

Spain: Congress belatedly honours victims of Franco

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A crisis has arisen within Spain's political elite due to the decision to pay a belated homage to the victims of Franco's fascist regime during the Civil War (1936-1939) and its aftermath.

On December 1, about 350 people from 30 organisations representing political prisoners, ex-combatants, exiles, militiamen, families of those gunned down and buried in mass graves, victims of retaliations and children of the war, attended a ceremony at Congress House in Madrid in the Hall of the Columns. Those attending, mostly elderly, was presented with a "fighter for freedom" certificate, a copy of the national constitution and were shown around the Congress House.

The organisations included the Friends of the International Brigades, the Association for the recovery of Historical Memory and Forum for Memory. The event was initiated by Izquierda Unida (IU), a coalition of diverse groups led by the Communist Party of Spain (PCE), and was endorsed by all Spanish political parties with the exception of the governing Partido Popular (PP) of Prime Minister José María Aznar.

The homage was conceived of as part of the 25th anniversary of the so-called "peaceful transition from fascism to democracy" and the writing of a new constitution in 1978 after the death of the dictator Francisco Franco. The adoption of the constitution marked the conclusion of a three-year political campaign led by the PCE and PSOE to prevent a political challenge by the working class to the Spanish bourgeoisie, under the slogan "Forget and Forgive," that granted a political amnesty to the fascists.

The December 1 ceremony was conducted in the same spirit. A spokesman for the social democratic Socialist Workers Party of Spain (PSOE), Jesús Caldera, said that this homage should be seen as "a historic debt, to prevent forgetfulness and poor memory." He added that the action sought to "honour everyone without offending anyone."

A spokesman from the nationalist Catalan Convergencia i Unió (CiU), Josep Sanchez Libre, wanted to make clear that the homage was not meant to "settle accounts with anybody" except "with history and truth."

However, one of the victims present stated, "It seems incredible that it was necessary to wait 25 years." And others were said to be very excited about the function because during the last 25 years they had had the feeling of being democracy's great unmentionable. Referring to the absence of the PP, another victim asked, "How many times do we have to forgive?"

Prior to the homage, Aznar and several of his cabinet ministers condemned and dismissed it as an attempt to rake up old resentments. The PP's parliamentary spokesman, Luis de Grandes, considered it a "revival de naftalina" (moth balls revival). De Grandes added that in his opinion it meant "going back to the past." He was quoted in *El Pais* as stating that the Carta Magna (the compromise of 1978) was not made between "conquerors and conquered" and accused IU of stirring the "remnants of hatred."

Ignacio Gil Lazaro, spokesman for the PP in Congress, complained that the opposition was breaking the pact arrived at last year with the government. On November 20, 2002, for the first time since it came to power in 1996, the PP agreed to support a motion condemning Franco's coup in 1936 to overthrow the democratically elected Republican government that led to three years of civil war. This agreement was made at a price. According to Gil, the November 20 Pact (agreed between PP Deputy Antonio Bermudez de Castro and the leader of the PSOE, Alfonso Guerra) carried with it the promise that this theme would never be utilised again in a political confrontation.

Far from politicians being able to draw a line and end any debate on the historical lessons of the civil war and revolution of the 1930s, history is coming back to haunt

them all. Questions are being objectively posed that go beyond the role played by former fascists within the PP: Who was responsible for the defeat of the Spanish working class in 1939? Who was responsible for the compromise of the 1970s which propped up and saved the Spanish bourgeoisie? Who was responsible for extending a political amnesty to the fascists? Who was responsible for enforcing 25 years of historical amnesia? Who is responsible for continuing the cover-up of the mass graves? Why did the PSOE do nothing for the victims and their relatives when it was in power for 14 years between 1982 and 1996?

The refusal of the PP to honour the victims of the Franco regime contrasts sharply with the innumerable homages given to the victims of the Basque separatist group ETA and to the members of the Aznar's occupying armies killed in Iraq, not forgetting all those pro-Franco supporters who fell in the struggle "for God and Spain" who have a monument erected to their memory containing Franco's own tomb.

The intention of those promoting the homage by Congress to the victims of Franco is to conceal their record of political cowardice behind a few words of recognition. The December 1 homage was kicked off by the journalist Rosa Maria Mateo, who expressed regret at the "persistence of terrorism in Spain despite the arrival of democracy" and praised the seven Spanish spies "assassinated in Iraq" on November 29 "while carrying out their duty"—asking for a minute's silence in their memory. The Communist Party and the Socialist Party, the midwives of the "peaceful transition," fear that the arrogant attitude of the PP will wreck the fragile status quo established in Spain since the collapse of the fascist regime in 1975. Felipe Alcaraz, spokesman for Izquierda Unida, was reportedly outraged by the PP's actions—warning that it showed that the government "has not understood the history of Spain."



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