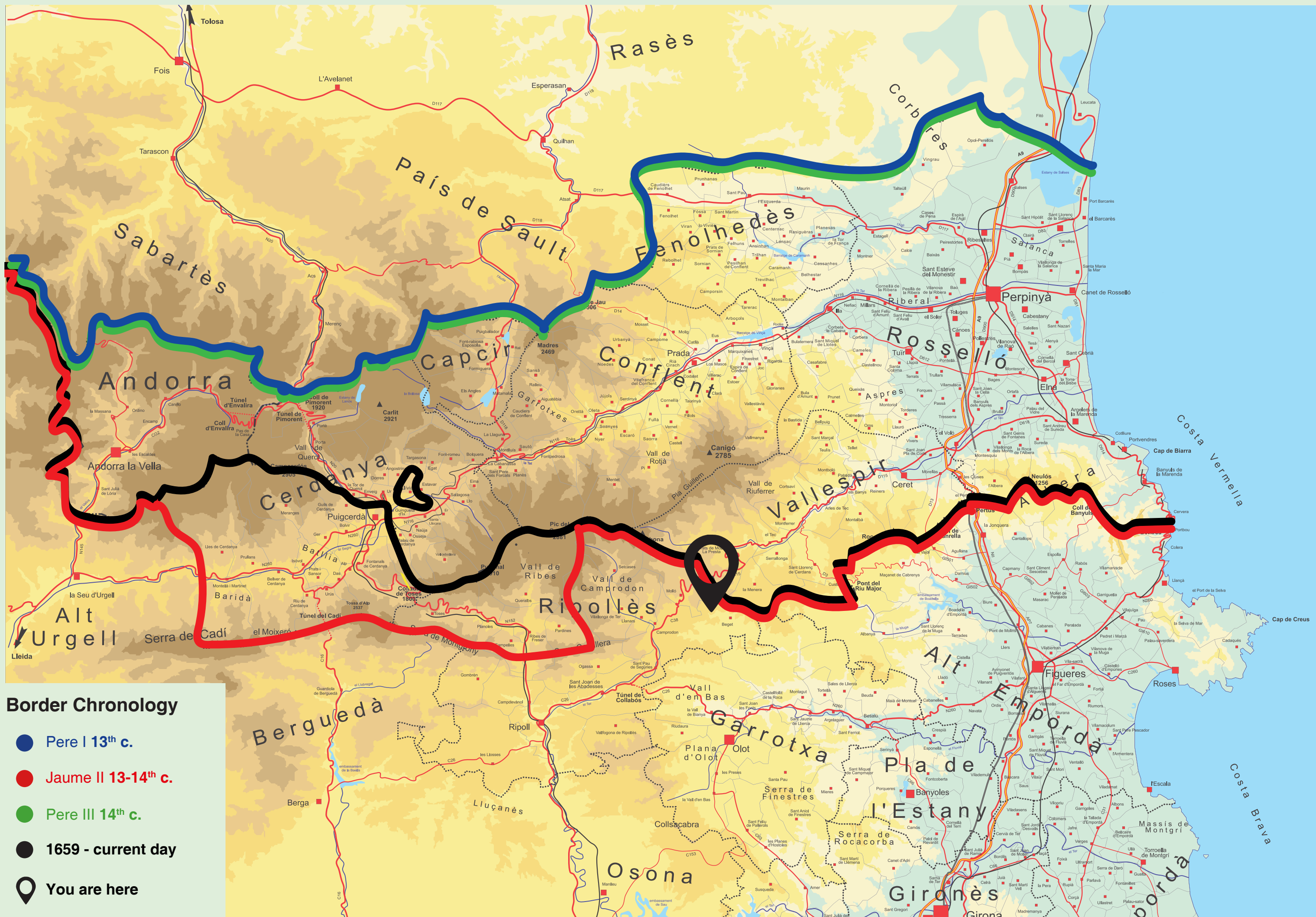


The Road to Exile



Photograph of the Gràcia family descending into Prats de Molló in 1939. Photograph: Hélène Roger Violet.

The frontier



The Treaty of the Pyrenees

The pass at Coll d'Ares has not always been the border between two states. For many centuries both sides of the ridge were part of just one territory (apart from a brief interlude in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries when it marked the border between the Kingdom of Mallorca and the Crown of Aragon).

The current border is the result of the Thirty Years' War in which many of Europe's modern states – among them France and Spain – were involved. The Reapers' War in Catalonia was one of the final episodes in this long drawn-out conflict. In order to end so many years of war and safeguard their rule in Flanders, Spain handed over the county of Rosselló and part of La Cerdanya to France. This agreement, known as the Treaty of the Pyrenees, was signed on 7 November 1659 on Illa dels Faisans, an island located in the middle of the river Bidasoa in the Basque Country. As a result, the territories north of the Pyrenees known as Northern Catalonia would henceforth remain separate from the rest of the Principality of Catalonia.

Road opened in 1964

On 1 August 1964 the long-awaited road over Coll d'Ares between Molló and Prats de Molló was opened. The project had been initiated in 1935 but was never completed due to the outbreak of the Civil War and the defensive worries of the Spanish state under Franco. However, with the opening up of Franco's regime, coupled with Spain's economic growth and its desire to attract foreign tourists, work got underway again in the 1960s.

Initially, as there was no customs post, the road was not open all day and it was closed off with a chain: opening times were from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. in winter but from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. in summer and on holidays.

Schengen Area

Of the former customs post at Coll d'Ares only the building on the French side still stands as its Spanish counterpart was demolished in 2003.

In fact, there has been no permanent border control since 16 May 1992 as a result of the agreements signed by a number of European states in 1985 and 1990 in the city of Schengen in Luxembourg. The aim of these agreements was to gradually suppress all internal frontier controls between the signatory states to encourage the free circulation of capital, services and people, both workers and travellers.

Thanks to this removal of their internal borders, it is now possible to travel freely between the 26 states who participate in this agreement.

The Road to Exile

During the brief period in which the French government opened the frontier to civilian refugees (28 January 1939-13 February 1939), it is thought that around 100,000 people, half of whom were soldiers or carabiners, crossed over into France via the border at Coll d'Ares or other nearby passes.

The aerial bombardments that the refugee columns were suffering nearer the coast on the border passes in the Alt Empordà drove thousands to look for safer routes further inland. The news that there was a road out of Catalonia that crossed into France at Coll d'Ares provoked many to rush there with their vehicles piled high with all their worldly good. Yet, if truth be known, this 'road' ended a kilometre and a half from the border and so most of these refugees had to abandon many of their belongings and deliberately consign their vehicles to the valley below, thereby, in the words of Artur Bladé, creating a "... strange impression of a shipwreck on a high mountainside".

In light of the desperate situation of the refugees and the need to transport the wounded to military hospitals, on 6 February a unit of engineers from the Republican army started to open a track with heavy machinery that would link up the two sides of pass. However, the French authorities would not permit it and it wasn't until 25 years later that the road as you see it today was completed.

During those 17 days at the beginning of 1939, thousands of refugees crossed the border and flooded into the town of Prats de Molló, which at that time had a population of just 2,000 people. The town gave shelter and succour to these new arrivals with what little they had. Nevertheless, given the sheer number of refugees and to avoid being overwhelmed, the local authorities opted to set up four provisional installations in the town itself, from where the refugees were then sent on to more permanent camps on the coast at Argelers, Sant Cebrià and Ribesaltes.

Sadly, many of the refugees who fled into exile in 1939 lost their lives during their flight or in the unsanitary camps they were confined in.



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Ajuntament
de Molló