

Spain: Federico Garcia Lorca's body to be exhumed

Victim of Franco's Falangist militia

By Paul Stuart
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Socialist Party (PSOE) Mayor Juan Caballero, in the village of Barranco de Viznar near Granada in southwest Spain, has given his support for the beginning of legal proceedings to secure a permit for the excavation of a mass grave located in a nearby ravine at the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

The site has remained untouched since 1939 and is one of many throughout Spain dating from the civil war (1936-39). The Viznar mass grave contains the bodies of up to 4,000 victims shot and buried by General Francisco Franco's Falangist militia. It is also believed to contain the body of one of the greatest poets and playwrights of the twentieth century, Federico Garcia Lorca (1898-1936).

Lorca was murdered on August 19, 1936, four weeks after Franco's fascist army rose against the democratically elected Popular Front government. Granada, where Lorca's family home was located, was one of the first regions to fall to Franco. Lorca was arrested, questioned, imprisoned and on the morning of the 19th was shot and thrown into an unmarked grave along with thousands of others. To this day their bodies have never been recovered.

After unofficial investigations surrounding Lorca's execution, the site of his grave became common knowledge. However it was officially proclaimed as a continuing mystery by both rightist and—to their eternal shame—PSOE governments.

The exhumations will be conducted by the recently formed Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory in conjunction with the pacifist Service Civil Association and a number of university scientists. The associations have received no support from Aznar's Popular Party (PP) government and have been driven by the Spanish authorities' obstructive behaviour to take their case to the United Nations Working Group on Forced Deportations. The PP have financed to the tune of millions of pesetas the recovery from the former Soviet Union of the bodies of a Spanish fascist brigade sent by Franco to fight with Hitler's armies during the Nazi invasion of the USSR in 1941. The brigade was sent as a good will gesture by Franco in thanks for Hitler's military support in defeating the Republicans during the Civil War.

On July 16, 1936, in order to overturn the Popular Front government led by the liberal president Manuel Azana, Franco led a military uprising from Spanish Morocco. Workers organisations responded by forming rank-and-file antifascist militias. Franco called on all military garrisons to rise up against the Republic. In those areas seized by the fascists they enforced a policy of systematic mass murder of political opponents. Eyewitnesses in Viznar described how every night during three years of civil war, truckloads of prisoners were taken up to the site, shots would be heard and the trucks returned empty.

Federico Garcia Lorca was born in Granada on June 5, 1898. His father was a prosperous farmer. Lorca wrote a series of powerful plays—*Blood Wedding*, *Yerma*, *The House of Barnardo Alba* and *The Public*. Each dealt

with the repression of women in Spanish society, particularly in the countryside. They were immensely popular amongst the people and earned the hatred of the Catholic Church, the monarchy, the military elite and powerful landowners.

In a conversation reported in June in *El Sol*, Lorca had condemned the Catholic reconquest of Arab Granada in the fifteenth century. He declared it “a terrible moment, even though they say just the opposite in the schools. An admirable civilisation was lost, and a poetry, astronomy, architecture and a delicacy unique in the world, in order to give way to a poor, cowardly, narrow-minded city inhabited at present by the worst bourgeoisie in Spain.”

With such statements Lorca made himself a target for assassination by the Falange.

Along with his poetry and plays, Lorca was also attacked for his homosexuality. In his plays and poetry he increasingly drew the conclusion that problems of sexuality could only be resolved through the liberation of society from poverty and cultural and religious backwardness. To this end he created a travelling theatre company to bring new and old plays to the peasantry and was sponsored by the Popular Front government. Despite fascist intimidation it proved extremely popular. Like many others Lorca was steadily drawing the conclusion that, as political murders and conspiracies reached epidemic proportions, Spain was heading for civil war. He threw his weight behind the Socialist Party-led Popular Front alliance with the Stalinist Communist Party, the centrist Party of Marxist Unification (POUM) and the supposedly “democratic” sections of the Spanish bourgeoisie.

Lorca remained at his family home in Granada after the area was seized by Franco. He was warned that the fascists had begun widespread executions of political opponents. He had considered fleeing to safety in a Republican area, but after listening to a radio broadcast by Socialist Party leader Indalecio Prieto was, like many others, lulled into a false sense of security. He insisted, “Granada is surrounded by Republicans and the revolt will soon fail.” However, he was soon arrested in hiding and on August 19 at 3:00 a.m. was handcuffed to a lame teacher, Dioscoro Galindo Gonzalez, and taken in a car by the Falange to a building called La Colina in Viznar.

La Colina had been used since August 1 as a holding camp for condemned prisoners. The upper floor was occupied by soldiers, guards, gravediggers and housekeepers. Shortly before dawn Lorca was taken out, with the teacher and two bullfighters—members of the Anarchist trade union CNT—and shot and buried in a hastily dug grave. Franco officials never admitted killing Lorca. In 1936 the fascists issued a news broadcast stating that Lorca “died in the month of August from war wounds, his body having been found on the 20th day of the same month on the road from Viznar to Alfacar.”

Lorca's murder made him an international symbol of fascist oppression.

Until 1971, Franco retained an official ban on Lorca's work. For four decades the location of his grave remained an official secret. In an unofficial investigation during the 1970s, Irish historian Ian Gibson, author of *The Death of Lorca, Federico Garcia Lorca, A Life* and *The Assassination of Federico Garcia Lorca*, discovered crucial circumstantial evidence that Lorca's remains were disposed of in the mass grave at Barranco de Viznar.

In an interview in the British *Guardian*, Gibson explained how he had been approached by a man who at the age 16 was forced by Falangists to bury Lorca's body. This information has been known since the 1970s by all the main government parties, including the Communist Party.

Since the end of the civil war relatives of the dead have been afraid to explore the graves because of the threat of arrest by the civil guard and victimisation at the hands of former Franco officials still in place. Despite the establishment of a constitutional monarchy after Franco's death in 1975, the mass graves remained untouched. In 1977 a cross-party agreement was signed absolving from prosecution those guilty of mass murder during the civil war. They have honoured this despicable agreement ever since.

The association has been unable to win the support of Lorca's family to begin the dig. One side of the family has insisted that "it is an affront to a hallowed place" and should remain undisturbed. However, permission for the exhumations has been secured from the relatives of those killed and buried alongside Lorca, including the school teacher and one of the bullfighters, Francisco Galadi.

Gibson reacted to the Lorca family's objections by insisting that the exact location of Lorca's body and the cause of death need to be conclusively proven. Right-wing Spanish historians have in the past exploited the absence of a corpse to absolve the Falange from responsibility for Lorca's murder. Gibson insists, "I have heard oral testimony of what happened, but I think it is essential to find the body, out of respect for Garcia Lorca.... Where did they kill him exactly? Did they torture him? One certain fact about his life would be worth 100 books.... Lorca belongs to humanity, not his family. He is an emblem who gave his life for Spain. He is a martyr..."

According to the association, nearly every major town has a mass grave, containing 30,000 known victims of Francoist repression. At a regional level some local authorities are agreeing to exhumations. According to press reports, so far 210 bodies have been recovered. However, the predominant attitude in the national and local establishment is that the issue is closed.

This attempt to continue repressing the experiences of the civil war is causing permanent political damage.

The Popular Party continues to finance and maintain Francoist monuments, built by Republican slave labour, while resisting funding the work of the association.

The PSOE has timidly raised the issue of finance for the work of the association in parliament, but has no right to present itself as the champions of the victims of Franco's dictatorship. It was their treacherous opposition to the socialist revolution throughout the 1930s, and their suppression of the working class and the peasantry in 1931 and then again in 1936, that protected the military and enabled Franco to seize power.

The Socialist Party participated in the Popular Front government between February and July 1936. Through its support to Azana it created the best possible conditions for the advance of Franco's forces from Morocco through Spain by disarming the Spanish masses. In his comprehensive account of the causes and first years of the civil war, *Revolution and Counterrevolution in Spain*, Felix Morrow explains the activities of Azana before the fascist uprising of July 16 and with the coalition government in 1931 in which Azana was minister of war:

"Again his regime rejected the idea of the distribution of the land, and put down the peasantry when it attempted to seize it. Again the church remained in control of its great wealth and power. Again Morocco remained in the hands of the Foreign Legionnaire until they finally took it over on July 17. Again strikes were declared illegal, modified martial law imposed, workers demonstrations and meetings broken up.... Suffice it to say that in the last critical days, after the assassination of the fascist leader, Calvo Sotelo, the working class headquarters were ordered closed. The day before the fascist outbreak the Labour press appeared with gaping white spaces where the government censorship had lifted out editorials and sections of articles warning against the coup d'état!..."

"The most damning insight into Azana was provided by his attitude toward the army. Its officer caste was disloyal to the core toward the Republic. These pampered pets of the monarchy had seized every opportunity since 1931 to wreak bloody vengeance against the workers and peasants upon whom the republic rested. The atrocities they committed in crushing the revolt of October 1934, were so horrible that criminal punishment of those responsible was one of Azana's campaign promises. But he brought not a single officer to trial in the ensuing months.... Franco, Goded, Queipo de Llano—all had similarly malodorous records of disloyalty to the Republic and yet Azana left the army in their hands. More, he demanded that the masses submit to them."

This treacherous policy continued during the transition. In 1977 during negotiations for elections and a constitution for Spain, an amnesty was granted to all those that participated in the civil war. However, after threats from the military, Republican soldiers still in Spain were excluded from the amnesty—a final humiliation. They could neither work nor receive social assistance under Franco and this continued during the transition.

The negotiations led to the Moncloa Pact, which the Communist Party championed and the Socialist Party agreed to. Its aim was to break up a mass political strike movement in the working class and reduce inflationary wage demands to defend big business. This was in return for social welfare reforms. But four years after the pact none of the welfare reforms had been implemented.

After the 1982 elections the PSOE came to power under the leadership of Felipe Gonzales. 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 PSOE opposed this demand throughout its 14 years in power. The Gonzales government used the attempted military coup of 1981, where a few army men took over Congress at gunpoint, to argue that such moves would revive "the brutal passions of the civil war."

One of the association's spokesmen explained the refusal of both right and left parties to dig up the mass graves as "one of the most shameful chapters in the transition to democracy."

Manuel Garcia, the nephew of Lorca who was four years old in 1936, was elected a PSOE parliamentary deputy in 1977. In an article earlier this year on the *History News Network* he explained what the new found interest of the PSOE was in the mass graves—to once again seek to buttress the authority of the Spanish state:

"Maybe seen from today's perspective, we did make a mistake and we should have dug a little deeper so that the foundations of our new regime would be much more solid than they are."

In a conciliatory move to placate the right-wing establishment, the association has offered its services to uncover alleged mass graves of fascist victims of the Republican government, which they know do not exist. Not surprisingly no such claims have been registered with the Association. It is a dangerous attempt to put a false equal sign between fascist and Republican violence. Historians have categorically shown that fascist violence was planned and coordinated mass murder, whereas Republican violence toward fascists took the form of small-scale spontaneous outbursts of revenge by the population. But the association is

led by forces that want to see the political experiences of the civil war interpreted as an effort to “heal wounds” and consolidate “democracy.”

Leading individuals within the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory are calling for an “Independent Truth Commission” similar to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission organised by the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa after it had taken power. The ANC’s commission had a number of purposes—to absolve from prosecution those responsible for mass murder, to defend the big business financiers of Apartheid, and to prevent a revolutionary social upheaval in the working class threatening the African bourgeoisie. Such a truth commission in Spain would have similar aims.

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