

2011

Vincent Druliolle on Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves and the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain. Edited by Carlos Jerez-Farrán and Samuel Amago. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 410pp.

Vincent Druliolle
University of Essex

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw>



Part of the [Human Rights Law Commons](#), [International Humanitarian Law Commons](#), [International Law Commons](#), [International Relations Commons](#), [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Politics and Social Change Commons](#), and the [Social Policy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Druliolle, Vincent (2011) "Vincent Druliolle on Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves and the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain. Edited by Carlos Jerez-Farrán and Samuel Amago. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 410pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 11: Iss. 1, Article 5. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol11/iss1/5>



All Rights Reserved.

This Book Notes is brought to you for free and open access by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Human Rights & Human Welfare by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact jennifer.cox@du.edu, dig-commons@du.edu.

Vincent Druliolle on Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves and the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain. Edited by Carlos Jerez-Farrán and Samuel Amago. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 410pp.

Abstract

A review of:

Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves and the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain. Edited by Carlos Jerez-Farrán and Samuel Amago. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 410pp.

Keywords

Human rights, Spain, Spanish Civil War, Francisco Franco, Dictatorship, Mass graves, Amnesty, Historical memory, Democracy, Transitional justice

Copyright Statement / License for Reuse



All Rights Reserved.

Publication Statement

Copyright is held by the Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver. User is responsible for all copyright compliance.

Unearthing Franco's Legacy: Mass Graves and the Recovery of Historical Memory in Spain. Edited by Carlos Jerez-Farrán and Samuel Amago. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010. 410pp.

Eleven years ago, the bodies of an anonymous grave were exhumed in the province of León in northwestern Spain. It was the first exhumation of one of the numerous unmarked graves from the period of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and the early years of Franco's dictatorship (1939-1975) scattered across the country. Since the first exhumation in 2000, digging up the country's violent past has remained an extremely controversial issue. The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH), created in 2000, and other associations turned to the courts. In 2008, Judge Baltasar Garzón declared himself competent to investigate the "crimes against humanity" committed by Franco and the Nationalists between 1936 and 1952. But in April 2010, he was indicted for abusing his powers, as the Spanish Supreme Court reasserted that these crimes are protected by the Amnesty Law adopted by referendum in 1977. Judge Baltasar Garzón was suspended in May 2010, pending trial. Several commentators noted the sad irony that the only person to have been prosecuted to date in relation to Spain's dictatorial past is the one person who endeavored to formally investigate these events.

Unearthing Franco's Legacy analyzes the opening of mass graves and the controversial public debate about the wider issue of "recovering historical memory" through a collection of essays by prominent actors, commentators, and scholars. The book is divided into four parts that analyze different aspects of the "recovery of historical memory." Each part is introduced by an opening essay that is a commentary on the subsequent chapters, though in Part I and II they add neither substance nor analysis.

Part I is devoted to historical analysis. Paul Preston highlights the mix of anti-Semitism and anti-communism of the Nationalists' ideology and the dictatorship's propaganda, while Hilari Ragner Suñer recounts the role of the Spanish Church and clergy, which, except for a few notable exceptions, supported Franco's dictatorship and have not acknowledged or condemned their role to date. In his chapter, Julián Casanova provides detailed descriptions of the horrors of the postwar era. Finally, Michael Richards critically discusses the dominant narratives about the Civil War (religious crusade, class war, and fratricidal struggle) and how these representations, but also their critique, have shaped the debate about the "recovery of historical memory." Referring to the various forms of personal histories published over the past fifteen years, he highlights their lack of a sense of historical consciousness, calling historians to see that they are an essential part of the Civil War and its aftermath, and making the case for a "social history" of the conflict.

Part II of Unearthing Franco's Legacy is a stimulating analysis of various documentaries and testimonies about the Civil War and Franco's regime. Gina Herrmann compares two documentaries about the opening of mass graves, focusing on the visual and narrative representation of past events, what bones and reburials are meant to signify in these documentaries, and how these two issues are related. She shows that an obsessive focus on bare bones decontextualizes and depoliticizes the past, and reproduces the contested narrative of shared responsibility for past atrocities. This way of narrating the past interprets history as outburst of violence for which everyone is to blame, and it reproduces the Francoist narrative of

shared responsibility for past atrocities, which has been used to justify the absence of justice. Moreover, equating reburial with private closure and the possibility of turning the page on a painful past hinders a critical re-assessment of this past. By contrast, *Les Fosses del Silenci*, an award-winning documentary produced for Catalan television and published in an equally successful book format, makes it clear that recovering and identifying remains do not exhaust what memory is about, and that memory and justice are inseparable. Reburial is not an act of justice or redress if the crime is not officially and publicly recognized and if perpetrators are not identified. Reburial is thus an opportunity to question contemporary society, and the documentary is presented as an imperfect substitute for justice.

In the following chapter, Jo Labanyi analyzes the edited collections of testimonies about the Civil War and the dictatorship published over the last decade. She criticizes the over-emphasis on macabre details that tend to explain past events through two figures, the helpless victim and the evil perpetrator, and thus portray a simplistic and apolitical historical process. Labanyi stresses that testimonies, including those of the Nationalists, are necessary, though not as a source of factual evidence about the past, but, like in *Les Fosses del Silenci*, as a window into the feelings of the narrators in the present.

The subtle discussions of *Les Fosses del Silenci* by Herrmann and Labanyi contrast with the analysis by Montse Armengou Martín, one of the documentary's co-directors. Claiming that investigative journalists have an "ethical" and "activist" duty to give voice to those who have been silenced (158), her chapter denounces the "media crusade" (163) and censorship orchestrated by the Right against her and other documentary filmmakers, and blames what is often called the conspiracy or pact of silence about the past in post-transition Spain. The use of this rhetoric gives a heroic dimension to the director's own work, but it does not clarify the idea of an ethics of investigative journalism. While these resistances to re-opening the debate about the past cannot be denied, Anne E. Hardcastle underlines in her essay opening Part II that Labanyi stresses the fundamental paradox that "this pact of silence or oblivion has been constructed as 'fact' precisely through the process of denouncing it" (148).

Part III of *Unearthing Franco's Legacy* addresses the implications of the pact of oblivion for contemporary Spanish democracy. In his opening essay, Antonio Gómez López-Quñones claims that although Spaniards celebrate the transition to democracy as a model, "[w]hat should have been (in geo-political, social, economic, and institutional terms) merely a beginning was and is legitimized as a point of arrival" (211). It is for this reason that recovering memory is for him an urgent political task for present-day society, and the main questions are "how and in what terms we regard the victims and the motives for why we talk about them" (215).

In a stimulating essay, Joan Ramon Resina analyzes the institutionalization of amnesty and oblivion in post-transition Spain, as well as resistance to it through the exhumations. He denounces the across-the-board amnesty that was essential to the transition, arguing that it is "amnesia by decree" (227) that "[made] the roles of victims and perpetrators interchangeable" (229). For Resina, the exhumations are the manifestation of an "Antigone complex" that reflects the decay of the mythical spirit of consensus that is said to have dominated the transition. The last chapter of Part III, by Samuel Amago, is devoted to the broad issue of the relationship between literature and memory. Discussing the novels of Javier Carcas, Amago emphasizes how,

through the role of the narrator, writers may reflexively and critically engage with the task of recovering memories and writing history. Owing to its focus, the chapter can be read as a complement to the reflections on documentaries in Part II.

The final part of Unearthing Franco's Legacy offers anthropological perspectives on the exhumations. Antonius C. G. M. Robben interprets mass graves as “invisible monuments” and a “hidden cartography” glorifying the Nationalists’ victory in the Civil War and imposing a regime of fear. Ignacio Fernández de Mata’s chapter reflects on the difficulties for both interviewees and anthropologists to recover personal memories more than seventy years after the Civil War. He also analyzes the “conflicts of memory” that the exhumations have resuscitated and exacerbated, illustrating them through his own father’s discomfort about his research (298). “Conflicts of memory” refers to the different interpretations of the past, whether the past should be remembered, how it should be remembered, and to the implications of the exhumations on these issues.

In the following chapter, Francisco Ferrándiz reminds us that a whole range of memories remain unrecorded or unexpressed seven decades after the end of the Civil War, and argues that they are particularly rich evidence of the “intimacy of defeat” and of the long-lasting effects of terror. Finally, in the last chapter of the book, journalist Giles Tremlett provides an overview of the heated debate that preceded the adoption of the Historical Memory Law (although it is known under this name, the term “historical memory” was scrupulously avoided in the final draft) by the Spanish Parliament in 2006 at the instigation of the Socialist government.

Spain is a unique case study to analyze fundamental issues pertaining to memory, human rights, democracy, and transitional justice. The international dimension of the demand for justice for the victims of Franco’s crimes (a lawsuit was opened in Argentina in 2010 and an appeals court overturned a previous ruling blocking it), and the suspension of Judge Baltasar Garzón that he has taken to the European Court of Human Rights (Garzón accuses Spain’s Supreme Court of violating his rights by blocking his investigation of the crimes of Franco’s dictatorship, which are for him crimes against humanity and, as a result, can no longer be protected by Spain’s Amnesty Law), are likely to further increase interest in these issues in Spain. Unearthing Franco's Legacy is thus a timely (and long-overdue) anthology about the movement to “recover historical memory.” Its great strength is its exhaustive and multidisciplinary analysis of the social, political, cultural, and ethical meanings, implications, and challenges of these debates and struggles, rather than a narrow focus on legal actions and policies to address the past—or hinder it. In other words, Unearthing Franco's Legacy largely succeeds in establishing itself as the authoritative book about the “recovery of historical memory” in Spain.

Vincent Druliolle
University of Essex