

# Religious Forerunners of Conscientious Objection During the Spanish Civil War and Early Francoism, 1936–59

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/jch](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/jch)**Miquel Àngel Plaza-Navas** 

CSIC, Barcelona, Spain

**Jose Torres-Pruñonosa** 

Universidad Internacional de la Rioja (UNIR), Logroño, Spain

## Abstract

This article examines the early conscientious objection to military service by Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain during the Civil War (1936–9) and the first two decades of Franco's dictatorship (1939–59). While previous scholarship has primarily focused on secular and political forms of objection arising in the 1970s, this study foregrounds an earlier, religiously motivated resistance that has remained largely undocumented. Drawing on military records, oral testimonies, and denominational religious publications, the article reconstructs the moral reasoning, legal consequences, and lived experiences of ten Jehovah's Witness objectors. It identifies two key phases: isolated wartime refusals under conditions of extreme repression, including the execution of one objector; and a renewed pattern of objection in the 1950s, marked by imprisonment, psychiatric diagnoses and chained sentencing. The analysis is further situated within a comparative international perspective, contrasting the Spanish case with other national experiences in both democratic and authoritarian contexts. The findings demonstrate that religious conscience played a significant role in shaping early conscientious objection and non-violent dissent in Spain. The study contributes to the historiography of civil resistance, religious persecution and human rights under authoritarian regimes, calling for broader integration of religious actors into the analysis of pacifist movements in twentieth-century Europe.

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## Corresponding author:

Miquel Àngel Plaza-Navas, Institución Milá y Fontanals de Investigación en Humanidades (IMF), CSIC, Egipcíaques, 15, 08001 Barcelona (Spain).

Email: [maplaza@dicat.csic.es](mailto:maplaza@dicat.csic.es)

## Keywords

Conscientious objection, Francoist repression, Jehovah's witnesses, military conscription, religious dissent, Spanish Civil War

In the midst of the Spanish Civil War, a 19-year-old boy stood silent before a firing squad. He had not committed what many would consider a crime. His only 'offense' was refusing to go to the front – not out of rebellion or ideology, but in obedience to his conscience shaped by biblical convictions. He was executed on 18 August 1937.

Today, conscientious objection to military service is widely recognised as a legitimate expression of individual conscience and a protected component of human rights and fundamental freedoms in democratic systems.<sup>1</sup> Scholarly analyses have predominantly situated the origins of the Spanish conscientious objection movement in the political and social transformations of the 1970s, linking its emergence to the late Franco regime's liberalisation and the subsequent democratic transition. In this framework, objection is commonly interpreted as a form of ideological or political resistance associated with pacifist, anti-militarist, or leftist movements. As a result, the historiography has tended to emphasise the role of secular actors and civic organisations in challenging military conscription and advocating for legal recognition of the right to object.<sup>2</sup>

This perspective, while well-documented, has contributed to the marginalisation of earlier expressions of conscientious objection that fell outside the dominant narrative of political or ideological dissent, particularly those grounded in religious conviction. Long before the emergence of secular objection movements in 1970s Spain – movements that developed independently in a very different context – members of Jehovah's Witnesses<sup>3</sup> refused compulsory military service on the grounds of faith-based moral convictions, often facing imprisonment, social marginalisation or, occasionally, psychiatric confinement. While they preceded the later movement, they did not cause it, but instead embodied the principle of conscientious objection and kept it alive throughout the dictatorship. Nonetheless, their role as pioneers of conscientious objection in Spain

1 J. Kessler, 'The Invention of a Human Right: Conscientious Objection at the United Nations, 1947–2011', *Columbia Human Rights Law Review*, 44,3 (2013), 753–91; D. Weissbrodt, 'The United Nations Commission on Human Rights Confirms Conscientious Objection to Military Service as a Human Right', *Netherlands International Law Review*, 35,1 (1988), 53–72.

2 J. Oliver-Araujo, 'Historia de la objeción de conciencia al servicio militar en España', in F.J. Ansuátegui-Roig, J.M. Rodríguez-Uribes, G. Peces-Barba Martínez and E. Fernández-García (eds.) *Historia de los Derechos Fundamentales* (Madrid 2013), iv, t. 6, 653–727; P. Oliver-Olmo, 'El movimiento de objeción de conciencia e insumisión en España (1971–2002)', *Hispania Nova: Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 19 (2021), 353–88; C.Á. Ordás-García, 'The Antimilitarist Campaign Against Compulsory Military Service in Spain During the 1970s and 1980s', *Contemporary European History*, 33,1 (2024), 286–304.

3 Although known as Bible Students before 1931, this article uses Jehovah's Witnesses for clarity and consistency.

remains largely invisible in mainstream scholarship.<sup>4</sup> This absence reflects limited access to military archives until recently, the small number of Jehovah's Witnesses at the time, which complicated efforts to trace and document their cases, and the apolitical, doctrinal nature of their objection, rendering their dissent less intelligible to frameworks prioritising ideological or political activism.

In contrast, international scholarship has recognised the historical significance of Jehovah's Witnesses as a persecuted group in wartime and under authoritarian regimes, particularly for their refusal to engage in military service.<sup>5</sup> These works highlight patterns of repression, legal exclusion, and social stigmatisation, as well as the ethical and legal dilemmas posed by claims of conscience. By drawing attention to the global dimension of faith-based objection, these studies provide a useful comparative framework for assessing the Spanish case and underscore the relevance of including Jehovah's Witnesses in broader discussions on non-violent resistance and the limits of state power.

In order to situate the Spanish case within an international context, the article adopts a comparative perspective by engaging with three contrasting international experiences. These include Great Britain, as one of the earliest countries to recognise conscientious objection as a legal category; Germany during the Nazi period (1933–45), as an extreme case of authoritarian repression; and France in the decades following the Second World War. Together, these cases allow for a contrast between different political and wartime contexts, highlighting variations in legal frameworks, practical responses to conscientious objection, and associated punitive mechanisms.

This article aims to examine the early opposition to compulsory military service by Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain during the Civil War and the earliest years of the Franco dictatorship,<sup>6</sup> situating their actions within the broader history of dissent in autocratic contexts. At the time, Jehovah's Witnesses constituted an extremely small religious minority in Spain, particularly when compared both to the overall population and to Protestant groups.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, their role in the emergence of conscientious objection

4 Fernández-Ruiz, for instance, despite identifying Jehovah's Witnesses as the first conscientious objectors, even claims they 'hold little relevance to the political development of the phenomenon of objection'. (J.J. Fernández-Ruiz, 'Historia de una disidencia', *Papeles para la Paz*, 38 (1990), 187–97).

5 P. Brock, 'Jehovah's Witnesses as Conscientious Objectors in Nazi Germany', in P. Brock, *Against the Draft: Essays on Conscientious Objection from the Radical Reformation to the Second World War* (Toronto 2006), 425–47; H.-H. Dirksen, 'Jehovah's Witnesses Under Communist Regimes', *Religion, State and Society*, 30,3 (2002), 229–38; T.J. Kehoe, 'The Reich Military Court and Its Values: Wehrmacht Treatment of Jehovah's Witness Conscientious Objectors', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 33,3 (2019), 351–72; G. Perkins, *Bible Student Conscientious Objectors in World War One-Britain: For the Sake of the Kingdom* (n.p. 2016); P. Piccioli, 'I testimoni di Geova durante il regime fascista', *Studi Storici*, 41,1 (2000), 191–229.

6 For a historical overview of the group in Spain during these years, see: M.À. Plaza-Navas, 'Historia de los testigos de Jehová en España: un siglo de presencia (1910–2015)' unpublished PhD thesis, Universitat de Barcelona; CSIC. Institución Milá y Fontanals (2016), 203–478, doi:10.20350/digitalCSIC/13729; M.À. Plaza-Navas, 'Testigos de Jehová y objeción de conciencia al servicio militar en España (1936–1964). Parte II', Institución Milá y Fontanals de Investigación en Humanidades (CSIC) (April 2023), doi:10.20350/digitalCSIC/15230; K. Stoklosa, 'The Franco Dictatorship and Jehovah's Witnesses', *Religion-Staat-Gesellschaft. Zeitschrift für Glaubensformen und Weltanschauungen*, 10,2 (2009) 281–89; 'Spain', in *1978 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Brooklyn, NY 1978), 134–257.

7 While the Spanish population ranged between approximately 23 and 30 million inhabitants from the 1930s to the 1950s, the number of active Jehovah's Witnesses remained extremely small, with estimates of around 30–

to military service and to war cannot be regarded as marginal or insignificant. To the best of our knowledge, no scholarly study has examined in depth religiously motivated conscientious objection – regardless of denomination – during the Civil War itself, making this the first documented analysis of such a stance in that period.

By focusing on the period between 1936 and 1959, the study explores how this group developed a religiously motivated objection in a political environment where such refusal was criminalised and pathologised. Drawing on primary sources – including oral testimonies as well as military records – it seeks to reconstruct the forms, motivations and consequences of this stance, as well as to assess its historical significance in anticipating subsequent debates on freedom of conscience and civil resistance under dictatorial regimes.

This article contributes to the historiography of conscientious objection and authoritarianism by re-evaluating the role of Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain as early and morally opponents of compulsory military service during the Civil War and the Franco regime. It moves beyond the testimonial or marginal treatment often given to religious objectors by situating their actions within a broader analytical framework that includes state repression and the construction of dissent outside traditional political categories. By doing so, the study opens new perspectives for understanding religious passive resistance as a form of civic engagement and ethical protest in contexts where legal and political avenues of expression were severely limited. It further adds to the literature on state-religion relations and human rights under dictatorship by foregrounding a case that has remained largely overlooked despite its continuity, coherence, and transnational parallels. Ultimately, it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how moral resistance emerged outside of conventional political frameworks and helps to integrate religious dissent into the historiography of non-state opposition under wartime and European dictatorships.

The article first outlines the historical and legal context of conscription in Spain, then presents the methodological approach and theological framework of Jehovah's Witnesses. It traces their presence before the war, examines documented cases during the Civil War and early Francoism, and concludes with an assessment of their legacy and future research directions.

Long before the Spanish Civil War (1936–9) and Franco's regime (1939–75), Spain had developed a complex and stratified system of compulsory military service.<sup>8</sup> Throughout

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40 active members in the 1930s and 1,394 by 1959 (Plaza-Navas, 'Historia de los testigos de Jehová en España', 1103, 1107–08.) By contrast, Protestant denominations in Spain during the same period are estimated to have numbered between 10,000 and 30,000 members (C. Irizarry, *The Thirty Thousand: Modern Spain and Protestantism* (New York, NY 1966), 376; J.B. Vilar-Ramírez, 'La persecución religiosa en la zona nacionalista: el caso de los protestantes españoles', in O. Ruiz-Manjón Cabeza and M. Gómez-Oliver (eds.) *Los nuevos historiadores ante la guerra civil española* (Granada 1990), II, 184; J.B. Vilar-Ramírez, 'La represión de las minorías religiosas durante el primer franquismo: el caso de los protestantes españoles, 1939–1945', in J.M. Castells, J. Hurtado-Sánchez, and J.M. Margenat-Peralta (eds.) *De la dictadura a la democracia: la acción de los cristianos en España (1939–1975)* (Bilbao 2005), 178).

<sup>8</sup> M. Esteban-de-Vega, 'El servicio militar en la España de la Restauración, 1875–1931', in J.-C. Rabaté (ed.) *L'armée dans la société espagnole, 1808–1939*, (Nantes 2003), 118–32; J.F. García-Moreno, *Servicio militar en España (1913–1935)* (Madrid 1988); J.A. Herrero-Brasas, *¡Rompan filas! La cara oculta del 'servicio a la patria'* (Madrid 1995), 154–216; F. Molina-Luque, *Servicio militar y conflicto: historia y sociología de las*

the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the *quintas* system relied on periodic draws to conscript young men into the army. Nevertheless, mechanisms such as *redención en metálico* [monetary redemption] (1851–1912) and *sustitución* [replacement by another recruit] (1837–1912) allowed wealthier citizens to pay to avoid service entirely or to hire a substitute. This practice gave rise to the figure of the *soldado de cuota* [fee-paying conscript] (1912–40), who, by paying a fee, served shorter terms and under less demanding conditions. These arrangements institutionalised deep class inequalities in the fulfilment of national military duty, and contributed to the growth, during the first three decades of the twentieth century, of a widespread anti-militarist sentiment. This was reflected both in the emergence of pacifist organisations and movements and in more spontaneous or even violent expressions of rejection among segments of the population.<sup>9</sup> In 1940, Franco's government reinstated compulsory service with fewer exemptions, establishing a model that endured until democracy.<sup>10</sup>

At the outbreak of the Civil War, the 1890 Code of Military Justice – in its 1931 version and wartime amendments – was in force. It classified desertion, incitement to desertion, and aiding or abetting desertion as criminal offenses punishable by a minimum of 2 years' imprisonment or even the death penalty, depending on the context and the offender's military status.<sup>11</sup>

During the Spanish Civil War, compulsory military service took on a coercive and totalising character. Both Republican and Nationalist factions issued conscription decrees that imposed forced enlistment across the territories they controlled.<sup>12</sup> Republican legislation stipulated that 'all male citizens between the ages of twenty and forty-five, in good health, are hereby militarised and placed in the service of the Spanish people and their representative government in a military capacity,' allowing the government to use them for 'any type of service or labour that benefits national

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quintas en España (1878–1960) (*Lleida 2012*); F. Puell-de-la-Villa, *El soldado desconocido: de la leva a la 'mili' (1700–1912)* (Madrid 1996); N. Sales-de-Bohigas, *Sobre esclavos, reclutas y mercaderes de quintos* (Barcelona 1974).

9 X. Agirre-Aranburu, 'Los insumisos del 36: el movimiento antimilitarista y la guerra civil española', in *Movimiento de Objeción de Conciencia* (ed.) *En legítima desobediencia: tres décadas de objeción, insumisión y antimilitarismo* (Madrid 2002), 33–47; F.J. Leira-Castiñeira (ed.), *El pacifismo en España desde 1808 hasta el 'No a la guerra' de Iraq* (Madrid 2023); F. Puell-de-la-Villa, 'Causas del antimilitarismo y antibelicismo de la ciudadanía española: la incidencia del servicio militar (1808–2001)', *Revista UNISCI*, 17,51 (2019), 43–68.

10 España. Jefatura del Estado, 'Ley de 8 de agosto de 1940 por la que se modifica la legislación vigente sobre reclutamiento', *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (22 August 1940), 5810–14; L. Velasco-Martínez, '¿Uniformizando la nación? El servicio militar obligatorio durante el franquismo', *Historia y Política: Ideas, Procesos y Movimientos Sociales*, 38 (2017), 57–89.

11 España. Ministerio de la Guerra, *Código de Justicia Militar, de 27 de septiembre de 1890. Legislación complementaria del mismo* (Madrid 1906), arts 271–273, 286–291, 319–323; E. Baldovín-Ruiz, 'El Código de Justicia Militar durante la guerra civil: 1936–1939', *Revista de Historia Militar*, 57,113 (2013), 11–52.

12 F.J. Leira-Castiñeira, *Soldados de Franco: reclutamiento forzoso, experiencia de guerra y desmovilización militar* (Madrid 2020); J. Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors: Republican Popular Army and Nationalist Army Conscripts in the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939* (Oxford 2012).

defence, aligned with the Republican cause'.<sup>13</sup> The Nationalist side enacted similar mobilisation policies.<sup>14</sup>

Under both Republican and Nationalist legal frameworks, conscientious objection was not recognised as a legitimate moral stance, was prosecuted as a crime, and received the same treatment whether grounded in moral, religious, or ideological convictions. All were subsumed under a single juridical category: insubordination or desertion. As such, individuals who refused military service on grounds of conscience were prosecuted as criminals rather than recognised as objectors.

As noted by Leira-Castiñeira, Matthews and Corral, both Republican and Nationalist authorities adopted decrees to punish those who failed to respond to conscription calls or chose to desert.<sup>15</sup> On 18 June 1937, both sides formally hardened penalties, signalling a shared escalation in the repression of military non-compliance. On the Nationalist side, failure to report for service was equated with the crime of desertion and punished by the addition of 4 years of compulsory frontline service. Republican legislation went further in formal terms, providing for sentences ranging from 5 to 20 years of confinement in labour camps, combined with enforced service at the front.

While Republican authorities extended this framework to include the death penalty in April 1938, Nationalist authorities had already adopted capital punishment for similar offences at an earlier stage of the conflict. Nevertheless, Republican regulations theoretically required governmental confirmation for the application of capital punishment, reflecting what Matthews<sup>16</sup> describes as a more inclusive and procedurally constrained model of discipline, even though summary executions also occurred as military conditions deteriorated. By contrast, Nationalist military justice relied on a rigid and traditional system in which punitive violence functioned as an immediate instrument of control. As Leira-Castiñeira and Matthews<sup>17</sup> note, deserters were frequently executed summarily, often without the opening of a formal case or the need for authorisation from rear-guard authorities.

This absence of legal distinction proved especially consequential for Jehovah's Witnesses. Their refusal to bear arms, motivated by biblical teachings, was not interpreted

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13 España. Ministerio de la Guerra, 'Decreto disponiendo queden militarizados y puestos al servicio del pueblo español y de su gobierno representativo, con tal carácter militar, todos los ciudadanos varones de los veinte a los cuarenta y cinco años de edad y que gocen de buen estado de salud, de 29 de octubre de 1936', *Gaceta de Madrid. Diario Oficial de la República* (30 October 1936), 544–45; Baldovín-Ruiz, 'El Código de justicia militar durante la guerra civil', 22–23, 31–32.

14 España. Presidencia de la Junta de Defensa Nacional, 'Decreto núm. 29, de 8 de agosto de 1936. Disponiendo la urgente incorporación a filas de los individuos pertenecientes a los reemplazos de 1933, 1934 y 1935, de 8 de agosto de 1936', *Boletín Oficial de la Junta de Defensa Nacional de España* (9 August 1936), 17–18; Baldovín-Ruiz, 'El Código de Justicia Militar durante la guerra civil', 37–38.

15 Leira-Castiñeira, *Soldados de Franco*; J. Matthews, 'Comisarios y capellanes en la guerra civil española, 1936–1939: una mirada comparativa', *Ayer. Revista de Historia Contemporánea*, 94,2 (2014), 175–99; P. Corral, 'Desertion and Shirking in the Civil War: Man Versus Propaganda', in J. Matthews (ed.) *Spain at War: Society, Culture and Mobilization, 1936–1944* (London 2019), 70–86.

16 J. Matthews, 'Foot Soldiers for the Two Spains: Conscript Experience During the Spanish Civil War', in J. Matthews (ed.) *Spain at War: Society, Culture and Mobilization, 1936–1944* (London 2019), 53–69.

17 F.J. Leira-Castiñeira and L. Fernández-Prieto, 'Military Mobilisation of the Nationalist Coup Leaders During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): The Correlation Between Killing and Recruitment', *War & Society*, 43,2 (2024), 163–86; Matthews, 'Foot Soldiers for the Two Spains'.

as a religious stand but as a deliberate act of defiance against national duty. Such perceptions toward conscientious objectors were not merely implicit but openly articulated by political leaders on both sides of the conflict, as Corral states: ‘Franco called them “parasites insensitive to the war”. The Republican president Negrín labelled them “cowards and unpatriotic”. They earned the contempt and animosity of both sides during the Civil War’.<sup>18</sup> These perceptions were translated into an increasingly punitive legal framework. In the eyes of military authorities – both Republican and Nationalist – refusing to enlist or obey commands could be equated with cowardice, treason, or desertion, each carrying severe penal consequences.

The cases examined later in this article are consistent with this broader pattern applied to conscientious objectors, in which Republican legislation was formally more severe, while Nationalist enforcement was more immediate and lethal in practice.

After the Civil War, the Franco regime eliminated traditional redemption mechanisms and reinforced military service as a mandatory and ideologically infused rite. Conscription was now aligned with authoritarian, nationalist and Catholic values, transforming military duty into a ritual of allegiance to the state.<sup>19</sup> Although the penal categories of desertion and disobedience coexisted, during the Civil War refusal to serve was primarily prosecuted as desertion; in the 1940s, a series of legal reforms progressively reclassified such conduct as disobedience, a shift consistent with the transition from a wartime to a post-war authoritarian order, culminating in the Military Code of Justice of 1945.<sup>20</sup>

The new order was defined by the fusion of political power, military authority, and the Catholic Church, embodied in the ideology of national Catholicism. This confessional nationalism legitimised the regime and profoundly shaped all spheres of life in Spain.<sup>21</sup> Obedience to authority became the highest civic virtue, enforced through

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18 P. Corral and C. Conesa, ‘Desertores: los apestados de la Guerra Civil’, *Elmundo.es. Suplementos. Magazine*. 354 (9 July 2006) <https://www.elmundo.es/suplementos/magazine/2006/354/1152274394.html> (accessed 26 December 2025).

19 Molina-Luque, *Servicio militar y conflicto*; C.Á. Ordás-García, “‘Traidores a la patria’. Objetores e insu-  
misos en España, 1958–1991’, *Clio & Crimen. Revista del Centro de Historia del Crimen de Durango*, 14 (2017), 209–26.

20 España. Jefatura del Estado, ‘Ley de 12 de julio de 1940 restableciendo, en todo su vigor, el Código de Justicia Militar con la redacción que tenía en 14 de abril de 1931, sin otras modificaciones que las introducidas por la Ley de 26 de julio de 1935’, *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (23 July 1940), 5102–03; España. Jefatura del Estado, ‘Ley de 8 de agosto de 1940 por la que se modifica la legislación vigente sobre reclutamiento’; España. Ministerio del Ejército, ‘Reglamento provisional para el reclutamiento y reemplazo del ejército de 6 de abril de 1943’, *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 184, suplemento (3 July 1943); España. Ministerio de Justicia, ‘Decreto de 23 de diciembre de 1944 por el que se aprueba y promulga el “Código Penal, texto refundido de 1944”, según la autorización otorgada por la Ley de 19 de julio de 1944’, *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (13 January 1945), 427–72.

21 España. Ministerio del Ejército, ‘Fuero de los españoles, de 17 de julio de 1945’, *Boletín Oficial del Estado* (18 July 1945), 358–60 (arts 2, 6); J. Casanova, ‘España: de la iglesia estatal a la separación de Iglesia y Estado’, *Historia Social*, 35 (1999), 135–52; J.M. Cuenca-Toribio, *Nacionalismo, franquismo y nacionalcatolicismo* (Madrid 2008); J. Marco, ‘Rethinking the Postwar Period in Spain: Violence and Irregular Civil War, 1939–52’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 55,3 (2020), 492–513; A. Mateos-López (ed.), *La España de los cincuenta* (Madrid 2008); M. Ortiz-Heras, ‘Historia social en la dictadura franquista: apoyos sociales y actitudes de los españoles’, *Spagna Contemporanea*, 28 (2005), 169–86.

indoctrination, surveillance, and religious education. In this context, conscientious objection was framed, not as an expression of personal conviction, but as moral deviance and a threat to unity.

Militarisation extended beyond the army, permeating state rituals and collective identity. The regime's use of militaristic imagery and structures – such as mass military parades, widespread conscription, and a centralised political apparatus – served to reaffirm its absolutist control and to embed a culture of conformity. The Catholic Church, privileged and institutionally embedded, served to sacralise political loyalty.

Non-Catholic confessions were denied legal recognition. As Molina Meliá states: 'Neither the legal personality of the confessions nor that of their institutions was recognised'.<sup>22</sup> As a consequence, Jehovah's Witnesses had their meetings banned, literature seized, and proselytism treated as subversion. This situation was noted by Whalen, who observed that they were 'banned in fascist Spain' and that 'a Witness in Spain violates the law when he goes from door to door, advertises a public meeting, or tries to sell his publications on the street'.<sup>23</sup> Their stance, rooted in religious conviction, directly challenged the regime's definition of national duty. Prosecuted, imprisoned and sometimes pathologised, they exposed the deep tension between authoritarian nationalism and religiously grounded conscience. In a system where military service was an unquestionable moral obligation, their refusal was seen not only as illegal but as an incomprehensible betrayal.

While other non-Catholic conscripts also came into conflict with military authorities the nature and severity of their treatment generally differed from that imposed on Jehovah's Witnesses. In most documented cases, these objections concerned participation in religious acts rather than refusal of military service as such, and the resulting sanctions tended to be limited in scope and duration.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, Jehovah's Witnesses articulated a broader and more systematic form of conscientious objection that encompassed not only religious practices but also core military obligations, including the bearing of arms and participation in combat. This position placed them in direct confrontation with the foundations of compulsory military service and national defence, and helps to explain why, outside the exceptional context of the Civil War – when repression was broadly intensified – their treatment was generally more severe than that imposed on other religious dissenters.

This article employs a qualitative historical approach based on the systematic analysis of primary sources on Jehovah's Witnesses as conscientious objectors during the Civil War and Franco's regime. It integrates documentary, testimonial, and archival evidence to reconstruct repression patterns, institutional responses, and individual trajectories.

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22 A. Molina-Meliá, 'Las minorías religiosas en el derecho histórico español', in *Acuerdos del estado español con los judíos, musulmanes y protestantes* (Salamanca 1994), 28.

23 W.J. Whalen, *Armageddon Around the Corner: A Report on Jehovah's Witnesses* (New York, NY 1962), 18, 146.

24 Plaza-Navas, 'Testigos de Jehová y objeción de conciencia al servicio militar en España (1936–1964). Parte II', 60–84.

First, the research includes oral testimonies from former objectors and their relatives, offering key insights into their experiences of persecution, incarceration, and marginalisation. These interviews form a crucial primary source base. They include direct interviews with one of five Jehovah's Witness objectors from the Civil War and relatives of two others. Of five early Francoist objectors, four were interviewed. Reported dates were crosschecked with Matthews' conscription timelines.<sup>25</sup>

Second, the study draws on military records – including court rulings and military tribunal decisions – that reveal how both sides of the conflict and the Francoist state criminalised objection. These documents also contain identification sheets, disciplinary reports and, in some cases, psychiatric evaluations by prison doctors or military authorities. They provide insight into institutional responses and help trace the codification of religious objection as deviance or pathology, while also offering glimpses into the lived experiences of objectors. The primary sources were obtained from the General Military Archive of Guadalajara, the Military Judicial Archive of Zaragoza, and directly from conscientious objectors.

Third, the article examines materials published by Jehovah's Witnesses. These reflect the theological rationale for objection and the group's response to persecution. Such secondary sources are key to understanding how they internally framed their stance – not as civil disobedience, but as religious fidelity – and how they organised spiritual and logistical support for imprisoned members.

The methodological framework relies on triangulating diverse sources to enable a multi-level reading – institutional, communal and individual. It aims not only to document repression but also to recover the moral reasoning of those who resisted conscription on religious grounds. The sources have been carefully contextualised within the wartime and authoritarian settings in which they emerged, adopting a critical view of the categories and diagnoses imposed by repressive institutions.

Jehovah's Witnesses currently uphold a doctrine of absolute conscientious objection, which entails the categorical rejection of all forms of military involvement – including combatant roles, military training, wearing a uniform, or engaging in auxiliary services such as medical, logistical, or administrative duties.<sup>26</sup> This position is particularly rooted in Jesus' declaration to Pontius Pilate, 'if my Kingdom were part of this world, my attendants would have fought [...]' (John 18:36, *NWT*<sup>27</sup>), as well as the broader Bible mandate against killing (Exodus 20:13; Deuteronomy 5:17; Matthew 5:21;

25 Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors*, 37–38.

26 'Is War Compatible with Christianity?', *The Watchtower (Public Edition)* (1 October 2009), 29–31; 'Loyally Supporting God's Government and No Other', in *God's Kingdom Rules!* (Wallkill, NY 2014), 148–56; 'Neutrality', in *How to Remain in God's Love* (Wallkill, NY 2017), 244; 'Neutrality', in *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (Brooklyn, NY 1989), 269–76; 'Should Christians Be Pacifists?', *Awake!* (8 May 1997), 22–23; 'Superior Authorities', *Insight on the Scriptures* (Brooklyn, NY 1988), II, 1045; 'What It Means to Be Neutral', in *Enjoy Life Forever! – An Interactive Bible Course* (Wallkill, NY 2021), 187–90; 'Why Don't Jehovah's Witnesses Go to War?', *Frequently Asked Questions About Jehovah's Witnesses*, 2022, <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/502013257> (accessed 7 August 2025).

27 *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (Wallkill, NY 2013).

26:52; Romans 13:9). Additionally, two interrelated theological concepts also underpin this stance: ‘neutrality’ and ‘superior authorities’.

Today, Jehovah’s Witnesses understand ‘neutrality’ as a strict refusal to take sides in political or military conflicts, although performing civilian service as an alternative to conscription is considered a matter of individual conscience (John 17:16). Likewise, they interpret the ‘superior authorities’ in Romans 13:1–7 as referring to human governmental institutions, to which they owe relative obedience – except when such commands contradict divine law (Acts 5:29). Their interpretation of these principles has evolved since the group’s origins in the late nineteenth century.

In 1886, the ‘superior authorities’ were interpreted as referring to human governmental authorities, to whom obedience was due unless their commands conflicted with God’s law.<sup>28</sup>

By 1898 and 1904, non-participation in warfare was encouraged; however, if conscripted, efforts were to be made to obtain a non-combatant role. If such options were unavailable and the individual was sent to the front, it was recommended to avoid killing – potentially by taking actions such as firing into the air.<sup>29</sup> A shift occurred in 1915, when this position was revised, questioning whether such a stance amounted to compromising their Christian beliefs, and merely suggesting that it might be preferable not to wear a uniform or serve in the military, regardless of the consequences.<sup>30</sup>

A significant doctrinal shift occurred in 1928–9,<sup>31</sup> when the ‘superior authorities’ were redefined as Jehovah God and Jesus Christ, rather than secular governments. From 1939 on, the promoted stance was one of complete neutrality in matters of war, although no specific guidance was provided concerning alternative non-combatant roles.<sup>32</sup> In 1946, the necessity to request exemption from all military service was explicitly stated – an extremely difficult task under the repressive conditions in Francoist Spain.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, in 1962, the pre-1928 interpretation of ‘superior authorities’ as secular governments was reinstated. Nevertheless, it was clarified that subjection to such authorities was to be understood as relative rather than absolute and ultimately subordinate to God’s commands.<sup>34</sup> This interpretation remains the officially held view within the denomination.

28 Charles Taze Russell, *The Plan of the Ages*, Millennial Dawn, 1 (Allegheny, NY 1886), 266.

29 ‘Interesting Queries’, *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence* (1 July 1898), 204–205 (Reprints 2332); ‘Interesting Questions Answered’, *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence* (1 August 1898), 231–232 (Reprints 2345); Charles Taze Russell, *The New Creation*, Millennial Dawn, 6 (Brooklyn, NY 1904), 591, 594–95.

30 ‘Christian Duty and the War’, *The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence* (1 September 1915), 260–61 (Reprints 5754–55).

31 ‘The Higher Powers’, *The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence* (1 June 1929), 163–70; ‘The Higher Powers. Part 2’, *The Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence* (15 June 1929), 179–86.

32 ‘Neutrality’, *The Watchtower* (1 November 1939), 323–33.

33 *Let God Be True* (Brooklyn, NY 1946), 226–42.

34 “‘Be In Subjection’ – to Whom?”, *The Watchtower* (11 November 1962), 649–58; ‘Benefiting by Subjection to Authorities’, *The Watchtower* (1 December 1962) 709–13; ‘Conscience and Subjection to Authorities’, *The Watchtower* (1 December 1962), 713–23; ‘Subjecting Ourselves to “Every Human Creation”’, *The Watchtower* (11 November 1962), 658–66; ‘Subjection to “Superior Authorities” – Why?’,

There is an ongoing historiographical debate among scholars regarding whether Jehovah's Witnesses can be regarded as a pacifist group. Some authors argue that their characterisation as pacifists is inaccurate. King, for instance, states that Jehovah's Witnesses are 'wrongly classified'<sup>35</sup> as pacifist. By contrast, other scholars emphasise their consistent refusal to participate in human warfare; Segura Herrera highlights their 'strict adherence to pacifism',<sup>36</sup> underscoring the non-violent implications of their stance in practice. At an intermediate level, Brock classifies Jehovah's Witnesses within his typology as 'eschatological pacifists', understood as a form of non-violent 'interim ethic'<sup>37</sup> situated in the border zone of pacifism, given their theological acceptance of divine warfare, and distinguishes them from traditional pacifist churches such as the Quakers and the Mennonites.

This debate is further complicated when the self-understanding of Jehovah's Witnesses is taken into account, as they do not define or consider themselves to be pacifists.<sup>38</sup> Their position has remained consistent over time. Three articles published in *The Watchtower* in 1939 and 1951<sup>39</sup> indicate that Jehovah's Witnesses do not regard themselves as pacifists because they do not oppose what they understand as God's war, nor do they denounce pre-Christian servants of God who, according to biblical narratives, took up arms to uphold Jehovah's universal sovereignty and the theocratic nation of ancient Israel. Moreover, their theology affirms that Jesus himself fought against Satan in 1914 (Revelation 12:7–9) and anticipates divine warfare at Armageddon (Revelation 16:14,16), beliefs that are incompatible with an absolute or philosophical pacifism. Nonetheless, they do not interfere in armed conflicts, whether wars of aggression or defence, nor do they seek to obstruct or resist the actions of secular governments, although they do make use of the legal means available to them to defend their rights and position. Consequently, they maintain that they are not pacifists, as they cannot be described as war-resisters in a political or activist sense. At the same time, they do identify as conscientious objectors – a point also noted by Brock and Socknat<sup>40</sup> – and profess a position of strict neutrality in political and military affairs.

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The Watchtower (15 November 1962), 681–90; 'The Benefits of Subjection to Authorities', *The Watchtower* (15 November 1962), 691–95.

35 C.E. King, 'Pacifists, Neutrals or Resisters? Jehovah's Witnesses and the Experience of National Socialism', *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, 70,3 (1988), 150.

36 E. Segura-Herrera, 'Una teología destituyente: la "neutralidad política" de los testigos de Jehová', *Horizontes Decoloniales/Decolonial Horizons*, 7,1 (2021), 62, 64.

37 P. Brock, *Pacifism in Europe to 1914* (Princeton NJ 1972), 473–74.

38 'Should Christians Be Pacifists?'

39 'Neutrality' (1 November 1939); 'Pacifism and Conscientious Objection – Is There a Difference?', *The Watchtower* (1 February 1951), 73–81; 'Why Jehovah's Witnesses Are Not Pacifists', *The Watchtower* (1 February 1951), 67–73.

40 P. Brock, 'Conscientious Objectors in Nazi Germany', in P. Brock and T.P. Socknat (eds.) *Challenge to Mars: Pacifism from 1918 to 1945* (Toronto 1999), 370–79; Brock, 'Jehovah's Witnesses as Conscientious Objectors in Nazi Germany'; T.P. Socknat, 'Conscientious Objection in Canada', in P. Brock and T.P. Socknat (eds.) *Challenge to Mars: Pacifism from 1918 to 1945* (Toronto 1999), 256–71.

During the early twentieth century, pacifist and anti-militarist ideologies began to emerge in Spain, albeit in a marginal and fragmented form. Various anarchist and socialist currents – particularly those rooted in the libertarian tradition – developed anti-militarist discourses grounded in political ideology, advocating the categorical rejection of all forms of military obligation. In contrast, several non-Catholic religious groups – such as Protestants and Adventists<sup>41</sup> – accepted compulsory service but refused to participate in religious ceremonies like attending Mass or joining Catholic processions or to work on their designated day of worship (Saturday), thereby expressing selective objections to the confessional dimensions of military life.

Within this context, the early presence of Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain began with the arrival of missionaries – Juan Muñiz Álvarez (1920–4), George Young (1925–8), and Herbert Fred Gabler (1930–6) – followed by others of British and German origin. The group was still developing its identity and presence in Spain – with small congregations in Madrid, Barcelona, Zaragoza, Huesca, Torralba de Calatrava, among other locations – and the few known adherents remained largely invisible in official records.

No evidence has been found of formal conscientious objection by Jehovah's Witnesses during this period. At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in 1936, foreign missionaries were forced to leave, marking a turning point that exposed a small network of Spanish believers to the political and religious upheavals of the conflict and, soon, to severe Francoist repression without external support or legal recognition.

The war plunged Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain into severe isolation from both their emerging local network and the broader international organisation, halting their modest pre-war growth and pushing them into a fragile state of clandestinity.

The conflict constituted an unprecedented test of faith for Spanish Witnesses, exposing them to extreme moral and political pressures. Confronted with a polarised landscape in which both Nationalist and Republican factions demanded allegiance, the refusal to participate in violence or military structures became a source of suspicion and risk. There was no room for claims of conscience, nor for doctrinal arguments regarding neutrality or faith-based pacifism. Whether the refusal stemmed from political ideology, religious conviction, or a personal decision to avoid violence, the institutional response was uniformly punitive. The juridical system treated all acts of non-compliance as a threat to military discipline. For young Jehovah's Witnesses – who had neither legal support nor public recognition – choosing faith over duty placed them at immediate risk of imprisonment, persecution, or even execution.

While no central directive governed their behaviour, a few early adherents – often in isolation – began to manifest what could be retrospectively understood as conscientious

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41 J.D. Hughey Jr., *Religious Freedom in Spain: Its Ebbs and Flow* (London 1955), 104–08, 113, 140; Irizarry, *The Thirty Thousand*, 109–14; M. León-de-la-Vega, *Historia del protestantismo en Asturias: 150 años de la segunda Reforma protestante en España* (2nd edn, n.p. 2011), 441–46, 474, 489–91; J. López-Gutiérrez, *'Mirando al cielo': los adventistas españoles, 1903–1978* (Barcelona 2018), 146, 147, 159, 198, 199, 202, 250–52; M. López-Rodríguez, *La España protestante: crónica de una minoría marginada (1937–1975)* (Madrid 1976), 29, 30, 43, 44, 68, 93, 95, 96; J.A. Monroy, *A Defence of Spanish Protestants* (London 1966), 66–68.

objection. Each individual had to respond to the escalating pressures of war and repression based solely on personal conscience, unified only by a shared biblical commitment to avoiding the use of weapons. Their responses varied notably in intensity – from absolute objection, characterised by the refusal to wear a uniform and engage in any military-related activity, to more selective forms, such as avoiding combat duties, limiting participation to medical or logistical tasks, or seeking exemptions. These positions also took diverse practical forms: fleeing conscription, going into hiding, presenting oneself at recruitment centres only to refuse participation, or attempting to secure exemption through legal or procedural means, among others.

At the international level, the early twentieth century witnessed the gradual incorporation of conscientious objection into domestic legal systems, reflecting a growing – though deeply contested – recognition of individual conscience as a legitimate ground for refusing military service. While this recognition emerged unevenly and often under the pressure of mass mobilisation during the First World War, it nonetheless marked a significant shift: refusal to bear arms began, in some contexts, to be framed not solely as criminal disobedience, but as a moral claim that states were compelled, however reluctantly, to address.<sup>42</sup>

The British case offers a particularly illustrative example of this ambivalent development. The Military Service Act of 1916 formally acknowledged the right to exemption for those whose objections were based on religious or moral convictions. In practice, however, this recognition was implemented through local tribunals whose decisions were highly restrictive and inconsistent. As Kennedy<sup>43</sup> demonstrates, of the approximately 16,500 men who applied for exemption, nearly 6,000 were imprisoned or otherwise detained. Jehovah's Witnesses were also affected: of the 264 who sought exemption, 82 were ultimately transferred to military custody.<sup>44</sup> The British experience thus reveals a pattern of *recognition without effective protection*, in which conscientious objection existed as a legal category but was narrowly construed and frequently overridden by military imperatives.

Despite these severe limitations, such frameworks differ fundamentally from the Spanish context. In Spain, during both the Civil War and the early years of Francoism, conscientious objection was not merely restricted or selectively enforced; it was absent from the legal order.<sup>45</sup> No legislation recognised refusal of military service on grounds

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42 Early legal recognition of conscientious objection was introduced at different moments across several countries in the early twentieth century, including Australia (1903), South Africa (1912), Great Britain (1916), the United States, Canada, New Zealand and Denmark (1917), Sweden (1920), Norway and Finland (1922), and the Netherlands (1923) (G. Cámara-Villar, *La objeción de conciencia al servicio militar (Las dimensiones constitucionales del problema)* (Madrid 1991), 34–37; A. Millán-Garrido, *La objeción de conciencia al servicio militar y la prestación social sustitutoria: su régimen en el derecho positivo español* (Madrid 1990), 35–37).

43 T.C. Kennedy, 'Public Opinion and the Conscientious Objector, 1915–1919', *Journal of British Studies*, 12,2 (1973), 105.

44 'They Stood Firm in an "Hour of Test"', *The Watchtower (Study Edition)* (15 May 2013), 31–32.

45 This legal neglect continued throughout the entire Francoist period and was not reflected in Spanish legislation until the end of the dictatorship and the beginning of democracy. Initial attempts to regulate religiously motivated conscientious objection to military service were made with Royal Decree 3011/1976 of 23 December.

of conscience, whether religious, moral, or humanitarian.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, acts that might elsewhere have been processed – however repressively – within a legal framework of exemption were, in Spain, invariably criminalised as insubordination or desertion. This legal vacuum meant that early Jehovah’s Witness objectors operated outside any horizon of juridical intelligibility, a condition that profoundly shaped both the severity of repression and the forms their resistance could take.

During the Civil War, there are at least five documented cases of Jehovah’s Witnesses who were called up by one side or the other in the conflict – a significant figure considering that there were likely fewer than 50 active members in Spain at the time. Figure 1 brings together four photographs of early Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objectors discussed in this article: Antonio Gargallo Mejía, Nemesio Orús Audina, Ramón Serrano Abella, and Salvador Sirera Colom. The inclusion of this figure serves an evidentiary and historiographical purpose, as it allows readers to visualise the individuals whose cases are analysed and to restore a human dimension to a form of dissent that has remained largely invisible in the historical record. To the best of our knowledge, none of these photographs has previously been published in an academic context.

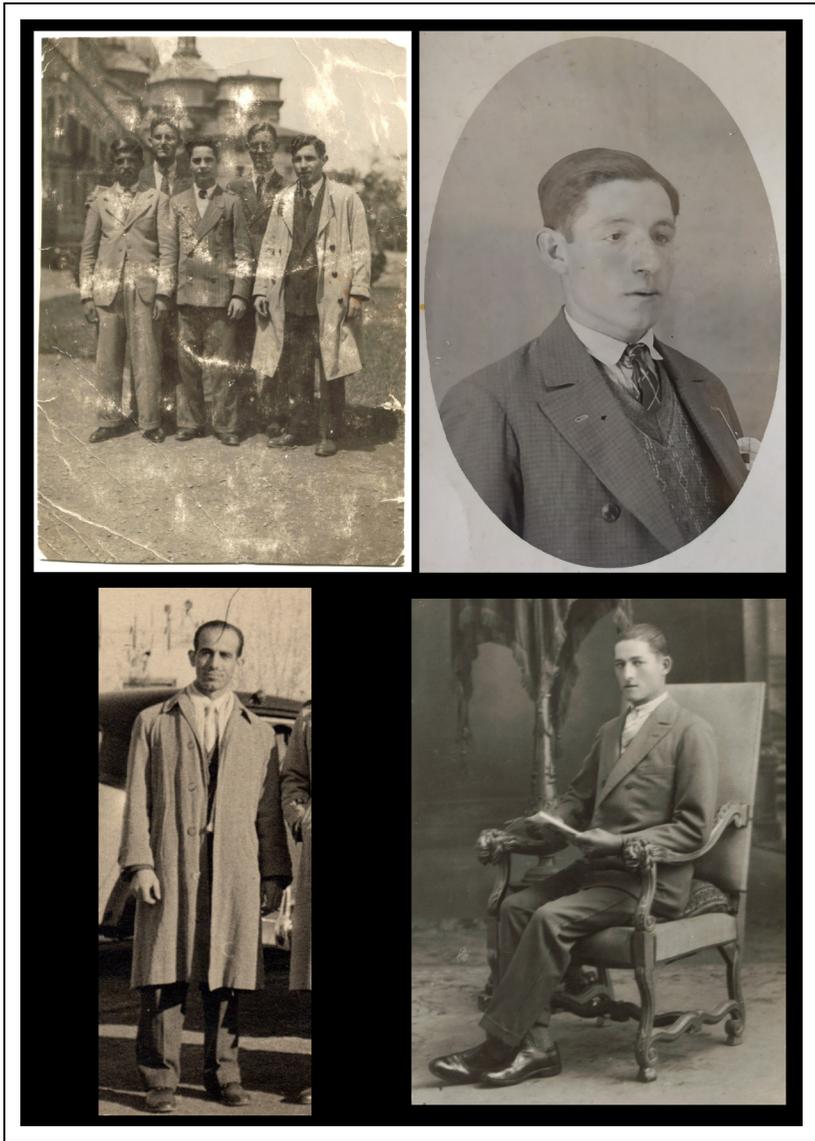
Antonio Gargallo Mejía<sup>47</sup> (Madrid, 14 May 1918-Jaca, Huesca, 18 August 1937) encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses around 1934 and was baptised in May 1936 in Zaragoza. Figure 2 reproduces statements by two military officers from Antonio Gargallo’s court-martial file referring explicitly to the religious motives underlying his refusal and subsequent desertion. Although the documents do not identify him by denomination, they explicitly state that ‘his religion did not allow it’ (*‘su religión no se lo permitía’*) and that ‘his religious beliefs did not permit him to do so’ (*‘sus creencias religiosas no se lo permitían’*), which makes it possible to classify his case as one of religiously motivated conscientious objection. These documents,

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This was followed by Article 30.2 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, which made a brief and explicit reference to conscientious objection to military service, and, more decisively, by the approval of a specific law on conscientious objection in 1984.

46 A partial and highly exceptional reference to conscientious considerations during the Civil War can be found in an order issued by the Republican authorities on 1 March 1938. This order stated that, ‘taking into account the circumstances of our war and with the desire not to violate the conscience of those who have devoted themselves to any religion, those who can prove their status as religious – regardless of denomination – shall be assigned to medical services’ (España. Ministerio de Defensa Nacional. Secretaría, ‘Orden. Reclutamiento. Circular. Núm. 3339 [De fecha 1 de marzo de 1938]’, *Diario Oficial del Ministerio de Defensa Nacional* (3 March 1938), 637; J.B. Vilar-Ramírez, ‘Los protestantes españoles ante la guerra civil (1936–1939)’, *Cuenta y Razón*, 21 (1985), 219). This provision represented a limited and provisional measure, applicable only within Republican-controlled territory – the losing side of the conflict – and in the final phase of the war, for a period of approximately one year. To the best of our knowledge, no study has examined the implementation of this provision, and it therefore remains unclear to what extent it was applied or how many Catholic priests, Protestant pastors, or members of other religious denominations may have benefited from it.

47 His story is reconstructed from his Court-martial file, complemented by interviews with Mari Carmen Orús Escanero, daughter of Nemesio Orús Audina, a close personal friend of Antonio (‘A Man Who Chose to Obey God’, *Awake!* (8 March 2003), 31; A. Gargallo-Mejía, ‘[Court-Martial No. 1374/37 against Antonio Gargallo Mejía]’, 1937, Third Territorial Military Court (Barcelona) (TMT3). Territorial Military Judicial Archive No. 32 of Zaragoza, ES/AJTZ-01247/0022; M.C. Orús-Escanero, *[Interview with Mari Carmen Orús Escanero at Her Home in Hospitalet de Llobregat, Barcelona]*, 20 November 2000; M.C. Orús-Escanero and E. Barberá-Orús, *[Zoom Interview with Mari Carmen Orús Escanero and Esther Barberá Orús at Her Home in Lanja, Huesca]*, 28 September 2024.).



**Figure 1.** Antonio Gargallo (centre, front row), Nemesio Orus (far right), March 1936 (top left); Nemesio Orús, 1934 (top right); Ramón Serrano, mid-1950s (bottom left); Salvador Sirera ca. 1930 (bottom right). M.C. Orús', Serrano's family and J. Sirera's personal archives.

preserved in the military records of his court-martial (No. 1374/37), have not previously been published in an academic context. To the best of our knowledge, this constitutes the earliest explicit documentary reference worldwide to a Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector

en que se llevó a cabo: Que como dato interesante puede manifestar que el día anterior y con motivo de entregar el armamento a los reclutas de la Compañía, el Sargento Don Francisco Duro, también de semanana, hizo saber al declarante que el recluta Antonio Gargallo Mejía se negaba a recibir el fusil que se le entregaba, pues según decía este su religión no se lo permitía: Que el Sargento

militar o desagrado a su cumplimiento, Quinto: Que nunca han tenido que reprender por nada al soldado Antonio Gargallo Mejía, pues se portaba bien en todos los órdenes de la vida militar y parecía un muchacho educado y respetuoso, pero que si hade hacer contar que últimamente y con motivo de hacer entrega del equipo y armamento a todos los reclutas de su compañía, el ptesado dijo al declarante, que no recibía el fusil que se le entregaba, pues sus creencias religiosas no se lo permitían: Que ésto llamó poderosamente la atención del declarante e hizo ver

**Figure 2.** Statement by two officers on Antonio Gargallo's religious motives for his desertion. ES/AJTZ-01247/0022.

executed on religious grounds.<sup>48</sup> His story remained unknown for decades due to the absence of documentation.

On 3 August 1937, Antonio was drafted by the Nationalist army and assigned to the Aragon Infantry Regiment No. 17 in Zaragoza.

Although he initially agreed to wear the uniform and undergo training, on 16 August he refused to accept the standard-issue rifle, explaining that 'his religious beliefs did not

48 Antonio's case predates even that of the first known Jehovah's Witness conscientious objector to be executed for his stance in Nazi Germany, August Dickmann, on 15 September 1939 ('He Died for a Principle', *The Watchtower* (1 May 2000), 32; 'Germany--Part 2', in *1974 Yearbook of Jehovah's Witnesses* (Brooklyn, NY 1974), 165–68).

allow it'.<sup>49</sup> Military officials were surprised by this unusual stance. He eventually took the rifle and participated in training exercises. Nevertheless, within hours, he changed his mind and deserted on 17 August. As the sergeant declared on 18 August 'he began to suspect that what he had initially thought was a joke regarding the refusal to take the rifle was in fact (...) desertion'.<sup>50</sup>

Judicial proceedings began on 31 August 1937, with the aim of locating and bringing him before a military court. His file records the magistrate's investigation, including formal information requests, documents (enlistment, disciplinary, and desertion reports), and interviews with three officers, two soldiers, and Antonio's mother. Although thorough, procedurally correct, and timely, the investigation ultimately came too late.

Antonio had been arrested on 17 August, the same day he deserted, in Canfranc (Huesca province), a Pyrenean village near the French border. He was taken to the barracks in Jaca (Huesca) and executed the next day, 18 August, just hours after his capture – a practice consistent with the widespread use of summary trials and immediate executions of deserters and political opponents during the Spanish Civil War. When military officers apprehended him, they asked whether he would stand by his decision. He confirmed he would and was subsequently shot.

As noted in the Summons, his mother was interviewed on 9 September.<sup>51</sup> She stated she had not known his whereabouts since 16 August but had received a letter dated 18 August. That letter – handwritten by Antonio on the day of his execution and still preserved in the military file – is reproduced in Figure 3. Addressed to his mother and sister, it constitutes a crucial piece of evidence, as it explicitly explains the reasons for his decision to desert, as an act of conscientious objection. The document conveys his awareness of the likely consequences of his decision, suggesting that fear following these threats precipitated his desertion: 'I did not say goodbye to you because, as it is said that the families of deserters are executed, I did not do so just in case; if you did not know, they could do nothing to you' (*'no me despedí de vosotras porque como se dice que fusilan a todas las familias de los desertores, pues por si acaso, no sabiéndolo tú no te podían hacer nada'*). In the letter, Antonio states that he could not 'take up arms' (*'tomar las armas'*) for reasons of conscience and that he had been 'threatened' (*'amenazaron'*) when he refused to do so. This testimony directly contradicts the claims made by military officers in the court-martial file 'he was not mistreated by anyone'.<sup>52</sup>

Although the magistrate had grounds to believe by 9 September that Antonio had been executed, official confirmation was not received until 27 October. The Military Governor of Jaca reported that 'Soldier ANTONIO GARGALLO MEJÍAS was shot on 18 August for having been caught trying to cross the foreign border and desert abroad' (*'el soldado ANTONIO GARGALLO MEJÍAS, fue pasado por las armas el día 18 de agosto último,*

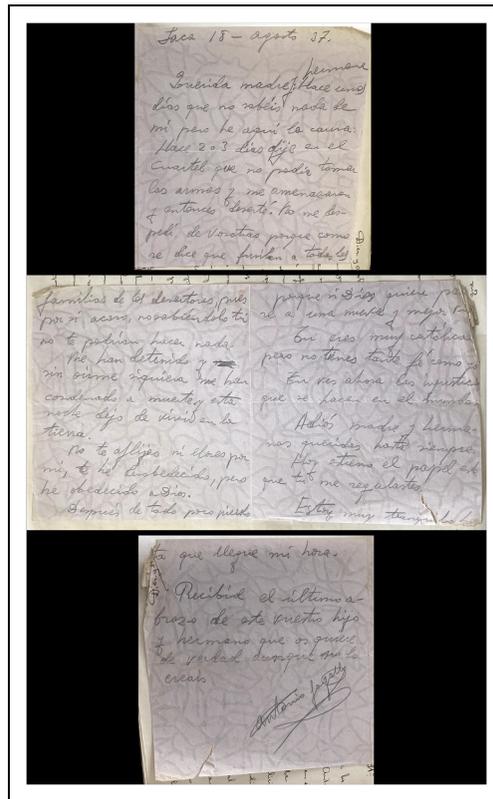
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49 Gargallo-Mejía, 'TMT3. Territorial Military Judicial Archive No. 32 of Zaragoza', 11, 13, 29.

50 Ibid., 12.

51 Ibid., 15–18.

52 Ibid., 10.



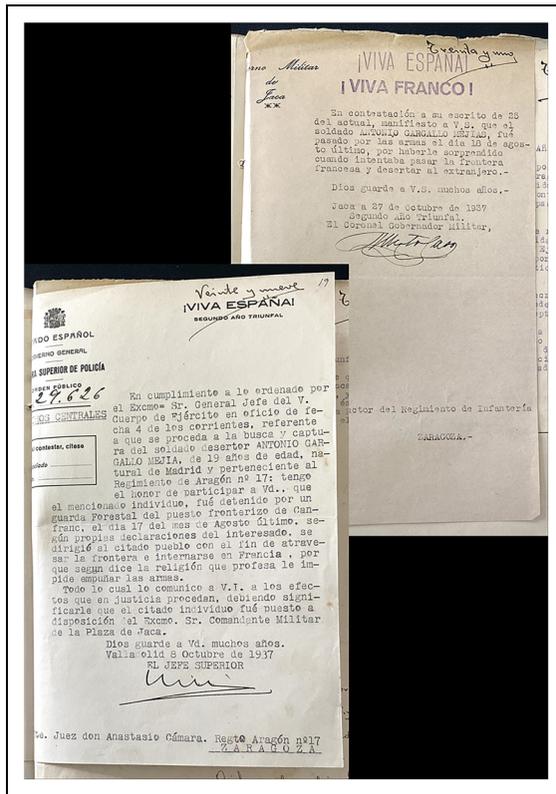
**Figure 3.** Antonio Gargallo's letter to his mother and sister, 18 August 1937. ES/AJTZ-01247/0022.

por haberle sorprendido cuando intentaba pasar la frontera francesa y desertar al extranjero';<sup>53</sup> see Figure 4). The judicial investigation was concluded and the case was closed on 9 December.

Notably, at the time, the official position of Jehovah's Witnesses emphasised refusal to bear arms or kill, but wearing a uniform or undergoing training was left to individual conscience. Antonio's case reflects this early doctrinal ambiguity. Although he initially agreed to wear the uniform, he ultimately chose absolute conscientious objection.

Antonio Gargallo Mejía is the only known conscientious objector in Spain who was executed on religious grounds, at the age of 19. His burial register entry simply reads: 'one without a name'.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 31.



**Figure 4.** Documents relating to Antonio Gargallo’s arrest (bottom) and execution (top). ES/AJTZ-01247/0022.

Nemesio Orús Audina<sup>54</sup> (Huesca, 19 December 1908–18 August 1995) was also an absolute conscientious objector. He encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses in early 1931 and was baptised with Antonio Gargallo in May 1936.

At the war’s outbreak, with Huesca under Nationalist control, Nemesio was labelled a leftist or freemason and pressured to applaud troops and join the fascist party – he refused. Nationalist forces searched for him repeatedly, and in mid-1936, he was taken by truck with others. As they passed, onlookers shouted ‘To Valdespartera!’ – a known execution

54 Although a military file exists, no Civil War records have been found; pending confirmation, Nemesio may be the first Jehovah’s Witness conscientious objector, reportedly by mid-1936. His story is reconstructed from interviews with his daughter Mari Carmen and brief biographical data in a Witnesses’ publication (N. Orús-Audina, ‘Regulatory Enlisted Personnel File of Nemesio Orús Audina’, 1925, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Recruitment Authorities, Recruitment Zones, Huesca Recruitment Zone, R/1925. Caja 7; Orús-Escanero, [Interview...], 20 November 2000; Orús-Escanero and Barberá-Orús, [Zoom Interview...], 28 September 2024; ‘Spain’, 156–57.).

site in Zaragoza for Republicans and regime opposers. Though presumed destined for execution, he was instead jailed. Although he was offered unarmed service, he rejected it, thus demonstrating an absolute form of conscientious objection. Unpersuaded, deemed mentally unbalanced, he was sent home.

Released on 16 December 1936, he returned to Huesca after visiting Antonio Gargallo in Zaragoza. Shortly after, he moved with his family to Ansó, a remote Pyrenean town, hoping to remain unnoticed. There, Nemesio joined fellow believer Pedro Goñi, and both considered fleeing. In late 1937, when his draft class was called up, he was summoned, refused, detained, and again faced execution. Eventually, an order to halt the executions came in time, saving him once more.<sup>55</sup> He was imprisoned in Jaca, where he was informed of Gargallo's execution and threatened with the same fate.

In 1938, Nemesio was moved from Jaca to Zaragoza prison, where he endured harsh conditions for months. One night, he narrowly escaped a *paseo* – a staged escape used as a pretext for extrajudicial execution.<sup>56</sup> Officials offered release if he accepted non-combat duties or merely fired into the air, but he consistently refused. At war's end in 1939, he was deemed unfit and released on medical grounds,<sup>57</sup> returning to Huesca with his family.

Unlike Antonio Gargallo, who was executed shortly after refusing service, Nemesio endured a prolonged physical and mental struggle throughout the Civil War. Though their outcomes differed – Antonio was killed, Nemesio survived – both exemplify absolute conscientious objection at a time when non-combatant roles were still seen as matters of individual conscience among Jehovah's Witnesses.

Ramón Serrano Abella<sup>58</sup> (Barcelona, 6 October 1917–24 April 2011) encountered Jehovah's Witnesses in Barcelona by 1932.

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55 Orús-Escanero, [Interview...], 20 November 2000.

56 His daughter, Mari Carmen, recounts that while her father was imprisoned in Zaragoza, one day he was not given his food ration and heard guards say: 'There is no need to feed this one. Tomorrow he will be... nothing', an expression suggesting that something was about to happen to him. He later received a visit from the prison chaplain and, after speaking with him for a while, she reports that her father heard the priest tell a military officer as he was leaving: 'This is one of those who have Jehovah as their God. We will have to give him a *corrida* [*paseo*] tonight' (Ibid.). In the end, it was not carried out and he survived. As Buxeiro-Alonso explains, the practice of the *paseos* was widespread and became deeply embedded in popular memory during and after the Civil War (X. Buxeiro-Alonso, 'Memory and Oblivion of the Paseos: Places and Stories', in Antonio Míguez-Macho (ed.) *Sites of Violence and Memory in Modern Spain: From the Spanish Civil War to the Present* (London 2021), 75–82). Leira-Castiñeira argues that 'the extrajudicial *paseos* were the materialisation of the violence that Mola [the Nationalist general] considered necessary for the coup. Consequently, the practice continued – albeit alongside formal executions by firing squad – as a means of securing and affirming the new power'. (Leira-Castiñeira and Fernández-Prieto, 'Military Mobilisation of the Nationalist Coup Leaders During the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)', 176).

57 In 1940, a medical certificate contained in his military file recorded 'mental hallucinations and paranoid tendencies of a peaceful nature', which reportedly caused him to miss the annual review, echoing his daughter's memory of wartime hospitalisation (Orús-Audina, 'AGMG. Huesca Recruitment Zone, R/1925. Caja 7').

58 This account draws on interviews and conversations with Ramón Serrano Abella, his brother Francisco, and their children, David and Isabel, a brief autobiography, and complemented by a few military records (F. Serrano-Abella, [Interview with Francisco Serrano Abella at His Home, C/Sepúlveda, Barcelona], 18 October 2000; R. Serrano-Abella, [Interview with Ramón Serrano Abella at His Home, C/Sepúlveda, Barcelona], 8 September 2000; R. Serrano-Abella, 'Our Five Decades of Integrity-Keeping', *The Watchtower* (15 December 1980), 24–29; R. Serrano-Abella, 'Personal file of soldier worker Ramón Serrano Abella.', n.d., Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Disciplinary

In Republican-held Barcelona, Ramón hid for 7 or 8 months in 1937 to avoid conscription – consistent with the Recruitment Calendar of the Republican Popular Army and Matthews’ observation that over half of eligible men evaded service in mid-1937.<sup>59</sup> After a neighbour reported him, Ramón was arrested and imprisoned for 4.5 months in Barcelona’s ‘La Modelo’ Cellular Prison (May–September 1938) before being court-martialled and reportedly sentenced to 30 years – though no record confirms this. The sentence was ultimately commuted, and he was sent to the Lleida front instead.<sup>60</sup>

Though forced to wear the uniform, Ramón refused to bear arms and, under pressure from commanders, served only in auxiliary roles as administrative and stretcher-bearing. His life was spared during a deadly Nationalist offensive. After about 3 months, he was eventually captured by the Italian Littorio Brigade, aligned with the Nationalists, and transferred first to the Barbastro Depot (Huesca), then to the Deusto concentration camp (Bilbao) on 2 January 1939.<sup>61</sup>

As Badiola Ariztimuño and Hernández de Miguel document,<sup>62</sup> Deusto’s inmates were routinely forced to attend mass and fascist ritual. When Ramón refused the fascist salute, he was made to run in circles with a heavy sandbag while guards beat him with belts to keep him moving. He eventually collapsed and was placed in solitary confinement.

Later, Ramón appeared before military doctors who sought to persuade him; he remained firm. One doctor admitted him to hospital for 2 weeks for psychiatric assessment and promised discharge. Ramón was freed on 2 May 1939 – exactly 1 day and 1 month after the official end of the war.

Ramón’s experience illustrates repression by both Republican and Nationalist authorities: first jailed for evading conscription and sent to the front, and later subjected to coercion and violence in a Nationalist camp. His conduct reflects early relative conscientious objection – accepting non-combatant roles while refusing to bear arms. His resistance also had a political dimension, shown in his rejection of fascist ritual.

Pedro Goñi Piedrafita<sup>63</sup> (Huesca province?, ?–Zaragoza, ?) encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1928. Though not yet baptised as a Jehovah’s Witness, he chose exile as a conscientious objector during the war. Denounced for preaching, he fled Jaca

Units. Disciplinary Battalions of Soldier Workers. Box 304030, File 134728; I. Serrano-Royo and J. Alcaraz Benavent, [*Conversation with Isabel Serrano Royo and Juan Alcaraz Benavent at His Home in Barcelona*], 27 January 2023).

59 Matthews, *Reluctant Warriors*, 37.

60 Serrano-Abella, ‘AGMG. Disciplinary Battalions of Soldier Workers, Box 304030, File 134728.’

61 *Ibid.*

62 A. Badiola-Ariztimuño, ‘La represión franquista en el País Vasco. Cárceles, campos de concentración y batallones de trabajadores en el comienzo de la posguerra’, unpublished PhD thesis, UNED. Facultad de Geografía e Historia (2015), 164; C. Hernández-de-Miguel, *Los campos de concentración de Franco* (Barcelona 2021), 81–82.

63 This account draws on Mari Carmen Orús’s recollections of her father, Nemesio Orús Audina – a close friend of Pedro – as well as on data compiled by Aníbal Matos from the Public Information Department of the national Jehovah’s Witnesses branch (A.I. Matos-Cintrón, [*Zoom Conversation with Aníbal Iván Matos Cintrón from the National Branch of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Torrejón de Ardoz, Madrid*], 31 January 2023; Orús-Escanero, [*Interview...*], 20 November 2000; Orús-Escanero and Barberá-Orús, [*Zoom Interview...*], 28 September 2024; ‘Pedro Goñi: The Exile. His Story [Biographical Account for an Exhibition on the History of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Aragón]’, n.d.).

(Huesca) to the Pyrenean village of Ansó, living in semi-concealment for nearly 2 years to avoid conscription. As the threat to his life increased, he crossed the border at Canfranc with his wife and child between late 1938 and early 1939. Interned in the Argelès-sur-Mer concentration camp, he later reconnected with the religious community and embraced its teachings.

His case illustrates both the doctrinal fluidity of the time and the use of flight as a form of conscientious objection. Reflecting on his internment, he recalled that ‘The only company I had was the Bible; I just had to hide it. [...] I had to cover myself with a blanket and read it through a hole where light came in, thus staying spiritually awake’.<sup>64</sup>

After more than a decade in exile, he returned to Spain in the early 1950s, when the Franco regime authorised the repatriation of those exiles not implicated in blood crimes.

Salvador Sirera Colom<sup>65</sup> (Bóixols, Lleida, 1 November 1905–Sant Boi de Llobregat, Barcelona, 27 April 1944) encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses around 1927 or 1928 and developed a close friendship with Nemesio Orús.

Salvador was called up in Manresa (Barcelona) around May 1938 but refused to bear arms. He was sentenced to several weeks of confinement and later released – possibly for unfitness, mental instability, or escape.

Back in Pradell (Lleida), Salvador’s public preaching drew hostility. Mounting pressure led him to isolate in his attic, where he developed a lung condition. This decline, plus hiding stress, likely harmed his mental health. In mid-1939, authorities persuaded his wife to institutionalise him in the Sant Boi de Llobregat psychiatric centre. His son claims the commitment aimed to remove Salvador from public life. The medical report diagnoses ‘mystical-religious delusional ideation’ and ‘schizophrenia’ but omits any mention of military refusal.<sup>66</sup>

At that time, such psychiatric admissions were often politically driven, though genuine mental illness cannot be ruled out. Antón Fructuoso describes the Sant Boi psychiatric hospital as chaotic in the immediate post-war period. By April 1939, just weeks before Salvador’s admission, it already housed 604 patients – far over capacity and lacking sufficient staff and resources.<sup>67</sup> Salvador died there on 27 April 1944.

64 ‘Pedro Goñi: The Exile. His Story’.

65 While a prior military file has been located, no Civil War-period documentation has been found (S. Sirera-Colom, ‘Regulatory Enlisted Personnel File of Salvador Sirera Colom’, n.d., Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Recruitment Authorities. Recruitment Zones. Lérida Recruitment Zone. R/1926. Box 240, File 27119). This account draws on medical records preserved by his son, Juan Sirera, and on his oral testimony recounting his mother’s memories (J. Sirera-Bel, [Interview with Juan Sirera Bel by Zoom from His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 12 December 2022; J. Sirera-Bel, [Personal Conversation with Juan Sirera Bel at His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 1 August 2025; J. Sirera-Bel, [Personal Interview with Joan Sirera Bel at His Home, C/ Vizcaya, in the El Clot Neighborhood, Near Avda Meridiana, Barcelona], 5 June 2001).

66 S. Sirera Colom, ‘[Medical History of Salvador Sirera Colom, April 27, 1944, Psychiatric Hospital. Men’s Department. Vilaboi (Barcelona)]’, 27 April 1944; S. Sirera Colom, ‘[Medical Certificate of Salvador Sirera Colom]’, n.d.

67 P. Antón-Fructuoso, *Almacén de razones perdidas: historia del manicomio de Sant Boi (1853–1945)* (Barcelona 1982), 90–98, 120–61. Antón-Fructuoso also discusses the treatments often reflecting a policy of ‘maximum therapeutic aggressiveness.’

Although the legal frameworks governing military discipline were similarly punitive on both sides of the conflict, the forms and intensity of repression applied to conscientious objectors differed in practice. On the Republican side, the cases documented in this study resulted primarily in imprisonment, a response that, while severe, was broadly consistent with wartime disciplinary measures in a context where conscientious objection lacked any legal recognition. By contrast, repression on the Nationalist side assumed markedly harsher forms, including physical abuse (as in the case of Ramón Serrano), explicit death threats and preparations for extrajudicial execution (Nemesio Orús), and, in at least one documented case, summary execution (Antonio Gargallo). This contrast suggests that, despite a shared discursive framing of objection as desertion or betrayal, Nationalist authorities were more likely to translate this interpretation into extreme and eliminatory forms of violence.

The Civil War period cannot be characterised as one of absolute silence, but rather as a phase marked by scarce documentation, atomised individual responses and comprehensive institutional hostility. The repression exerted by both sides of the conflict made no distinction between objection based on religious faith and other forms of defiance or insubordination. Early objectors – such as those identified among Jehovah’s Witnesses – acted in isolation, without legal recognition, collective support, or broader social legitimacy. Despite their limited visibility, the Jehovah’s Witness objectors who emerged during the Civil War constituted the closest living reference for subsequent Jehovah’s Witness who would refuse military service in the 1950s, as some of these earlier objectors were still alive and represented the only available point of experiential continuity in the absence of documented cases during the 1940s.

The period between 1940 and 1953 marks one of the darkest and least documented chapters in the history of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Spain. After the Civil War and the Nationalist victory, a new sociopolitical order was established, defined by the consolidation of National Catholicism, the regime’s ideological core. Under this framework, religious dissent was not only discouraged but treated as a threat to national unity and moral order. In this repressive and fearful climate, any deviation from official norms was harshly punished or suppressed.

In this context, the apparent silence of Jehovah’s Witnesses regarding military service must be interpreted. Although their beliefs about war and military duty remained unchanged, no documented cases of conscientious objection are known during this period. Fragmentary evidence suggests that one Witness may have evaded conscription and two others may have served. However, the latter claims are doubtful given their later religious activity.

One possible interpretation of this absence, as suggested by Ordás and Rius,<sup>68</sup> is that military authorities may have resorted to informal or intermediate solutions that assigned

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68 C.Á. Ordás-García, ‘De objetores a insumisos. Surgimiento, expansión y desarrollo del Movimiento Antimilitarista en Catalunya, 1971–1989’, unpublished PhD thesis, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. Departament d’Història Moderna i Contemporània (2015), 151–52 ; C.Á. Ordás-García, ‘La represión a la objeción de conciencia durante el Franquismo’, in P. Oliver-Olmo and J. Carlos Urda-Lozano (eds.) *La prisión y las instituciones punitivas en la investigación histórica* (Cuenca 2014), 798; Ordás-García,

conscience objectors to forms of service not involving the use of weapons, allowing them to complete their period of military obligation without attracting attention or generating public cases of dissent. Such arrangements would have served the interests of the regime by avoiding publicity while maintaining control.

At the same time, a second possible interpretation must be considered. This period coincided with the harshest phase of Francoist repression, during which fear and the risk of severe punishment may have discouraged the small number of Jehovah's Witnesses then present in Spain from openly articulating a conscientious objection to military service. In this sense, silence itself may reflect not acquiescence, but the constraints imposed by an exceptionally repressive environment.

This historical silence – whether due to evasion, lack of reporting or erasure – calls for further archival and oral research. It also reflects the repressive mechanisms of early Francoism, which drove public expressions of conscience, especially from minority faiths, into hiding or extinction.

Situating the Spanish case within a broader comparative framework allows for a clearer assessment of both common authoritarian logics and historically specific outcomes. A brief comparison with Nazi Germany, often invoked in the literature on Jehovah's Witnesses, illustrates why direct equivalence between the two cases is analytically problematic.

Although Nazi Germany and Francoist Spain shared key ideological features – most notably authoritarian nationalism and the fusion of political power with moral conformity – the treatment of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors differed in important respects that caution against a direct equivalence between the two cases. One fundamental difference lies in the size and visibility of the group itself. Whereas in Spain Jehovah's Witnesses numbered only a few dozen adherents during the 1930s and 1940s, in Germany they constituted a mass movement numbering in the thousands. This demographic contrast had significant implications: in the German case, refusal of military service and other forms of nonconformity were perceived not only as individual acts of dissent but as a potential threat to public order and as a contagious example that might inspire wider resistance. In Spain, by contrast, the extremely limited numerical presence of Jehovah's Witnesses reduced their immediate visibility, even if it did not eliminate repression.

A second crucial difference concerns the temporal horizon and political stability of the two regimes. The Nazi regime, which lasted little more than 12 years (1933–45), operated under conditions of permanent mobilisation and escalating radicalisation, particularly as military defeat became increasingly likely. In this context, coercion and violence intensified as the regime sought to enforce absolute loyalty in the face of collapse. Francoism, by contrast, emerged victorious from the Civil War and consolidated itself as a long-term authoritarian order lasting nearly four decades. This relative stability helps to explain why repression in Spain, while systematic and often severe, tended to

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'Traidores a la patria', 215; X. Rius-Sant, *La objeción de conciencia: motivaciones, historia y legislación actual* (Barcelona 1988), 133–34.

be less immediately annihilatory than in the German case and was more frequently channelled through prolonged imprisonment, disciplinary units, and cumulative sentences rather than mass execution.

None of the foregoing is intended to minimise or soften the repression applied to conscientious objectors under Francoism. Rather, it underscores the analytical difficulty of direct comparison with the Nazi case, whose extremity sets it apart from other European experiences. As Brock observes, ‘in Nazi Germany the decision to refuse military service on grounds of conscience entailed far more serious consequences than this act usually brought elsewhere. For there the objector faced almost certain death, even if in rare cases capital punishment was commuted into long-term imprisonment. [...] The treatment of conscientious objectors in Nazi Germany remains unparalleled in its harshness, at any rate within recent centuries’.<sup>69</sup>

A second generation of Jehovah’s Witness objectors emerged after the darkest years of repression. Ordás García indicates that until 1958, ‘*if a young man wanted to avoid military service, the most sensible strategy was to resort to fleeing [...] However, there was indeed a specific group in which it appeared, namely the Jehovah’s Witnesses*’.<sup>70</sup> The following cases examine those who became precursors of this renewed phase of objection, whose photographs are shown in Figure 5.

Juan Sirera Bel<sup>71</sup> (Trempt, Lleida, 21 August 1933 –) was baptised in October 1953, 9 years after his father, Salvador, died. This represents one of the first scholarly historical or religious publications to include his case.

Juan objected to military service, in 1954. Nevertheless, he was ordered to report to the Port de la Selva camp (Girona) on 27 March 1955, at the Fortress Sappers Regiment No. 1,<sup>72</sup> where he was told to await the barracks to formally state his objection.

As his refusal persisted, he was placed in solitary confinement. Being the first such case, officers sought guidance from the Captaincy General in Barcelona, initiating court-martial No. 601-IV-55.<sup>73</sup> He spent 3 months at Figueres Castle (Girona), a facility for soldiers sanctioned for misconduct, and after continued refusal, was sent to Peralada Castle (Girona) for another 3.5 months, leading to court-martial No. 1226-IV-55.<sup>74</sup>

During this time, Sirera faced constant pressure and was repeatedly offered alternative tasks – kitchen work, blacksmithing, even building a latrine – all of which he firmly

69 Brock, ‘Conscientious Objectors in Nazi Germany’, 375.

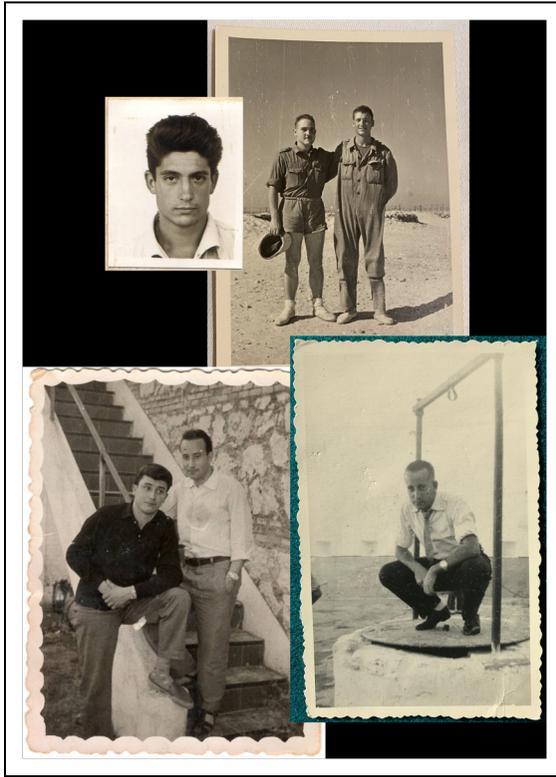
70 C.Á. Ordás-García, ‘Objeción de conciencia, no-violencia y antimilitarismo: del Franquismo al referéndum de la OTAN’, in F.J. Leira-Castiñeira (ed.) *El pacifismo en España desde 1808 hasta el ‘No a la guerra’ de Iraq* (Madrid 2023), 381.

71 The case is documented through interviews with Juan and the military and medical records he provided (Sirera-Bel, [Interview...], 12 December 2022; J. Sirera-Bel, *Interview with Juan Sirera Bel [for Bethel]*, n.d.; Sirera-Bel, [Personal Interview...], 5 June 2001; Sirera-Bel, [Personal Conversation...], 1 August 2025).

72 J. Sirera-Bel, ‘[Filiation of Juan Sirera Bel (1954–1955)]’, n.d., Personal archive of Juan Sirera.

73 J. Sirera-Bel, ‘[Court-Martial No. 601-IV-55 against Juan Sirera Bel]’, 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; J. Sirera-Bel, ‘[Official Communication No. 45070, Dated February 18, 1956, Approving the Sentence of Court Martial No. 601-IV-55 against Juan Sirera Bel]’, 18 February 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera.

74 J. Sirera-Bel, ‘[Final Dismissal of Ordinary Case No. 1226-IV-55 of Juan Sirera Bel]’, 13 June 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera.



**Figure 5.** Juan Sirera, 1956 (top left); Enrique Roca (left), Sahara, late 1959 (top right); Jesús Martín, Fort Rostrogordo, Melilla, March 1958 (bottom right); Jesús with Alberto Contijoch, 1961, Ocaña Adult Reformatory (bottom left). J. Sirera's, E. Roca's, J. Martín's and A. Contijoch's personal archives

rejected. He was once subjected to a mock execution, but remained steadfast, prompting a third court-martial (No. 1640-IV-55<sup>75</sup>). He explained that 'I have come to realize that if a soldier is not given food, he cannot kill, and I am as responsible if I provide food as is the soldier who goes to war and kills. Therefore, I cannot be part of the military arrangement'.<sup>76</sup>

75 J. Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication No. 207, Dated June 27, 1956, Informing of the Resolution of Ordinary Case No. 1640-IV-55 Concerning Juan Sirera Bel]', 27 June 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication No. 45070, Dated February 18, 1956, Approving the Sentence of Court Martial No. 601-IV-55 against Juan Sirera Bel]'.

76 Sirera-Bel, *Interview with Juan Sirera Bel [for Bethel]*.

Although not allowed to speak freely during proceedings, his religious motivation was noted in official records – in disobedience reports dated 6 April and 29 July 1955, and in his first court-martial (No. 601-IV-55), which resulted in a 6-month sentence.<sup>77</sup> His is the earliest documented conviction of a Jehovah's Witness for religious objection, presented here for the first time in Figure 6; no comparable documentation survives from the Civil War period.<sup>78</sup>

During his third court-martial, the military judge noted two similar prior cases and questioned his mental state.<sup>79</sup> In February 1956, Sirera was sent to the Military Psychiatric Clinic of Sant Boi de Llobregat (Barcelona), where, on 5 April, the Military Psychiatric Medical Court issued a report diagnosing 'paranoid schizophrenia' and declaring him 'unfit' and 'irresponsible for his actions'.<sup>80</sup>

The Court confirmed the diagnosis on 20 May, annulling all three court-martials. According to his medical record, on 17 July 1956 he was transferred by court order to the same civilian psychiatric facility where his father died in 1944, remaining there until 1 March 1957.<sup>81</sup> Though sentenced to 6 months, he spent nearly 2 years in detention. Juan Sirera stands as the first documented conscientious objector among Jehovah's Witnesses after the Civil War. His was a stance of absolute objection.

Referral to psychiatric services or confinement in a mental asylum was not a systematic response to Jehovah's Witness conscientious objection, but it was nonetheless a recurring feature that reveals broader patterns of institutional misunderstanding. Of the 10 cases analysed in this study, only two individuals – Salvador Sirera and Joan Sirera – were confined in psychiatric institutions, and in both instances the medical authorities formally confirmed the presence of a psychiatric diagnosis. However, a significantly larger number of cases were subjected to medical or psychiatric examinations. At least three additional objectors,

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77 Sirera-Bel, '[Court-Martial No. 601-IV-55 against Juan Sirera Bel]'; Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication No. 45070, Dated February 18, 1956, Approving the Sentence of Court Martial No. 601-IV-55 against Juan Sirera Bel]'; J. Sirera-Bel, '[Report of Disobedience of Juan Sirera Bel (1)]', 6 April 1955, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; J. Sirera-Bel, '[Report of Disobedience of Juan Sirera Bel (2)]', 29 July 1955, Personal archive of Juan Sirera.

78 Antonio Gargallo was not explicitly identified as a Jehovah's Witness, but referred to generically regarding his religious beliefs (Gargallo-Mejía, 'TMT3. Territorial Military Judicial Archive No. 32 of Zaragoza', 11, 13, 29).

79 J. Sirera-Bel, '[Background Information Sheet of Juan Sirera Bel, Military Psychiatric Clinic]', 4 February 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; J. Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication Dated February 5, 1956, Informing of the Admission of Juan Sirera Bel to the Military Psychiatric Clinic]', 5 February 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; J. Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication (no. 13) Dated January 10, 1956, Transfer to the Military Psychiatric Clinic of Juan Sirera Bel]', 10 January 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera.

80 J. Sirera-Bel, '[Notification No. 781, Dated May 20, 1956, of the Ruling Issued by the Classification and Review Board of Recruitment Box No. 36 Concerning Juan Sirera Bel]', 20 May 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication Dated February 5, 1956, Informing of the Admission of Juan Sirera Bel to the Military Psychiatric Clinic]'; Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication (no. 13) Dated January 10, 1956, Transfer to the Military Psychiatric Clinic of Juan Sirera Bel]'.

81 Sirera-Bel, '[Final Dismissal of Ordinary Case No. 1226-IV-55 of Juan Sirera Bel]'; J. Sirera-Bel, '[File No. 2742 of Juan Sirera Bel from the Military Psychiatric Clinic]', 16 July 1956, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; J. Sirera-Bel, '[Medical Record of Juan Sirera Bel, Psychiatric Sanatorium of Our Lady of Montserrat, San Baudilio de Llobregat. File No. 4163]', 1 March 1957, Personal archive of Juan Sirera; Sirera-Bel, '[Official Communication No. 207, Dated June 27, 1956, Informing of the Resolution of Ordinary Case No. 1640-IV-55 Concerning Juan Sirera Bel]'.

A Vd. da parte el Jefe que suscribe que el recluta JUAN SIRERA BELL de la 2ª Compañía, al incorporarse al Campamento manifestó pertenecer a la organización "Testigos de Jehová", solicitado se le enviara del Servicio Militar según ya di parte a Vd. en última visita de inspección realizada a este Campamento.

Dicho recluta en la instrucción se ha negado contestar a las preguntas que el Oficial le hizo sobre el Mosquetón, alegando que el no puede ni quiere instruirse en el manejo del arma, por impedírselo sus creencias, y manifiesta que el día que le entregan el Mosquetón, no se hará cargo del mismo por ningún concepto.

Además manifiesta que a toda costa, realice el procedimiento en el servicio que expresa la carta que se adjunta.

El Jefe que suscribe ha ordenado el ingreso de dicho recluta en la Prevención de este Campamento por no disponer de calabozos.

Todo lo cual porjo en conocimiento de Vd., en los fines que procedan.

Puerto de la Cruz a 6 de Abril de 1.955

**Figure 6.** First official document of a Jehovah's witness—Juan Sirera—refusing military service, 6 April 1955. J. Sirera's personal archive.

including Nemesio Orús, Ramón Serrano and Vicente Bordoy, underwent such assessments, indicating that military authorities repeatedly sought to determine whether refusal to serve could be explained by mental incapacity rather than by conscience.

These practices point to a profound institutional inability – shared by military and medical authorities – to comprehend conscientious objection as a rational and principled stance. In an authoritarian political culture that denied legitimacy to dissent, refusal to bear arms was frequently interpreted through the lens of abnormality. Medical and psychiatric examinations functioned less as therapeutic assessments than as instruments to classify objectors either as fit for military service or as legally irresponsible, reflecting a broader historical pattern in which psychiatric institutions operated as mechanisms of social regulation and administrative categorisation rather than clinical care.<sup>82</sup> In this

82 D. Wright, 'Asylums and Alienists: The Institutional Foundations of Psychiatry, 1760–1914', in D. McCallum (ed.) *The Palgrave Handbook of the History of Human Sciences* (Singapore 2022), 1253–71. On the psychiatric assessment of conscientious objectors in early twentieth-century, including forms of medical management and associated experimental practices, see: R.A. Bennette, *Diagnosing Dissent: Hysterics, Deserters, and Conscientious Objectors in Germany During World War One* (Ithaca, NY 2020); P. Brock, 'Confinement of Conscientious Objectors as Psychiatric Patients in World War I Germany', *Peace & Change*, 23,3 (1998), 247–64; H.-G. Hofer, C.-R. Prüll, and W.U. Eckart (eds.), *War, Trauma and Medicine in Germany and Central Europe (1914–1939)* (Freiburg 2011); D. Kaufmann, 'Science as Cultural Practice: Psychiatry in the First World War and Weimar Germany', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 34,1 (1999), 125–44; J. Pemberton, 'Medical Experiments Carried Out in Sheffield on Conscientious Objectors to Military Service During the 1939–45 War', in *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35,3 (2006), 556–58; S.J. Taylor, *Acts of Conscience: World War II, Mental Institutions, and Religious Objectors* (Syracuse, NY 2009).

sense, dissenting conscience was implicitly treated as a form of deviance, and any position that fell outside the ideological and moral framework of the regime risked being interpreted as a sign of mental imbalance.

This dynamic must be situated within the broader context of Francoist psychiatry, which – particularly after the Nationalist victory – became increasingly ideologised and closely aligned with the regime’s repressive project. Influential figures such as Antonio Vallejo-Nágera explicitly linked political dissent, moral deviation and mental inferiority, framing the dissident not as a rational actor but as psychologically defective.<sup>83</sup> Within this framework, refusal to fight was not medicalised in a clinical sense but moralised: only severe mental illness could exempt an individual from penal responsibility. Psychiatry thus operated less as a space of care than as a technology of social control and ideological legitimation within the military and penitentiary systems of early Francoism.

Enrique Roca Arteu<sup>84</sup> (Barcelona, 25 December 1934–) encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses in late 1953 in Barcelona and was baptised about a year later. His case is presented here for the first time in any scholarly publication. His stance was ‘relative’: no weapons or oath, but he accepted administrative duties.

Belonging to the 1955 conscription cohort, he requested that his religion be recorded as ‘Christian’ rather than ‘Roman Catholic Apostolic’. This alteration is visible in his military booklet and personal records, as reproduced in Figure 7.<sup>85</sup> On 14 March 1956, upon joining the 72nd Anti-Aircraft Regiment in Barcelona, he openly identified as a Jehovah’s Witness – recorded in his file as *Jehovino*, (as reproduced in Figure 7) a rare pejorative term.<sup>86</sup> From then on, his objection was explicitly tied to religion.

He refused to wear the uniform – eventually being dressed by force – and consistently declined military training. He spent 2 months in solitary confinement, then 6.5 months in a cell with military criminals, without privacy even for basic needs. He faced intimidation, including sexual threats. Despite strong psychological pressure, he never renounced his beliefs.

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83 A. Vallejo-Nágera, *La locura y la guerra: psicopatología de la guerra española* (Valladolid 1939). For the approach that might have been implemented had the Republican side won the war, see: E. Mira-y-López, *Psychiatry in War* (New York, NY 1943).

84 The case is documented through interviews and military files from his personal archive and the Guadalajara Military Archive (E. Roca-Artu, [Interview by Zoom with Enrique Roca Arteu at the Milá y Fontanals Institution for Humanities Research of the CSIC, in Barcelona], 28 February 2023; E. Roca-Artu, [Conversation with Enrique Roca Arteu at the Bracafé de Ronda Universitat, Barcelona], 9 March 2023; E. Roca-Artu, [Conversation with Enrique Roca Arteu in El Mos de C/Comtal in Barcelona], 31 May 2023; E. Roca-Artu, ‘Regulatory Enlisted Personnel File of Enrique Roca Arteu’, 1955, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Recruitment Authorities, Recruitment Zones, Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1955. Caja 139; E. Roca-Artu, ‘[Filiation of Enrique Roca Arteu (1955–1967)]’, 1955, Personal archive of Enrique Roca; E. Roca-Artu, ‘Military Service and Mobilization Booklet of Enrique Roca Arteu (1955–1973)’, 1955, Personal archive of Enrique Roca).

85 Roca-Artu, ‘[Filiation of Enrique Roca Arteu (1955–1967)]’; Roca-Artu, ‘AGMG. Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1955. Caja 139’, 1955; Roca-Artu, ‘Military Service and Mobilization Booklet’.

86 Roca-Artu, ‘[Filiation of Enrique Roca Arteu (1955–1967)]’; Roca-Artu, ‘AGMG. Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1955. Caja 139’, 1955.

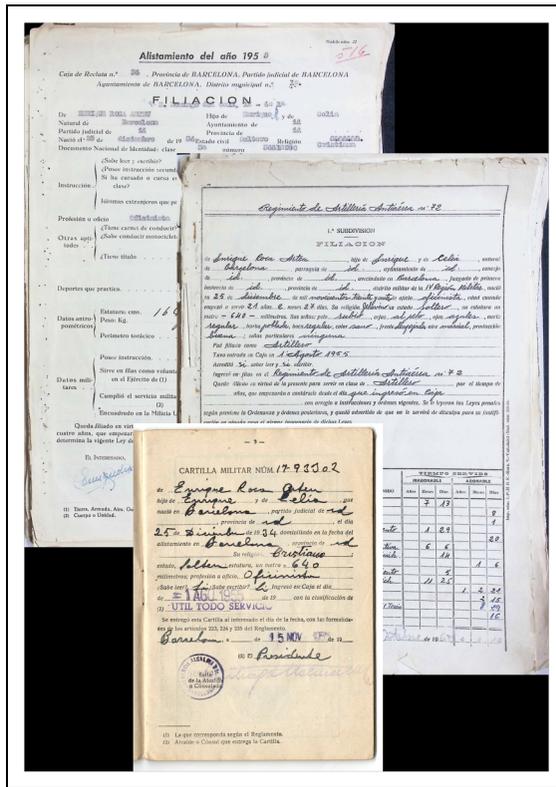


Figure 7. Enrique Roca's military documents showing changes of religion to 'Christian' (top and bottom) and to 'Jehovino' (centre). E. Roca's personal archive.

His first court-martial (No. 498-IV-56)<sup>87</sup> (reproduced in Figure 8) resulted in a 9-month sentence. He served much of his first sentence in the barracks' dungeons, so he spent only a couple of weeks in Montjuic Military Fortress Prison (Barcelona), being released on 2 January 1957, but was called up for military service again just a few days later.<sup>88</sup>

87 Roca-Arteu, '[Filiation of Enrique Roca Arteu (1955–1967)]'; Roca-Arteu, 'AGMG. Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1955. Caja 139', 1955.

88 Roca-Arteu, '[Filiation of Enrique Roca Arteu (1955–1967)]'; Roca-Arteu, 'AGMG. Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1955. Caja 139', 1955; E. Roca-Arteu, 'Prisoner record card of Enrique Roca Arteu', 1956, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Units, Centres and Agencies. Military Prisons. Montjuich Prison. Box 306940, File 3213; E. Roca-Arteu, 'Personal prisoner file of Enrique Roca Arteu', 1959, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Units, Centres and Agencies. Military Prisons. Monteolivete Prison. Box 306859, File 13; E. Roca-Arteu, 'Personal prisoner file of Enrique Roca Arteu', 1959, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Units, Centres and Agencies. Military Prisons. Castle of San Francisco del Risco. Box 305653, File 1461; Roca-Arteu, 'Military Service and Mobilization Booklet'.

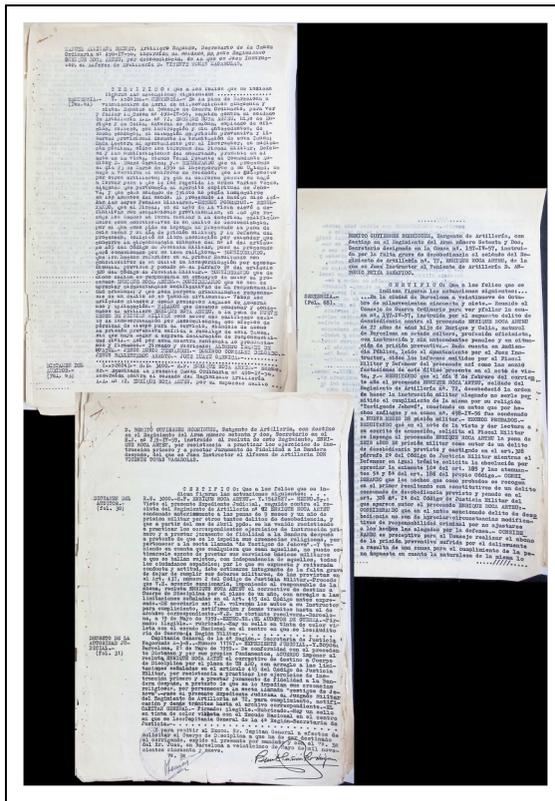


Figure 8. Court-Martials no. 498-IV-56, no. 197-IV-57 and no. 239-IV-59 against Enrique Roca. E. Roca's personal archive.

A prison sentence for refusing duties did not cancel conscription; renewed refusals triggered new prosecutions. Enrique was convicted in two more court-martials (nos. 197-IV-57, 239-IV-59)<sup>89</sup> (reproduced in Figure 8), receiving a total of 2 years and 9 months in military prisons, though he ultimately spent over 4 years and 1 month deprived of liberty.

What Enrique recalls most vividly from his imprisonment is the deep sense of isolation – cut off from family and fellow believers. This was especially acute in the distant Spanish Sahara, where the ongoing Ifni War (1957–58/59), then in its final stages, heightened the risk of execution. He was eventually released on 14 April 1960.

89 Roca-Artu, '[Filiation of Enrique Roca Artu (1955–1967)]'; Roca-Artu, 'AGMG. Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1955. Caja 139', 1955.

Vicente Bordoy Font<sup>90</sup> (Pollença, Mallorca, 28 September 1935–Palma de Mallorca, 17 October 1986) encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses in the late 1940s in Mallorca. His case was never previously published by an academic or religious publication

He attempted to avoid military service in 1955 by working in the coal mines of Lloseta (Mallorca), as those employed before their call-up were granted exemption. He left after 6 months owing to the harsh conditions, after which his enlistment proceeded alongside that of his replacement. On 24 February 1956, his record identified him as a ‘Jehovah’s Witness’. His application of 17 April for exemption on religious grounds was rejected, resulting in a 1-month sentence in the civil prison of Mallorca (Judicial File No. 15/56).

On 18 March 1957, he was conscripted in the No. 51 Machine Gun Infantry Battalion in Manacor (Mallorca) but repeatedly refused military training. His stance triggered court-martial proceedings (No. 12/57) and a psychiatric evaluation to assess possible mental illness. He was sentenced to 4 years in prison, serving nearly two. After his release, on 13 March 1959, he was sent to complete military service in a disciplinary battalion in the Spanish Sahara, at El Aaiun and Villa Cisneros (1959–60), during the final stages of the Ifni War, where he accepted auxiliary duties.<sup>91</sup> In total, he spent approximately 3.5 years in prison. He was released on 23 September 1960.

Jesús Martín Nohales<sup>92</sup> (Madrid, 26 April 1936–) encountered Jehovah’s Witnesses in early 1950s Madrid and was baptised on 25 July 1955.

On 23 November 1956 he was called up for the initial steps of conscription. In February 1958, Jesús presented himself as a conscientious objector at the Madrid recruiting office, where his stance was ignored, he was physically mistreated and sent to his

90 The case is documented in his military file, a brief mention in a local newspaper and his obituary (V. Bordoy-Font, ‘Regulatory Enlisted Personnel File of Vicente Bordoy Font’, 1956, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Recruitment Authorities, Recruitment Zones, Balearic Islands Recruitment Zone, R/1956. Caja 8; R. Reig, ‘Moll de Pollença (VII). Nova llavor i altres esdeveniments’, *Vivències, Punt Informatiu Pollença* (Mallorca) (16 October 2003), 24; ‘Vicente Bordoy Font [Death Notice]’, *Diario de Mallorca* (Palma de Mallorca) (19 October 1986), 41).

91 Bordoy-Font, ‘AGMG. Balearic Islands Recruitment Zone, R/1956. Caja 8’; A. Contijoch-Berenguer, [Interview with Alberto Contijoch Berenguer at His Home in Santa Perpetua de Mogoda, Barcelona], 28 May 2001; J. Martín-Nohales, [4th Interview with Jesús Martín Nohales by Zoom from His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 6 August 2021; J. Martín-Nohales, [7th Interview with Jesús Martín Nohales by Zoom from His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 22 September 2021; Roca-Artu, [Interview...], 28 February 2023.

92 For many years, he and Alberto Contijoch were regarded as Spain’s first conscientious objectors. His case is based on interviews, a brief autobiography and military documents from his personal archive (J. Martín-Nohales, [1st Interview with Jesús Martín Nohales by Zoom from His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 22 July 2021; J. Martín-Nohales, [2nd Interview with Jesús Martín Nohales by Zoom from His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 26 July 2021; J. Martín-Nohales, [3rd Interview with Jesús Martín Nohales by Zoom from His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 2 August 2021; Martín-Nohales, [4th Interview]; J. Martín-Nohales, [6th Interview with Jesús Martín Nohales by Zoom from His Home in Segur de Calafell, Tarragona], 16 September 2021; Martín-Nohales, [7th Interview]; J. Martín-Nohales, [Interview with Jesús Martín Nohales Conducted at Bethel], 29 November 2000; J. Martín-Nohales, [Interview Conducted with Jesús Martín Nohales at his Home in Alella, Barcelona], 1998; J. Martín-Nohales, “‘Jehovah Rescued Me in My Darkest Hour’”, JW.ORG: Jehovah’s Witnesses – Official Website, 27 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.jw.org/en/library/series/life-stories-jehovahs-witnesses/jesus-martin/> (accessed 9 July 2025); ‘Spain’, 201–05).

assigned post with the Chemical Defense Company in Nador – a then-Spanish enclave near Melilla in northern Africa.

While held at Rostrogordo in Melilla in March 1958, Jesús was repeatedly beaten – once whipped unconscious and stomped on the head – then thrown into a punishment cell without a mattress. Threats and mistreatment significantly escalated. He spent months in solitary confinement in a two-by-two-meter underground cell, using a tin can for hygiene and surrounded by rats. Fearing for his life, he eventually received protection after a military secretary – alarmed by his injuries – intervened, assuring him that although the court could impose any sentence, no one would lay a hand on him again.

Jesús faced three courts-martial (nos. 1167/58, 1191/58 and 1310/58)<sup>93</sup> (as reproduced in Figure 9), which together resulted in a 22-year sentence: 15 years for disobedience and 4 years for sedition (first and second courts-martial were consolidated into a single one) and three more for disobedience (third) – the sedition charge being particularly severe amid the Ifni War in the Spanish Sahara. The combined sentences remain the harshest known penalty for a Jehovah's Witness objector in Spain. His sentence was gradually reduced through pardons and credit for prison work.

Thanks to a bureaucratic oversight,<sup>94</sup> Jesús was never summoned again after his conditional release on 22 August 1964 – allowing him to avoid the cycle of chained sentencing many other objectors faced. He ultimately served 6.5 years.<sup>95</sup>

Alberto Contijoch Berenguer<sup>96</sup> (Barcelona, 4 January 1937–Sant Vicenç de Castellet, Barcelona, 20 July 2025) encountered Jehovah's Witnesses in 1957 and was baptised the following year.

93 J. Martín-Nohales, '[Courts-Martial No. 1167/58 & 1191/58 against Jesús Martín Nohales]', 2 August 1958, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Court-Martial No. 1310/58 against Jesús Martín Nohales]', 11 February 1959, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Indictment Order of Jesús Martín Nohales]', 4 June 1958, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Indictment Order of Jesús Martín Nohales (2)]', 18 August 1958, Personal archive of Jesús Martín.

94 J. Martín-Nohales, '[Approval of Conditional Release in Non-Military Life for Jesús Martín Nohales Related to Court-Martial No. 1167/58]', 5 November 1963, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Certificate of Conditional Release (No. 1167/58) of Jesús Martín Nohales and Verifying Stamps]', 9 November 1963, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Certificate of Conditional Release (No. 1310/58) of Jesús Martín Nohales]', 22 August 1964, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Certificate of final Release of Jesús Martín Nohales]', 2 August 1965, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Request for Conditional Release of Jesús Martín Nohales Related to Court-Martial No. 1167/58]', 30 August 1963, Personal archive of Jesús Martín.

95 J. Martín-Nohales, '[Instructions to Jesús Martín Nohales Related to the Pardon Associated with the Arrival of Pope Paul VI to the Papacy]', 13 February 1960, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Pardon Granted to Jesús Martín Nohales Related to Court-Martial No. 1167/58]', 13 February 1960, Personal archive of Jesús Martín; J. Martín-Nohales, '[Pardon Granted to Jesús Martín Nohales Related to Court-Martial No. 1167/58 (2)]', 12 September 1963, Personal archive of Jesús Martín.

96 His case is documented through personal interviews, his published autobiography, other biographical data, and military files from both his personal archive and the Guadalajara Military Archive (F.D. Batista-Silvera-y-Suárez, 'Tras las huellas de... Un pasado viviendo el presente por un Testigo. E 39 Castillo Mahón La Mola', unpublished (n.d.); P. Goñi, 'Sobrevivire a les presons espanyoles [Surviving Spanish Prisons]', interview with Alberto Contijoch-Berenguer, 15 June 2021, Barra Lliure. Canal Taronja. Comarques centrals, <https://www.canaltaronja.cat/central/manresa/sobreviure-a-les-presons-espanyoles/> (accessed 2 August 2025); Contijoch-Berenguer, [Interview...], 28 May 2001; A. Contijoch-Berenguer, *Once años, un mes, once días: España 1958–1970. Cárceles, militares y objetores de conciencia* (Torres Editores, 2020); A. Contijoch-Berenguer, [Story Presented by Alberto Contijoch Berenguer in Memory of

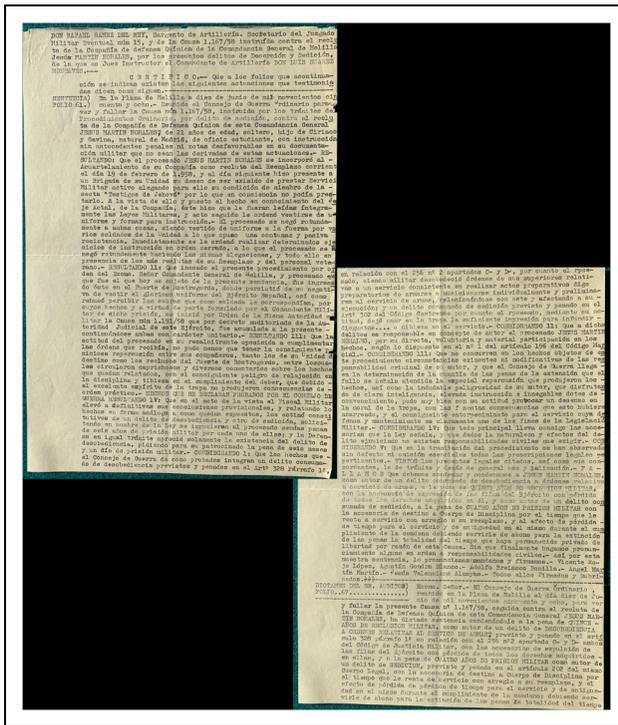


Figure 9. Court-Martial no. 1167/58, recording the longest sentence to date in Spain for a conscientious objector. J. Martin’s personal archive.

From the 1970s, he was mistakenly seen as the first to reject military service under Franco’s regime, though earlier cases later emerged. His case remains emblematic for the length of his imprisonment, its international resonance and his presence in Spanish media.

He was called up on 13 March 1959 and assigned to the Palma Infantry Regiment No. 47 of Mallorca, where he declared himself a conscientious objector. Sentenced to 19 years and 2 days across four consecutive courts-martial (nos. 8/59, 17/61, 121/64 and 105/67)<sup>97</sup> (as reproduced in Figure 10), he ultimately served 11 years, 1 month and 11 days, making him one of the longest-imprisoned Jehovah’s Witness objectors in Spain.

Francisco Díaz Moreno Shortly after His Death, at a Meeting of Former Spanish Jehovah’s Witness Conscientious Objectors, 29 December 2020; A. Contijoch-Berenguer, [Interview by Zoom With Alberto Contijoch Berenguer from His Home in Sant Vicenç de Castellet, Barcelona], 25 November 2022; ‘Spain’, 202–07).

97 A. Contijoch-Berenguer, ‘Regulatory Enlisted Personnel File of Alberto Contijoch Berenguer’, 1958, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Recruitment Authorities, Recruitment Zones, Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1958, File 31; A. Contijoch-Berenguer, [‘Military File of Alberto Contijoch Berenguer’], 1958, Personal archive of Alberto Contijoch; A. Contijoch-Berenguer,

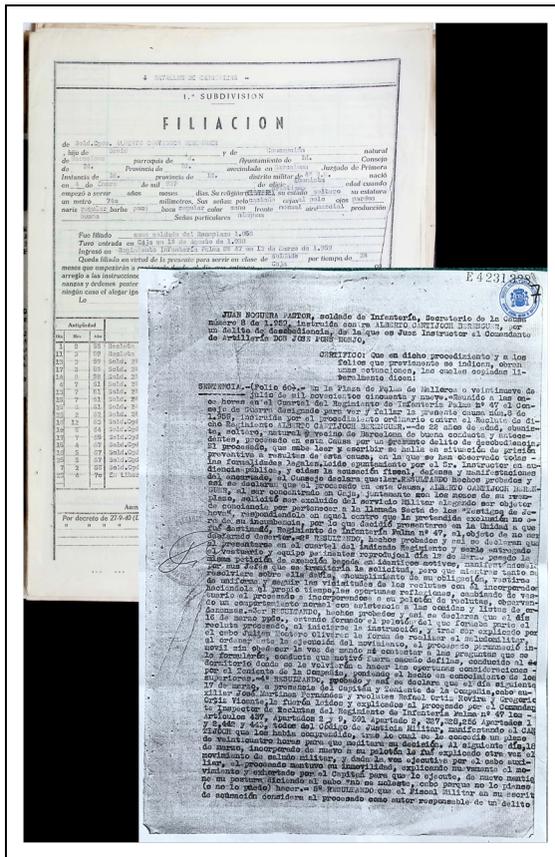


Figure 10. Alberto Contijoch’s affiliation sheet records his religion as ‘Christian’ (left); court-martial summary no. 8/59 (right). A. Contijoch’s personal archive and AGMG. Barcelona Recruitment Zone, R/1958. Dossier 31.

Around 1963, he was among the first objectors to examine military law, discovering that work in disciplinary battalions in the Sahara counted as military service – unintentionally legitimising conscription. This insight led them to adopt a stance of absolute objection, refusing all forms of cooperation.

‘Personal prisoner file of Alberto Contijoch Berenguer’, 1963, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Units, Centres and Agencies. Military Prisons. Castle of Santa Catalina. Box 306241, File 1170; A. Contijoch-Berenguer, ‘Personal prisoner file of Alberto Contijoch Berenguer’, 1967, Spain. Ministry of Defence. General Military Archive of Guadalajara (AGMG), Units, Centres and Agencies. Military Prisons. Castle of San Francisco del Risco. Box 305674, File 3033; A. Contijoch-Berenguer, ‘[Indictment Order against Alberto Contijoch Berenguer]’, 24 May 1967, Personal archive of Alberto Contijoch; A. Contijoch-Berenguer, ‘[Sentence of the Court-Martial No. 105/67 against Alberto Contijoch Berenguer]’, 19 January 1968, Personal archive of Alberto Contijoch.

In 1965, Alberto began corresponding with Amnesty International, which accepted his case and adopted him as one of the first Spanish prisoners of conscience. This marked a turning point, bringing international attention to the situation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Spain.

Alberto remained in prison until 23 April 1970, when he was released through a special pardon.<sup>98</sup>

In the early Franco years, Jehovah's Witnesses responded to conscription in varied ways: some sought exemption through exile or alternative assignments like mining, while others refused service – partially (accepting auxiliary roles) or absolutely. This marked the emergence of a form of religious objection that remained largely invisible.

This period was marked by physical, verbal and psychological abuse, compounded by emotional hardship. Many were held in remote prisons, far from their places of residence, which deepened their sense of isolation. They all faced chained sentencing: each time a sentence was served, they were recalled for service, refused again, and were re-convicted – creating a cycle that often meant indefinite imprisonment until at least age 38, when military obligations formally ended. These conditions unfolded in a climate of legal uncertainty, prolonged solitary confinement and constant risk of renewed prosecution – placing early Jehovah's Witness objectors among the most severely punished for reasons of conscience in post-war Western Europe.

The emergence of new Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors in Spain during the 1950s coincided with the outbreak and development of the Algerian War (1954–1962), a conflict that generated widespread resistance to compulsory military service in France and posed significant challenges for the French authorities. As Ordás<sup>99</sup> suggests, this contemporaneous context may not have gone unnoticed by Francoist military authorities. It is therefore plausible that the French response – characterised by severe and cumulative prison sentences for objectors – formed part of the broader reference framework within which Spanish authorities operated. The adoption of similarly harsh sentencing practices in Spain during this period lends support to this interpretation.

Although repression remained a constant feature across the periods examined in this study, there were substantial differences in its logic and operation between the wartime context of 1936–9 and the post-war decades of the 1950s, which unfolded under an authoritarian regime formally at peace. These temporal shifts shaped not only the intensity of repression but also the way conscientious objection was interpreted, prosecuted, and managed by the state. Recognising these differences is essential to understanding how similar acts of refusal could generate distinct institutional responses depending on

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98 A. Contijoch-Berenguer, '[Personal Pardon of Alberto Contijoch Berenguer]', 14 March 1970, Personal archive of Alberto Contijoch.

99 Ordás-García, 'De objetores a insumisos', 151–52; C.Á. Ordás-García, 'From Resisting Military Service to the Anti-Militarist Movement: Conscientious Objection and Resistance to Compulsory Military Service in France, Italy and Spain. A Comparative Analysis, From the First World War Until the 1980's', *Workers of the World: International Journal on Strikes and Social Conflicts*, 1,6 (2015), 40; Ordás-García, 'Objeción de conciencia, no-violencia y antimilitarismo', 381; Ordás-García, 'The Antimilitarist Campaign Against Compulsory Military Service in Spain During the 1970s and 1980s', 289.

whether the regime perceived them as an immediate military threat or as a challenge to public order and ideological conformity.

During the Civil War, refusal to perform military service was interpreted primarily through the lens of military emergency. Jehovah's Witness objectors could be commonly framed as traitors, deserters, or collaborators with the enemy, and their refusal was perceived as an immediate threat to the survival of the armed side they were expected to serve. In this context, there was little or no space for the recognition of individual conscience; the overriding logic was that of wartime necessity. By contrast, in the 1950s, under conditions of authoritarian peace, conscientious objection was no longer treated as an act of military betrayal but was reinterpreted as disobedience, indiscipline, religious obstinacy, or a problem of public order. This shift did not lessen repression, but it altered its rationale, recasting objection from a battlefield offence into a challenge to social control and ideological conformity. Repression adapted to changing political circumstances, to the degree of threat perceived by the authorities, and to the evolving needs of the state. The combination of persistence and adjustment allows the repression of Jehovah's Witness objectors to be understood not as mere repetition, but as a form of operational continuity marked by institutional variation.

Not only did the interpretation of conscientious objection differ between the two periods, but the forms of punishment also varied markedly. During the Civil War, repression took an explicitly eliminatory form. Jehovah's Witness objectors were subjected to courts-martial (Ramón Serrano and Antonio Gargallo), prison sentences (Ramón Serrano and Nemesio Orús), and in at least one documented case, execution (Antonio Gargallo). Punishment was exemplary in nature, intended to deter collectively and to reinforce military discipline in a context of armed conflict. Death and severe imprisonment thus served a clear political and military function. By contrast, during the 1950s, courts-martial and imprisonment remained central instruments of repression, but they were increasingly implemented through very long sentences (Jesús Martín), repetitive administrative cycles (Enrique Roca and Alberto Contijoch), confinement in geographically remote locations (Enrique Roca, Vicente Bordoy, Jesús Martín, and Alberto Contijoch), and, in some cases, psychiatric confinement (Juan Sirera). This later form of repression was disciplinary and dissuasive in the long term: repeated incarceration and confinement in geographically remote locations functioned as a means of psychological attrition, while avoiding the creation of visible martyrs. In this context, the objector ceased to be treated as an enemy to be eliminated and was instead managed as an administrative problem to be contained.

Taken together, these shifts reveal a fundamental transformation in the logic of repression. In the 1930s, the conscientious objector was not recognised as a moral subject but constructed as an immediate military threat to be eliminated through exemplary and often lethal punishment. By the 1950s, under conditions of authoritarian peace, the objective was no longer physical elimination but neutralisation. Repression became cumulative and disciplinary, aimed at breaking the will of the objector through repeated incarceration and institutional control rather than through spectacular violence. This transition – from eliminatory repression in wartime to dissuasive and administrative repression in peacetime – highlights how the Francoist state recalibrated its response to conscience-based

dissent according to context, while maintaining a persistent hostility toward any form of refusal that lay outside its ideological and institutional framework.

This article has shed light on the earliest Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors during Civil War and the Early Franco regime, reconstructing ten individual trajectories through military and judicial records, religious materials, and oral testimony. By foregrounding cases that had remained largely undocumented, it offers new insight into the moral, legal and personal dimensions of religious objection in authoritarian Spain.

These findings suggest a two-phase trajectory of Jehovah's Witness conscientious objection in Spain. The first, spanning the Civil War, was marked by isolated acts of defiance, lacking public recognition or coordinated support, and met with especially harsh repression. After a period of near-invisibility during the 1940s, a second wave gained momentum in the 1950s, gradually forming a more identifiable pattern of resistance. Although still met with severe punishment, these later objectors laid the foundation for a numerous religious stance in the 1960s that anticipated the rise of civilian objection in the 1970s. This evolution – from solitary, faith-driven defiance to a more visible, trans-nationally supported movement – underscores the continuity and historical depth of conscience-based resistance in Spain.

Beyond reconstructing individual trajectories, this study has sought to embed these cases within a broader analytical framework that connects legal structures, institutional practices, and shifting political contexts. By situating conscientious objection within the evolution of Spanish conscription law in both wartime and peacetime, and by comparing Republican and Nationalist mobilisation policies during the Civil War, the article demonstrates how similar acts of refusal were processed through distinct disciplinary logics.

Within a broader European comparative context, the Spanish case reveals both points of divergence and partial convergence with other significant international experiences. In Great Britain during the First World War, the existence of a democratic political system enabled the legal recognition of conscientious objection, a structural difference of major significance when contrasted with Spain. Yet in the British case, this legal provision did not ensure uniform or non-arbitrary application, and many objectors continued to face severe sanctions in practice. In Nazi Germany, certain ideological parallels can be identified in the exaltation of military duty and the stigmatisation of dissent; however, the extreme violence and totalising character of the Nazi regime render the German experience analytically exceptional and resistant to direct comparison with any other European case. Finally, in France during the 1940s–1960s, despite the existence of a democratic political order and thus a fundamentally different ideological foundation from Francoism, a relevant point of convergence can be observed in the recurrent use of cumulative prison sentences as a punitive response to conscientious objection. This parallel allows for a partial comparison at the level of repressive practices, even if not at the level of the political principles that underpinned them.

The Spanish experience stands out for the prolonged absence of any juridical framework and for the persistence of punitive responses well into the post-war period. The analysis of repression – ranging from summary execution during the Civil War to cumulative sentencing and psychiatric intervention in the 1950s – shows how the Francoist state

recalibrated its mechanisms of control without abandoning its fundamental hostility toward conscience-based refusal. In this sense, the article contributes to broader debates on authoritarian governance, civil resistance, and the management of dissent beyond overtly political opposition.

Far from isolated or anecdotal cases, the actions of early Jehovah's Witness conscientious objectors in Spain reveal a sustained and morally grounded refusal to participate in state violence – often at high personal cost. These trajectories, largely absent from the mainstream historiography, challenge the notion that meaningful dissent in authoritarian regimes must be political in nature. By tracing the legal, social, and emotional dimensions of their objection, this study brings to light a form of civic resistance shaped by religious conviction but rich in implications for the understanding of repression and ethical protest under wartime and dictatorship. More broadly, it challenges the secular bias that often marginalises religious actors in studies of passive resistance and calls for their fuller integration into the scholarship on pacific opposition and ethical protest in twentieth-century Europe.

Although the peaceful opposition of Jehovah's Witnesses to military service has been the subject of international scholarly attention in recent years, the Spanish case remains largely unexplored. The Spanish Civil War period is particularly relevant, situated chronologically between the two world wars, and yet studies on conscientious objection during this time are scarce. Moreover, considering Spain's early military conscription laws and the authoritarian context that followed, this case offers a unique lens through which to examine religiously motivated dissent.

Future lines of research should extend archival and oral investigations to examine Jehovah's Witness objection during late Francoism (1960–75) – being especially urgent given the advanced age of surviving witnesses – while also, the Transition, and up to the abolition of conscription in 2001, as well as cases from other religious traditions and secular pacifist or anti-militarist movements of the 1920s and 1930s.

When Alberto Contijoch – the last of the 10 objectors examined here – was released in 1970, over 100 Jehovah's Witnesses were already imprisoned across Spain, 1 year before the first civilian conscientious objector entered prison in 1971. Rooted in religious conscience, their early defiance anticipated later debates on civil liberties and the right to object, establishing a moral frontier within an authoritarian regime. Even though Jehovah's Witnesses did not coordinate with secular pacifists, their existence demonstrates an indigenous Spanish tradition of conscientious objection rooted in faith, thereby expanding the sociocultural understanding of dissent. Acknowledging their story is not only historical justice, but a step toward restoring the memory of those involved and their families and toward understanding the roots of conscience-based dissent in modern Spain.

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### ORCID iDs

Miquel Àngel Plaza-Navas  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6807-0185>

Jose Torres-Pruñonosa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2276-1655>

### Biographical Note

**Miquel-Àngel Plaza-Navas** is responsible for communication, training, and dissemination services at URICI (Unit of Scientific Information Resources for Research) of the CSIC (Spanish National Research Council). He holds a PhD in Art History, a BA in History, and a BA in Library and Information Science. His research has focused on Jehovah’s Witnesses, particularly on the history of their musical practices, technological adaptation, and emotional impact during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as on the history of the group in Spain and its role in the struggle for religious freedoms, including conscientious objection to compulsory military service. He has also published bibliometric studies in the social sciences. His work has appeared in journals such as *Entertainment Computing*, *Electronic Commerce Research*, *Cogent Social Sciences*, and *Acta Comparanda-Subsidia*.

**Jose Torres-Pruñonosa** is an Associate Professor at the Universidad Internacional de La Rioja and Principal Investigator of the REDEES Research Group. He holds a PhD, an MA in Stock Markets and Financial Derivatives, a BA in Actuarial Science and Finance, a BA in Business Science, and is a graduate of IESE Business School. His research focuses on finance, banking, social value, religion, and sport economics. He has published in a range of prestigious academic journals, including *Journal of International Financial Markets, Institutions and Money*, *Socio-Economic Planning Sciences*, *Electronic Commerce Research*, *European Journal of Management and Business Economics*, *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, *International Journal of Organizational Analysis*, *International Regional Science Review* and *Entertainment Computing*, among others. He is serving as an Associate Editor for *Electronic Commerce Research*, *Sage Open* and the *Journal of Management and Business Education*.