

Spain: Socialist Party demands opening of Franco's mass graves

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The opposition Socialist Party of Spain (PSOE), which governed Spain for 14 years after the death of the fascist dictator General Francisco Franco and the so-called “peaceful transition to democracy”, has belatedly lodged an amendment to this year’s budget demanding the government earmark one million euros to finance the opening of the mass graves from the Civil War. Earlier this month the PSOE demanded of the Congress Constitutional Commission that the memory of the dead be honoured and their bodies recovered.

Mass graves are thought to be spread all over Spain. According to the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, which has taken the case to the United Nations, there are more than 30,000 Spaniards and foreigners assassinated by Francoist troops, falangists and fascist thugs secretly buried. The friends and relatives of the victims have kept details of the geographical location of some graves for more than 60 years. A few have already been opened by the association with the help of volunteers from 10 different countries and some excavating machines lent by several councils.

Attempts have been made to identify only four corpses found two years ago and the results are still to be published. Now the Instituto Anatomico Forense will carry out DNA tests on the corpses of at least seven young Republican soldiers assassinated in 1937 and exhumed last summer from a mass grave found in a ditch in Piedrafita de Babia (Leon). This work will be at the expense of the state. While this is a minimal beginning, it will set a precedent for the discovery and identification of the bodies contained in other mass graves. One of the beneficiaries, 84-year-old Isabel Gonzalez, witnessed the detention of her 22-year-old brother, Eduardo, and one of her brothers-in-law when

she was just 19. Their grave was excavated three months ago. She told the newspaper *El Pais*, “We have suffered much over many years and if we now had to pay in order to know with certainty that our loved ones are there ... I couldn’t afford it.”

One of the demands that the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory has put to the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances is the withdrawal from public display of all the countless Francoist symbols which “offend the dignity of the victims”. The most infamous of these is the monument Franco had built to be his final resting place: El Valle de los Caidos (The Valley of the Fallen). This is an underground shrine topped with a 500-foot-high stone cross, which can be seen from a distance of 30 miles.

Prisoners of Franco, many of whom lost their lives in the process, were forced as slaves to quarry this huge cavern, 250 meters deep, into the rocks of the mountain of the Sierra de Guadarrama. The work began in the early 1940s and was completed in 1959. While supposedly housing the dead from the Civil War, it is a monument to Franco and his regime. On show inside are the graves of Franco himself and of Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of Franco’s extreme right-wing political party, Falange Espanola. To sugar the pill, a few Republicans were buried among the 50,000 bodies of Francoist supporters. The memorial is advertised today as one of the main tourist sites around Madrid.

This is not the only construction built by slave labour. On October 24, the Congress of Deputies approved unanimously a motion from Izquierda Unida, an umbrella organisation set up by the Spanish Communist Party, which seeks to honour the dead and acknowledge the tragedy of “Franco’s slaves”—prisoners who

between 1937 and 1970 were utilised as forced labour. As well as erecting the Valle de los Caidos, they were hired off to private companies. They are thought to have numbered over 400,000 people, who built more than 30 dams and canals, prisons, viaducts, railway lines and factories, including Sniace and Portland Cement, as well as mines. Companies such as Dragados, Construcciones, Banus, Duro Felguera and others also made use of their labour. They even built luxury chalets. The prisoners received 25 percent of the low wages paid by the companies, with the state pocketing the rest.

The ruling Partido Popular (PP) agreed to honour the “slaves” of the Franco dictatorship, but did not accept compensation as demanded by the motion. The PP has recently poured about £50,000 of state funding into a foundation dedicated to the memory of Franco. Ten percent of the Ministry of Culture funding for independent archives has been given over to the National Francisco Franco Foundation. The foundation organises celebrations to mark Franco’s death every year and maintains fresh flowers on his tombs at the Valley of the Fallen.

The government grant is to help with the computerisation of its files. These files are kept only for the eyes of Franco sympathisers. Professor Paul Preston, the British historian and Franco biographer who was the main historical adviser to the recent exhibition at the British War Museum “Dreams and Nightmares”, was denied access along with other international researchers. There have been protests from trade unions and other organisations that have been refused permission to reclaim documents taken from their archives during the civil war.

The foundation is headed by Franco’s daughter Pilar. Its web site describes the dictator as “modest, honest and providential” and claims that the 1936 military rebellion against the elected government was legal and legitimate.



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