

Excavating the Past, Healing the Present, and Preparing the Future: Exhumation of the Remains of People Assassinated During the Spanish Civil War

By Rafael Gonzalez

It is impossible, even for the most oblivious visitor to Spain, to ignore the remnants of a bloody civil war that surface time and time again; they permeate Spanish society and cannot be quelled. It is not uncommon to hear conversations about the atrocities committed by Franco's regime on the streets, in coffee shops, or on the subway. Political discourse is inflamed and pulsating with constant recollections of a past that many wish they could forget. Yet no one seems capable of forgetting. Much of the youth speaks passionately of the Civil War and Franco's subsequent dictatorship as if they had lived and witnessed these events first hand. Yet in reality they have only heard the stories-both from their living and dead relatives.

General Francisco Franco (who staged the coup d'état that erupted in a three year Civil War from 1936-1939 and later became dictator of Spain until 1975) has been dead for thirty-five years now, and Spain's transition from fascism to democracy is an exemplary one. In the process of creating a post-Franco Spain however, it was more convenient (for everyone's sake) to allow for wounds and trauma to heal themselves with time. The crimes committed hitherto were left in the past and Spain turned over a new leaf, or so they thought. Today, it is evident that the wounds and the trauma have not healed but remain lacerated under the Band-Aid. Many Spaniards today are seeking justice and a dignified remembrance of those who were victims. In the democratic country that Spain claims to be, Spaniards cannot fathom why proper justice has not been carried out. In December of 2007, the government of incumbent Spanish president

José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero signed into law what is known as *La Ley de Memoria Historica*, which was drafted with the aim of beginning to heal the wounds. Its intentions particularly guided at moral healing, the recovery of collective and personal memory, the recovery of history, and the clearing of hostilities and elements of dissidence amongst citizens. An important article within the law lays out the government's responsibility to assist and sponsor the opening and exhumation of mass grave sites from the Civil War and Franco's regime, many of which have remained closed until today. This law has been controversial within Spain where many of Franco's supporters feel it is only widening the divide amongst Spaniards, and still others see this as the very first step of a long overdue process that will take years to reach completion.

During the Spanish Civil War and during the Dictatorship, executions were often carried out en masse and the bodies placed in mass graves all over Spain. A few sites have been opened since Franco's death but only through the endeavors of private entities. With the *Ley de Memoria Historica*, petitions can be made to the Spanish government by families of victims to have graves opened and the remains of their loved ones recovered. Unfortunately, funds have been hard to come by and the law remains to be fully executed.

I was fortunate enough to have been invited to participate in the opening of one such grave this past August at a site known as *La Pedraja* 20 miles east of Burgos in northern Spain along the famed *Camino de Santiago de Compostela*. It was here that I gained a much more insightful understanding of what Spain's past, present, and future are all about. The excavation was the culmination of many years spent on collecting testimonies, doing research, and gathering funds by an association of families of victims from the Civil War formed over thirty years ago. As part of my invitation, I was given a packet that included a brief plan of the proceedings along with a brief itinerary. What was clear from this plan was that the effort was to be a

multidisciplinary one which included experts in many fields: forensics, archeologist, anthropologist, historians, sociologist, medical doctors, dentists, and biologists. The team was spearheaded by Francisco Etxeberria from the Aranzadi Society of Sciences in the Basque Country. This prestigious institute was commissioned by the petitioning association of families and the Spanish government to carry out the excavation and identification of bodies. Upon arriving in Spain and meeting up with the group from Aranzadi it became unequivocal that this was much more than simply digging up remains. The whole process was packed with strong emotions and symbolism. It was a process of finding history and making history.

Aerial images from as far back as the 1950s were collected and in conjunction with testimonials from survivors of the Civil War potential grave sites were identified. In early August, a company that specializes in archeological digs employed georadars and proton geometers to map out the subsurface in the area. By the end of August all the necessary preparations had been completed and the excavation team moved in. The digging began at 8:30am on a cool Monday morning. After about four hours of fruitless digging the sole of a boot surfaced; the edge of one of the mass grave sites was finally found. From thereafter, the soil was slowly removed in layers, digging up a tragic past in the process. After a couple of days, the Aranzadi team had unearthed a second grave and through painstaking manual labor that required us to be bent over for hours the imprints of bodies could vaguely be discerned in the soil. Most bones were highly deteriorated if not completely pulverized. The Aranzadi team determined that this was the inevitable result of the highly acidic and humid soil found in the area. As more human remains were found it became less likely that intact skeletons would be found. To further complicate the matter, most of the bodies had been stacked on top of one another in what seemed to be random order. The findings yielded a frantic array of bones intertwined with pieces

of cloth, teeth, bullets, and other personal items that the victims had carried with them before being executed. The unexpected condition of the remains was quite shattering for the families who had their hearts set on finally finding their loved ones. They had been hoping to find complete skeletons and unscathed bones, which are necessary for identification with DNA analysis. After both graves were cleared, it was estimated that about one hundred bodies had been piled at la *Pedraja*.

Throughout the duration of the excavation visitors from all around flocked to see the work that was underway. Some were simply passing by on the *Camino de Santiago* and others were just curious; and still more stopped because they believed one of their loved ones had been buried at the site. Many of these people brought pictures and shared their stories with those around, generating tears, laughs, and moments of silence. One of these visitors, Eva Martínez Movilla, reminisced about the day when her grandfather was arrested at the beginning of the Civil War in 1936 for being a socialist. He was the father of five children and was still a youthful forty-two years old. He was executed two months after his arrest. For Spaniards like Eva, finding her grandfather would finally provide her with some closure and much needed emotional healing.

Something that struck me as a foreigner immersed in the middle of something with such historic magnitude was the unanimous sense that good and long overdue work was finally being done. There was no question about it. The experts that comprised the Aranzadi team were mostly volunteers from all over Spain who dropped all they were doing and willingly offered their expertise for the excavation (the money provided by the Spanish government for excavations up to this point covers very few of the expenses that arise). For them, the excavation meant embracing their history and making right many of the wrongs from their country's past.

For the families from the area, they were ensuring that the deaths of their loved ones had not been in vain.

The current initiatives to seal old wounds from a not so distant past are only the beginning of a long process of national recovery for all of Spain. Although the country now enjoys the liberties and civil rights that are inherent in a democracy, the ghosts of war and fascism continue to haunt it. The task that lies ahead for the future generations of Spaniards is gargantuan in size, but the current wave of citizens that are so passionately embracing their history are hopeful about what the future holds in store.