



VALLEY OF THE FALLEN

Madrid, Spain

40.6425 -4.1554



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Executive Summary

The Valley of the Fallen in Madrid was built in the 1940s by order of dictator Francisco Franco and, was in part, built by forced labour from political prisoners. Its aim was to be a mausoleum for victims of the Civil War from the Francoist side but at the end it was decided it would turn into a mausoleum for all the fallen of the Civil War, regardless of the side they fought for. However, even though there are thousands of victims buried in the mausoleum, only two had markers: Francisco Franco, exhumed in 2019, and José Antonio Primo de Rivera's, founder of the fascist party Falange. This case study explores the contestations surrounding the Valley of the Fallen Francoist legacy in modern Spain.

Introduction

The Valley of the Fallen (*Valle de los Caídos*) in Madrid, Spain, is a landmark of 20th-century Spanish architecture, spanning over 1000 hectares; the site, despite its impressive grandeur, is the largest mass grave in Spain.¹ The valley contains the remains of 33,833 people who died in the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) who are buried in the site's crypts.² Until 2019, it was most notorious for being the burial ground of General Francisco Franco, the dictator of Spain from 1939 to 1975. The monument has fueled controversy as many in modern Spanish society perceive the Valley of the Fallen as a celebration of Francoism. In 2019, Spain's left-wing government took the decision to exhume Franco's body and bury it together with his wife in a mausoleum in Mingorrubio Cemetery³ also in Madrid. This once again brought the ongoing debate in Spain regarding the management of the material legacy of civil war and dictatorship to the centre of public consciousness.⁴

Background

The Spanish Civil War and the Origin of the Monument

On July 18, 1936, the Nationalist movement, led by General Francisco Franco⁵ and later on also referred to as Francoists, organised a coup against the democratically elected Republican government. Quickly the country was divided between those loyal to the Republicans, and those who supported Franco, erupting in a three year long civil war. After three years of war, in April 1939, General Franco finally took over Madrid, ending the war and becoming the de facto leader of the country. Although the official number of victims from the civil war remains unknown, several associations and experts⁶ place estimates of fatalities in the hundreds of thousands. While there remains no universally agreed upon figure, Julián Casanova counts around 150,000 Republicans killed during the war and 50,000 in the immediate aftermath,⁷ whereas other experts have concluded that the total number of victims is closer to 540,000.⁸

After the conclusion of the war, the Francoist regime sought to eradicate dissidents, which resulted in tens of thousands of Republican supporters and Franco's opponents were executed and tortured by the Nationalists during and after the war.⁹ As the Caudillo, Franco held the power in Spain for 36 years until his death in 1975 at the age of 82. Which for Spain meant the beginning of the Transition to a constitutional democracy, with the restoration of monarchy and the approval of a new

¹ David Velasco and Pablo J. Álvarez, "Así es la mayor fosa común de España", *El Diario*, November 14, 2019.

² El País, "A valley for all the fallen?", *El País*, June 12, 2011.

³ Javier Casqueiro, "Así es la nueva tumba de Franco en Mingorrubio", *El País*, October 30, 2019.

⁴ González-Ruibal, Alfredo, "Topography of terror or cultural heritage? The monuments of Franco's Spain," in *Europe's Deadly Century: Perspectives on 20th Century Conflict Heritage*, eds. Neil Forbes, Page Robin, and Guillermo Pérez (Swindon: English Heritage, 2009), 65-72.

⁵ For a discussion on the evolution of Franco's power and dictatorship see: Walter L. Bernecker & Sören Brinkmann, *Memorias Divididas. Guerra Civil y Franquismo en la Sociedad y la Política Españolas, 1936-2008*, Adaba Editores, 2009; Julián Casanova (ed.), *40 años con Franco*, Editorial Crítica, 2015.

⁶ José Antequera, "Guerra Civil Española. El enigma sin resolver sobre el número de muertos", *Diario16*, March, 21, 2021.

⁷ Julián Casanova, "Los desaparecidos y las fosas del incómodo pasado," *Info Libre*, July 17, 2017.

⁸ José Manuel Abad Liñán, "¿Cuántas víctimas se cobró la Guerra Civil? ¿Dónde hubo más?", *El País*, February 28 2019.

⁹ Julian Coman, "Eighty years on, Spain may at last be able to confront the ghosts of civil war," *Observer*, May 29, 2016.

Constitution in 1978.

It was during the Franco dictatorship that construction of the Valley of the Fallen first began in 1940.¹⁰ It was largely built by forced labour from Republican political prisoners.¹¹ The original plan was to build the Basilica, the monastery and the youth barracks to 'perpetuate the memory of the fallen in our Glorious Crusade,'¹² in reference to the Civil War. Historian Juan Pablo Fusi suggests that as many as 20,000 political prisoners were involved in the monument's construction.¹³ The site took nineteen years to build and cost around seven million Euros, this immense price tag proved controversial as at the time Spain was going through a period of autarchy where the use of ration cards for survival was common to most citizens.¹⁴ The funds to construct the Valley were raised through 'national subscriptions' and voluntary donations to help the Nationals during the War. Franco wanted the Valley to be built in a year, however, due to the economic crisis of the postwar years and the difficulties posed by its design, it took nearly two decades to be completed in its entirety.¹⁵ The 13.6 km² plot was designed by Pedro Muguruza and Diego Méndez, and was intended to be the final resting place for those who died fighting in the war. It would further serve as a monument that would endure the test of time as a living testament to Franco's vision for Spain - Catholic, nationalist and powerful.¹⁶ In reflection of this, the focal point of the mausoleum is a 150-metre-high stone cross,¹⁷ the tallest stone cross in the world.¹⁸



Figure 1: 'Close up of the Cross' Image by Magic Ketchup via Flickr CC BY-NC-SA 2.0

¹⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the Valley of the Fallen see: Queral Solé i Barjau, *La dictadura de Pedra*, Ara Llibres, 2019.

¹¹ Reyes Rincón, "Supreme Court authorizes immediate exhumation of Francisco Franco," *El País*, September 30, 2019.

¹² Boletín Oficial del Estado, no. 93, April 2 1940, p. 2240, disponiendo se alcen Basílica, Monasterio y Cuartel de Juventudes, en la finca situada en las vertientes de la Sierra del Guadarrama (El Escorial), conocida por Cuelgamuros, para perpetuar la memoria de los caídos en nuestra Gloriosa Cruzada.

¹³ Agencia EFE, "El Valle de los Caídos: los números de un monumento de futuro incierto," *El Mundo*, July 16, 2018.

¹⁴ CG, "Diez curiosidades del Valle de los Caídos", *Levante*, September 24, 2019.

¹⁵ Omar G. Encarnación, *Democracy Without Justice in Spain: The Politics of Forgetting*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 45.

¹⁶ Marina Otero Verzier, "Silent Walls: The Architecture of Historical Memory in Spain," *Archinect UK*, January 23, 2018.

¹⁷ Reyes Rincón, "Supreme Court authorizes immediate exhumation of Francisco Franco", *El País*, September 30, 2019.

¹⁸ Omar G. Encarnación, *Democracy Without Justice in Spain: The Politics of Forgetting*. (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), 45.

This cross is located in the basilica, which is 262 meters long and has a 10-meter diameter dome, making it only slightly smaller than St. Peter's Basilica at the Vatican.¹⁹ In explaining the vision of the design, Franco stated that he wanted something that had 'the grandeur of the monuments of old, which defy time and memory,' and that this monument would serve as a tribute to 'those who died for God and the Fatherland.'²⁰ Thus, as historian Encarnación explains, almost every feature of the monument seeks to visually link Franco's triumph in the Civil War to the tradition of Spain's past, namely the country's 'epic evangelizing crusades: from the reconquest of Spain in the 15th century over the Arabs, to the expulsion of the Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, to the 'discovery' of the Americas.'²¹

The Valley of the Fallen is located in the outskirts of San Lorenzo de El Escorial,²² a municipality in the autonomous community of Madrid and just 47km away from Madrid's city centre. After the monument was inaugurated on April 1, 1959, on the 20th anniversary of the end of the Civil War, the first high profile person to be buried there was José Antonio Primo de Rivera, buried in the basilica in 1959. Primo de Rivera was the founder of the fascist Falangist party and was executed by the Republican government in 1936, in the early months of the Civil War. After the end of the war, his body was exhumed and carried by arm in a ten-days procession from Alicante to El Escorial on November 20, 1939. Twenty years later, when the Valley was finished he was again exhumed and carried by arm to the Valley of the Fallen, where he remains buried today.²³ Primo de Rivera was revered by many in the Francoist regime as a martyr for the nationalist cause, which led to his high profile inclusion in the Valley in a burial ceremony that was both a ceremonial and reverential procedure.²⁴

The Valley was initially conceived as a Mausoleum for those fallen on the Francoist side. However, following construction it was decided that alongside the fallen nationalists, bodies of fallen Republicans would also be included at the site. A 1958 letter from the Minister of the Interior confirms the change of course of commercialisation in the Valley and



Figure 2: 'Photo of the Benedictine Cloister' Image by Neticola via Flickr CC BY-NC 2.0

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Anjan Basu, "With Franco Exhumed, Spain May At Last Leave Behind Its Fascist Past," *Wire*, August 28, 2018; Guy Hedgecoe, "Spain brings up the bodies," *Politico*, February 5, 2018.

²¹ Omar G. Encarnación, *Democracy Without Justice in Spain: The Politics of Forgetting*. (University of Pennsylvania Press 2014), 45.

²² El Escorial, also known as the Royal Site of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, is the historical residence of the King of Spain. It consists of two different complexes, the building of the Royal Monastery and the 'Granjilla', a royal hunting lodge. The building, the largest Renaissance building in the world, functioned as a pantheon of Spanish monarchs, monastery, basilica and royal palace (although Philip II is the only king to have lived there), and today also as a library, museum, university, school and hospital.

²³ Manuel P. Villatoro, "Así exhumó Franco los restos de José Antonio Primo de Rivera del Monasterio de El Escorial", *ABC*, October 24, 2019.

²⁴ New York Times, "Falange To Carry Founder To Tomb," *NY Times*, November 19, 1939.

specifies that the burials would now be made ‘without distinction of the band in which they fought.’²⁵

Since 1959, there has been a sustained effort to bury all of the now more than 30,000 identified victims of the Civil War. With the last inhumation during the democratic period in 1983. The bodies were taken from across all of Spain and re-buried in the Valley.²⁶ Bodies of soldiers from either side of the conflict were relocated from military and municipal cemeteries *en masse*, without permission from their surviving relatives in the case of the Republican victims. Today, many of the living relatives of those who were buried there without permission in the Valley, want their relatives' remains removed from the site. Two of these victims buried at the site are the Lapeña brothers, whose family has been requesting their brothers' exhumation since 2008. In 2021 the working permits to do the exhumation were finally issued, twelve years after the initial request.²⁷ As Mercedes Abril, 86, whose father is buried in the Valley, told Spanish newspaper *El País*:

It was painful and ridiculous that my father was next to his executioner, as though [Franco] was still watching over him. But there is an unresolved issue that continues to cause pain: I want to have a dignified site to bury my father and to be able to bring him flowers, like any other person. And we are running out of time.²⁸

Interestingly, historian Queralt Solé contends that Franco did not intend Republicans to be reburied at the site, however, due to a lack of desire from nationalist families to have their deceased relatives moved, the decision was taken to include deceased Republicans, in order to raise the profile and significance of the national memorial.²⁹ In the Register Books,³⁰ the entries were recorded from March 17 1959 to July 3 1983, but of the 33,833 people registered as being buried at the Valley of the Fallen, 12,410 are unknown and only two people had marked graves - José Antonio Primo de Rivera and General Francisco Franco.³¹

Franco was buried in the Valley after his death on November 20, 1975. The decision to bury him there did not come from his family, but rather from the transitional government of the 1970s. As Francisco Ferrández, an anthropologist and leading figure in the debates around the future of the monument, noted, Franco himself had decreed that the site was to be the resting place for the fallen, hence his death in a Hospital at aged 82 did not qualify for burial by his own standards, yet despite this he was still buried at the Valley.³²

Annually, on the anniversaries of the deaths of Franco and Primo de Rivera, who both passed away on November 20, members of the far-right movements visit the memorial, marching and performing

²⁵ Francisco Ferrández, “Guerras sin fin: guía para descifrar el Valle de los Caídos en la España contemporánea”, *Política y Sociedad* 48, no. 3 (2011).

²⁶ Juan Miguel Baquero, “Estos son los otros muertos del Valle de los Caídos,” *El Diario*, September 1, 2018.

²⁷ Alejandro Torrús, “Los hermanos Lapeña y su exhumación del Valle de los Caídos”, *Público*, September 19, 2019.

²⁸ Natalia Junquera, “Valley of the Fallen: The fight to recover remains from ‘Spain’s largest mass grave,’ *El País*, September 25, 2019.

²⁹ *El País*, “A valley for all the fallen?”, *El País*, June 12, 2011.

³⁰ Nomesevoices, “Listado de víctimas enterradas en el Valle de los Caídos,” Nomesevoices.

³¹ Juan Miguel Baquero, “Estos son los otros muertos del Valle de los Caídos”, September 1, 2018.

³² Francisco Ferrandiz and Marimar Huguet-Jerez, “Will Franco Finally Be Exhumed? Francisco Ferrández: ‘This Is As Complex As Ground Zero or Srebrenica’,” *Volunteer*, August 23, 2018.

military-style ceremonies³³ to commemorate Franco and his heritage.³⁴ This has raised concerns that Franco's burial and the increasingly high-profile nature of the site had become a monument to fascism. Subsequently, due to this notoriety, since the approval of the 2007 Law of Historical Memory, successive governments have considered whether Franco's body should be exhumed from the site. Despite this long period of contemplation and debate, the exhumation of Franco was only carried out on October 24, 2019. The remains of the former dictator were transferred to the Mingorrubio cemetery, where his widow Carmen Polo is also buried.³⁵

Archaeologist González-Ruibal explains that such decisions and the general policies implemented by the Spanish government regarding the monument are not essentially different from those that exist in Germany or France in relation to civil conflict.³⁶ However, in Spain, these policies provoked great controversy and have been criticized by some as an attempt at rewriting history to appease at the will of certain political considerations. Others, such as Kimmelman, argue that 'we have to ignore Franco's monuments and leave them to their own devices because nobody talks about them anymore and nobody cares.'³⁷ Yet, not everyone agrees with the view that the fascist foundation of the monument has truly been displaced from collective memory and in 2007 the Spanish government passed the Historical Memory laws recognising this.

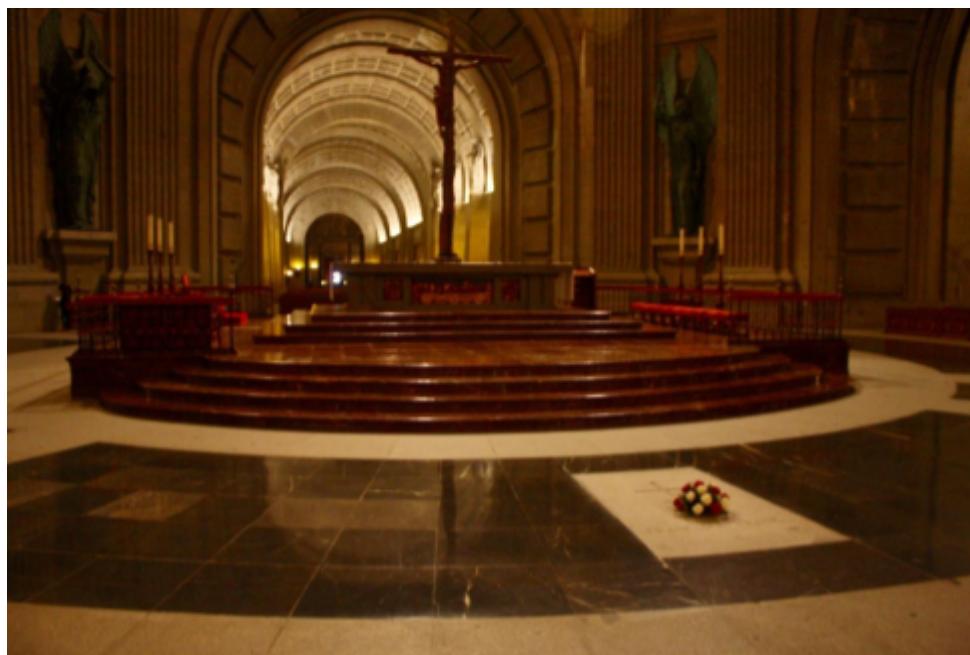


Figure 4: 'Inside of the Basilica' Image by Trevor.Huxham via Flickr [CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

History of the Contestation

³³ Ruptly, "Spain: Falange supporters commemorate Franco's death," Youtube video, posted by "Ruptly", November 24, 2013.

³⁴ Álvaro Sánchez Castrillo, "La exaltación de la dictadura continuará en el primer 20N sin Franco en el Valle de los Caídos," *Infolibre*, November 18, 2019.

³⁵ Anjan Basu, "With Franco Exhumed, Spain May At Last Leave Behind Its Fascist Past", *Wire*, August 28, 2018.

³⁶ Alfredo González-Ruibal, "Topography of terror or cultural heritage? The monuments of Franco's Spain".

³⁷ Michael Kimmelman, "In Spain, a Monumental Silence," *New York Times*, January 13, 2008.

The Memory Laws

After Franco's death, successive governments have tried to forge a path forward for democratic Spain to face its fascist past. The first Law that dealt with this issue was the Law of Amnesty from 1977, which was passed two years after Franco's death. The Law, which completes a former amnesty from 1976, was one of the main claims of the opposition as it would mean the liberation and pardon of all political prisoners in disregard of the crime committed. However, as it pardons all crimes committed before 1976, and also indemnifies the crimes of the perpetrators of state violence as opposed to solely the victims and political prisoners of the Francoist dictatorship.³⁸ Due to this, it was heavily criticised by the United Nations, which has continuously recommended that it be abolished. As the UN Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances stated in 2013, Spain must:

Assume a leadership role and engage more actively to respond to the demands of thousands of families searching for the fate or whereabouts of their loved ones who disappeared during the civil war and the dictatorship.³⁹

Pablo de Greiff, the United Nations Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council, criticised in his 2014 report the 'privatisation' of the exhumations, the lack of official information and the Amnesty Law. He further recommended that the Valley of the Fallen cease to be a site of 'exaltation of the Franco regime' and underscored the necessity of Spain to 'resignify' the place as the guardian of memory. In light of this the report recommended the exhumation of Francisco Franco's body, on the basis that the Valley of the Fallen:

can hardly be thought of as a place for peace and reconciliation as long as the dictator's tomb with flowers remains in the center of the monument. Nothing shows that it was built with the forced labour of thousands of political prisoners under inhuman conditions [...] nothing explains who José Antonio Primo de Rivera was or why he was buried in the centre of the Basilica, or why Franco was buried there without being a victim of the Civil War.⁴⁰

However, whilst the Spanish Government, ultimately decided against abolishing the 1977 law, in 2007 the left-wing *Partido Socialista Obrero Español* (PSOE) government passed the Historical Memory Law⁴¹ which was only voted against by members of the *Partido Popular* and the Catalan Republican Party. The former voted against the law as they are a right-wing political party who believed the law to be unnecessary and that it only served to open up old wounds, while the left-leaning Catalan Republican Party voted against the law on the grounds that it did not go far enough in transitional justice matters.⁴²

The Memory Law key provisions are as follows: the full recognition of the victims on both sides of the

³⁸ Ley 46/1977 de 15 de octubre, de Amnistía, arts III- VIII, *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, October 15, 1977.

³⁹ BBC, "UN presses Spain over Franco-era crimes and mass graves," *BBC*, October 1, 2013.

⁴⁰ Natalia Chientaroli, "Los 10 suspensos de la ONU a España en memoria histórica," *El Diario*, August 28, 2014.

⁴¹ The Law 52/2007, of December 26, which recognizes and extends rights and establishes measures in favour of those who suffered persecution or violence during the Civil War and the dictatorship, known popularly known as the Law of Historical Memory, was approved by the Congress on October 31, 2007, based on the bill previously approved by the Council of Ministers on July 28, 2006, during the mandate of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero.

⁴² Natalia Junquera, "The enduring myths around Spain's Historical Memory Law," *El País*, July 1, 2019.

war; the official condemnation of the Francoist dictatorship; the permission to remove Francoist symbols and heraldic from public spaces; the State's implication in the identification and reburial of those buried in mass graves; and to establish public aid for the victims and their descendants.

After its initial passing, the law's impact was effectively shortened due to political change in Spain in 2011 when the right-wing government of Mariano Rajoy's *Partido Popular*, came to power and remained so until 2018. While the Rajoy government did not outright abolish the law, it hindered its impact by restricting funding allocated to the law's enforcement.⁴³ With the PSOE back in power since 2020, through a coalition government with left-wing party Unidas Podemos (UP), new funding was allocated to historical memory projects and the first draft of a new historical memory law, entitled the Democratic Memory Law,⁴⁴ was approved on July 20, 2021.⁴⁵ The law will enable investigation into human rights abuses perpetrated between 1936 and 1975 and will ensure that Spain takes more responsibility in identifying those who still rest in unmarked graves, through for example, creating a DNA database of victims and relatives.⁴⁶ The law will also prevent publicly funded groups from glorifying Franco, like the Foundation Francisco Franco,⁴⁷ and will turn the Valley of the Fallen into an official cemetery, protected by the governmental National Heritage agency, for people who died on both sides of the civil war.⁴⁸

What has been done?

Since the approval of the Historical Memory Law in 2007, some actions have taken place. However, even though the Law forbids all political events glorifying Francoism in the Valley, they continue to happen every year at the site. The law intended the 'de-politicization' of the Valley of the Fallen to make it a memorial to all the victims of the Civil War.⁴⁹ Historians Julián Casanova and Santos Juliá agree that the symbolism of fascism and the tribute to the dictatorship that the monument encompasses has not yet changed, and have welcomed the willingness of the Spanish government to resolve this issue after years of empty promises.⁵⁰ Many argue that the enforcement of the law is an important step to displace the connection of the monument with the fascist ideology without having to destroy the architecture. In this way, it appears that the government is attempting to emulate the strategies taken in countries such as Germany,⁵¹ where fascist monuments are acknowledged as a reminder of the importance of democracy.

Another important decision was made in line with a report by a 12-man Expert Committee for the Future of the Valley of the Fallen commissioned by the PSOE just before the election of the *Partido*

⁴³ Francisco Ferrandiz and Marimar Huguet-Jerez, "Will Franco Finally Be Exhumed?", *olunteer*, August 23, 2018.

⁴⁴ La Moncloa, "Proyecto de Ley de Memoria Democrática", *La Moncloa*, July 20, 2021.

⁴⁵ Natalia Junquera, "Spain to release funds for mass grave exhumations," *El País*, July 30, 2020.

⁴⁶ Guy Hedgecoe, "Spain tackles Franco's ghost (again)," *Politico*, September 15, 2020.

⁴⁷ The Francisco Franco foundation was created in 1976, as stated in their webpage their aim is to 'disseminate and promote the study of the life and legacy of Francisco Franco'. For more information: <https://fnff.es/paginas/372712893/historia-y-fines.html>.

⁴⁸ Reuters Staff, "Spain to transform 'Valley of the Fallen' Franco monument into civilian cemetery," *Reuters*, September 15, 2020.

⁴⁹ Anna Oakes, "A Letter from the Valley of the Fallen," *Public Seminar*, September 25, 2018.

⁵⁰ Natalia Junquera, "Should the Valley of the Fallen Be Allowed to Fall into Ruins?," *El País*, June 26, 2018.

⁵¹ In Germany, in March 1946, it published the 'Enactment and Approved Papers of the Control Council and Coordinating Committee,' its directive no. 30 deals with the 'Liquidation of German Military and Nazi Memorials and Museums'. For more information visit: https://www.loc.gov/rr/frd/Military_Law/Enactments/Volume-III.pdf.

Popular, which concluded that Franco's body should be exhumed.⁵² However, it did not happen until 2019. Anthropologist Francisco Ferrández, one of the members of the commission, wrote in 2018 that there were three barriers preventing the exhumation from taking place, bureaucratic, legal and symbolic.⁵³ In addition, there was a political dimension which affected the timeline of events; the *Partido Popular* government would not exhume Franco nor would they use bureaucratic and legal means to achieve this.⁵⁴ Hence it was not the coalition government of PSOE and UP from which the recommendations of the 2011 Expert Commission were acted upon.

Assuming office in June 2018, the newly elected president, Pedro Sánchez, announced his intention to undertake the long debated exhumation. This was legitimised in September 2018 by a congress vote in which the 'green light' was given to move forward. In recognition of this milestone Sanchez tweeted on September 13, "Justice. Memory. Dignity," and remarked that 'today our #democracy is better.'⁵⁵ Having been granted political permission to move forward with the exhumation, there remained several bureaucratic and legal hurdles to clear, which would delay definitive action for over a year. Additionally, there were concerted efforts to hinder the governments' intended exhumation of Franco. Notably, Franco's family and the Francisco Franco Foundation⁵⁶ were the key forces behind active attempts to block the exhumation. Shortly following the cabinet decree, Spain's supreme court examined a case presented by Franco's family to prevent the exhumation from taking place. Nevertheless, following two hours of deliberation, the court ruled in favour of the government and granted the exhumation.⁵⁷ Subsequently, Franco's body was finally removed from the Valley and moved to *El Pardo* cemetery in Madrid on October 24, 2019.

Since Franco's exhumation, two other key milestones have been achieved in 2021. First, the approval of an archaeological excavation on the grounds where the political prisoners' barracks stood.⁵⁸ It is one of the many projects of the new Secretariat on Democratic Memory to foster research on memory matters and to recognise the suffering of the victims. The archaeological excavation fills a gap in the information and testimonies available on the construction of the valley and how the prisoners lived.⁵⁹ As Alfredo González Ruibal, chief archaeologist of the excavation, explained, 'the barracks are a very powerful and indisputable testimony' as 'they were between four and nine square meters, the roofs were made of branches and lacked windows, and of course, had no electricity, running water nor heating.'⁶⁰

The second, is the approval of the exhumation of some of the Republicans buried in the mass graves in the crypts. In total, 60 persons will be exhumed, among them the Lapeña brothers, however, even

⁵² Francisco Ferrandiz and Marimar Huguet-Jerez, "Will Franco Finally Be Exhumed?", *Volunteer*, August 23, 2018.

⁵³ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁴ Marta Monforte Jaén, "Casado promete derogar la ley de Memoria Histórica si llega al gobierno", *Público*, July 19, 2021.; Juan Miguel Baquero, "Rajoy repite con la Memoria Histórica", *El Diario*, April 3, 2018.

⁵⁵ Pedro Sánchez, Twitter post, September 18, 2018, 2:45 PM.

⁵⁶ The *Francisco Franco Foundation* is a private Spanish institution, created in 1976 and whose objectives are to spread the memory and work of this dictator. One of its purposes was to enhance the figure of Franco, but to avoid its outlawing, the foundation modified its statutes in 2018.

⁵⁷ Agencia EFE, "Spain top court rejects family's appeal to stop dictator Franco's exhumation," *EFE*, December 17, 2018.

⁵⁸ J. J. Guillén, "Comienzan los trabajos arqueológicos para conocer cómo vivían los presos y trabajadores del Valle de los Caídos", *Público*, April 27, 2021.

⁵⁹ Pablo Batalla Cueto, "La arqueología tira por tierra la leyenda rosa franquista del Valle de los Caídos," *La Marea*, July 2, 2021.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

though the majority are from the Republican side, the project will also exhume Nationalist victims following requests from their families.⁶¹ This concludes a process that the relatives of the deceased started decades ago, five years after the approval of the judge from the local *El Escorial* Court.⁶²

Decision-Making Processes

It has been debated whether closing the monument and leaving it to be forgotten may dissolve the strong attachment fascist groups in Spain have to it. Yet, shutting down the monument has also been proposed due to safety concerns since there have been at least three attacks with explosive devices to the Valley of the Fallen throughout its history. The first time was in 1962, by Defensa Interior Group. The second was by the terrorist group GRAPO (*Grupos de Resistencia Antifascista Primero de Octubre*) in 1999, who planted a bomb next to Franco's grave, although it did not cause damage to the grave, it did destroy several confessionals. The last attack took place in 2005 in the outer compound of the site, where the alleged perpetrator had called the *Gara* newspaper to claim the action on behalf of ETA, the Basque Nationalist terrorist group, however, the police have denied this connection.⁶³

While the site was never closed, the government's National Heritage body, who are responsible for the management of the Valley, have at times closed the basilica to the public for reasons of restoration of the basilica's facade and public safety. It was also closed for a longer period of time before and during the exhumation of Franco's body. In response, the Benedictine monks of the basilica held a public mass in protest during the month of November 2010. In the sermon, speaking to hundreds of people who had gathered at the temple, it was claimed that the monks' religious freedom was under attack and the closure was labelled to be a 'subtle psychological and emotional harassment'.⁶⁴ Consequently, it is difficult to make any decisions without consideration of the deeply rooted religious aspects that are also attached to the monument.

Regarding the exhumation of Franco's body, it was only in 2019 that the exhumation took place and that the government started to make plans to identify and exhume the thousands of unmanned victims buried in the crypts. The Spanish government argued that this was the first necessary step to desacralise the place. Moreover, the removal of Franco's remains appears to be a historic moment for those seeking exhumations of their loved ones from the crypts. By setting a new precedent, families have been encouraged after decades of frustration. On November 13, 2019, it was revealed that 31 requests had been made to National Heritage to exhume their relatives.⁶⁵ And in November 2021, the exhumation of 60 victims was approved and the process to do so started.

Multiple dynamics are important to consider in current or future decision-making regarding the future of the monument. For instance, the division between the political left and right is important to

⁶¹ Irene Castro, "El Gobierno inicia el proceso para exhumar víctimas del Valle de los Caídos cinco años después de la sentencia de los hermanos Lapeña", *El Diario*, March 29, 2021.

⁶² EuropaPress, "La familia Lapeña reprocha a Patrimonio que bloquee la exhumación de los dos hermanos represaliados en el Valle de los Caídos", *El Diario*, September 23, 2019.

⁶³ Delso Rodrigo, Atxu Amann and Federico Soriano, "Time, Architecture and Domination: The Valley of the Fallen".; Alejandro Requeijo, "Las tres veces que atentaron con explosivos en el Valle de los Caídos," *Vozpópuli*, October 13, 2019.

⁶⁴ El País, "Monks and Supporters Defy Closure of Franco Basilica," *El País*, November 16, 2010.

⁶⁵ Reuters Staff, "Spain opens door to 31 exhumations in the Valley of the Fallen mausoleum," *Reuters*, November 13, 2019.

consider. The new leader of *Partido Popular*, Pablo Casado, has condemned PSOE and UP's efforts to exhume Franco's body and investigate human rights abuses that happened during the dictatorship, arguing that 'we don't have to reopen old wounds. We have to look forward.'⁶⁶ Specifically targeting the process of identifying the deceased, Casado has claimed that the PSOE 'are a bunch of mossbacks who are stuck in their grandfather's war and constantly going on about this grave or that.'⁶⁷

The continuing existence of the 1977 Amnesty Law and the lack of legal and historical accountability towards the victims of the Franco regime and their relatives is also important to consider. As individuals responsible for torture and human rights abuses pass away without facing legal scrutiny and victims pass away without being recognised, the Valley of the Fallen might become an active site to question and reflect about the past.

Several institutions are making projects to 're-think' monuments such as the Valley of the Fallen. One of these is organised by the Goethe Institut in Madrid. Their Deep Space project is the product of an international think tank called Hybrid Space Lab, which is made up of archaeologists, anthropologists, psychologists, architects, historians, and legal experts.⁶⁸ The project uses 'augmented reality' to create a new environment which merges real and virtual worlds. Their goal is 'to transform and re-signify the Valley of the Fallen' by educating people about its history and importance and reassigning its aesthetic beauty to new values.⁶⁹

Summary and Conclusions

Since the end of Franco's violent dictatorship and Spain's return to democracy, the Valley of the Fallen has been and remains contested. Despite the Memory Laws passed in 2007 and 2021,⁷⁰ and the recent efforts of the Spanish Government to untie the monument from right-winged reverence,⁷¹ the controversies continue. Fuelled by fear over losing a sacred place, religious and right-wing groups feel that the government's handling of the monument has reopened old wounds⁷² - particularly the exhumation of Franco's body and the threat to shut down the Basilica. Yet, many of the relatives of the deceased have lamented the fact that their loved ones are still buried in the crypts.⁷³ The calls for justice and reconciliation still echo loudly demanding that more is done to motivate people to use the monument as an opportunity to reflect upon the time of turmoil and suffering. The fault lines that tore apart families, communities and regions during the civil war reach across Spain's recent history, wounds that have been buried - but not healed; now manifest in new forms, mediums and political parties. These same fault lines converge at the Valley of the Fallen, home to republican and nationalist victims, and the legacy of General Francisco Franco.

⁶⁶ Ian Mount, "Spain's People's Party elects Pablo Casado as Leader," *Financial Times*, July 21, 2018.

⁶⁷ The Local, "Confusion over Spain's plans to grant citizenship for descendants of International Brigades," *Local*, September 24, 2020.

⁶⁸ Peio Riaño, "An International Project to Re-Think the Burial Site of Former Dictator Franco," *El País*, June 6, 2019.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 39.

⁷⁰ La Moncloa, "Proyecto de Ley de Memoria Democrática", *La Moncloa*, July 20, 2021.

⁷¹ Guy Hedgecoe, "Spain tackles Franco's ghost (again)," *Politico*, September 15, 2020.

⁷² Constanza Lambertucci and Sara González Boutriau, "Cientos de personas protestan en el Valle de los Caídos contra el traslado de los restos de Franco", *El País*, July 15, 2018.

⁷³ Natalia Junquera, "Valley of the Fallen: The fight to recover remains from 'Spain's largest mass grave,'" *El País*, September 25, 2019.

Ultimately, the legacy of the Valley of the Fallen has more to it than Franco's exhumation. Now that his tomb is no longer there its resignification will depend on whether the government follows the recommendations made by the Commission and searches for social consensus,⁷⁴ or if on the contrary, the line of action focuses on avoiding dealing with sensitive issues such as the Civil War or what the Franco dictatorship meant for the Spanish population.

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(Figure 4)

About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter-ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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