

Spain: controversy surrounds opening of Garcia Lorca's grave

By Vicky Short
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A state of expectation is growing in Spain regarding the disinterment of the body of the great Spanish poet, author and playwright, Federico Garcia Lorca. He was shot by General Franco's Falangist forces just four months after their rebellion against the second elected Republic in 1936 and dumped in an unmarked grave.

Throughout the three years of the civil war and the years following the fascist victory, Franco's death squads, "la escuadra negra" (black squadron), executed thousands of people. They kept some records of those shot. But tens of thousands were exterminated in the middle of the night and their bodies thrown into mass graves that dot the entire map of Spain.

The exact whereabouts of most of those disposed of and the way in which they were killed—in many cases after horrible torture—are still unknown. One such opponent of fascism was Garcia Lorca.

It is now firmly believed that the famous poet is buried in a grave close to a mass grave in Viznar, a village just outside Granada in Andalucia, where up to 3,000 people are interred. He is believed to have been tortured and shot in his backside. Ian Gibson, an Irishman and Lorca expert, who first pointed to where the poet's grave was, said: "I think they beat him badly before they killed him. You can just imagine the visceral hatred that these people felt towards homosexuals and 'reds.'"

When General Franco launched his rebellion against the elected Republican government in 1936, Andalucia was the first region to fall. As each town and village was taken, a witch-hunt of leading left-wing people took place followed by mass executions, in the name of the nationalist's "crusade to rid Spain of the followers of Karl Marx." While Lorca did not belong to any political party, he was inextricably associated with the libertarian movement, and his sister was married to Granada's Republican mayor, putting him high on the fascist hit list. It is also believed that his homosexuality added to the antagonism of the fascists.

Lorca was one of the 30,000 inhabitants of Granada to pay with their lives for their social, political or intellectual opposition to fascism, as well as their contempt for fascist ideology.

As a young man, Lorca studied philosophy and law at the University of Granada, but he would soon abandon his legal studies for literature, art, and the theatre. In 1918, he published a book of prose inspired by a trip he had taken to Castile, and in 1919, he transferred to the University of Madrid where he organised theatrical performances and continued to read his poems in public. During this period, Lorca became associated with a group of artists who would become known as "Generación del 27," including the painter Salvadore Dalí, the filmmaker Luis Bunuel, and the poet Rafael Alberti.

Between June 1929 and March 1930, the 30-year-old Spanish poet,

playwright and author travelled abroad for the first time. He spent time in New York, Vermont and Havana. The trip inspired a book of poetry, *Poet in New York*, which was published posthumously.

According to editor Christopher Maurer, *A Poet in New York* is "both a condemnation of modern urban civilisation—the spiritual emptiness epitomised by New York—and a dark cry of metaphysical loneliness."

Later, Maurer writes: "A recent critical account of *Poet in New York* identifies its three major themes as 'social injustice, dark love and lost faith.' Their common element is the alienation or 'otherness' just mentioned. The 'social' aspect of the book is easiest to grasp; *Poet in New York* condemns capitalist society and all that it seems to entail: an anthropocentric world view; the degradation of nature; indifference to suffering; the materialistic corruption of love and religion; and the alienation of social groups, particularly the blacks."

Lorca studied English at Columbia University where he came into contact with amateur theatre groups and professional repertory companies.

He returned to Spain in 1931 and formed his own theatre company, composed mostly of students, "La Barraca." He toured the countryside giving free performances of the Spanish classics, including the works of Lopez de Vega, Calderon de la Barca and Miguel de Cervantes. The company also produced the three "rural tragedies" on which Lorca's theatrical reputation rests.

In his series of poems published in *Poet in New York* he wrote prophetically, "They combed the cafes, graveyards and churches for me/pried open casks and cabinets,/destroyed three skeletons...."

Intellectuals were considered dangerous by Franco's nationalists, and in the early morning of August 19, 1936, along with a schoolmaster and two bullfighters, Lorca was dragged into a field at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, shot, and thrown into an unmarked grave

Lorca's writings were outlawed and burned in Granada's Plaza del Carmen. Even mentioning his name was forbidden. The young poet quickly became a martyr, an international symbol of the politically oppressed, but his plays were not revived until the 1940s, and certain bans on his work remained in place until as late as 1971. Today, Lorca is considered the greatest Spanish poet and dramatist of the twentieth century.

After Franco's death in 1975, the Spanish Communist Party and the Socialist Party forced a so-called peaceful transition to democracy onto the Spanish people, which was in fact a "pact of silence" on the horrors of the dictatorship and a political amnesty for those who committed them.

Enforced amnesia was the price extracted by Franco's loyalists for

the “peaceful transition to democracy.” And so the dead were left to sleep in their mass graves.

The few years between the death of Franco and the consolidation of the “peaceful transition” were anything but peaceful. Thousands of workers and particularly youth fought in the streets for a settling of accounts with the fascists. It was then the role of centrists and radical groups such as the Partido Trabajador (PT) and Maoists groups to derail that struggle, hand back the initiative to the Stalinists and Social Democrats while sowing disillusionment among the youth.

This enforced silence continued and included the 14 years of Socialist Party government between 1982 and 1996. A new mood of defiance is fast developing, however, again particularly amongst the younger generation. This was exemplified by the mass demonstrations against the invasion of Iraq last year, the results of the general elections in March this year, which kicked out the right-wing Popular Party government, and the demands placed on the new Socialist Party government for the withdrawal of troops from Iraq. This is shattering the pact of silence that accompanied Spain’s post-Franco transition.

“Today, almost 30 years [after Franco’s death], many young people in Spain wonder why they know more about crimes against humanity in Nazi Germany, Bosnia, Argentina and Chile than in their own country,” says Montse Armengou, 40, who has produced two influential television documentaries, *Franco’s Forgotten Children*, which revealed the fate of several republican prisoners, and *The Spanish Holocaust*, about the mass killings committed by Franco’s troops.

Under pressure from this desire for knowledge of the past, the now deposed right-wing Popular Party government of Jose Maria Aznar was forced to approve a resolution condemning Franco’s 1936 military coup. But the government rejected calls that the state finance the exhumation of the bodies of Franco’s victims. It was not until 1999 that the Spanish parliament denounced Franco’s 1936 seizure of power—a vote on which Aznar abstained.

Demands are growing that the new Socialist Party prime minister, Jose Luis Zapatero, whose own grandfather was executed by the fascists, address the demands of the victims of repression.

This is the background—both to the setting up of the new organisation, Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, which is campaigning for the opening of the mass graves, including the one containing the remains of the poet Garcia Lorca—and to the conflict with Lorca’s family, which opposes the opening of his grave with the argument that it will cause too much pain and bring back old divisions.

The Lorca family are wealthy and well established, and have adapted to the conditions of the transition and profited from the world recognition of the greatness of their relative.

Manuel Fernandez-Montesinos Garcia was four years old when his uncle, Federico Garcia Lorca, was executed in Granada. In 1977, Manuel was elected to parliament on the Socialist Party slate.

Others are dedicated to heading publicly funded Lorca foundations.

The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory was set up four years ago by the Communist Party-led coalition Izquierda Unida (United Left). It was a response to the growing opposition to maintaining a public silence and the amnesty granted to the fascists. Relatives were demanding to know what happened to their loved ones, to find out where their bodies are, to recover access to their documents which are still kept in military archives, and to be granted compensation. The CP and its allies are seeking to keep this political discontent within controlled parameters.

The United Left and its regional allies in Catalonia, Galicia, Navarre and the Basque country want the PSOE government to create a “truth and reconciliation committee” like the one set up in South Africa to “heal the wounds” of apartheid. Attempting to rework the old CP slogan “forget and forgive,” Felipe Alcaraz, a member of the coalition, said, “One can pardon, but one should not forget.”

“Up to now in Spain, amnesty has been confused with amnesia,” said Joan Tarda, spokesman for the Catalan independents. “In contrast to Nazi Germany, South Africa or Argentina, Spain has yet to carry out its act of catharsis.”

The Stalinists are not seeking a settling of accounts or to find socialist solutions to the problems confronting working people through the clarification of this most bitter historical experience, but only the establishment of a truth commission and an apology from the Roman Catholic Church, which backed Franco.

Even here their concern is to re-legitimise the church.

“The church played an atrocious role in the persecution of dissidents, but it plays a fundamental role in the lives of many who remember the war,” says Emilio Silva, a cofounder of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. “In order for fear to dissipate, we need a political as well as a religious commitment to tell the other side of the story.”

There are many indications that the political issues fought out during the revolution and civil war of 1936-1939 are being questioned and discussed. Several books have recently appeared addressing the political issues of the 1930s. These have been responded to by the appearance of books that viciously attack the entire heritage of the revolutionary struggles in Spain and distort the facts to a ridiculous extent.

But not many of these works address the most crucial question: the false equation between Communism and Stalinism. It was the Kremlin bureaucracy and its Spanish followers that was responsible for the defeat of the Spanish Revolution and which went on to mediate the historical compromise of the “peaceful transition” in the 1970s.

The type of Commissions of Truth and Reconciliation they now popularise have been established in countries around the world where fascist and racist dictatorships had existed. Their aim has not been truth, but to establish a new basis for reconciliation with the class enemy.

Reconciliation is impossible in a society wracked by inequality and oppression. Not a single one of the central figures responsible for mass repression has been brought to justice by such commissions. Property has remained in the same hands, social conflicts have intensified, clarification avoided.

For Spanish people to establish the truth about their historical experiences they must act fully independently of the Communist Party and its affiliate Izquierda Unida, and the Socialist Party and other radical groups. And the studying of their experiences should be extended to the experiences of working people around the world with these discredited organisations.

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