

The battle over the memory of the Spanish Civil War

In 2019, Spanish authorities exhumed the remains of dictator Francisco Franco from the Valley of the Fallen, the Catholic basilica and tomb he built for himself during his 40-year rule. The site is also home to tens of thousands Civil War dead from both sides of the conflict, making it one of the largest mass graves in Europe. The Spanish government's contested decision comes after years-long national controversy over the fate of the mountainside basilica and tomb, which was the subject of a Smithsonian magazine story in 2018.

When the Spanish Civil War began, in 1936, fascism was on the march across Europe, as a new breed of strongman leader emerged from the horrors and economic ravages of the First World War and the Great Depression. The war in Spain played out like a dress rehearsal for the global cataclysm that was to come—the first pivotal battle in the struggle between ascendant right-wing authoritarianism and beleaguered liberal democracy. Each side was aided by ideological allies from across the continent and beyond. When, for example, the Republican stronghold of Guernica was bombed to ruin in 1937 (the subject of Picasso's famous antiwar painting), the assault was carried out at Franco's request by warplanes that Hitler and Mussolini had dispatched. Thousands of volunteers also went to Spain to fight on the side of democracy, including nearly 3,000 Americans.

The conflict ripped Spain apart. Neighbours turned on one another, brothers killed brothers, and thousands of teachers and artists and priests were murdered for their political sympathies. The wounds left by the conflict never quite healed. To this day, Spanish politics tend

to cleave along the lines established during the civil war: the conservative, religious right, heirs and defenders of Franco, against the liberal, secular left, descended from the defeated Republicans.

By 1939, after Franco's Nationalists had conquered the last Republican holdouts, an estimated 500,000 people were dead. More than 100,000 were unaccounted for, "lost" victims who, like Manuel Lapeña, had been piled in mass graves. Both sides had committed atrocities; there was no monopoly on suffering. But in Franco's four decades of rule, he made sure that the war was remembered in simple terms: The dangerous Republican anarchists had been pure evil, the enemies of the people. Anyone who said differently risked imprisonment and torture. For families like Puri's, silence was a survival strategy.

When Franco died, in 1975, the country faced a choice. In countries such as Germany and Italy, defeat in World War II had forced a measure of reckoning over the crimes committed by fascist regimes. Spain, which remained neutral during the war despite secret cooperation with the Axis powers, chose a different path, cementing its legacy of silence through a political arrangement known as the Pact of Forgetting. In the name of ensuring a smooth transition to democracy, the country's rightist and leftist parties agreed to forgo

investigations or prosecutions related to the civil war or the dictatorship. The aim was to let the past stay buried, so Spain could move on.

For decades, the graves went unacknowledged: no markers, no plaques, no memorials. When mourners did visit them, it was in secret. In the years immediately after Franco's death, a small number of Spaniards quietly began to reclaim the remains of their disappeared loved ones with little more than hands and shovels. But those exhumations were scattered and unofficial, kept out of public view by fear and shame. There was no way to know whether the bodies discovered by families actually belonged to them.

By the early 2000s, though, the silence was beginning to give way. A social movement took root as archaeologists, journalists and ordinary citizens, led by a sociologist named Emilio Silva, sought to document and unearth mass graves across the country. In the span of a few years, thousands of bodies were recovered. The awakening was driven in part by advances in forensic anthropology. With new tools like DNA sequencing and skeletal analysis, forensic specialists could identify remains and match them to living relatives. The search was no longer an exercise in hopeful guesswork: Now the bodies had names and loved ones they had left behind.

The Valley of the Fallen was the brainchild of Franco himself. He declared his intention to build the site, a towering Catholic basilica and civil war memorial outside Madrid, in 1940, one year after the end of the civil war. The Valley would be a "national act of atonement," Franco said, and a monument to reconciliation. But from the beginning it was clear the Valley would be something else entirely. Built in part by Republican political prisoners, the basilica would in time hold only two visible tombs: one for Franco, and one for the founder of the

Falange, a far-right political party that helped propel the Nationalists to power. Construction took nearly 20 years. A few months before the site's inauguration, in 1959, Franco

ordered municipalities from across Spain to send remains from mass graves, to enhance the Valley's size and grandeur. Whether the graves held Republicans or Nationalists didn't matter. In death, Franco would watch over them all.

In total, 33,847 bodies were moved, largely in secret and without the knowledge or consent of relatives. But it was impossible to hide the process entirely, and some people, like the man Puri met in the Calatayud cemetery, had witnessed it. Local officials had also kept some records, including a report stating that on April 8, 1959, nine pinewood caskets containing 81 bodies from Calatayud arrived at the Valley of the Fallen and were placed in a crypt inside the basilica. The fact that the bodies were unidentified indicated that the people inside the caskets had been killed by Franco's troops. When Nationalist remains reached the Valley, they arrived in individual coffins with their names inscribed above plaques designating them as "martyrs."

