

Rebellion without a cause?

To conflate those who oppose independence for Catalonia with extremist nationalists is an insult to those who fought Franco, writes Tim Fanning



Independence supporters in Catalonia. Photo: AP

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A few years ago, I attended the unveiling of a plaque in a small cemetery in the Basque Country. Those gathered were honouring the memory of three victims of the savage Francoist repression which followed the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936.

A teacher, Juan Larreta, was among the victims. He was 54, a widower and the father of five children. He was shot dead by local fascists against the wall of a shepherd's hut because he was a socialist and a supporter of the Popular Front government. What struck me as I listened to the speakers in the cemetery was the raw emotion in their voices. It was as if the events had taken place a few short days ago. In fact, more than seven-and-a-half decades had elapsed since the murders. But it was only now that many of the elderly men and women present, including Larreta's 93-year-old son, Jose, were able to articulate their grief.

Part of the reason lies in the bargain struck in the immediate aftermath of Franco's death in 1975, which enabled Spain to move from dictatorship to democracy in the space of seven years. Under the 'pacto del olvido' - the 'pact of forgetting' - left and right agreed to bury the memory of Francoist crimes for the sake of, if not reconciliation, then peaceful coexistence. Those on the losing side of the Civil War, and their children, who had suffered most during the dictatorship agreed to go along with the pact, fearful that a prolonged period of instability might bring another round of bloodletting.

The culmination of the process was the election of Felipe Gonzalez at the head of a Socialist government in 1982. Spain's dour image gave way to that of a vibrant country taking its rightful place on the world stage thanks to the Seville Expo, the Barcelona Olympics and the growing reputation of artists and filmmakers such as Pedro Almodovar.

It took the next generation, those who reached adulthood in the democratic era and who were free from the fear and paranoia of their parents and grandparents, to question this act of collective amnesia. Novelists began exploring the legacy of the Civil War and local historical associations began digs to locate the remains of those who had been executed by Francoist death squads. Most significantly, the Socialist government of Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero ordered the removal of Francoist monuments and symbols from public buildings and spaces. The Catholic Church was exempted, meaning that fascist plaques and insignia continue to adorn facades and interior walls of many of the country's churches.

Two-hundred thousand Spaniards died during what English historian Paul Preston describes as the Spanish Holocaust. They were non-combatants, men, women and children who were murdered behind the lines during the Civil War. Some of the worst massacres committed by Franco's troops took place in the poverty-stricken south of Spain. In 1936, Andalusia was controlled by a small group of rich landowners who treated their workers as little more than serfs, which meant it was fertile ground for anarchism and socialism. Upon its election in February of that year, the Popular Front government began to challenge this economic exploitation, provoking the fury of the wealthy elites.

During the early months of the Civil War, Franco's forces, battle-hardened foreign legionaries and North African mercenaries, took control of Andalusia. They systematically raped, murdered and pillaged as they entered each town and village. Franco did not care about winning the war quickly, he wanted to make sure that the working classes - and those middle-class supporters of the Spanish Republic who were committed to economic, social and educational reform - would be so terrified that they would never again dare to challenge the status quo. According to Preston, the Nationalist generals, who had learnt their trade in North Africa, 'regarded the Spanish proletariat in the same way as they did the Moroccan, as the inferior race that had to be subjugated by sudden, uncompromising violence'.

In the aftermath of the war, workers in the south of Spain endured near famine conditions. In the 1950s and 1960s, more than a million Andalusians migrated to wealthy Catalonia. They were members of the working-classes who had survived the brutal Francoist repression. They settled in the outskirts of Barcelona, finding work in the city's factories.

The children of these emigrants grew up speaking Castilian at home rather than Catalan. But they identify themselves as Catalans. They cheer for FC Barcelona, some of them may even support the Spanish football team - a heinous crime in the eyes of Catalan nationalists. They are ordinary Catalans who are proud of their regional identity but also feel a kinship with the rest of Spain. They have no love for the right-wing government in Madrid but many have deep reservations about the pro-independence movement.

Madrid's hard-line response to the referendum in Catalonia last month has obscured the fact that the Catalan government is attempting to secede from Spain against the wishes of the region's majority. Unfortunately, the images of masked riot police swinging their batons at peaceful protesters perpetuates a simplistic narrative that contrasts freedom-loving Catalans against a tyrannical central government in Madrid, while denying a voice to those who identify as both Catalan and Spanish and who wish to remain part of Spain.

This narrative popped up in the pages of last weekend's Irish Times. Four pictures were used to illustrate a measured piece about the divisions in Catalonia by the newspaper's Madrid correspondent Guy Hedgecoe. The main picture was of a group of fascists, tattooed arms outstretched, lit by the demonic red glare of the flares they were carrying. Though the far-right in Spain is minuscule, one could have been forgiven for thinking Barcelona was experiencing its own Nuremberg Rally. A picture below showed a well-behaved, elderly woman peacefully carrying a pro-independence placard in Catalan and English which mentioned the word 'freedom'.

To conflate those who oppose independence for Catalonia with extremist Spanish nationalism is an insult to all Catalans whose ancestors died fighting fascism. Catalans who oppose independence, especially those whose

ancestors fled Francoist repression in other parts of Spain, do not deserve to be treated, especially in the foreign press, as some kind of fifth columnists who are doing the dirty work of the Madrid government.

The official flag of the autonomous region of Catalonia is the Senyera, which consists of four red bands on a yellow background. The pro-independence flag is the Estelada, similar to the Senyera but which also includes a white star on a blue chevron. The Estelada is the flag which Sinn Fein councillor Chris Andrews hoisted above City Hall during a self-serving stunt last month.

Sinn Fein and People Before Profit say they stand 'in solidarity' with the people of Barcelona and their members on Dublin City Council wish to raise the 'Catalan flag' above City Hall for a month. In fact, they stand in solidarity with the pro-independence movement, which is led by a bourgeois Catalan party with a long history of serious financial corruption. It is stranger still to see two avowed parties of the left associating themselves with a wider phenomenon which sees wealthy regions of European countries attempting to secede because they no longer wish to pay for their poorer neighbours. Is this solidarity?

If Dublin City Council is going to fly the Catalan flag over City Hall, let it be the Senyera, in solidarity with all Catalans who suffered under the Francoist dictatorship and during years of economic mismanagement by both the Madrid and Catalan governments.

Tim Fanning is a writer with a particular interest in Spanish and Latin American history and politics. He is the author of Paisanos: The Forgotten Irish who Changed the Face of Latin America (Gill, 2016)

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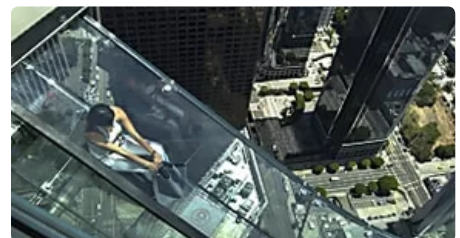
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