

The Silence of Others: The victims of Spanish fascism then and now

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Directed by Robert Bahar and Almudena Carracedo

A documentary from Spain, *The Silence of Others*, directed by Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar and produced by well-known filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar, importantly details the ongoing struggle to expose the atrocities committed by the fascist dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939-1977).

Surviving victims are pursuing an international lawsuit and fighting against a “pact of forgetting” in regard to the crimes they suffered. The number of Franco’s tortured and executed victims is estimated to run into the hundreds of thousands.

After the dictator’s death in 1975, Spain’s Socialist Party (PSOE) and Stalinist Communist Party (PCE), operating on the basis of a perspective they had promoted for decades, supported and co-authored the reactionary Amnesty Law with the Francoites. That law was one of the key elements of the “Transition” during which the Franco regime or its remnants, responding to the danger of mass struggles by the Spanish working class and with the backing of the European powers and the US, integrated the PSOE and the PCE into the state apparatus, in exchange for the strangling of working class revolution.

By 1978, Spain had adopted a new constitution and officially made the shift to “democracy.” Thereafter, many Francoite judges, police and civil servants continued to be promoted to top posts under successive PSOE governments. No one was held to account for the infamous crimes committed during 40 years of dictatorship.

Since its premiere in 2018, *The Silence of Others* has received dozens of prizes and prize nominations, including the Panorama Audience and Peace Film Awards at the 2018 Berlin International Film Festival, as well as the Goya Award, the Platino Award for Iberoamerican Cinema and the José María Forqué Award for best documentary, all in 2019. The film has been screened at festivals in over 70 countries, and released in cinemas and televisions in more than 20. It is now available on Netflix in Latin America (except Brazil), the US and Canada.

In Spain, the film was shown on public television in April 2019, reaching nearly 1 million viewers and becoming one of the network’s most watched documentaries. The film’s hashtag became the number two trending topic in Spain on Twitter.

The makers of *The Silence of Others* have clearly tapped into a growing oppositional mood among broad layers of the global population concerned about the rise of authoritarian regimes and far-right parties, imperialist war, the persecution of migrants and

the incarceration of political prisoners such as Julian Assange or Chelsea Manning. Deeply disturbed and angered by these developments, workers and youth are trying to comprehend today’s developments in part by understanding the past.

Compiled from a large quantity of footage, shot over six years and many interviews, the Carracedo-Bahar film follows several stories at once, centering on a lawsuit brought by several victims who sought justice in Argentine courts after being unable to obtain a legal hearing in their own country. Each strand of the story deserves its own film and one wonders how much was left on the cutting room floor in the interests of time.

The Silence of Others opens with Maria Martin, a small woman in her 80s, who describes how her mother was abducted and murdered by the fascists in 1936. She recalls how the naked body was dumped in a mass grave, one of the 114,226 corpses that remain in unmarked graves throughout the country. Maria was six at the time. In her old age, she regularly leaves sunflowers by the road where she suspects her mother’s remains are located. Undaunted, she is determined to uncover her body.

Other stories include the testimonial from Ascension Mendieta trying to recover the remains of her father, Timoteo Mendieta, murdered in 1939. Ascension’s daughter explains how her mother cried for years asking about her father’s remains. Ascension bursts into tears when she receives the news that her father’s remains will be extracted from the mass grave, stating that at least “now if I die I will take one of his bones with me.”

There is also Maria Mercedes Bueno, one of countless mothers whose newborn babies were abducted. Victims’ associations have estimated that up to 300,000 children were stolen under the regime by a network of nuns and doctors who took babies from left-wing families, poor families or single mothers and gave them to wealthy parents unable to conceive.

Jose Maria Galante, a former political prisoner, describes having survived torture in his early 20s at the hands of an infamous fascist torturer Antonio Gonzalez Pachecho, nicknamed “Billy the Kid,” only to end up living just streets away from his tormentor.

Until its name was changed in 2017, the street he lived on was “Calle del General Yagüe,” in honor of General Juan Yagüe, known as “the butcher of Badajoz” for ordering the executions of up to 4,000 militiamen and civilians in 1936.

The testimonials are raw and disturbing. The survivors strive to recover the remains of their loved ones or seek to bring the regime’s officials to justice.

The Silence of Others elaborates on how many streets and public memorials are still named after Franco and his murderous henchmen. As if to underscore the point, the filmmakers show Franco's political descendants holding political rallies complete with the fascist salute. In an ominous nod to American audiences, signs are held up reading, "Make Spain great again." The grotesque mausoleum to Franco, The Valley of the Fallen, built by slave labor, is still around today while the memorials to his victims are routinely vandalized.

Revealing the impact of decades of deliberately cultivated political amnesia, people are interviewed on the street who know little to nothing about the Civil War and the dictatorship that followed. Some of the older ones defend the amnesty as the only solution to the divisions in Spain during the 1970s.

The filmmakers have created a work that openly and distinctly rejects the ruling class mantra that the Spanish population needs to "forgive and forget," offering a cautionary tale about the historic crimes of fascism by showcasing the lives and struggles of Franco's victims.

In an interview with online daily eldiario.es, Almudena Carracedo explains how she embarked on this project in 2010, when "the stories of the stolen babies began to be known." Together with her husband, Robert Bahar, she had recently finished filming and editing *Made in L.A.* (2007), an Emmy Award-winning film that documents the story of three Latin American immigrants, seamstresses in Los Angeles, who embark on a three-year odyssey to get basic job protections at a famous clothing store. She explains, "I thought about why not do something here, in my own country. It was important to tell the legacy of the Franco regime in Spain and we found ourselves with the Argentine lawsuit."

Carracedo was troubled by the forgetfulness of the current generations. She says young people under 35 years of age "know very little about this situation" and the co-directors thought that the audience could sit down for 90 minutes and put themselves "in the characters' shoes."

Asked about the importance of the "silence" that is part of the film's title, Carracedo explained, "It's very important and gives rise to many interpretations. ... We all think that the silence belonged to others and really, and I ask the question, it belonged to everyone. How did we get to this situation in 2018? How is it possible that a country like Spain, with strong democratic institutions, can allow this kind of thing? It's incredible. And as a society we have to pay attention to this, once and for all."

The question she raises, however, is never answered in *The Silence of Others*. Its greatest weakness is that the filmmakers are not equipped to deal with the political issues surrounding the 1977 Amnesty Law, which is still in force today and guarantees impunity for those who participated in crimes under the Civil War and Francoite Spain.

This, however, is not the individual fault of the filmmakers. Decades of intellectual and cultural regression, along with the cover-up organized by the Spanish social democrats and Stalinists and their "left" hangers-on, have made it more difficult for artists to portray history and politics seriously. The film tends to treat the question of fascism as a personal issue of morality and memory.

In fact, the audience never knows what the politics are of the victims interviewed, either living or dead. The definite pressures exerted on artists not to delve into the political motivations of those who fought fascism are clearly in play here.

The Silence of Others presents the victims as innocent bystanders who were swept up in the war and counterrevolution. To be sure, many innocent civilians were killed and tortured during this era, but many, if not most, were involved in left-wing politics in one way or another.

The documentary treats the vicissitudes of the aforementioned court case and ends with Spanish courts refusing to hand over the fascist criminals. Tellingly, it explains that Spain was even considering breaking diplomatic ties with Argentina over the probe. The case continues.

In the meantime, two victims shown in the film, Maria Martin and Jose? Mari?a Galante Serrano, have died. The documentary shows how Martin's daughter, who had refused until then to be involved in her mother's struggle, takes up the fight to recover her grandmother's remains.

It is worth noting what has happened in the 16 months since the documentary was released.

Prime Minister Pedro Sa?nchez of the PSOE-Podemos government first sent a tweet urging everyone to watch the film. No sooner had Sa?nchez sent his tweet when the news came that his government joined the right-wing PP in blocking the publication of torturer Billy the Kid's service record. Only after a public outcry did Podemos make a meaningless gesture indicating they might change their vote later. Billy the Kid eventually died from COVID-19, without ever having answered for his crimes.

We are confident that while important questions remain unanswered in the present film, a layer of artists and young people is emerging who consciously oppose the "Pact of Forgetting" and every other rotten aspect of the "transition to democracy."

The upsurge in the class struggle will produce an atmosphere conducive to a new and even more probing look at the issue of fascism and the Spanish Civil War, as part of the development of a revolutionary socialist movement in the Spanish working class.

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