

Exhuming Franco: Spain's Immemorial Divisions

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"Of course there's one Spain. If there was another, we'd all be in that one." — Joke on Franco's Spain, in [London Review of Books](#), 37, July, 2015

Beware the corpse that never truly expires. **General Francisco Franco** might well be entombed in the Valley of the Fallen (*Valle de los Caídos*) – at least for the moment – but his remains are set for exhumation, to be disturbed on the wishes of Spain's socialist government led by **Pedro Sánchez**. **Fernando Martínez** of the Justice Ministry, entrusted with handling matters on the delicate subject of historical memory, [explains](#) the rationale.

"In a democratic society, there cannot be a dictator who is the subject of homages, or whose tomb is a site of fascist pilgrimage, or who has a monument in his honour."

This might be all well and good, though it tends to jar with the delicate transition process Spain endured in the 1970s. It also sits uncomfortably with voters, whether as a priority or as a necessity. Sigma Dos, in a [July poll](#) for the daily *El Mundo*, found a mere 41 percent of Spaniards in agreement with moving the remains, while 54 percent also felt that the issue was not of importance at this time.



Franco is entombed in the monument of Santa Cruz del Valle de los Caídos (Source: CC BY-SA 4.0)

What came after the general's death was a matter of political juggling, as much a case of rehearsed, and encouraged amnesia, as it did archiving matters of the mind. This form of forgetting had much practice, perfected by Franco himself before his death through what was termed "recuperation". Reconciliation was off the books, though Franco, in his last message, sought "pardon of all my enemies, as I pardon with all my heart all those who declared themselves my enemy, although I did not consider them to be so."

To attain the goal of democracy came with its own distasteful compromises, not least of all an acceptance that Francoist officials would be left untouched by any prosecuting process. Victims of Franco's Spain duly felt confined to the status of *víctimas de segunda* - "second class citizens", contributing to the new, and reformed country, in painful silence.

There have been attempts to edge towards confronting the bloody past of the Civil War and Franco's legacy. In 2000, unmarked graves of the Civil War began being opened at the behest of such organisations as the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory. Eight years later, **Judge Baltasar Garzón** embarked on his own mission to investigate Franco's blood-soaked handiwork, deemed by him crimes against humanity.

Garzón subsequently found himself in hot water, accused of knowingly exceeding his powers in ignoring the Amnesty law of 1977 injunctioning any effort to initiate prosecutions against Francoists. In February 2012, the Supreme Court of Spain affirmed the law had a barring effect on the investigating efforts, though the enthusiastic examining magistrate was cleared at trial in a case brought by three right-wing organisations, including Franco's own party, Falange Española. It is a testament to the stubbornly vibrant legacy of Franco's memory that Garzón could mount prosecutions against terrorists and authoritarian figures

such as Chile's Augusto Pinochet, but fall foul of the dead generalissimo.

From the Valley of the Fallen, where he resides in sombre reminder about wars and divisions, where then? Franco's seven grandchildren, preferring the status quo, filed a [petition](#) with the Ombudsman's Office in October to stop the move.

Failing that, the grandchildren insisted that a 2010 decree entitles Franco to be buried with full military honours with the whole complement of "national anthem, volley shots and a canon gun salute". This might be, pardon the pun, ceremonial overkill, given that Franco already received one after he died in November 1975, an occasion marked by his coffin's journey from the Victory Arch in La Moncloa in Madrid to the Valley of the Fallen monument.

The monument itself attests to the slaughter between 1936 and 1939, Europe's own variant of Syria's current civil war where a state withers before ravishment and military molestation. It saw the collapse of the Republican government at the hands of Franco's Falangists and paramilitaries bent on a Christian reclamation, and the death of hundreds of thousands, 33,000 of whom are buried on the site. Powers such as the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany could test their arms against army personnel and civilians; hypocrisy and cant ruled in the corridors of state across Europe. While Franco himself remained unmistakably adorned with his marker at the monument, his identity as victor known to all, most remain unmarked. To name would be to give suffering an identity, and render loss intimate.

The family's plea now is to have the remains interred in the La Almudena cathedral, the very notion of which is unnerving to those of Spain's political divide who fear a pro-Franco resurgence. To do so would also go against the object of this entire, potentially risky exercise, which is to de-sacralise and demystify the Franco cult. Franco, at least symbolically placed outside the perimeter of the capital, would find himself buried at its heart.

This newly invigorated drive has received some added momentum with the rise of a new political right in Spain. Since Franco's death, Spain has kept host, in some minor form, to right-wing pretenders calling for the return of a strongman undaunted by the effete effects of democracy. Fuerza Nueva, España 2000 and Democracia Nacional can count themselves amongst them. Previously, goes one line of reasoning on this, there was no need for a larger neo-fascist following, if only because, in Dan Hancox's [words](#), "the political, bureaucratic and ideological legacy of Francoism lives on in the mainstream of Spanish power."

Now, the Vox party has shown its credentials at the ballot box, despite being considered previously to be a dramatic, clownish outfit led by Santiago Abascal intent on initiating his own version of the "reconquest". They have done well in regional elections, [picking up](#) 12 seats in Andalucía's 109-seat parliament, thereby giving the socialist PSOE party a considering bruising. Vox's Andalusian leader, Francisco Serrano, has given some flavouring of what the movement stands for: a revived, virile misogyny in the face of "psychopathic feminazis" and a reassertion of European values.

Franco's remains might as well be Spain's kryptonite, a sort of character flaw that, if disturbed, will merely serve to show a country permanently riven. Íñigo Errejón of Podemos prefers to read the lay of the land differently. To move Franco, he [suggested](#) in June, "would not open any wounds. On the contrary, it would reconcile Spanish democracy with

democrats.” But Paloma Aguilar’s [Memory and Amnesia](#) (2002) reminds us how “the memory of historical misfortune and the fear of the dangers of radicalization contributed most to moderating the demands of all the important political and social groups of the time.”

Ironically enough, for officials charged with the management of memory, disturbing such matters as managed memory may well serve to enliven, rather than bury, the very subject of the exercise. Franco remains, in a very troubling way to Spanish history, a reminder and an influence.

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