

# Haunted by the past

Unearthing Catalunya's Civil War graves has opened some old wounds as well.

By Nick Mead



**When truth is replaced by silence, the silence is a lie.**

—Yevgeny Yevtushenko

It's a tragic fact that there are still many unmarked graves in Spain. Victims on both sides of the Civil War continue to lie buried in roadside ditches and fields, forgotten by a country desperate to put the past behind it.

When Franco died in 1975, the transition to democracy ignored these victims of war and those who died later at the hands of El Caudillo's 40-year dictatorship. The newly-hatched democrats, many of whom had worked under Franco, saw it prudent to include a clause in the country's new constitution—the *pacto de olvido* or the 'pact of forgetting'. In the words of Catalan journalist Montserrat Armengou, it effectively meant that, "Spain chose silence and memory loss over justice for tens of thousands of victims of the war and Franco's dictatorship. There was to be no truth commission, no investigations and no search for the bodies—until now.

Last year, President José Luis Zapatero—whose own grandfather was shot by nationalist troops during the Civil War—broke the 30-year-silence by introducing the *Ley de la Memoria Histórica* (Historical Memory Law). It includes several initiatives to help right past

wrongs, and erase the nation's last vestiges of Francoism. In the government's words, it is an attempt to, "Repair the dignity and restore the memory of those people who underwent jail, repression or were killed defending the democratic values we enjoy today."

One part of this plan is allowing families to locate and exhume the bodies of their relatives that remain in the hundreds of common and mass graves littered across the country.

## One of the biggest problems is locating the graves.

The bodies consist of those on both Republican and Nationalist sides who were killed in fighting, including the many thousands of Franco's victims that were dumped in roadside ditches, fields or simply thrown off cliffs. The biggest graves are thought to lie where the most remote battles took place, when casualties often ended up being dumped into mass graves. For years, many families of these victims have preferred to forget the terrible events of the past, whilst others have patiently campaigned for dignified burials. As a result

of this and the government's own initiative, the Generalitat is also currently debating an official ruling about whether to grant financial and logistical help to families wishing to exhume their dead. This is not just a moral responsibility, but also a legal one, according to Jesús Bono, director of the *Memòria Democràtica de la Generalitat*.

"According to the new autonomy statute, the Generalitat has a legal obligation to right the wrongs of the past," Bono told *Metropolitan*. "Article 54 states that public bodies of power have a responsibility to contribute to the knowledge and maintenance of our historical memory in order to respect the democratic rights and liberties we have today."

So why has it taken almost 40 years to come to this conclusion? Manel Perona, President of the *Associació per a la Recuperació de la Memòria Històrica de Catalunya* (ARMHC) said, "This law would never have been possible under the previous government—not just under the PP in Madrid but even with the previous CiU government in Catalunya, there was little chance of seeing it taken seriously. It's thanks to the change in government both in Madrid and with the current coalition here that we're finally seeing justice done."

However, such landmarks haven't just come about as a result of political sympathies. It's thanks to people such as himself

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that such a proposal has ever seen the light of day. His organisation has campaigned on the issue for the past five years and has been awarded one of Catalunya’s top honours—the Saint George Cross—for its work. Perona isn’t resting on his laurels, however, warning there is still a long way to go and time, unfortunately, is not on his side. “The bill proposed by the Generalitat could take years to be finally passed. This is a serious problem for us mainly because those who know where the graves might be are simply dying out. For those that are alive, their memories are fading quickly too which makes finding exactly where bodies are very difficult. It’s not easy to pinpoint the exact point in the ground where a body might or might not have been buried 50 years ago, and fear still stops many elderly people speaking out about where the graves are.”

So far, the ARMHC has located around 100 graves in Catalunya (and opened three sites without luck), although the Generalitat claims it knows of at least 150. The size of the graves remains unclear though and it’s thought they could contain anything from a handful to a few thousand bodies. The process is still at an early stage in Catalunya, and the Generalitat has only opened one grave—in Puigviós near Prats de Lluçanès. Seven bodies were exhumed, six Republican soldiers, and one

civilian. They were all given a proper burial by their respective families in their hometowns, according to Bono.


One of the biggest problems is locating the graves. Some of the whereabouts remain classified in military records whilst others rely on the testimony of witnesses. “The majority of the graves are located where the most intense battles were,” said Bono. “The Republican front stretched from the borders of the rivers Noguera, Pallaresa, Segre and Ebre where there was ongoing fighting. In December 1938, Nationalist troops breached the front and started their progression towards the French border. The increasingly intense confrontations left thousands of dead who farmers often ended up dumping in cemeteries or simply burying on the spot. There are also, of course, many civilian graves, victims of bombings and atrocities by Franco’s troops.”

The number of families wanting to exhume graves is slowly growing and if the Generalitat does grant financial aid to the process, this trend is sure to continue. Perona said his organisation is already dealing with increasing enquiries. “Demand is steadily rising—we now receive at least two or three calls a day from families asking us to help them locate a grave.”

Interestingly however, according to Bono the Generalitat’s experience is that it is the

younger generation spearheading the drive for justice. “We’re seeing that it is mainly the grandchildren of victims who seek to find the graves rather than the children of victims.”

Of course, not everyone is happy with this attempt at righting the wrongs of the past. The right-wing, opposition PP party has been particularly angered by what it perceives as the government’s attempt to re-ignite old tensions and in the words of one member, “rewrite the past in their own favour”. However, those that are outraged morally can have no quarrels with the move legally. In the years since the transition to democracy, Spain had effectively been breaking international law by refusing to acknowledge crimes of the past. Montserrat Sans, the lawyer who took the case of victims’ families to the UN, said, “Spain’s transition to democracy was carried out leaving aside the internationally recognised duty of all states to investigate serious and systematic violations of fundamental rights.”

The exhuming of common graves is another small step towards fulfilling this international obligation. 

▲ Manel Perona receives the Saint George’s Cross from Pasqual Maragall.