

Where Will Francisco Franco Remain?

by Michael Curtis



The Valley of the Fallen includes Gen. Francisco Franco's tomb.

I thought I knew the wheat from the chaff. Can't we be friends?

The world today is full of dictators, at least 19 in sub-Saharan Africa, 12 in the Middle East and North Africa, 8 in Asia, and 1 in Europe. All are characterized by similar features: concentration of political power, no social liberty or personal freedoms, absence of the rule of law, manipulation of the media, personally cruel and frightening. Figures of the recent past were plentiful; Ido Amin in Uganda, Augusto

Pinochet in Chile, Francois Duvalier in Haiti, Pol Pot in Cambodia, not to mention the archetypal exemplars, Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Close to the letter two was Generalissimo Francisco Franco, exponent of severe repression, suppression of dissidents, concentration camps, forced labor, and executions.

The world has the unusual experience of what to do with fallen and dead dictators? The problem has arisen in democratic countries that experienced dictatorial regimes in pre-World War II Europe. Symbols of Hitler and Stalin are gone, as are those of Saddam Hussein in Bagdad, but Franco remains in a place of honor, the last standing monument to former dictators in Europe. The present controversy is over the exhumation of Franco from that monument. Will exhumation be, according to Pedro Sanchez, prime minister of Spain, a great victory for Spanish democracy, or, as opponent argue, a political ploy to help the electoral campaign of Sanchez on November 10, 2019?

The issue was raised in 2007 with a law for exhumation, but no action was taken. At bottom, the memory of the brutal Spanish civil war remains as does the consequent dictatorial rule of Franco, 1939-1975, during which many thousands were killed or imprisoned.

Born on 1892, Francisco Franco joined the army and was prominent in control of Morocco 1912-26, where he was wounded. He became a general at age 33, the youngest in Europe. In 1931 the King of Spain Alfonso XIII was deposed and the Second Republic formed which reduced the power of the military. Franco was reprimanded for criticizing the more liberal ruling group, and was banished to El Ferrol, his birthplace, and later to the Canary Islands. He became the army chief of staff in 1935, and began discussing a coup with army colleagues. At first he hesitated taking action, but joined the coup in July 1936 after the assassination of a radical monarchist Jose Calvo Sotelo. The leaders of the coup obtained assistance from fellow fascists, Germany and Italy, with arms, and other

assistance. The liberal republicans received aid from the Soviet Union and International Brigades. The civil war began on July 8, 1936 and lasted until 1939.

Franco was the Generalissimo of the army in the civil war, getting support from the Catholic Church, the fascist and monarchist political parties, and dissolving all other political parties. Madrid fell to his forces in March 1939, and the military conflict ended. The attention of the world was drawn to the conflict by various factors: the extraordinary painting of Pablo Picasso's *Guernica*, his most powerful political statement, done because of the Nazi bombing of the Basque town; the Hollywood film *For Who the Bell Tolls*, 1943, based on a story by Ernest Hemingway; and George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* which showed the complexity of the groups on both sides fighting in the war, as well as outside fascists and communists on the two sides.

That complexity was illustrated by the mixed nationalist groups supporting Franco: the brutal Spanish Foreign Legion, which massacred prisoners, but which in spite of its name was composed mostly of Spaniards; the *regulares* who were essentially Muslims recruited in Morocco which engaged in gang rape of Spanish women; the Catholic Church the main group supporting Franco. Anti-Franco forces were divided among socialists, communists, Trotskyists, anarchists, unionists, political rivals which fought each other, as well as Franco.

In the war 500,000 combatants and civilians died, and the memory of their deaths lingers.

After the war Franco was head of state, sometime referred to as *Caudillo*, from 1939 to 1975, and was responsible for many thousands killed or imprisoned, elites who were critical of the regime being murdered, and a population largely intimidated. Catholicism was the only tolerated religion, and Catalan and Basque languages were forbidden. A secret police force was created to survey citizens.

Though Spain did not directly participate in World War II, Franco was not neutral. He sent 50,000 volunteers to ally with Nazis against the Soviet Union, opened Spanish ports to Nazi submarines, and invaded the international city of Tangier in Morocco.

Franco died on November 20, 1975 aged 82. His funeral was attended among many others by Prince Rainier of Monaco, and Chilean dictator General Augusto Pinochet. Richard Nixon called General Franco "a loyal friend and ally of the United States, who earned the world-wide respect for Spain through firmness and fairness." Franco was honored by an elaborate tomb, the Valley of the Fallen, the colossal Valle de los caídos basilica, in the granite mountains, 55 km from Madrid.

The memorial covering 3,300 acres has a prominent feature, a 500 feet high Christian cross, said to be the largest cross in the world. The memorial was ordered by Franco, who talked of it as meant to be a national act of atonement and reconciliation. It took 20,000 men, many of them political prisoners, 20 years to build, and opened in 1959. The king and queen of Spain at that time attended the opening ceremony in Franco's honor. Thousands, more than 34,000, from both sides of the civil war, pro and anti-Franco, mostly unidentified, are buried in the Valley. So is Franco himself along with army colleagues. Interestingly, only Franco, and Jose Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the neo-fascist Falange party, have a marked grave,

The monument has been the scene of many demonstrations. Fresh flowers are laid on Franco's grave every day. This and other signs of support for Franco led Spanish governments in 2007 to ban political events. The controversy over Franco continues.

A motion on May 11, 2017 to exhume Franco's remains was approved, 1981-1 with 140 abstentions. A decree on August 24, 2018, stated that only those who died in the civil war would

be buried in the Valley. Therefore, Franco who did not die in the war was to be exhumed. Having Franco in the Valley was a lack of respect for the victims buried there. Again, on September 13, 2018, the Congress of Deputies voted 176-2 but with 165 abstentions. to remove Franco's body from the monument.

The problem continues. The leaders of the Spanish Catholic Church have opposed exhumation using the argument that agreement from interested parties and family must be obtained. Franco's family did write to the Prior of the site Benedictine abbey to block the action. However, In June 2019 the Spanish Supreme Court suspended the process of removing Franco until all the legal appeals had been ruled. The acting prior at the basilica, Father Santiago Canterra did object , but on September 24, 2019, the Court ruled in favor of exhuming the body of Franco. It decided he would not be reburied with military honors, as his family proposed, in the La Amadena Cathedral in the heart of Madrid, but in a municipal cemetery outside of Madrid.

Franco died on November 20, 1975, aged 82, was succeeded by Prince Juan Carlos as king, and Spain, with a short interruption, has been a democratic country. After the civil war, an unwritten agreement, legalized in 1977, called the Pact of Forgetting, was a decision by both left and right parties in Spain not to have investigations of the civil war or the nature and consequences of the Franco regime, or of the 400,000 people who were in prisons, camps, or forced labor battalions. It remains to be seen if the controversy of the exhumation has ignited the debate over the civil war and its consequences, and whether division will replace reconciliation.