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Restoring collective memory or making moral reparations to the victims?

Spain's transition to democracy in the mid 70s put the country's Civil War (1936-39) in the limelight. The debate permeated both public and private spheres. This was because the Franco dictatorship had imposed its own version of events and forced the vanquished to remain silent.

After Franco's death there was a great deal of public interest in discovering what had really happened —a thirst for knowledge that went beyond purely political and ideological reasons. Many politically committed students at the time —of whom I was one— chose history for its role in establishing the truth of events. One can say that History was perceived as the handmaiden of democracy. Indeed, some saw the discipline as a political weapon. The eagerness to “restore collective memory” went beyond academic circles. Clio, the muse of history, had never had so many ardent admirers nor had historians enjoyed such social status. Indeed, the scholars seemed like latter-day heroes as they wrested control of archives from the regime's cronies in order to give the vanquished a new vision of the recent past. A whole host of capstone projects and theses were begun in those years on the history of the Republic and the Spanish Civil War. Josep M. Solé Sabaté and Joan Villarroya pioneered research into Fascist repression.

In 1976, two publishing houses, *La Gaia Ciència* and *Edicions 62*, published an ambitious project directed by Anna Sallés and also animated by Rosa Regàs. The project was titled *Recuperem la nostra història* [Recovering Our History] and consisted of a large format

work in twelve issues that covered the period from the proclamation of the Republic, inspired by the president of the Generalitat in exile Josep Tarradellas, up to the military occupation. This one, written by Josep Benet, a leading figure in the struggle against the Franco dictatorship. The sponsors clearly stated the purpose of the collection in the following terms: “It is not nostalgia that drives us to recover our history but rather the firm conviction that it is necessary if we are to understand the present. Recovering our history is a way of shaping the present and thus our future [...] It involves recovering people’s memory and going back to the sources. As Raimon says: *He who forgets his origins loses his identity*”.

The final quotation was from a song by Raimon, whose iconic lyrics —*Jo vinc d’un silenci* [The Silence From Whence I Come]— are taken from a poem by Salvador Espriu. The same quotation was used by the magazine *Juventut*, the mouthpiece of *Juventut Comunista de Catalunya*, the youth wing of the PSUC [*Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* - Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia] in an issue published in 1977 that ran to some 10,000 copies. The publication helped fill a glaring gap in the country’s history. Long before Benito Bermejo in his book, and Llorenç Soler in a documentary put Francesc Boix in the spotlight, Emili Peydró (first Director of *Juliol*, a youth magazine published by the JSUC movement in 1936) told readers of *Juventut* just who the Catalan photographer accusing the Nazis at the Nuremberg Trial was.

Arreu magazine came out in October 1976 under the aegis of the PSUC, a party that was still illegal at the time. The magazine had a regular section titled *Memòria Popular* [The People’s Memory]. Jesús Maria Rodés, who was in charge of the section, adopted the name to stress that it served the people’s interests and defended Catalan and working-class identity. The first issue consisted of 80,000 free copies. In it, Josep Benet wrote a long article on the arrest, trial, and execution of President Lluís Companys, a subject on which Benet is now an authority.

It is worth mentioning some articles from the Franco era. The historians Enric Ucelay Da Cal and Borja de Riquer referred to the Catalans that helped Franco; Leandre Colomer to the trial of Joan Comorera; and Fèlix Fanés to the 1951 tram strike. Other themes were: the mass round-up of PSUC members in 1946, which ended in the execution by firing squad of four “ringleaders” in 1949; the Free University Assembly of 1957; the sit-in at the Capuchin Friary in Barcelona in 1966; the execution of Salvador Puig Antich. The Catalan language arm of RTVE [Spanish State Broadcasting Corporation] also broadcast a programme titled *Memòria Popular*, presented by Salvador Aslius and with the historian Joan B. Culla acting in an advisory capacity.

Prof. Santos Juliá reminded us that these were the golden years of history magazines with new publications springing up like mushrooms (*Historia 16*, *Tiempo de Historia*), and with thousands of copies sold. *L’Avenç* was founded in Catalonia —the flagship of what some have termed “popular front history”. Labels aside, *L’Avenç* met social demand with a product that was written with intellectual rigour but that adopted a journalistic style. Among the first issues of the magazine, directed by Ferran Mascarell among others, there is an article by Josep M. Solé Sabaté on the repression of the *maquis*.

Other publishers —both old and new— helped slake the public’s thirst for information on the country’s recent history. Jaume Sobrequés (holder of the Chair of Catalan History,

erstwhile senator of the *Entesa dels Catalans* coalition, and Director of the Catalan History Museum) set up the Undàrius publishing house. The first book, *L'Onze de Setembre a Catalunya* [11th September in Catalonia¹] coincided with the massive demonstration in Sant Boí on 11th September 1976. The book sold a record 20,000 copies in the first few weeks. The book *Els catalans als camps nazis* [Catalans in The Nazi Concentration Camps] was published on Saint George's Day 1977². Written by the journalist Montserrat Roig, it spoke frankly of life and death in the Third Reich's concentration camps. Josep Benet was instrumental in the book's publication. The work was inspired by Joaquim Amat-Piniella's novel *K.L. Reich*³ (1963), which spoke of the Catalans, Spanish Republicans and other groups who shared the fate of Jews in Nazi Germany's concentration camps.

Montserrat Roig's book was a best-seller and had an enormous social impact. The presentation of the book was often preceded by documentaries on the concentration camps, narrated by Joan Pagès and other survivors of Mauthausen. Republican combatants and freedom fighters began to speak out in the various political associations that sprang up at the time. Suddenly, trade unions and other groups were filled with the elderly who now had the opportunity to relate their political activities in the 1930s after decades of silence. The 4th PSUC Congress, held in October 1977, agreed to set up a Historical Archive covering all kinds of documents relating to the party and its social movements. The PSUC also paid homage to its members who lost their lives in the fight for freedom. The event was held in Barcelona's Congress Hall on 24th May 1980. The conference speeches were later published as the book *U no és ningú* [You Are Nobody], with a poem by Joan Brossa and a cover illustration by Antoni Tàpies. The PSUC (and now ICV) gathered each year to lay wreaths at the *Fossar de la Pedrera* —the quarry where the last PSUC members were shot by the regime in February 1949.

AMNESTY DOES NOT MEAN AMNESIA

The end of hostilities in 1939 marked the beginning of a long period of brutal repression which only deepened the division between the victors and the vanquished. This split lasted right the way through the dictatorship and was a fundamental trait of the Franco regime. The quest for amnesty thus became a key demand in anti-Francoist political culture, spurring solidarity and social mobilisation. Hence the importance of the manifesto drawn up in 1956, which was embraced by the offspring of those on both sides in the Spanish Civil War. The policy of National Reconciliation was adopted by the Spanish Communist Party. As Gregorio López Raimundo stated in his homage to fallen PSUC members: "The policy of National Reconciliation was adopted in 1956, when the Catholic Church was still sitting on the fence. The policy was decisive in opening up new avenues in the struggle against the regime and reorganising the Party [...] Here, I would like to emphasise that this policy means that our homage to comrades fallen in the

■ ¹ Translator's note: 11th September commemorates the fall of Barcelona in 1714 during the War of Spanish Succession. The event marked the end of Catalonia's independence.

² Translator's note: Saint George is the Patron Saint

of Catalonia. The day is celebrated by the giving of books and roses.

³ Translator's note: The title derives from the labelling of objects in Nazi concentration camps. "K.L." stands for *Konzentrationslager*.

fight against the dictatorship should in no way be construed as blood-lust or a desire to wreak vengeance”.

The Amnesty Act passed by the Spanish Congress on 14th October 1977 was a watershed. It gave immunity to those who had committed human rights violations during almost four decades of dictatorship. It was interpreted as explicit consent to sweep the past under the carpet. However, the amnesty was the product of the results of the elections of 15th June 1977 —the first following Franco’s death— and was proposed by democrats and the left. The 1939 Amnesty Decree solely benefited the regime’s supporters and covered pardons, rehabilitation, and other measures. From the legal point of view, the 1977 Amnesty Act covers people whether or not they had been accused, convicted, or punished. Moreover —and this is important— it considered that the deeds committed were not punishable. Put another way, there was no pardon because no crime had been committed. Thus, beneficiaries of the amnesty could demand rehabilitation and even damages. This allowed many teachers to be rehabilitated and, in some cases, readmitted to the profession.

However, the Amnesty Act had two glaring exceptions: military personnel who were members of the Democratic Military Union and those accused of assisting in an abortion. In 1977, both the Army and the Church were powers to be reckoned with and were able to impose their own views on the rest of society.

The amnesty ended the 40-year division between victors and vanquished. Unlike other countries that waged dirty wars on dissenters, in Spain the repression was carried out in accordance with the Law. While in Argentina it was the regime’s death squads who gave away the children of those they had slain, in Spain the process of “adoption” and ideological indoctrination of infants was regulated by legislation. The 1977 amnesty was fundamentally democratic in nature, providing a framework for social harmony. By contrast, the 1939 legislation benefited one segment of society.

Today, there are those who criticise the 1977 Amnesty Act and who argue Spain needs a kind of Nuremberg Trial to set things to rights. However, it is all too easy to notice the timidity of the de-nazification programme that followed the trial. For example, in Italy the very same judge who implemented the racial laws in 1938 had reached the summit of the Italian judiciary in the early 1950s. One can therefore ask what a realistic alternative to the 1977 legislation would have been. In any case, no political party at the time considered drawing up legislation to bring human rights abusers to justice or, for that matter, drawing up a General Indictment with retroactive effect to 1936. Indeed, few party manifestos in 1977 even made reference to the need to purge the police and armed forces of Fascists.

Another interpretation of the transition is that the politicians at the time had no idea of what they were voting for or were unaware of the consequences of letting the regime’s torturers off the hook. Put baldly, this reading considers the politicians as not merely naive but as stupid to boot. The Communist Congressman, Josep Solé Barberà, who had defended people detained under the regime’s Public Order Act, noted that he often had to make lawyers and political prisoners see the need for an Amnesty Act (in the same line expressed by Gregorio López Raimundo). Senator Josep Benet, spokesman for *Entesa dels Catalans*, defended the Amnesty Bill by arguing that those who had suffered would





pardon those who had wronged them and would desire a new society capable of embracing everyone. This was not a moral issue but rather a basic political one. Overcoming the deep divide in Spanish society was the only way of burying General Franco's legacy.

Josep Benet, in a speech given on 30th May 1978 in the Spanish Senate, argued the need to set up a single Association for the War Wounded: "There will be no democracy in this country until there is true reconciliation, which must be based on a sincere desire to live in peace with those we once fought." Soon, those who had formed part of the under-age levies⁴ on the Republican side threw open their association to their opposite numbers who had fought for the Fascist cause.

MORAL REPARATIONS TO VICTIMS

The problem does not lie in the Amnesty Act, in what might be termed collective amnesia, but in the failure to make moral reparations to the victims. The issue goes beyond the judicial sphere and concerns the attitude taken by the powers that be. Neither the CIU or PSOE governments (from 1980 and 1982, respectively) did anything to recognise and make reparations to the Republican victims of the Spanish Civil War and the subsequent repression. The general attitude taken by politicians at the time was to "let sleeping dogs lie". Politicians' intention may have been good ones but the festering wounds of the dictatorship only kindled resentment and a desire for revenge. The governments of Jordi Pujol and Felipe González took the easy way

■ ⁴ Translator's note: These levies were called to the colours in 1938, even though they were not due for call-up until 1940 or '41 when the recruits would have been 21 years of age. The measure was a desperate one and taken to halt the rapid deterioration in the Republic's military position.

out, repeating the same discourse used by the Franco regime, namely, that the Civil War had been a national tragedy in which every one had been equally to blame. Hence the strategy of consigning the country's recent history to oblivion and positively encouraging collective amnesia. This is what the journalist Gregorio Morán called many years ago "the price of the transition". It has proved a high price, undermining Spain's fledgling democracy.

The presentation of my first book —the fruit of my capstone project— coincided with the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. It was 1986 and the book

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was titled *La Conca de Barberà 1890-1939: de la crisi agrària a la guerra civil* [La Conca de Barberà 1890-1939: From Agricultural Slump to the Spanish Civil War]. The Conca de Barberà Institute of Studies, which published the book, used the presentation of the work to pay homage to the county's Republican soldiers. The event included the award of certificates to former soldiers accrediting their service in the People's Army.

Hundreds of people packed the Montblanc theatre, which was decked out for the occasion with Republican flags. Many people, with tears in their eyes, asked for a certificate for a missing family member. The whole town took on a festive air. The CIU party⁵ governed most of the councils in the county and held the largest number of seats by a long chalk. Even so, the CIU initially refused to take part in the homage on the grounds that the wounds of the Civil War were still too fresh (remember, this was 50 years after the event!). In any case, the ceremony did not pay homage to the victims or justify political violence: it merely provided the first formal recognition of those who had served in the Republican Army, whether as volunteers or as unwilling conscripts. To put this in a broader context, no one in the United States bridled at the display of Confederate flags in shops or even on army bases. The CIU finally don't took part in an event that showed how many people felt about the past.

Another valuable lesson can be learnt from Solivella —another municipality in the same county. Solivella has the dubious distinction of being the Catalan municipality with the highest percentage of political killings by both sides in the Civil War. During the transition, memory of the Civil War was a running sore. As the years went by, the Council thought it would be a good idea to replace the standard Fascist inscription on the war memorial ("Fallen for God and Spain") for a more inclusive one ("To all those who fell between 1936 and 1939"). It was well meant but the vanquished bridled at the inscription since many of their number had actually been shot after the end of hostilities.

The first task that needs to be performed is therefore to identify the victims. On 17th September 2005, the Roses Town Council erected a memorial to the victims of Franco's

repression. The same day, Josep M. Fradera wrote an article in *El Punt* newspaper. In it, he complained that those who were killed in the wake of the failed coup d'état had been forgotten. Thirty years after the dictator's death and almost seventy years after the beginning of the Civil War, it is now the "Franco" side's turn to complain about being left off a municipal memorial. Fradera argued that the Roses Council had missed the opportunity of reconciling the victims of both Fascist and Republican terror. Personal reasons aside (the murder of a great grandfather, and grandfather in the summer of 1936), the historian's proposals are similar to those put forward by Pasqual Maragall, President of Catalonia⁶. Maragall argued that the mass grave in the Montjuïc quarry should be made into a memorial to the dead on both sides.

We can agree with Fradera and Maragall that the victims of political terror in the Republican zone should not be forgotten. Thus, all victims of the violence should be respected and sympathy shown for their families and friends. However, not all victims of the Civil War have been treated the same or died for the same cause. Fradera admits the dictatorship went out of its way to glorify "its own" dead and bury the story of those who died on the other side. He therefore naively argues that we should not fall into the trap of making the same mistake from a Republican standpoint.

While morally irreproachable, the proposal is unacceptable. The grief of all those bereaved should be publicly respected. However, a democracy requires that the reasons behind each victim's death or suffering be a matter of public record. In this respect, one cannot accord the same status to killings committed by lawless bands and to systematic killing and repression by the organs of State. The graves of the dead may lay side by side but that is no reason to erect a common monument to the victims. I do not believe that Fradera would argue that the Valle de los Caídos⁷ should be converted into a memorial to all the Civil War dead. This kind of tokenism would be nothing new —the late Franco regime itself practiced it when it opened a cemetery for the losing side at the monument. The corpses had been discreetly dug up and transferred from the mass graves in which the Fascists had thrown their victims after shooting them out of hand. With regard to Valle de los Caídos, there are two options. The first is to bulldoze the monument and the second is to use it for educational ends in much the same way as Auschwitz and other concentration camps are used to explain the horrors of the holocaust. It is therefore a bad idea to mix victims at such sites, from whatever period they come. For example, at the Fossar de les Moreres⁸: not all of the Catalans who died in the Siege of Barcelona are buried there.

If we were to accept Fradera's argument, what should we make of the Church's beatification of priests and nuns killed during the Civil War?⁹ Should we take the Church's obsession with martyrdom as a barrier to national reconciliation? As I see it, the Catholic Church has as much right as say Barcelona FC to commemorate its members who died in the Civil War and discover the identity and the motives of those who killed them.

■ ⁵ Translator's note: *Convergència i Unió* [Convergence and Union, the party presided by Jordi Pujol].

⁶ Translator's note: now former president.

⁷ An enormous monumental complex built by the Fascists to their war dead and the site of Franco's mausoleum.

⁸ The site where many of those fallen in the heroic defence of Barcelona were buried during the siege of 1714.

⁹ Translator's note: The Catholic Church eagerly embraced Franco's "crusade" and was thus a target of Republican ire.

The impunity enjoyed by the killers is an affront to the victims and to the principles that should govern society. The Truth Commissions established in various countries have helped grapple with the traumatic legacy left by dictatorships and the systematic violation of human rights. The aim of these commissions is to help people pardon the killers, not by sweeping the crimes under the carpet but by getting those responsible to recognise and repent for their sins. Many killers and those who actively collaborated with the dictatorship still live among us and have not had the decency to ask their victims to pardon them.

THE VICTORS' IMPIETY

I share Lluís Quintana's view that forgetting the victims of human rights abuses is a bigger problem than the impunity of those who committed them. Quintana uses Homer's *Illiad* to demand compassion for the vanquished. In this context, one of the things that has spurred demands for setting the historical record straight has been the opening of mass graves. Any kind of reconciliation must be based on allowing the vanquished to bury their dead. In the last book of the *The Illiad*, the Trojans despair not because of Hector's death but because his corpse cannot be recovered and given the proper funeral rites. Zeus takes pity on Priam, King of Troy and Hector's father. Through Iris, a messenger of the Gods, Zeus suggests that Priam go alone to Achilles' camp to demand the corpse of his son. Quintana notes that Iris tells the Trojan King that Achilles will show compassion¹⁰ and allow Priam to take Hector's corpse.

Returning to *The Illiad*, Quintana notes the dilemma facing Achilles and how he should treat Priam's entreaty. The King of the Archeans is furious at the death of his friend, Patroclus, at Hector's hands. Achilles swore to kill Hector, desecrate his body, and deny him a decent funeral. Priam abases himself before Achilles, kissing the Archeon sovereign's hands. Achilles, seeing that Priam's grief is as great as his own, agrees to the Trojan king's request. Quintana sees this episode not as decrying war and violence but rather as a criticism of the victors' harshness towards the vanquished: "compassion and humility should always guide the dealings of men".

One cannot say whether Manuel Azaña made the same reading of this book in *The Illiad* but he certainly took a similar line in his famous speech at Barcelona Council. His address marked the second year of the Civil War and was titled: "Peace, Compassion and Pardon". The President of the Spanish Republic abased himself but Franco did not respond in kind. For all their outward show of religious fervour, Franco's army, the rebel authorities and the Church all showed a chilling lack of compassion for their victims.

After the impact of the Nazi death camps and Argentine atrocities on international public opinion, what possible excuse is there for the hurdles to exhuming Civil War victims from Spain's mass graves? Surely, identifying the corpses and letting their families give them a decent burial is the very least one can expect. While many of the survivors have long

■ ¹⁰ Translator's note: the author notes Quintana's use of *pietós* (originally "pious", and in its more modern sense, "compassionate") and goes on to contrast the moral of Homer's epic with the regime's unholy lack of compassion towards the vanquished.

since given up their loved ones for dead, doubts and questions have haunted them for decades. Resolving this matter is not only an issue of common decency and justice, it is also a Matter of State if Spain is to heal the wounds of the Civil War.

That is why we should hearken to the victims, help them form part of the common weal, and ensure their grief finds public expression. Only thus can the individual and collective trauma be overcome and a boost be given to Spain's feeble democracy. Sadly, the time has passed for a Truth Commission given that many of the victims of the war and its aftermath are no longer with us or have lost faculties. History, however, can do much to give many victims a voice again. Instead of wasting time reviewing the sentences handed down by courts martial or opening up mass graves all over the country, we need to discover more about our past so that the ghost of the Civil War can finally be exorcised. Finally, we should heed Josep Benet's proposal to establish an international tribunal of historians to document the mass murder committed by the Franco dictatorship II

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■ More reading

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