. Es lo que hará realidad nuestros sueños. La revolución nos dará de comer, te enseñará a escribir, a pensar. Nos hará libres” (129). Under Stalin, Andreu makes similar statements in his letters to Carmen. When he was peppering his correspondence with these “ideas,” Andreu’s voice was masked – he became a puppet for the party. Here, however, he boldly tackles his father’s and his own sense of idealism:

Por el culo nos dio la puta revolución [...]. ¿Cuántas veces se debió tragar mi padre su justicia y sus sueños? ¿Tantas como yo mismo? Crecí fiel a su jodida herencia de intangibles. Lo repetí tanto, lo engrandecí tanto, que toda mi vida traté de estar a su altura. (129)

Again, Andreu associates the empty rhetoric of his childhood with the desire to emulate a male role model—here, what could just as easily be his father as Stalin. It is not so much revolution itself as one’s devotion to the cause that Andreu signals as a pre-condition for murder. Inevitably, in every example of revolution or war he offers, he identifies the father-son relationship, whether real or imagined, as an impetus for violence.

Andreu returns repeatedly to the idea that he could have just as easily killed his own father as anyone else. Tackling the divisions within Communism that pitted the Soviet Communist Party (PCUS) against the Trotskyist, anti-Stalinist POUM, Andreu realizes that Jaume, who supported the POUM, would have opposed the very doctrine the former promoted in the USSR. In the narrative the Stalin regime and members of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE) continually fed the Spanish children—that they would bring “la luz del comunismo a un país devastado” (140)—the children’s purpose and motivations reflected that of their parents. For this reason, Andreu tells us, Spanish children enlisted in the Soviet army during

World War II, seeing in themselves “el reflejo idolotrado de los padres perdidos [...] la oportunidad. La gran ocasión de vencer a los nazis y, de rebote, conseguir la caída de Franco” (133).

Andreu’s thoughts on patricide may arise from the theoretical showdown he envisions between Jaume and himself, yet they also seem to reflect his awareness that Stalin helped render his father invisible. Andreu recognizes that once, before exile, “tuve un padre. Un verdadero padre” (127). Writing about his relationship with Jaume and Stalin appears to stir up long-buried memories in Andreu. Not coincidentally, it is in “La derrota,” a document addressed simultaneously to his daughter and symbolic father, where Andreu also confesses for the first and only time in the novel to the murder of a father and daughter in the USSR. When he becomes a killer, he is just twenty-six years old and anxious to prove his loyalty by eliminating a Trotskyite. Yet as he pulls the trigger, he activates the rage provoked by the loss of his parents: “Apretaba por mi padre muerto, por mi infancia robada, por mi madre perdida, por las dos guerras que se me comieron el alma” (146). In this act of violence Andreu not only kills a father, when he notices the victim’s four-year old daughter watching the scene unfold, he strangles her as well.

Whereas thinking about Stalin led Andreu to reflect on Jaume, when he recalls the murders he committed, he begins to consider his *own* role as father. This is a critical moment in the novel, because even as an adult, Andreu’s chief identity marker has been “the child of,” and now he observes himself as a parent. On the one hand, Andreu appears to shun his paternal identity, preferring instead to adopt the persona of a dirty old man. Just after he finishes telling Paula about his relationship with her mother Beatriz, he appears to lose sight of his addressee, and instead, digresses into a rather lengthy, explicit exaltation of women’s genitalia (154). As he drinks himself into oblivion, Andreu appears to drift in and out of consciousness, slipping freely from one thought to the next. Thus, at other times, he conveys regret about his absence in Paula’s life, and his inability

to be a good father, referring to himself as “este desgraciado que nunca ejerció de padre” (155) and admitting to Paula, “nunca tuviste a tu verdadero padre” (159). The phrase “verdadero padre,” which Andreu used earlier in reference to Jaume, suggests that, like Andreu, Paula also must re-consider her lineage.

Near the end of the final section of the novel, “El legado,” Beatriz dies, and in a letter, reveals to Paula that Andreu is her biological father. Arriving in Havana just after Andreu’s death, Paula writes him,

Hace tres meses perdí a mi madre, perdí la verdad de mi padre y gané un desconocido. Quizás eras el padre que siempre deseé tener, el héroe, el idealista, el revolucionario [...]. O quizás sólo eras el hombre que dejó preñada a su amante [...]. (285)

Just as Andreu has done in his own reflection, Paula’s letter allows her to come to terms with the knowledge that her father was not who she thought he was, implying that she will also revise her life story. Significantly, Paula’s grandfather Salvador is the man that betrayed Andreu’s father Jaume, leading to his death. Ángel, Beatriz’s husband and the father that raised Paula as his own, appears to be a foil for Andreu. Whereas Andreu’s letters are charged with Communist rhetoric, Ángel’s letters to Beatriz reflect strong National Catholic values. As the daughter of two fathers of opposing political ideologies, Paula thus represents the potential for reconciliation between the so-called “two Spains,” but she also suggests the need to incorporate the memory of exile into the historical consciousness of democratic Spain.

Although Andreu dies prior to meeting Paula, her arrival in Cuba signals, for the first time, a female character’s intervention in the novel’s established narratives. Andreu’s earlier letters marginalized key women in his life as he sought to promote and sustain political fathers. In the correspondence Andreu exchanged with Carmen, his mother, and Beatriz, his lover, the women were not so much storytellers themselves as receptacles for his

memories and political musings. Here, however, Andreu relieves Paula from part of the burden of his past, opting to write her a simple, brief letter, rather than bequeathing her the rambling reflection of “La derrota.” Not only does the last letter signal Andreu’s recognition and acceptance of his fatherhood, it allows him to reconcile his broken childhood as he addresses the daughter he has never met. The final letter belongs to Paula, and Andreu can only write it after he reflects on his identity as a “niño de la guerra” and confronts the various fathers, real and political, that have helped shape him. In his letter to Paula, Andreu boldly disassociates himself from the collective identity that has marked his entire life and addresses his daughter as the future: “tú eres mi sueño” (287).

Riverola’s decision to end the novel with Andreu’s investment in the “dream” of his daughter creates a powerful shift from the collective political project to the personal that on the one hand, can be interpreted as a liberating move that opens up new pathways for political agency in future generations. As the author notes,

en la memoria de los exiliados hay un deseo claro de dejar su legado [...]. Hay una necesidad de sentir que las vivencias de uno, o los recuerdos de esa vivencia, pueden ser de utilidad para futuras generaciones [...]. (Korcheck, Personal e-mail interview)

After a chain of failures in Spain, the USSR and Cuba, Andreu is finally free to abandon the party and be—albeit in the final moments of his life and via the letter—to Paula the father he never had. On the other hand, the final line of the novel could also point to a disengagement from the political altogether, an acknowledgment that totalitarianism’s final legacy is the loss of a belief in politics as something greater than propaganda and coercion.

In contemporary narratives on the war and Franco dictatorship, children often play a ventriloquial role for the nation at large, helping to articulate and work through historical

traumas. *Cartas* confronts, through the figure of Andreu, the political manipulation of children during the Spanish Civil War and in exile; however, the novel also takes pains to present us with the *man* Andreu becomes as a result of this experience. Although Andreu and his daughter Paula do not meet, their crossed letters begin to reconcile the past, while acknowledging the shared history between them. The seventy-year trajectory of *Cartas desde la ausencia* reimagines the personal and collective legacy of children's exile as more than simply a domestic issue characterized by ongoing polemics between the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and the conservative People's Party (PP).<sup>16</sup> In rejecting seemingly spent ideologies and imagining a process of reconciliation that is both transnational and transgenerational, the novel dreams of a space beyond politics itself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Similarly, Mari Paz Balibrea has noted that in Spain, “[t]enemos, pues, una situación en la que el exilio, su historia y su cultura, quedan estructuralmente excluidos de la nación. Con ello quiero decir que la nación necesita expulsarlos, o mantenerlos fuera, para definirse” (23).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, *La lengua de las mariposas*, *El espinazo del diablo*, *El laberinto del fauno*, or *Los girasoles ciegos*.

<sup>3</sup>For more, see Balibrea, Cate-Arries and Faber. Various expositions in Spain and abroad have explored the particular nature of children's exile during and after the war. In 2010, Carlos Iglesias's *Ispansi (Españoles)* became the first fiction film to address the exile of children to the USSR.

<sup>4</sup>Several perspectives characterize the application of the term “exile” to the evacuated children. For Alicia Alted, the children's exile begins not with the evacuation itself, but upon the impossibility of repatriation (19). Another perspective suggests we see *all* evacuated children as exiles:

Las evacuaciones de los niños españoles al extranjero durante la Guerra Civil [...] deben catalogarse como manifestaciones de exilio forzado y no voluntario (los padres pueden ser emigrantes voluntarios

o forzados, pero los niños resultan siempre ‘exiliados’, no eligen partir y no pueden elegir volver) [...] (González Martínez 180).

I will refer to the children as “exiles,” following Alted's angle.

<sup>5</sup>Verónica Sierra notes that approximately 2,895 children, in a total of four official expeditions, were evacuated to the Soviet Union in 1937, ranging from three to fifteen years of age (155). According to Sierra, “los criterios de selección incluían, además de la filiación política de los padres, la edad de los niños [...] la situación de riesgo en que vivían [...] y el deseo expreso de los padres, concretado en una autorización firmada” (157). Most children were of a lower middle class socioeconomic status, and came from families with multiple offspring (Altred 22).

<sup>6</sup>Kowalsky observes that

[i]t is clear from the collection of unpublished letters sent by the children in the USSR to their families in Spain, written between 1937 and 1939, that the ideological content of their upbringing had a profound impact. Many of the letters—some from children as young as six or seven—are decorated with the hammer and sickle. Not a few children ended their letters with exuberant, pro-Soviet exclamations: ‘¡Viva Rusia!’ or, more often, ‘¡Viva la URSS!’; ‘¡Viva el Ejército Rojo!’; and, occasionally, ‘¡Viva Stalin!’ (pár. 52).

<sup>7</sup>Of course, Žižek has deconstructed Arendt's definition of “totalitarianism,” arguing that the term, “far from being an effective theoretical concept, is a kind of *stopgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking” (3).

<sup>8</sup>As Sierra notes, several factors made the return of the children especially difficult. First, the Soviet Union rejected the Franco dictatorship and refused to send the children back. In 1945, at the end of World War II, Stalin issued an official statement condemning the Franco regime. And, from 1947 to Stalin's death in 1953, very few children were allowed to leave the country “pues la sola expresión de

abandonar la patria soviética constituía un ‘delito de anticomunismo’, de traición al régimen” (328).

<sup>9</sup>In this letter, Riverola apparently recovers and quotes directly from “Españoles sin patria,” an article published in several newspapers in 1952 by Federico de Urrutia. Urrutia’s article is cited in the Phalangist journal *Rastro de la Historia*. For more, see Blanco Moral.

<sup>10</sup>For more on the proportion of children and adults repatriated from the USSR in 1956-57, see Zafra et al (83-84).

<sup>11</sup>Numerous studies have taken up the problematic return of the exiles in the four expeditions of 1956-57. See Alted; Devillard; Devillard, Pazos, et. al; González Martínez; Sierra and Zafra.

<sup>12</sup>It is interesting to note that the children exiled during the war have long been collectively known as “los niños de la guerra.” While it is easy to see the utility—and possibly, the necessity—of such a phrase, it also overshadows the varied geographic, political, linguistic and cultural landscapes that the children encountered after their departure from Spain. In addition, the anachronistic ring to the category “niños” freezes these children in time, obscuring all they faced *after* the war was over. In her study *Españoles en Rusia y rusos en España*, Marie José Devillard avoids the phrase “niños de la guerra:”

Contrariamente a un uso muy arraigado, evitaré la expresión ‘niños de la guerra’ por entender que, literalmente hablando, su aplicación exclusiva al colectivo estudiado constituye un abuso terminológico injustificado; por otra parte, porque muchos interesados rechazan esta denominación o, por lo menos, cuestionan que sea oportuna. (xii)

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<sup>13</sup>In the years following the Cuban Revolution, the Soviet Union appealed from within for assistance to Castro’s Cuba. Approximately 200 children participated in the national reconstruction process. For more, see Zafra, et. al. (93-4) and Devillard (42-50).

<sup>14</sup>For more on the Camino film, see Antonio Gómez López-Quiñones.

<sup>15</sup>The phrase “gracias al camarada Stalin” appears in the testimony of one of the Spanish children, Isabel Argentina Álvarez Morán: “Pegado a la pared [del pasillo] había un enorme cuadro con la efigie de Stalin muy sonriente con una niña achinadita en brazos, y abajo un *losung* [letrero] que decía: GRACIAS AL CAMARADA STALIN POR NUESTRA FELIZ INFANCIA” (qtd. in Sierra 239).

<sup>16</sup>In 2008, the Spanish government approved a provision to the Law of Historical Memory (2007) that would allow the descendants of exile (1936-1955) to obtain Spanish nationality. To date, over 100,000 have become Spanish citizens.

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