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Plan to Exhume Franco Renews Spain's Wrestle With History

By Raphael Minder

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SAN LORENZO DE EL ESCORIAL, Spain — After celebrating Mass last month, congregants here at the Valle de los Caídos basilica walked to the back of the altar to pay homage to Francisco Franco, the Spanish dictator who is buried here.

They stood in silence before the tomb. A handful made a fascist salute. Some bent down to touch the stone slab, which is engraved with Franco's name and was covered with two bouquets of flowers. One person tried to take a photograph — only to be told off by a security guard.

“Franco was a dictator, but a good one,” said Estela Tapias, who attended the Mass with her husband and two children. “I really don't understand why these Communists want to take him out.”

By “Communists,” she was referring to the Socialist government, led by Spain's new prime minister, Pedro Sánchez.

Mr. Sánchez unexpectedly came to power in June, replacing Mariano Rajoy and his conservative administration. Within days of taking office, he announced that his government wanted to exhume Franco and move him to a more modest burial place, as part of an effort to atone for the crimes of the civil war and the repression that followed the conflict.

The basilica and its giant stone cross dominate the Valle de los Caídos, or Valley of the Fallen, and were built by Franco to honor those who “fell for God and Spain” in his 1939 victory in the Spanish Civil War.

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The site, near the town of San Lorenzo de el Escorial, about an hour's drive northwest of Madrid, is one of Europe's largest mass graves, housing the remains of at least 33,000 people. Most had fought for Franco, but the monument also contains the bones of many of his Republican opponents who were anonymously dumped there, some of which were allegedly gathered from mass graves across the country in order to swell the numbers.



An activist held pictures of victims of the civil war outside the entrance to the basilica in April.

Juan Medina/Reuters

Some families have been demanding that their loved ones be returned to them for proper burial. In April, the remains of four men — from both sides of the civil war — were extracted from the site at the request of their relatives and after a lengthy legal battle. The ruling could pave the way for hundreds more to be exhumed.

Nobody casts a longer shadow over Spanish politics than Franco, even decades after his death in 1975. Almost every aspect of his legacy has fueled dispute, extending recently to the renaming of squares and streets associated with his regime. Some cities controlled by left-leaning politicians want to carry out other exhumations, notably in Seville, where one of Franco's military commanders, Gonzalo Queipo de Llano, was also buried in a basilica.

Paul Preston, a British historian and biographer of Franco, said that Spain was an anomaly in Europe in keeping a “place of pilgrimage for its fascist dictator” — there are no monuments to Adolf Hitler in Germany or in Austria, nor to Benito Mussolini in Italy. Among the more than 250,000 visitors to the Valle de los Caídos each year, Mr. Preston said, many are devotees of Franco “brought up to believe that he was a benefactor for Spain.”

Mr. Sánchez, the prime minister, leads a fragile Socialist government that has only a quarter of the seats in Parliament.

But he could order Franco's removal by decree. The exhumation plan — which was proposed a decade earlier by the previous Socialist prime minister, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero — is likely to win support from the leftist Podemos party and from Basque and Catalan nationalist

lawmakers who joined forces with Mr. Sánchez to allow him to replace Mr. Rajoy.

Franco decided to carve the basilica into the mountainside shortly after winning the civil war. Construction lasted 18 years, with Republican prisoners among the labor force. The basilica also became the resting place of several nuns and other members of the clergy killed during the civil war — some of whom were later beatified by the pope — as well as that of José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the leader of the far-right Falangist party, who was killed in 1936 and was considered a martyr by Franco's followers. His tomb is on the other side of the altar to that of Franco.

Last month, Mr. Sánchez met with Archbishop Ricardo Blázquez of Valladolid, the leader of the confederation of Spanish bishops. After the meeting, the Rev. José María Gil Tamayo, the secretary general of the confederation, suggested that the church would prefer to stay on the sidelines of what it considered to be a political debate over Franco's remains.

The basilica is run by Benedictine priests who live in an adjacent abbey. While the abbot, Santiago Cantera, long opposed any attempt to alter the site, this year he dropped a court appeal to stop the removal of the four civil war victims.



The imposing cross at Valle de los Caídos. According to one biographer of Franco, Spain is an anomaly in Europe in keeping a “place of pilgrimage for its fascist dictator.” Paul Hanna/Reuters

Some in Spain echo the feeling that moving Franco would simply be a case of politicians trying to make capital out of the painful events of the civil war. In that view, Franco built the basilica, so he has the right to be buried there. Others say the dictator should be removed because the

site was built for those killed in the civil war, while Franco died decades later in a hospital bed.

In fact, there are no official records showing what Franco wanted to happen after his death, even though Mr. Preston, the historian, recounts in his biography of the dictator that Franco told the architect that he should be buried at the site.

The most obvious alternative place for Franco's embalmed corpse is alongside his wife, Carmen Polo, who died in 1988 and who lies in a crypt in the cemetery of El Pardo, Franco's former residence near Madrid.

The exhumation plan comes as Franco's family is already entangled in several disputes after the death of the dictator's daughter, his only child, in December. The local authorities in Franco's home region, Galicia, want to block the sale of a family estate because it stands on land he expropriated.

Mr. Sánchez's government is also reviewing whether to strip the family's title of nobility, received from King Juan Carlos days after Franco's death and now held by his granddaughter.

Mr. Sánchez called for the exhumation of the remains to be "immediate." Although he has not set a date, the Socialists probably want to avoid a repeat of the protracted debate that took place under Mr. Zapatero's government, when a commission of experts was appointed to help transform the Valle de los Caídos into "a place of reconciled memory."

By the time the commission published its recommendations, in November 2011, Mr. Rajoy's conservative Popular Party had regained power. Mr. Rajoy stopped financing any project linked to a 2007 law of historical memory, instituted during Mr. Zapatero's government, which offered state support for moving people found to have been buried in common graves during the civil war. The law also allowed for an overhaul of the Valley of the Fallen.

Luis Castañón, a data analyst from Valladolid who was visiting the site with his wife, said that attending Mass in Franco's basilica allowed him "to pray for the dead, for reconciliation and for the unbreakable unity of Spain." He argued that the site should be left untouched: "Whoever doesn't like this place isn't forced to come here."

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