

DIGNIFYING THE MASS GRAVES OF THE REPRESSION IN CATALONIA

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The aim of this communication is to offer some reflection on the fact that, over thirty years after Spain recovered its democratic freedoms, it is still often far from easy to carry out actions aimed at repairing the memory of the victims of Franco's repressive violence. One good indication of this has been provided by the treatment received by judge Garzón in recent months, which has been widely reported by the world's media. Another can be seen in the apparent reluctance not so much as to exhume the victims of Francoist repression but to dignify the many places, scattered throughout the country, where they still lie in various, unofficial, mass graves.

This paper will specifically concentrate on this question within the context of Catalonia, where mass graves associated with Francoist repression were mainly dug in provincial cemeteries. As was the case in most of Spain during the same period, these cemeteries were the burial grounds for the victims of post Civil War repression. Most of them were sentenced in court martial, whose annulations remain the objective of repeated demands, given their blatantly undignified and unjust nature.

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In some of these cemeteries, alongside the mass graves containing the victims of post-war repression, it is possible to find others containing other victims of the revolutionary violence that followed the military coup of 1936. There are mass graves containing the remains of the soldiers who were killed on the front line or who died in hospitals as a result of their war wounds. Nearby, there are also mass graves containing the victims of bombings and the bodies of those who died of starvation or epidemic illness. These mass graves also contain corpses that were not identified or reclaimed by their families; these were also, effectively, direct or indirect victims of the war and of the precarious living conditions of the post-war period. The cemetery of the city of Lleida provides a good example of the coexistence of all these different types of mass graves.

The exception to this reality can be found in the zone that stretches along what was the front line for nine months, beginning in the spring of 1938, and which follows the courses of the rivers Noguera Pallaresa and Segre as far as the confluence with the river Ebro. The brutality and deadly nature of these combats meant that both sides had to bury their dead in ditches near the battle lines, many of which have yet to be located. In contrast, the mass graves of the civilian victims of the terror of the first days of the Francoist occupation - and particularly those located in the north of the area, near the border with France - have, in the majority of cases, been located and dignified thanks, to a large extent, to the collaboration of eye witnesses.

In Catalonia, as many as 179 mass graves have so far been identified and documented. This census has been possible on account of the work undertaken by the *Unidad de Personas Desparecidas* (Unit for Missing People), an organisation that was set up by the *Generalitat de Catalunya* in 2003. A related map is also currently being compiled. It is based on information provided following the approval by the

Catalan Parliament of the "*Ley de Fosas*" (Law of Mass Graves) of 30th June 2009, which foresees finding and identifying the resting places of those who went missing during the Civil War and the dictatorship and dignifying the spaces where they were buried. This measure also reinforces the provisions established by Catalonia's "*Ley del Memorial Democrático*" (Law of Democratic Memory) of 31st October 2007, which contemplates memorial actions at places of mourning of historical significance in order to stress such questions as reparation, historical memory and the education of the wider society.

It has been under the protection of these laws that various bone remains have been collected from the surface or exhumed; these laws form the basis for the Generalitat's present protocol regarding exhumations and have governed the actions undertaken at Corbera d'Ebre and near Gurb (Osona). Military and civilian mass graves have also been dignified at Camposines, near the village of La Fatarella (La Terra Alta), and in the cemeteries of Romadriu and València d'Àneu (El Pallars Sobirà), Cervera (La Segarra), Camarasa (La Noguera), and Alpicat (El Segrià). The Republican mass grave in the cemetery of Tarragona has also been recently dignified. Together with the cemetery of Barcelona, this is - for the moment - the only mass grave located in a provincial capital to have registered memorial actions. There are, however, plans to proceed along the same lines in the cemeteries of the other two Catalan capitals: Girona and Lleida, by the end of 2010.

If this does occur, we will see a good example of the use of laws and government action to palliate a previous deficit and to rectify what has often been referred to as "imperfect mourning". This situation has existed in Catalonia since the end of the Civil War, but the social consensus required to close this unfortunate chapter of Spanish history with dignity has so far been surprisingly absent, particularly

when we consider how the Franco dictatorship ritualised the remembrance of its own dead, and often to pathological extremes.

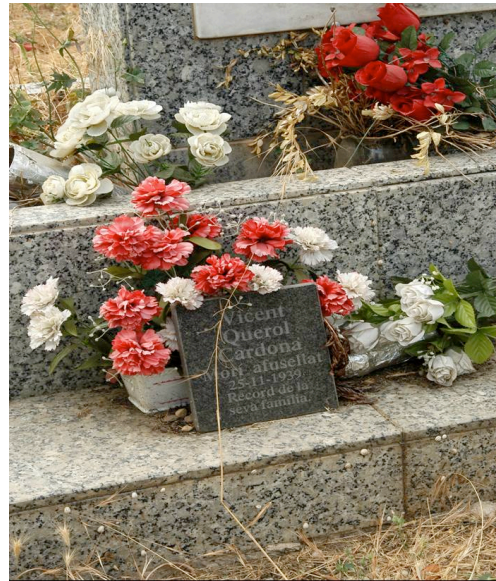
For this reason, it is interesting for historians to consider the route followed, in this process, since the death of the dictator. It starts with the situation in which these mass graves were found from the end of the civil war and runs through to the demands for recognition of the victims of Francoist repression that were formulated by the associations established at the beginning of the democratic transition, such as the lack of institutional attention and manifestations of equidistance when the process started. It is important to point to the most relevant aspects of the different trajectories followed and the difficulties that have been overcome on the route to arriving at the present achievements and the dignification of the memory of all of the victims.

a.- Between silence and family memory in the post-war years

There were too many victims of Francoist repression for their memory to be removed from even the cemeteries. Based on studies undertaken back in the mid-1980s, this repression would have resulted in some 150,000 deaths, of which 50,000 corresponded to the summary executions that took place once the Civil War was over. Already, back in 1940, some of the relatives of these victims asked for and received authorisation to erect crosses on the mass graves in which their loved ones were buried. In the case of the cemetery of Lleida, this was documented in the municipal records, where there was a warning that that no other inscription than the name of the person would be permitted: there could be no indication of the circumstances of death, no dates, and no references to places of origin. This last point is particularly relevant because it was in the capital of each province that those condemned to death were first judged and later buried. This occurred after the prisoners had been

transferred from their respective towns and villages to prisons located in the corresponding provincial capitals. Doing this effectively stole away or obstructed any possibility of historically reconstructing some of the events that the authorities of the time wished to keep secret.

Even so, little by little, victims' relatives accompanied their crosses first by flowers and then by photographs, dates and toponyms. Later - during the political transition - they added references to the causes of death; in some cases inscriptions referred to "execution by firing squad". In this regard, the cemetery in the Valencian village of Paterna offers a really unique image and one that it is not possible to find in any Catalan cemetery. The ceramic tiles that were used to cover the mass graves of those buried after being "taken for strolls" for illegal execution shone in a very explicit way and from the post-war period onwards they bore the cause of death of those buried there. A single word "*fusilado*" (executed by firing squad) has remained throughout the years and survived the different memorial actions that this exceptional cemetery has witnessed. This burial site contains a small space with examples of the different private and public memory policies in remembrance of the victims of Francoist repression from the end of the war until the recent passing of the Law of Historical Memory.



The ceramic tiles on the mass grave of the Cemetery of Paterna (Valencia), which were presumably placed during the Dictatorship, and the small stele on the mass grave of the cemetery of Lleida, which was erected during the period of democratic transition and which, until very recently, was the only item that made reference to the cause of death of those buried there.

In other cemeteries, such as that of Montjuïc in Barcelona, the presence of small crosses, added by the relatives of those buried in the *Fossar de la Pedrera* remained until its conversion, at the beginning of the 1980s, into the most important memorial dedicated to the victims of the Francoist dictatorship in Catalonia.



Fossar de la Pedrera mass grave at the quarry of Montjuïc, as photographed in 1976. This image has been kindly provided by the *Associació Pro-memòria als Immolats per la Llibertat de Catalunya*.



The *Fossar de la Pedrera* of Montjuïc in October 2008.

b.- Between the socialisation of memory and the memorial euphemisms born out of the democratic transition

It was after the death of Franco that demands for the dignification of places of mourning intensified in response to pressure from the civil associations that soon began to organise themselves. The *Associació Pro-memòria als Immolats per la Libertat de Catalunya*, (Association in favour of those Sacrificed for the Freedom of Catalonia), which was created in 1976, played an active role in the organisation of the memorials that were erected in the previously cited Montjuïc cemetery and at the *Camp de la Bota*, where thousands of people were executed by firing squad. These two memorials were erected in the early 1980s and 1990s.

In these years, as demands to remember the victims of political repression increased, other groups appeared who campaigned for measures to remember the military victims of the armed conflict, many of whom were also buried in cemeteries in mass graves, or in

ditches out in the open country, some of which have yet to be documented. It was with the intention of recovering the memory of these combatants that the *Agrupació de Supervivents de la Lleva del Biberó-41* (Group of Survivors of the Baby Bottle Levy of 1941) was created in 1983. This association brought together ex-combatants from the intake of Republican conscripts of 1941, who were popularly known as the "*quinta del biberón*" (the baby bottle levy) on account of the very young ages of those mobilised. This association urged the corresponding institutions to proceed with the exhumation of various mass graves scattered across the Segre front, which was where this draft first entered into combat, and also along the Ebro front. The aim was to collect together the resulting remains found at several places of communal mourning where the victims could be remembered and have their memory honoured. As a result, by the 1980s, the cemetery of Camarasa (La Noguera) had become an emblematic place of meeting and memory where survivors and the descendents of soldiers could meet every year. In 2006, its improved conditioning and dignification was one of the first actions undertaken by the *Memorial Democràtic de Catalunya* (Democratic Memory of Catalonia), which had only been created just over one year before.

It should be pointed out that the socialisation of the remembrance of the military and civilian victims of the Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, which began at the end of the Francoist period, had to coexist with the reconversion, or transfer - following another type of political remembrance - of a large number of the Francoist monuments "to the fallen for God and Spain" that had been erected in cemeteries or in other public places. In many of these cases, the change consisted of replacing the original Fascist iconography with inscriptions that read "To all the victims of the Civil War" or similar legends. This is, for example, what happened in the case of the monolith erected in the centre of the city of Reus, which was transferred to the city cemetery in 1998, without its Fascist symbols.

In 2004 a new plaque was added with the following inscription: *"From the citizens of Reus to all the men and women who fought and died in the war from 1936 to 1939. So that their memory should always remain alive and should teach us to follow the road of peace and coexistence"*.

Something similar occurred with one of the most exceptional monuments to the fallen that had been erected in the centre of the city of Terrassa. It was dismantled and reconstructed in an area of the city's cemetery and, in 1999, the inscription: *"The city of Terrassa, in memory of the victims of the war"* replaced the legend that had taken pride of place on the monument for so many years: *"Fallen for God and Spain. Here present!"*.

At the beginning of the 1980s, the city of Lleida used the back of a huge altar dedicated to the fallen, which had been constructed in the provincial cemetery in the early 1940s, to remember *"Those executed by firing squad, 1936-1940"* (Lleida. Als afusellats 1936-1940). This gesture sought to maintain historical equidistance, remembering the victims of violent political repression of both sides during the war and post-war period who were buried in this place, but it omitted the fact that the Francoist summary executions continued until 1945.



Back of the cross to the fallen in the cemetery of Lleida with an inscription from 1983

This prompts us to reflect on the opportunity and consequences of resorting to palliative phrases, or euphemisms, of the type used during the transition - and which, on more than one occasion, have continued to be used to the present day - to try to get round some of the awkward questions that have yet to be resolved concerning the historical memory. The reality of these phrases is that they mention the Civil War and the remembrance of all of the victims, which facilitates related actions, but the chronological limits established effectively omitted the victims of the Francoist summary repression of the post-war period. It is important to underline that in Catalonia, which was mainly in the Republican rearguard, it was in this post-war period that the majority - almost 4000 - of the executions were carried out. As we have already mentioned, legislative action relating to the historical memory and the actions of civil institutions will allow this question to be tackled, as can be seen from the actions already undertaken in the cemeteries of the major cities which is - as we have already commented - where the largest military and civilian mass graves are to be found.

c.- The memory of the Francoist repression in the provincial cemeteries of Catalonia: realities and projects

If we focus on military mass graves, we find a wide casuistry, because as we gradually discover more about the human toll of the Civil War, new graves appear whose dignification does not usually present any major problems. What is more, there is usually a good degree of complementarity between the virtual memorial, which offers the advantages of the opportunities for diffusion presented by information technology, and memorial actions undertaken in situ. This has particularly been the case of the memorial dedicated to the International Brigades that was inaugurated in the Capuchinos cemetery of Mataró in 1996 to commemorate the 60th anniversary of their arrival in Spain. This action established a physical memorial in

the territory to remember the 51 brigade members who died at the International Hospital that had been located there, but their names were first published on the Internet by a researcher who had found references to them in both the Registry Office and the registry of the local cemetery. This is just one example of the many acts of homage that have been paid to these defenders of freedom at both the national and international levels.

The names of the 409 soldiers who died in the blood hospital located in the town of Cervera, in the Catalan rearguard, also first appeared on the Internet. They were buried in a large mass grave in the local cemetery, but it was not until September 2008 – and again due to the work of the *Memorial Democràtic* – their grave was dignified with the inauguration of a monument in their memory. This same procedure has also been followed at other sites, and it has also been followed – without controversy – in the case of military graves. Although things have been a little more complicated when the spaces to be dignified have corresponded to mass graves associated with political repression, in line with the planning established at the present time, it seems that the four provincial cemeteries of Catalonia will finally complete the memorial actions that remain pending, some of which were started at the beginning of the 1980s.

This was the case with the previously mentioned *Fossar de la Pedrera* in the Barcelona cemetery of Montjuïc, where 1,717 victims of summary executions – which were mainly carried out at the former *Camp de la Bota*, the site that is now occupied by the Barcelona Forum – were buried. Several years ago, the president of the *Associació d'Expresos Polítics del Franquisme* (Association of ex-Prisoners of Francoism) – one of the entities promoted by the *Memorial Democràtic* – did not hesitate to affirm that if people were asked where this mass grave was located, hardly anybody would reply. And that is despite the fact that since 1976 there have been

constant demands to formally recognise this location as an emblematic site of mourning and memory. As we have indicated above, it was the tenacity of another civil association that appeared after the death of Franco - the *Asociació Pro-memòria als Immolats per la Llibertat de Catalunya*, which was founded in 1976 - that proved the catalyst for the whole group of actions that were undertaken at this site. Their initiative helped to convert its initial inhospitable state of abandon into what is now a model example of memorial actions of this type.

Broadly speaking, we should remember that between 1976 and 1979, the pressure exerted was successful in stopping this site being used as a common grave and also as a rubbish dump for the irregular housing that had become established on the sides of Montjuïc. Then, in 1985, as a result of action taken by Barcelona City Council in collaboration with the *Generalitat de Catalunya*, 25 columns were inaugurated on which the names of the victims of Francoist repression were engraved. In this same year, gardens were added to this area and the crosses that had been erected there since the end of the Civil War disappeared, as we can appreciate in the attached photograph. It was also at this time that the tomb of President Lluís Companys was transferred. He had been shot on 15th October 1940 and buried in the same cemetery, where his body remained until it was put to rest in the mausoleum that was constructed above the cited mass grave. This site has also received other additions which have been erected in memory of various militants, fighters and victims by political parties, Jewish organisations and the international brigades. In this respect, it is also important to stress that the quarry remains a place of family mourning for many of the descendents of the victims of the bombings and hardships of the post-war period and also for the "victims of fortune": anonymous civilian victims who are remembered on the inscription that accompanies the columns that bear the names of the victims of political reprisals and mark the

entrance to this mass grave. Following an initiative led by the *Memorial Democràtic*, there are now also plans to erect various commemorative panels explaining the historical significance of this site. This will complete the current series of commemorative actions to be undertaken at this site.

As previously mentioned, it was also due to an initiative of the *Memorial Democràtic* and Tarragona City Council that action was taken to dignify the Republican mass grave located in the provincial cemetery of this capital, which contains 724 previously documented victims of summary executions who were shot between 1939 and 1948. The inauguration of the monument that bears inscriptions of all their names - which took place on 16th January, 2010 - opened the way for similar actions in the cemeteries of Girona and Lleida. These other commemorations have yet to be made, but if the current schedule is followed, the corresponding memorials will be inaugurated on 1st November this year. The work of previous documentation has been completed by the departments of History of the universities of both of these cities and can already be consulted via Internet. This work will also serve as the base reference for engraving the names of victims on the memorials that are currently being prepared. The Girona memorial will bear the names of 510 people who were subjected to summary executions between 1939 and 1942; that of Lleida will have 547 names, corresponding to victims of repression documented between 1939 and 1945. This will bring to an end the process whose main virtue is that it seeks to repair a historic injustice by dignifying the sites where the victims lie. At the same time, a path will be left open for potential future actions aimed at improving the documentation and historical analysis of some of the sites that present a complex typology of mass graves. This is the case of the previously cited cemetery in the city of Lleida, where there are both military and civilian graves, including those corresponding to different bouts of political repression. There are also previous memorials

which, in the near future, we hope to see well signposted and explained in order to help educate a democratic citizenship, whose visits to these places of mourning and memory should have no other objective than that of promoting peace and solidarity.