

Spanish mayor desecrates mausoleum of fascist victims

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The right-wing Popular Party (PP) mayor of Poyales del Hoyo, in Alava province, has desecrated a mausoleum containing the remains of 10 victims executed by the fascists during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Mayor Antonio Cerro ordered the bodies to be thrown back into the mass grave outside Candeleda, a village near Poyales from which they had been exhumed in 2002.

Spain has some 2,000 mass graves containing 100,000 or more victims of the dictatorship. (See the map of graves at the Historical Memory Act web site.)

The exhumation at Poyales was carried out by the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH), a group composed of archaeologists, anthropologists and forensics scientists. Damiana González (PP), the mayor of Poyales del Hoyo, and the local section of her party fiercely resisted authorising space in the cemetery for the victims. According to *El País*, “The story of the town tells that a forefather of hers was the executioner. Or at least she bragged about it for years.” Eventually, the mausoleum was built with a plaque remembering all the names of the dead and a dove of peace on top.

The first three victims, Virtudes Punte (53), Pilar Espinosa (43) and Valeriana Granada (26 and pregnant at the time), were placed in the mausoleum in 2002. They were executed by a group of Falangists in December 1936, according to the daughter of one of the victims “because she had the luck to read, she read anything she could get her hands on, and among the newspapers they read as they were sewing was *El Socialista* [the newspaper of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE)].”

The other seven victims, Francisco Martín Vélez, his son Régulo Martín Plaza, Tomás Retamal Vicente, Emilio García Hornillos, Caferino Gómez Díaz, his wife, Tomasa de la Peña García, and their son, Benjamín Gómez de la Peña, were arrested, executed and buried in a mass grave

next to a road going to Candeleda.

The other 70 to 75 victims who were executed in the small town, now with a population of 620, have not been found. One example is the former mayor, a member of Izquierda Republicana (Republican Left—the party of President Azaña of the Second Republic), who was executed in 1936. His lands were expropriated and auctioned to pro-fascist neighbours, who continue to be the owners.

Throughout the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco (1939-1975), the fascists who were killed during the first days of the Civil War retained their honours with church plaques remembering all those who died “at the hands of the Marxist hordes.”

Mayor Cerro used the pretext that one of the granddaughters of Virtudes Punte wanted to remove her grandmother’s remains to bury her along with her father. On July 30, he went to the cemetery, accompanied by the granddaughter, a judge and two workers employed by the town hall, and destroyed the mausoleum to take out the remains. The rest of the family members were not warned about this. The mayor then ordered that the remains be thrown back in the mass grave in the cemetery from where they had been exhumed.

In response to the outrage, the Foropor la Memoria, ARMH and other associations linked with the identification, recovery and memory of the victims of the fascist regime called for a protest in Poyales.

On August 7, 40 members of these associations, along with family members of those thrown back in the mass grave, demonstrated in the central square to read a statement. The main banner on the protest stated, “We are the grandchildren of the workers you could not kill”.

According to *El País* and *Público*, the demonstration coincided with the end of services at a nearby church. The churchgoers, along with various local PP councillors and townspeople incited by the PP, hurled abuse at the

demonstration and then violently broke it up.

“If Franco lived, he would cut your heads off, rojos de mierda [red shits]”, “F**king rojos [reds]”, “You are social parasites” and “you are not even Spanish” were chanted at the protesters. The main banner was destroyed, its holders beaten up and the megaphone damaged.

The Guardia Civil, the Spanish gendarmerie, was called to protect the demonstrators from more attacks and the town placed under a “special control zone” to stop further violent attacks.

According to Yash Paul Gosain, great grandson of one of the victims, “When I arrived in the square, the four [town councillors from the PP] and more were drunk and waiting for us”, he told *El País*.

One of the organisers of the protest, Pedro Vicente, told the same newspaper, “We made a human chain amidst shouts and insults. They called us ‘f**king reds’, they said that we were not of the town and we were probably not even Spanish. The worst came when I tried to read out a statement; [it was] impossible.” He also said that the mob kept crossing the barrier by the Guardia Civil in order to assault them.

The provincial PP president and member of the senate said he “endorses the actions of the local council” whilst the PP spokesman in the Congress’s commissions declared that “it is an error to open the wounds of the past, in one way or another”. The fact is that Franco’s regime with the support of the Catholic Church gave tribute to its “martyrs” for over 40 years.

Similar incidents have taken place elsewhere in the region. A monument dedicated to the republicans located in the graveyard of Candella was daubed with fascist graffiti like the yoke and the arrows, symbols of the Falange. In Pedro Bernardo, where two years ago a judge had nullified a decision taken by the town council to remove a fascist plaque from a church, the mayor decided to padlock the cemetery gates to prevent family members from honouring the 23 civilians shot and buried in a mass grave inside.

These attacks, insults and humiliations are possible because the PP, the successor to Franco’s National Movement, is infested with his sympathisers. Many of its leaders were in the regime, such as PP founder and Franco minister Manuel Fraga, or former Prime Minister Aznar, who belonged to the youth section of the Falange. To date, the PP has still not condemned Franco’s dictatorship.

The PSOE and the Communist Party (PCE)-led United

Left (IU), along with “left” media, such as *El País*, are also complicit. In 1977, the PSOE and the PCE voted in favour of the Amnesty Law and other legal measures taken to ensure that there could be no settling of scores with the fascists by the working class. This law enabled Franco’s supporters to continue in office.

Since it was elected in 2004, the PSOE has done the barest minimum towards meeting demands for justice for the victims of fascism. In 2007, it enacted the Law of Historical Memory, recognising the “victims” on both sides in the civil war and rehabilitating their “memory”, and also removed some fascist symbols and monuments. However, the government only provides limited financial support for exhumations and it is left to relatives and unpaid volunteers to carry the work. It still has not done anything about the Valley of the Fallen, Franco’s huge mausoleum near Madrid, which continues to receive visitors and is a place of pilgrimage for the right wing.

In 2008, investigative judge Baltasar Garzón carried out Spain’s first criminal investigation into the crimes of the fascists. He accused Franco and 44 former generals and ministers, plus 10 members of the Falange party, of crimes against humanity and ordered the opening of mass graves. Under pressure, he was forced to close down the investigation. He was then prosecuted by the Spanish High Court, in an action brought by far-right organisations, for supposedly acting beyond his jurisdiction by investigating the fascist crimes, and he was finally suspended. Two years later, there is still no sign of a date for a hearing.

The events at Poyales, like the prosecution of Garzón, show that Spain’s ruling elite is determined to consign the fate of those murdered, imprisoned and forced into exile by the fascists to the shadows of history. However, the deepening economic crisis and political conflicts are unravelling the attempts by the PSOE, the PP, the PCE and all of those who imposed the pact of forgetting and the “peaceful transition” to democracy to cover up the crimes of fascism.



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