

Franco's shadow: reburial battle sees Spain confront its darkest days

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Past and future collide as nationalist Vox party gears up for success in next month's general election while exhumation of dictator draws closer

The gates of the suburban mausoleum that could soon house Spain's most restless ghost are decked with a shrivelling bunch of red and yellow carnations, a handful of prayer cards and a cheap, broken crucifix.

If the socialist government's [long and fraught campaign](#) to exhume Francisco Franco from the fascist splendour of [the Valley of the Fallen](#) finally succeeds, his body will be reinterred in June here in the humbler surroundings of the Mingorrubio-El Pardo municipal cemetery.

The graveyard, which sits at the end of a bus route less than an hour from Madrid, lacks the baleful scale of Franco's current resting place. Not far from its entrance, an engine idles and a driver relieves himself against a wall. Mingorrubio boasts neither the basilica's sword-wielding angel sentries nor the 150 metre-high cross that draws coachloads of tourists, schoolchildren and those nostalgic for a half-remembered [Spain](#).

Nor, come to that, is it [a mass grave](#) crammed with the bodies of more than 30,000 people from both sides of the civil war. But the cemetery is home to the Franco family vault, where El Caudillo's wife, Carmen Polo, has lain since she died in 1988 – and to another dictator. Behind the black marble and Doric columns of a nearby mausoleum is the body of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, whose three-decade tyranny in the Dominican Republic ended when he was [assassinated in an ambush](#) outside Santo Domingo in 1961.

Also buried across the cemetery is Franco's right-hand man, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco. The admiral was on his way back from mass in Madrid in December 1973 when [a massive bomb](#) planted by the Basque terrorist group Eta blew his Dodge car more than 20 metres into the air and over the roof of the church where he had sat minutes earlier.

In three months' time – the courts permitting – Franco will join Trujillo and Carrero Blanco and, in doing so, enable the country to shuffle a little closer towards confronting his legacy.

The timing could not be better, nor, perhaps, worse. At the end of April, Spaniards will vote in a general election that is set to see Vox become the first avowedly far-right party to win seats in the national parliament since Spain returned to democracy.

Vox, which broke through into the mainstream in [last December's Andalusian regional election](#), is big on slogans, short on details and shares much of its ideological DNA with Franco and his followers.

Over recent months and weeks, the anti-immigration, anti-feminist party has called for a

“reconquest” of Spain, railed against “feminazis”, and [called for the expulsion of 52,000 “illegal immigrants”](#).

Last week alone, it has raised the prospect of [banning far-left political parties](#) and those that push for Catalan independence– a particular *bestia negra* – and suggested that “good Spaniards” should be allowed to [possess weapons](#) and use them in self-defence without having to face “hellish” legal consequences.

It is little wonder, then, that these are bittersweet times for those who suffered under Franco and who have long yearned to see him exhumed from the Valley of the Fallen.

The activist, politician and writer [Lidia Falcón, now 83, was arrested seven times under Franco and tortured by his thugs](#). She was hung by her hands from a hook in the ceiling while they beat her abdomen and shouted: “You’re not going to give birth any more, you whore!”

She makes no apology for using a familiar line on the valley. “Do you think Hitler’s remains would be kept in an enormous monument where his acolytes could go and pay their respects?” she asks. “Where tourist and journalists would go? Do you think that people would pay out a huge sum for its upkeep? Can you imagine that? Well there you are.”

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Lidia Falcón, activist

Inés Madrigal, 49, is [one of the thousands of babies](#) who were stolen from their birth mothers and placed with other families in a practice that began shortly after Franco’s victory in the civil war and continued until well after his death in 1975. She, too, struggles to understand how Franco has managed to stay in his stately mausoleum. “All he did, as far as I’m concerned, was cause a suffering so profound that we’re still trying to find our way out of it,” she says. “It’s created a huge division in Spain: some of us want to talk about this and others just don’t.”

Falcón snorts at any parallels between Franco’s uprising in 1936 and the re-emergence of the far-right after a 40-year absence. But in Vox, “who have sprung up here overnight, like a mushroom in the woods”, she discerns a familiar kind of politics. “They’re the same people, except today it’s their grandchildren,” says Falcón. “A lot of fascists are rising to the surface now.”

She is not alone in her appraisal. In a recent interview, Iñaki Gabilondo, perhaps Spain’s best-known journalist, was asked how he would characterise Vox. “To me, it’s Francoism,” he [told eldiario.es](#). “I was 33 when Franco died. That means I’d lived for 33 years ... with Franco in my head, my heart, my world and my soul.”

Vox’s “ultra-Spanish, ultra-centralised thinking, based on fatherland, God, Spain and old values”, he added, was Francoism pure and simple. “It’s something totally recognisable because I lived it,” he said. “It’s exactly what we wanted to get rid of.”

The satirical magazine *El Jueves* has drawn equally explicit parallels. A recent cover showed the [Vox leader](#), Santiago Abascal, driving a tank towards panicked citizens while wearing the uniform of the Spanish Legion, which was once led by Franco. A speech bubble read: “At last you’ve managed to get Franco out of the Valley of the Fallen!”

Vox has criticised prime minister Pedro Sánchez's efforts to exhume the dictator, arguing that he should be tackling Catalan independence and immigration rather than "using Spaniards as hostages in his policy of ideological propaganda".

It is also drafting a controversial list of candidates. "A WARNING to the MEDIA and PARTIES that are combing our lists and scanning our candidates," Abascal [tweeted on Tuesday](#). "You won't find a single enemy of Spain. Nor a single ally of Spain's enemies. Nor will you find any trendy lefties, communists, separatists or wimps."

What you will find, however, are [two retired generals](#) who last year [signed a petition](#) that claimed Franco had been vilified and which lamented the government's "perverse" attempts to exhume him.

Also on the list, albeit briefly, was [Fernando Paz](#), an author and speaker [who believes](#) "the majority of Jews in eastern Europe" were shot dead rather than murdered in gas chambers, and that they died at the hands of local populations as well as German troops. Paz has also made a number of homophobic comments.

His "denialist and revisionist" remarks were condemned by Spain's Federation of Jewish Communities, which said his candidacy would have been unacceptable in other European countries where the trauma of the Holocaust has been properly addressed.

Vox did not respond to requests for comment on its relationship with Francoism, nor on Paz's comments. But the party announced on Thursday night that he would no longer be standing as its candidate in Albacete.

Pablo Simón, a political scientist at Madrid Carlos III University, counsels against direct comparisons between Vox and Francoism. Although Vox may draw support – not to mention candidates – from Franco nostalgists, it is very much a party of the new populist extreme right.

"Vox isn't going to burn down parliament," says Simón. "That may sound ridiculous but it's not irrelevant – it's not like when fascists come to power and reject democratic and liberal mechanisms. What they will try to do, though, is twist things when it comes to which groups enjoy certain social rights, so they'll whip up fear of others, fear of integration and fear of Catalan nationalism. They've already said they want to outlaw parties like Podemos or Catalan pro-independence parties."

The [issue of Catalan independence](#) – which has provoked Spain's worst political crisis since the transition back to democracy – played a decisive role in Vox's Andalusian breakthrough. Simón, who has pored over the polling data, says that it was Catalonia rather than immigration that proved a key issue. "It was all about the voters who rejected what was going on in Catalonia or were against regional self-government," he says. "They were the people who voted for Vox most. That has clear echoes of Francoism and a '[united, great and free](#)' Spain."

Simón points out that "ideologies don't travel well over time" and that while Spain's current politics may evoke those of the past, 2019 is not 1936. He sums up with the quote often attributed to Mark Twain: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

Another famous aphorism also haunts the debate – the Spanish philosopher George Santayana's assertion that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it".

The problem is that Spain, in its headlong rush towards democracy, chose not to remember. Both the 1977 law granting amnesty to those involved in crimes during the civil war and dictatorship, and the "[pact of forgetting](#)", were intended to help the country move beyond Franco as quickly as possible.

The dead, including Franco and the [100,000 people still buried](#) in unmarked pits around the country, were left where they were in the belief that sealed graves would ensure sealed lips. But Spain has more mass graves than any country except Cambodia and there is an odd irony that a nation that frets so much – and usually so unnecessarily – about how it is viewed abroad should have continued to exalt one dead man while leaving so many others to rot into anonymity.

The journalist and historian Carlos Hernández de Miguel has just written a book documenting the 300 or so concentration camps through which an estimated 700,000 to one million Spaniards passed in the name of Francoist re-education.

He understands why post-Franco Spain was willing to accept what he calls “a series of shameful conditions, such as the pact of forgetting”. The threat of a coup d’état was clear and present – [and would eventually be fulfilled in 1981](#) – the 40-year dictatorship had whitewashed itself and the regime had also been tolerated by European democracies.

But, he says, Spain’s failure to confront its past has muddied its future. “Today we’re up against the kind of denial and revisionism that’s condemned and prosecuted elsewhere in Europe. It’s been 40 years and we haven’t taken that step. That puts us at a serious disadvantage compared with the rest of [Europe](#) in taking on the resurgent far right. The far right and its discourse has been normalised and whitewashed here.”

Some, however, see signs that things are starting to shift. The film-makers Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar spent six years making [The Silence of Others](#), an award-winning documentary that follows a group of Franco’s victims as they seek justice under the principle of universal jurisdiction. [The film](#) is also intended to confront the pact of forgetting and get the country to talk about its past.

“When we started the journey of the film we thought we would encounter furious opposition,” say Carracedo and Bahar. “And yet what we have found, invariably, is the opposite: a real *hambre de memoria*: a hunger for memory, a need to know and learn and discuss a part of the history that for many comes as a revelation. ‘My history has been stolen from me’ is a very common comment from young people in the Q&As.”

In Mingorrubio, a cemetery worker with the weary and suspicious air of someone who’s been buttonholed by too many journalists watches a film crew set up a tripod. Will El Caudillo’s arrival change the graveyard and draw many more visitors? “Who knows?” he mutters and wanders off.

The talk of wounds and scars, and bones and ghosts, will continue well after Franco arrives in Mingorrubio – if he ever does. And it will continue no matter which rhyme history chooses at the end of April.

“The sooner you can close up wounds, the better,” says Hernández de Miguel. “It doesn’t matter what people say – it’s not a question of reopening old wounds, it’s about closing up wounds that have been kept open by forgetting the crimes of Francoism and forgetting its victims.”

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