

Spain: Excavation of Franco's mass graves demanded

By Vicky Short
16 October 2002

The Spanish government and judges might be instructed to cooperate in the investigation of scores of secret mass graves dating from the civil war (1936-39) and its aftermath. They may be forced to begin opening such graves and to identify the corpses lying within.

The graves are dotted all over Spain and their existence has been known to Spanish people for over 60 years. They are reported to contain the remains of more than 30,000 republican soldiers, militants and other opponents of Franco's fascist dictatorship. The victims were either captured or detained during the civil war and executed later, or were summarily executed by falangists or Francoist troops in the days and months immediately after the war. Their bodies were flung into hurriedly dug graves by the roadside, at the bottom of cliffs or in the middle of fields. Some were grabbed; others were persuaded to give themselves up after being assured that nothing would happen to them if they did so.

According to campaigners, among the scores of uncovered mass graves are some containing more than one thousand corpses near Oviedo and Gijon in the north, Teruel in the east and Seville in the south. The biggest grave near Merida is believed to contain more than 3,500 bodies.

The campaigners are also hoping to identify among the bodies the remains of Federico Garcia Lorca, the famous poet and playwright who was shot and dumped in a trench in August 1936. He has never been publicly acknowledged or honoured since his assassination.

In the region of Leon in the northwest, a handful of smaller mass graves have been discovered in the last three years by volunteers who paid for the bodies to be exhumed and for DNA tests to be made. In March this year the University of Granada agreed for one of their experts to take charge of some samples of corpses from one grave in order to carry out DNA tests. This was made as an exception and within the framework of an archaeological excavation, but lack of finance limited the tests to only four of the 18 corpses found in one grave. The results are due to be revealed.

Campaigners point out that in contrast the Spanish state recently made available millions to exhume and repatriate from Russia the corpses of several Spanish volunteers from the Division Azul (Blue Division)—a military group that was sent by Franco as a token of his friendship for Adolf Hitler and to support Nazi troops during the Second World War.

The initiative by families to begin privately excavating the mass republican graves has rallied thousands of other relatives who had longed for the proper burial of their loved ones and the honouring of their memory. An organisation named Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory has taken their case to the United Nations' Working Group on Forced Disappearances, after Spanish judges and the People's Party government refused to start the search for bodies. Their demands include the withdrawal from public display of all the countless Francoist symbols which "offend the dignity of the victims".

In the past the UN working group has dealt mostly with cases from Latin American, African and Asian countries.

The lawyer representing the relatives said the work is "urgent" because the majority of those who are demanding the opening of the mass graves are elderly and are the only ones who can give all the details that will lead to their location. Those who were alive at the time these murders were committed are today over 80 years old. Many of them, fearing that the fate of their disappeared would be forgotten, drew maps of the spot where they knew they lay and gave it to their children for safe keeping. The unmarked mass graves have been watched and revered by them for decades.

Seven sites are being privately excavated in search of a total of 50 people. Many remain unclaimed, but campaigners believe that as the graves are opened more relatives will come forward. "They are still afraid," said Santiago Macias, spokesman for the association. "They've been unable to speak for 60 years and it's an effort for them to break the silence. But they will."

Although the Spanish civil war ended 63 years ago, the military archives which contain the records of the disappeared, personal belongings and in many cases their

last letters and messages to their relatives have never been opened to the public. The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory is demanding the opening of these archives and the official return of personal belongings to the relatives or, in the cases where bodies are not reclaimed, exhibited to the public as a way to dignify their memory.

The Association maintains that the relatives of the disappeared are themselves victims of a legal set-up whereby they are prevented from benefiting from the mechanisms and services afforded to Franco's supporters who have been labelled by the regime as having "Fallen for God and Country". They claim that the victims of the Franco regime cannot enjoy the dignity they deserve while there are still today official plaques and monuments that hail as "liberators" the authors of the massive and systematic violation of basic human rights.

The secrecy surrounding the existence and location of mass graves 27 years after the death of Franco is an indictment of the cowardly and class collaborationist role played by all the so called workers organisations—the Stalinists, social democrats and radical groups. For 36 years, Franco ruled Spain through terror and the relatives and friends of the disappeared feared for their lives if they spoke out. After Franco's victory in 1939, scores of people served prison sentences of 20 and 30 years. Many others spent decades in hiding in barns, lying flat in false roofs, attics, dressed as women, etc. Many were denounced and sentenced to death.

When Franco died in 1975 the Communist Party, Socialist Party and the trade unions negotiated a "peaceful transition" to democracy under the slogan "forget and forgive" that gave a political amnesty for the fascists. None of the victims of the Francoist regime have ever been acknowledged, compensated, properly buried and honoured.

After Franco's death relatives of the disappeared began a campaign for the opening of the graves and even started opening some of them. However the Socialist Party (PSOE), which came to power in 1982 and governed for 14 years, used the attempted military coup of 1981, where a few army men took over Congress at gunpoint, to sweep the matter under the carpet on the excuse that they were "frightened of reviving the brutal passions of the civil war".

"In many towns and villages in Spain people are still frightened of talking about the civil war," said lawyer Montserrat Sans who took the case to the UN. "Spain's transition to democracy was carried out leaving aside the internationally recognised duty of all states to investigate serious and systematic violations of fundamental rights".

The case of the Spanish mass graves makes a mockery of the present concern shown by the imperialist countries over possible mass graves in the Balkans, Afghanistan, Iraq or

any other country that is in the firing line for attack. Spanish judge Baltasar Garzon himself made a big issue of the Chilean disappeared at the time military dictator Augusto Pinochet was charged and arrested while he was in London. It is difficult to imagine that he did not know of the existence of these graves in his own country, as a leading member of the judiciary and the socialist government of 1982-96.

Relatives of the victims of the fascist repression will do well not to place any confidence in the PSOE, the Communist Party, the United Left or any of those organisations who for decades have tolerated and helped to cover up the crimes of the fascists. If they are now taking up the issue under pressure it will only be in order to once more channel it into a harmless direction. That much can be gathered from the words of the Socialist Congress Deputy for Leon, Amparo Valcarce, author of a motion presented to Congress on the issue of the mass graves. Valcarce said that democracy, and with it "the reconciliation of all Spanish people", makes it possible to rescue all those people who died "to defend the Republic and democracy" from oblivion. However Valcarce, who has investigated the issue and has held discussions with friends and relatives of the disappeared, stated that she and her party were not "asking anybody to take responsibility"—adding that the relatives "merely want to restore dignity to their dead with something so elemental as their burial since they had been deprived of mourning them, a common practice in every civilisation".

The "peaceful transition to democracy" not only covered over the crimes of the Franco dictatorship, but also prevented Spanish people from making a reckoning with their own past. Millions of young Spaniards today are kept ignorant of the revolutionary events that took place in their country in the 1930s, a successful outcome of which could have changed the shape of world history, as well as the counter revolutionary role of the different organisations that betrayed them. The opening of the mass graves could provide an opportunity to revive these lessons.

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