

# Mass graves from Spain's civil war uncovered

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The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory has found mass graves in the Estépar Mountains on the outskirts of the Spanish northern city of Burgos.

A team consisting of 50 Spanish archaeologists, anthropologists and forensic scientists estimates that four mass graves could include between 300 to 400 corpses.

Archaeologist Juan Montero told *El Diario*, “We have managed to contact sixty families. Everyone is well aware that given the large number of mass graves and the lack of economic resources, due to there being zero government involvement, the tasks of identifying the victims are going to be tremendously complex.”

Among those who are said to be buried there are the composer Antonio José Burgos and his brother Julio, and the father of the writer Francisco Ayala, the last representative of the poets and writers of the Generation of 1927. Also rumoured to be interred there is the father of writer Sanchez Drago.

Sanchez Drago, once a member of the Stalinist Communist Party of Spain (PCE), was jailed under Franco in the late 1960s. He later moved to the far right, once calling José Antonio Primo de Rivera “the Spanish guy with most appeal in the 20th century.” Rivera founded the fascist La Falange, which became one of the key parties in General Francisco Franco’s coup of 1936.

According to local historian José Ignacio Casado, most victims come from those who were arrested and then released. Waiting for them were Falangists, soldiers and members of the Guardia Civil, who would execute them in what were known as “sacas” or “paseos” (“strolls”). Many of these prisoners were released from jails and concentration camps, driven to isolated places at dawn and shot.

The number of bodies in each grave matched the number of released prisoners who stayed in Burgos prison. Ignacio explained to *El Diario*, “I can tell you that it is those who left prison on September 29 and 30, 1936. Some cases may vary, but we can know who they were by identifying them and their ages with the documentation on those released from the prisons.”

Witnesses described to the Internet daily *Público* how the victims were executed. After being arrested, and to prevent them from cheering liberty and republic, they were gagged with straps, which were then washed in vomit and saved for the next execution. The executioners forced them to dig their own graves. They were shot at close range, and finished off with rifle butts.

Burgos witnessed one of the most notorious repressions during the Civil War. It is estimated that 2,500 people were executed, mainly consisting of members of the trade unions UGT and CNT, local politicians and mayors of Izquierda Republicana, and members of the Socialist Party (PSOE), and in some cases peasants and workers whose crime had been to claim unpaid wages.

According to Paul Preston’s *The Spanish Holocaust*, 200,000 people were executed between 1936 to 1945 by the fascists.

The regime of General Franco and post-Franco revisionist historiography have justified the repression as a response to the “red terror”. In fact, the fascist repression was planned well in advance, targeting the organised working class and any whom they deemed oppositionists.

In May 1936, two months ahead of the coup, General Mola, in charge of the northern sector, passed instructions to the military bases: “The action must be extremely violent as soon as possible to reduce the

enemy, which is strong and well-organised. Of course, we will arrest all the leaders of the political parties, associations or unions that are not affiliated with the [National] movement, applying exemplary punishment to those individuals in order to strangle rebel movements or strikes.”

On July 19, two days after the coup, Mola sent another order: “It is necessary to spread terror, eliminating without scruples or hesitation all those who do not think as we do.... All those who oppose the victory of the movement to save Spain will be shot.”

Since the death of Franco and the end of the fascist dictatorship in 1978, successive governments have attempted to cover up the crimes of fascist regime.

After its election in the 2011, the Popular Party (PP) government of Mariano Rajoy reduced by 60 percent the budgets dedicated to the Law of Historical Memory (LHM), passed by the previous Socialist Party government, and abolished the Office of Victims of the Civil War and the Dictatorship, which coordinated the exhumation of the remains of those that disappeared. For 2013-2014, the budget for LHM ceased to exist, forcing the associations dedicated to recovering the remains to rely on donations.

Last September, the Popular Party government refused to extradite four fascists indicted by Argentinean judge María Romilda Servini, who declared that under universal jurisdiction they could be charged under international law if the Spanish judiciary did not carry out prosecution.

This came four years after judge Baltasar Garzón, who began an investigation into Franco-era crimes, was subjected to an intense campaign of vilification that led to his prosecution and being barred from practising as a judge for 11 years.

Against Servini, the PP and the opposition PSOE closed ranks in defence of the 1977 Amnesty Law, passed during the transition from fascism to bourgeois democracy following Franco’s death in 1975, which prevents any reckoning and investigation into the crimes committed during the Spanish Civil War and the dictatorship. In response, the former leader of the Stalinist-led United Left, Gaspar Llamazares, called for a mere modification of the law.

The government has remained completely silent on the latest list of recommendations sent in July by the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or

Involuntary Disappearances, which call for a “schedule indicating the measures that will be taken.”

While the recommendations are not binding, Madrid has an obligation to reply.

Seventy-five years after the civil war, the continued campaign to open the mass graves exposes the arrangements reached by the Stalinists, the Social Democrats and the Francoist apparatus in 1977, granting the fascists an amnesty and a tacit “pact of forgetting” about their crimes.

The ruling class remains determined to obliterate from the consciousness of workers the role their forebears played in the struggle against capitalism. Their aim is to deprive workers of the historical lessons they require in order to mount an effective and revolutionary struggle against the capitalist system.

The efforts to conceal the past crimes are not motivated only by historic concerns. Under conditions where the economic crisis and austerity have caused 21 percent of the population to be classified as poor, where 2.3 million children—27.5 percent of the total—live under the poverty line, and where 25 percent of workers are unemployed, the same conditions that led to the revolutionary explosions of the 1930s and the ruling class’s pre-emptive counter-revolution, are being created.

The ruling class sees the need to justify past dictatorships in order to set up a new one and to smash any opposition to austerity and imperialist war.



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