Nationalist soldiers with captured republican fighters in 1936, in the first months of the Spanish civil war. Inset: exhumation work takes place at San Rafael cemetery in Malaga, where about 3,600 republicans were shot and then piled into mass graves

SHADOWS IN THE SUNSHINE

Spain is being forced to look again at the bitter schisms created by its civil war, as thousands of bodies are exhumed from the mass graves of republicans killed without trial. But will unearthing the past lead to reconciliation? Report by Christine Toomey. Photographs: Clemente Bernad

There is a place of eerie silence close to the centre of Malaga. Outside its walls, the roar of traffic tearing at speed to tourist destinations is almost constant. But inside this sad oasis of calm, the only sounds are the delicate scraping of trowels and brushes against human bones and the soft weeping of the elderly relatives of those whose skeletons are being exposed.

Walking into this place, just a few miles from the airport that decants thousands of visitors every day onto the beaches of the Costa del Sol, is chilling; a jarring contrast of cheerfulness and sorrow, prosperous present and the remains of a devastating past, thinly carpeted with red earth. It takes a few moments to register what that earth is now yielding up. At first, the four large rectangular pits in an unkempt corner of the now disused San Rafael cemetery, overlooked by cranes from adjacent building sites, appear to be preparations for another construction project. But look down into them a few feet and a giant white jigsaw puzzle of bones emerges. Stare a bit longer and the outlines of individual skeletons become clearer. Follow the lines of splayed arms and legs and you realise that their crooked positions reveal the way each man and woman fell or was pushed into this series of mass graves.

Seventy years have passed since the estimated 3,600 buried here were lined up against the cemetery wall or at the edge of these trenches they themselves had been forced to dig before being shot. This is the site of just one of the innumerable massacres carried out by both sides during Spain's barbarous 1936 civil war. Those buried here, however, are all from that war's losing side. All denounced as republicans – supporters of the democratically elected Second Republic, known as "*la nina bonita*", or "beautiful child", which was eventually crushed.

The memories of what happened during those brutal years are all that the families of those killed here had, until work began a few months ago to exhume their remains. This exhumation comes at a time when Spanish politicians are locked in a bitter struggle over a proposed law that would help fund such work. It is part of a broader move to make remembrance of the civil war and its victims legally mandatory – an initiative that has provoked much painful debate in a country that has chosen for decades to draw a veil over the past. Yet the past has dominated the lives of many whose loved ones lie buried in the killing field that San Rafael cemetery became during the conflict. Those such as

Top: Juliana Sanchez (left) and Francisca Cordoba visit San Rafael cemetery every day. Both believe their fathers were killed and buried there. Left: Juliana's father, Vicente. Far left: some personal belongings recovered with the remains

Francisca Cordoba, whose father was brought here in the early hours of July 21, 1937. Francisca vividly remembers sitting as a small girl on her father's knee just hours before he was taken from Malaga prison that day to be shot. "He wrapped his arms around me, hugged me tight and kissed me. I never saw him again," the 74-year-old grandmother recalls as she huddles in a makeshift waiting room at the entrance to the cemetery.

Her father, Vicente, had been a cobbler. His only crime was to pay a compliment to a woman customer who took offence at his attention. She denounced him as a republican sympathiser to the nationalists, who had seized control of Malaga in February of that year – one of the war's early offensives by the military fighting to crush the left-wing Popular Front coalition government.

The Spanish civil war, in which an estimated 500,000 died, was hailed internationally as an ideological struggle between the "two Spains" of right and left, a curtain-raiser for the global war between fascism and communism that was to follow, a battle between authoritarianism and democracy, rich and poor. Yet the mutual killing was also a cover for the settling of personal scores.

THOUSANDS OF BODIES WERE LEFT TO ROT IN MASS GRAVES ACROSS SPAIN

Unlike the families of many of those whose remains lie piled in the pits of San Rafael in layers five or six deep, Francisca had always known that her father was buried here. Shortly after her husband was killed, Francisca's mother went to the cemetery's perimeter wall, notorious as the site of dawn executions. As she washed the blood from the face of his corpse, she was spotted by a cemetery worker who had been a friend of her husband. He promised her he would lay her husband's body on the top layer of one of the pits and would make sure no lime was spread at that spot to speed the rotting of his remains. Once the fighting stopped, Francisca's family hoped to be able to move him to a decent resting place.

Every week for years after, Francisca and her mother stole into the cemetery to the place they knew her father was buried. Her mother hid, leaving the laying of flowers to her daughter, whose tender age she believed would protect her if she was caught. But instead of peace or reconciliation after General Francisco Franco declared the war over in April 1939, more blood-letting ensued, with violent reprisals against the vanquished republicans. It is estimated that between 60,000 and 100,000 more were killed or died in prison in the early years of Franco's dictatorship. Any hope Francisca's mother might have had of giving her husband a burial was →

PREVIOUS PAGES, MAIN PHOTOGRAPH: CORBIS

Left: drawings of skeletons as they were found inside the burial pits at San Rafael. Right: members of the excavation team at work in the cemetery in March

lost in the climate of fear endured for more than three decades by any who opposed Franco.

The generalissimo ensured the remains of thousands of his nationalist supporters were exhumed and reburied – in the case of Malaga, in an elegant crypt in the city's cathedral. But those of tens of thousands of republicans were left to rot in mass graves across Spain. Even after Franco died in 1975 and democracy was restored, few dared raise the subject of these graves for fear of stirring up the ghosts of the past. A shroud of silence regarding the years of bloody conflict descended on the country as a pact was sealed by politicians for peaceful transition to democracy.

The movement to start exhumations began slowly seven years ago, but has gathered pace since the prime minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, and his centre-left Socialist party won a surprise victory at the polls in March 2004 – just days after the Madrid train bombings, after which voters had lashed out at the ruling conservative Popular party for its support of the Iraq war. Zapatero's grandfather had been a captain in the republican army and was executed by Franco's military. During his election campaign, the would-be prime minister repeatedly spoke of his grandfather's life and death, as a rallying cry to the left. In his inaugural speech, he quoted his grandfather's last words as "yearning for peace, love of good and the social betterment of the less fortunate".

After decades during which the civil war had largely fallen from public discourse, if not private grief, remembrance of the conflict was suddenly thrust to the top of the legislative agenda. To mark the 70th anniversary of the coup to defeat the Second Republic, Zapatero last year drafted legislation called the Law of Historical Memory, intended to heal with "justice and concord" hidden scars from the country's civil-war past. Among the proposals is the removal of reference to Franco from public places. Hundreds of street names and squares are still named after him. The law also demands the drawing-up of "morbid maps" marking the sites of known and suspected mass graves of those killed during the civil war and shot without trial during the dictatorship. Further financial and technical help for exhumations would follow. The law also offers former exiles, political prisoners and relatives of the victims the option to apply to a committee to clear their names. If successful, prison sentences and death penalties meted out during this time could be declared "unjust" – though not illegal, given the huge financial implications for the state in terms of compensation this could entail.

Far from healing rifts, however, the planned law has become mired in controversy. The left condemn it for not going far enough. They believe the law should annul all convictions of Franco's courts on the grounds that his regime was illegitimate. The right have dubbed it "a necrophilic way of doing politics", denounced it as divisive, and called for it to be thrown out. With little hope of reconciling these views, the government is deadlocked. But as far as many are concerned, the genie of the country's internecine conflict is once more out of the bottle. The spectre of its past again haunts Spain. With the bandage that had so long covered wounds lifted, still-festering sores have been exposed.

THE GENIE OF THE COUNTRY'S CONFLICT IS ONCE MORE OUT OF THE BOTTLE

Psychologists called in to counsel those now seeking to exhume the remains of loved ones – an estimated 5,000 applications by groups and individuals have been lodged – argue that this is the result of a society trying to cover up its trauma for too long. Finally facing the truth of the past will, they say, lead to healing and reconciliation. But it is only through talking to those like Francisca, and others who have lost loved ones at the hands of the republicans, that it is possible to understand how deeply these injuries are still felt.

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It was a cold day in October last year when excavation work began at San Rafael cemetery, which had been closed for nearly 20 years. For decades it was known that thousands of republicans lay here in unmarked graves. But when Malaga city council announced plans to turn the cemetery into a municipal park, more than 300 families who believed their relatives were buried here formed an association to halt the plan until their remains had been recovered. It was not until the families set up an association and approached Malaga University to undertake the excavation work, however, that both the council and regional government agreed to back and fund the exhumations.

On the first day work began, Francisca brought a chair to the cemetery and sat waiting for what her mother had sought to do all her life. Because her father's body had been placed near the top of one of the pits, as his friend had promised, what are believed to be his remains were among the first to be recovered. They now sit in a 1ft-by-2ft box, one of hundreds that contain the remains of 445 corpses recovered in the first six months since the work began, and which are stacked in two Portakabins. None of the boxes carry names, just numbers – according to which level and in which pit they were found.

Only DNA testing, which the association has not yet secured funding for, will determine if the bones Francisca believes belong to her ⋙→

father are his. But a plastic bag lying on top of the bones, containing a few personal effects found with them, confirms their identity to her. As well as a zip, a buckle and a few buttons, are the soles and fragments of boots her mother had described her father as wearing when he was hauled off to jail. "I won't rest in peace until I can give my father's remains a dignified burial," says Francisca. "I still come here every day out of solidarity with others seeking their parents or grandparents."

One of those who accompanies Francisca is 76-year-old Juliana Sanchez. She makes a round trip of over 100 miles a day from her home near Cordoba to be near the archeologists as they crouch on their hands and knees prizing skeletons from the soil and lime. She too hopes to recover the remains of her father, also called Vicente, whom she last saw when she was six.

Vicente Sanchez was a hairdresser in a small community near Cordoba called Ruete, where Francisca still lives. As Franco's forces swept north from Seville in 1936, Juliana's father was among the masses that fled for fear of being killed. The only contact his family had with him after that was a letter sent from Malaga prison to one of his brothers in March 1937, pleading him to take care of his wife and five children. But, like hundreds of thousands of families left without their main breadwinner, Juliana, her mother and siblings were left destitute. Juliana worked as a maid at just nine years of age in the house of a local landowner, and in the evenings swept the streets.

The harshness of her life is etched in her features as she recalls her lifelong quest to discover what happened to her father. "The head of the household where I worked as a child used to taunt me that my father didn't care about his family because he had abandoned us. Those fascists made my aunt parade through the streets with a sign around her neck denouncing her as a communist, and forced resin oil down her throat to purge her of the devil."

For over 20 years following the fall of Franco, Juliana sought the help of authorities in Cordoba and Malaga for information about her father's fate. She was consistently stonewalled by officials with little interest in dragging up the past. "But after the new government was elected, some of these officials became more helpful," says Juliana. Two years ago she received a letter confirming her father had been taken from Malaga prison, almost certainly to San Rafael cemetery, on March 12, 1937, and shot. "The man whose name appears on documents as having denounced my father to the military was the head of the household where I worked. All those years he had my father's blood on his hands," Juliana says. "For me, all of those who lie here are my father. My heart breaks for all of them," she continues, tears rolling down her cheeks. A member of the excavation team takes me aside. He tells me how Juliana has wept every time a comb has been recovered. "She thinks it must be her father's because he was a hairdresser. But many men would carry a comb in their pocket as a sign that however poor they were, they kept themselves tidy."

The Valley of the Fallen, a mausoleum near Madrid that houses General Franco's tomb. Many find its grandeur an affront, as it contrasts starkly with the mass graves in which thousands of republicans are buried

Though years younger than Juliana, Emilio Silva, 41, understands this longing to know the truth about the past. His efforts to find out what happened to his grandfather led to the first mass exhumation, at a grave in Leon province in 2000. His intention was to write a novel about his grandfather, who was only ever mentioned in hushed tones when he was growing up. "If ever my father or uncles mentioned him, my grandmother would shout, 'That's enough!'" says Emilio, a TV producer living in Madrid.

His grandmother's fear was that the lives of the six children she was left to raise alone would be in danger during the Franco dictatorship if they spoke openly of a father denounced and killed by nationalists. Her husband had been deemed "unpatriotic" because he wanted local schools to offer a secular education. This fear was transmitted to his father, says Emilio. "Even when my father did begin to tell me a little about how his father had gone to New York and ran a shop before returning to Spain, marrying, and running the shop in his village until he was killed, he would always finish by saying, 'Never talk about any of this!' And of course if there is something you know you should not discuss, that is what you feel compelled to find out more about."

What Emilio discovered when he returned to his grandfather's village was that there were still elderly residents there who remembered the events of October 1936. They talked of how his grandfather had been hauled from jail at night together with a dozen others and taken for a "*paseo*" – a walk – the euphemism at the time for summary executions. They knew where his body was buried – at a spot under a walnut tree that local children called "the place where people run", believing it was haunted by the ghosts. With the help of a local archeologist and a team of volunteers, 13 skeletons were recovered from the site. Through DNA testing, Emilio was able to identify that of his grandfather, whom he then laid to rest beside his grandmother. She had died three years before.

'THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE WHO PREFER TO LEAVE THE DEAD RESTING'

As news of these first exhumations spread, Emilio was contacted by the families of others who had long sought explanations for what had happened to republican relatives missing, presumed killed, during the civil war. A national Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory was formed, which lobbied the previous conservative government of Jose Maria Aznar to help it open military archives and open hundreds of suspected mass graves. Though the government did authorise regional authorities to set aside some funding for exhumations, if requested, its response was deemed lukewarm by the association, which then lobbied the UN for help. Its response, however, was to rule that it had no jurisdiction to investigate the cases of those who had gone missing before it was founded in 1945.

Yet even when Zapatero's government drew up its memory bill, those within the association complained it did not go far enough. "The law is very light. It doesn't attempt to rectify what it should. It says very little, for instance, about the Valley of the Fallen," says Emilio, referring to the giant mausoleum hollowed out of the Sierra de Guadarrama mountains near Madrid where Franco is buried. Though the site professes to pay homage to all of the civil-war dead, many consider it an affront. They point to the only two tombs being those of the generalissimo and Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the fascist Spanish Falange party, and the fact that the complex was built by political prisoners during Franco's dictatorship. "Franco's family should take his body and bury it privately, not expect Spanish taxpayers to maintain his tomb," argues Emilio. He, like many others, believes the site should be turned into a museum to educate the public about the truth of what happened during the war. But whose truth?

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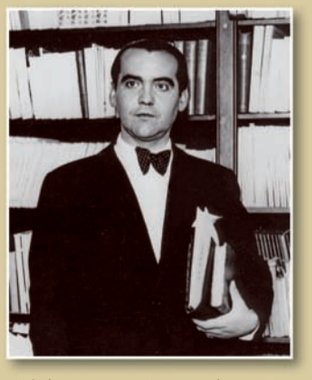
About as far from Madrid's Barajas airport as San Rafael cemetery lies from Malaga airport, there is another mass grave of civil-war dead. Unlike San Rafael's unmarked pits, this site can be identified from a huge distance by a giant white cross and rows of smaller ones, most without names. They honour the estimated ⟶

AGENCIA EFE

POETIC INJUSTICE

A few miles from the grandeur of Granada is a desolate hillside spot that has become the focus of fierce controversy. It is believed that buried here among the olive trees, close to the small community of Fuente Grande de Alfacar, are the remains of Federico Garcia Lorca, hailed as the greatest Spanish poet of the 20th century.

Lorca, 38 and at the pinnacle of his career when the civil war broke out, was handcuffed to a local schoolteacher and dragged to this spot, together with two bullfighters, on the night of August 18 or 19, 1936, shot by Falangists and buried here in a mass grave. While those shot



with Lorca were targeted as trade-union members and leftist sympathisers, there were suspicions that Lorca was killed because he was homosexual. Some even believe he was killed on the orders of his cousins, who were jealous of his success. A recent film has claimed that one relative boasted he had "put two bullets in his [Lorca's] arse for being a homo!" Such speculation is thought by some to explain why Lorca's family have resisted proposals to have the grave site excavated in order to give the poet a proper burial. Although his family argue that his remains should be left to rest in peace, there is talk that they long ago secretly moved his body to another site.

While Lorca's family oppose the exhumation, however, the grandchildren of the teacher, Dioscoro Galindo, and one of the bullfighters, Francisco Galadi, have petitioned the local council for it to go ahead.

The conflicting families' wishes have led to deadlock. For some, this is a metaphor for the likely fate of the current socialist government's Law of Historical Memory.

4,600 prisoners brought to this hillside of Paracuellos del Jarama by republican militias in the winter of 1936. All were executed and their bodies dumped in seven pits. Some are thought to have been buried alive. Among those killed here is Tomas Garcia-Noblejas, grandfather of Araceli Ezquerro, whose own father, Felipe, also narrowly escaped execution at Paracuellos. Felipe Ezquerro is 95, but vividly recalls the day republican soldiers burst into his home on November 16 that year and arrested him. "They told me, 'You have the face of a priest,' which in those days of anti-clericism was a grave accusation," says the former businessman, referring to the estimated 6,500 priests and nuns slaughtered by republicans during the war.

Felipe narrowly escaped being killed because a sympathetic prison warden warned him that the car waiting for him in the dark outside the jail when he thought he was being released would take him on a *paseo* – to his death, not freedom. He fled. The father of his future wife was not so lucky. Garcia-Noblejas was arrested for belonging to a Roman Catholic association and was held briefly in Porlier prison, in the centre of Madrid, before being bundled into the back of the last truck of those destined for Paracuellos. "Everyone has their own history of what happened to their family in the civil war. But what good does it do raking all this up now and making it into a new confrontation?" asks Araceli, as she stands at the gates of Paracuellos cemetery. "I respect those who want to recover the remains of their relatives. But there are many who prefer to leave the dead resting together. People need to remember that we all have our own personal histories, our own truths."

To make this point, Araceli and her father were among those who recently placed prominent death notices in national newspapers in honour of family members killed over 70 years ago. "I would not have thought of doing this if Zapatero had not started talking about his grandfather. But people need to remember there are those on the other side who had grandfathers who died. Their memories need to be respected too."

Some criticise the present government for reviving the issue of the civil war for political gain. They argue Zapatero is trying to entrench support for the left and undermine the right – especially among younger voters with no memories of that time – by conjuring up the spectre of Franco. "I believe what is going on now is a selective recovery of memory for political reasons," says Antonio Nadal, a political prisoner under Franco and now professor of contemporary history at Malaga University.

Nadal wrote the first comprehensive account of the fate of thousands of republicans killed by nationalist forces in this southern city. "Historical memory is being used as a weapon to further fracture the unity of this country at a particularly sensitive time," says Nadal, referring to the increasing autonomy being granted to regions such as Catalonia and the Basque country, which many fear is destroying Spain's sense of national identity. The government's controversial anti-terrorism policy – including the recent release from prison of a Basque terrorist convicted of multiple murders – and the ongoing political fallout of the Madrid train bombings have polarised public opinion. "Calling up the ghosts of the past like this is madness," warns Nadal. "There is little understanding of where this could lead." Some of Nadal's fears are also expressed by Victoria Prego, a columnist for the right-wing El Mundo newspaper and an expert on Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy. "Nobody opposes the right of those who want to recover the remains of their relatives. This should be left to the families to decide," says Prego. This is not always simple, as is illustrated by the controversy surrounding the proposed exhumation of the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca (see panel, left).

'THERE IS AN URGENCY TO WHAT IS GOING ON. SURVIVORS ARE DYING OFF'

"The Spanish people know very well what went on here in the civil war. There never was a pact of forgetting, but one of forgiveness, so that we could move on," says Prego. "Our history has been a very tragic one, full of negative emotions being stirred again by this law of historical memory. My view is that we should look forward and be positive. The younger generation isn't interested in what happened 70 years ago."

Paul Preston, an authority on the civil war, reflects the views of many, however, in saying that Spain is poised at a unique moment in time for work to be carried out to uncover the truth about the extent of republican casualties and to collect testimonies of those who lived through those bloody years. "There is an urgency to what is going on now. Survivors are dying off," says the London School of Economics professor. "Forgetting does not mean reconciliation, just as remembering does not mean vengeance. It is simply a matter of elemental justice that people know where their loved ones are buried."

But one sign of the extent to which the exhumations and proposed law have fuelled controversy, Preston admits, are the calls he has received from young Spanish journalists asking if there will be another civil war as a result. "I've never heard anything so ridiculous. Spain is a strong democracy, a country of huge wealth," he says. "I only hope the political nastiness surrounding these issues will die down soon."

Far removed from such debate, the work at San Rafael cemetery continues. With the help of student volunteers over the summer, there are hopes that it could be finished by autumn. The remains will then be placed in a memorial in the planned park, each in a separate vault. Some of these vaults could be individually named if future DNA testing permits identification.

"It is fundamental to human nature to want a place to mourn," says Maria Victoria Alcantara, 51, whose grandfather was gunned down against the wall of San Rafael cemetery after appealing against a 30-year prison sentence for belonging to a bakers' union. "My father went to the cemetery that day and recognised his father's body from the jumper he wore. My brother and I grew up knowing about this, and want to give him a proper burial. Perhaps this is the last moment to do such things. I don't believe the next generation will be interested." ■

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