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Research Article

DISSONANT HERITAGE AND THE LEGACY OF FRANCOISM: MATERIAL MEMORY IN CONTEMPORARY SPAIN

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ABSTRACT

Fifty years after the death of Francisco Franco, the divisive and complex legacy of his dictatorship remains a political and cultural battleground in contemporary Spain. Many thousands of victims of that regime are estimated to remain buried in mass graves throughout the country and demands for acknowledgement of the human rights violations perpetrated by the regime continue to be at the forefront of much political and social debate. A key component of these discussions concerns how to deal with the physical reminders of a contested past. Despite legislative intervention and the intense advocacy of civic associations, numerous material markers of the Francoist dictatorship continue to occupy public spaces in Spain. Within the context of the commemorative events of 2025 and the broader memory debates in contemporary Spain, this paper examines different approaches to dealing with the material heritage of the dictatorship as part of ongoing attempts to address Spain's "dissonant" or "difficult" heritage of civil war and dictatorship.

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1. Introduction and Context

2025 marks 50 years since the death of dictator Francisco Franco, whose divisive and complex legacy continues to cause intense debate in contemporary Spain. Many thousands of victims of the Franco regime are estimated to remain buried in mass graves throughout the country and demands for acknowledgement of the human rights violations perpetrated by the regime and recognition of its victims continue to be prominent in political and social debate. These debates are now longstanding, having emerged with force with the so-called "memory boom" of the late 1990s and early 2000s, yet they show no sign of receding, with the memories of Spain's 20th-century history of war and dictatorship continuing to be a source of controversy. While there have

been significant developments at an institutional level, including the introduction of legislation at state and regional levels that has sought to acknowledge the crimes of Francoism and provide redress for its victims, these provisions have been observed and implemented unevenly. Much of the progress towards transitional justice in Spain has been due to the work of numerous memory activist groups, whose grassroots campaigns have played an important role in advocating for and enacting change. This discussion will outline ways in which both institutional action and civic activism have informed practices of memorialisation and the public representation of the past in Spain. In particular, it discusses different approaches to dealing with the material heritage of the Francoist regime in public spaces as part of ongoing attempts to address Spain's "dissonant" or "difficult" heritage of civil war and dictatorship.

There is now an extensive body of scholarly work that examines the politics of memory, commemoration practices and different approaches to dealing with the contested nature of monuments and other sites of memory in many different cultures and contexts. From Tunbridge and Ashworth's work on *"dissonant heritage"*, Macdonald's deployment of the term *"difficult heritage"*, and Logan and Reeves' analysis of *"places of pain and shame"*, among many other important contributions, scholars have illuminated the diverse approaches adopted by different communities in attempts to address uncomfortable aspects of the past. In terms of monuments and other material remains, these approaches sit across a broad spectrum, with the most extreme action being to eliminate or destroy material traces of the past. However, as Rigney has warned, such obliteration *"risks whitewashing history by removing its traces and permanently erases a key material witness to an earlier mnemonic regime and its exclusionary logic"* (82). Less extreme actions include the replacement of monuments deemed unacceptable with new forms of commemoration, or acknowledging the difficult heritage through the addition of explanatory information or commemorative plaques, through to more ambitious attempts to comprehensively reinterpret monuments and other sites. In the Spanish context, these different approaches have been adopted variously both by institutional actors, whether at the regional or national level, and by civic associations at the grassroots level.

2. Institutional Initiatives

A key element of governmental attempts to address the divisive legacy of the Francoist past has been the introduction of legislation, both by the national government and by those of various autonomous communities in Spain. At the national level, laws were passed in 2007 and in 2022, both sparking intense controversy. The first, known as the Law of Historical Memory, included recognition of victims on both sides of the war and a condemnation of Francoism, as well as clauses relating to the removal of plaques and symbols commemorating the war and dictatorship from public buildings. The Democratic Memory Law of 2022 built on the provisions of the earlier law, explicitly prohibiting the glorification of the Francoist regime by outlawing symbols and monuments that exalted the dictatorship and its leaders. This includes plaques, graves, and other forms of commemoration, extending to the banning of foundations and associations that defend Francoism or the dictatorship. This more recent law also declared void the many thousands of

convictions for military rebellion against Franco and pardoned victims who were sentenced due to their political and religious beliefs or sexual orientation, and gave the government responsibility for exhuming and identifying victims of the regime buried in unmarked graves, including legislating the creation of an official register of victims to facilitate coordination and DNA testing.

Both pieces of legislation received significant criticism from groups on both sides of the debate. The 2007 law was widely seen by historical memory activists to inadequately address the injustices of the Francoist regime, particularly given its failure to address the Amnesty Law of 1977, its recognition of all victims, and its perceived lack of the necessary mechanisms for the enforcement of its provisions. While the 2022 legislation significantly strengthened some of the provisions of the 2007 law, it nevertheless received criticism from human rights associations for its continued failure to repeal the 1977 Amnesty Law and for not enabling the victims of human rights violations to seek compensation from the government. The implementation of the law's provisions also continues to present challenges, and it has become clear that it is being observed unevenly throughout Spain, in part due to the control held by autonomous regional administrations over areas such as education and their local databases recording details of graves and victims. Moreover, as political power shifts in different parts of Spain, with some areas governed by right-wing coalitions, a combination of inactivity, delay tactics and a denial of funding is serving to lessen the effectiveness of the law's initiatives. This is reflective of the continued vociferous opposition by groups on the right to both pieces of legislation, as they argue that the ongoing focus on the past serves only to reopen old wounds and generate harmful division.

3. *"España en Libertad"* (Spain in Freedom) 2025

In recognition of the significance of the year 1975 in Spain's history, the Spanish government developed a programme of over 100 commemorative events to take place in 2025, framing this initiative not as a marking of 50 years since the death of Franco, but as a celebration of the country's transition to democracy, under the tagline of *"España en Libertad"* (Spain in Freedom). The programme includes exhibitions, public lectures and panel discussions, documentaries on television and radio, and artistic performances, all with the stated purpose of celebrating *"the prosperous, diverse and democratic country"* that Spain has become (Government of Spain).[1] At least thirty new sites of historical memory are also expected to be recognised over the course of 2025. Not unexpectedly, this commemorative initiative has been fiercely criticized by political groups on the right who consider it to be both unnecessary and provocative and have called for a boycotting of the events, with Vox spokesperson José Antonio Fúster accusing the government of seeking to impose a *"single and divisive version of the past"* (Vox acusa) and Popular Party representatives alleging that the initiative is designed to divert public attention away from more pressing issues, such as immigration and the economy. Furthermore, some of Spain's civic associations for historical memory, while welcoming the intent behind the commemorative programme, have criticized aspects of the framing of the initiative and

[1] *All translations from text originally in Spanish are mine.*

lamented the lack of consultation with groups such as theirs, publishing an open letter outlining their concerns. The debates over these current commemorations point to both the unwaning intensity of feeling over the memorialisation of Spain's history of civil war and dictatorship, as well as to the societal importance of anniversaries and how these are deployed by different actors to advance their causes.

4. Civic Grassroots Activism

Numerous associations advocating for memory and justice for the victims of Francoist repression have now been established throughout Spain, and the institutional initiatives described above have come to fruition largely due to their continued activism. While these organisations vary significantly in size and scale and have different areas of focus, the most prominent is the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH), established in 2001 by Emilio Silva and Santiago Macías following Silva's search for the grave containing the remains of his grandfather who was killed by Nationalist forces in the first months of the Civil War. Silva's motivation stemmed from a desire to break the silence that had surrounded the war and its victims in his family: *"the war dead had always been present in my family; more through the silence that surrounded their names than through the stories about them"* (22). This association has played a key role in advocating for and facilitating the exhumations of mass graves in order to return the human remains to their families.

Another major organisation is the Forum for Memory, which has links with the Communist Party and is a nationwide grouping of associations in different parts of Spain. Its objectives are to memorialise all those who fought to defend the Republic and to see an end to the continued impunity around crimes perpetrated under Francoism. In addition, there are numerous other smaller grassroots associations organised around a specific group, such as the Association of the Friends of the International Brigade, or others that have formed around a specific local site, such as the Association of Relatives and Friends of the Mass Grave of Oviedo.

The objective of the memory activism of these various groups, referred to as *"memorial entrepreneurs"* by Macdonald (15), is what Gutman refers to as *"the strategic commemoration of a contested past outside state channels to influence public debate and policy"* (1-2). In Spain, these groups have indeed played an important role in raising awareness of the scope and scale of the crimes perpetrated under Francoism and in advocating for families and communities, deploying diverse strategies as part of their campaigns.

It is, however, a complex landscape, with the various organisations at times holding conflicting views about the most effective means of advocating for change. For example, while the ARMH continues to focus much of its attention on exhumations and considers relatives' wishes regarding the reburial of relatives to be paramount, the Forum for Memory opposes activist-led exhumations that lack official state involvement, seeing this as *"akin to destroying evidence of the Francoist crimes"* and *"betraying the memory of the Spanish Second Republic"* (Hristova 732). These different approaches and perspectives point to a fragmented and contested public memory landscape, even within memory activism communities.

5. Seeking to obliterate traces of the past

As is the case in many other societies grappling with controversial pasts, in Spain there has been a tendency to seek to eliminate traces of Francoism from the public arena, particularly as the "memory boom" brought significant popular interest in the history of the civil war and dictatorship. This followed a very determined strategy of eschewing references to that past during the earlier years of Spain's transition to democracy, as the country sought to position itself as a modern and forward-looking European democracy. As Labanyi has noted, the Socialist government's cultural agenda of the late 20th century sought to project to the world *"a view of Spain as a young, brash, ultramodern nation"* (94) with a focus on looking to the future, rather than to the nation's contested past. It was not until the early 21st century that debates about the past became central in the cultural and political spheres and, as part of those discussions, public attention was drawn to the continued existence of multiple markers glorifying the regime and its leaders throughout the country. These ranged from street names to inscriptions and insignia on buildings, from plaques to monuments and memorials, from statues in public spaces through to the gigantic mausoleum in Cuelgamuros that was Franco's burial place, all part of the regime's systematic establishment of material markers dedicated to the memory of their fallen.

The removal of these symbolic markers from the public sphere was one of the principal objectives of memory activist groups, whose demands in this area sparked intense debate and fierce opposition. The political leanings of local and regional authorities played no small part in the outcome of these disputes; as an example, the names of a number of prominent streets in Madrid were changed as early as 1981 due to the intervention of the city's Socialist Mayor Enrique Tierno Galván; most notably, the previous name Paseo de la Castellana was restored to this well-known city centre thoroughfare, replacing its Franco era designation as Avenida del Generalísimo in honour of Franco (Capdepón 105). However, most such name changes took effect much later and followed protracted debates and legal proceedings, although the historical memory legislation did facilitate some of these processes.

Another central focus of memory activists was the removal of statues of Franco and other key figures associated with the regime. In the early yeas of the transition to democracy, there were instances of subtle attempts to diminish the symbolism of monuments by, for example, removing inscriptions or Francoist insignia (de Andrés 164). However, these modifications did little to lessen the controversy and conflict they sparked, with protests by competing groups and acts of defacement common. Regional differences also came into play during this process, with de Andrés noting that *"it has been in communities such as the Basque Country or Catalonia where the rejection and elimination of Francoist symbols have been strongest"* (183). In other areas, such moves involved lengthy and complex processes of campaigns and negotiations. Among the most controversial and publicised of these was the removal of the prominent equestrian statue of Franco in Madrid, a monument that had become a meeting point for supporters of Franco who gathered there on key occasions, such as each 20 November to mark the anniversary of the dictator's death. The statue was also a target of anti-Franco protests and was regularly defaced with graffiti and covered with red paint and had thus become a site that epitomised the deep societal divisions in

Spain and had become a flashpoint for competing groups. The statue was removed overnight in 2005 on orders from the Ministry of Development, a highly contested decision that also sparked legal proceedings that lasted several years, with the Francisco Franco Foundation ultimately appealing unsuccessfully to the Supreme Court in Madrid for the statue to be remounted. This removal was followed by numerous others, among the most notable the 2008 dismantling of the statue of Franco on horseback in Santander, the final such monument standing on the Spanish mainland. However, it was not until 2021 that the last remaining public statue of Franco would be removed from the Spanish North African enclave of Melilla, with authorities having argued that the statue was exempt from the provisions of the Historical Memory Law as it depicted Franco as Commander of the Spanish Foreign Legion in the earlier Rif War, over a decade prior to the events of the civil war.

Numerous other physical markers paying tribute to key figures associated with Francoism were also destroyed, often in order to comply with historical memory legislation. Prominent examples include the monument to Onésimo Redondo, considered a glorious war hero and martyr by the regime, in Valladolid, removed in 2016, the removal of the remains of regime military leader General Queipo de Llano from the Macarena Basilica in Seville in 2022, and the exhumations of both Franco and Primo de Rivera, founder of the Spanish fascist movement the Falange, from the formerly known Valley of the Fallen, the vast monument at Cuelgamuros that was conceived as a tribute to the Francoist victory in the war and a burial site for their fallen.

6. From obliteration to preservation

At the other end of the spectrum from the elimination of markers of past violence and repression are determined efforts to conserve such monuments and sites, in spite of the laws that have prohibited their continued existence in public spaces. Proponents of this approach argue for the importance of protecting cultural heritage, pointing to particular objects or monuments as holding significant cultural and/or artistic value, and they also argue against the erasure of material markers of the historical record. However, groups representing victims and survivors of the regime's repression see such an approach as perpetuating the remembrance of perpetrators and causing further pain to victims.

One example of the continued presence of such material traces of Francoism in the public sphere, in clear violation of the provisions of both the national laws of 2007 and 2022 and a 2018 regional law, is the continued existence of a monument to Franco in Tenerife in the Canary Islands. While its original official name was Monument of the Angel, changed in 2011 to Monument to Victory, it has been known as the Monument to Franco since its official unveiling in 1966. That event received considerable media coverage at the time, consisting of a formal ceremony attended by Franco, numerous regime officials and a crowd of some 100,000 people. Coverage of the monument's inauguration makes explicit that the work was conceived to pay homage to Franco, describing it as *"a monument to His Excellency, the Spanish Head of State"* (Monumento a Su Excelencia).

The bronze sculpture consists of a winged angel and a saviour-like male figure, commonly understood to represent Franco, standing over the angel and wielding a downward-facing sword in the shape of a Christian cross. While it has been the object of controversy and protests and there are ongoing calls for its removal, the monument has remained in place based on arguments that it holds particular artistic and cultural value and can therefore be considered exempt from legal provisions. There have also been efforts to reinterpret the monument, with its defenders arguing that it depicts Franco as Commander of the Spanish Foreign Legion in the earlier Rif War, over a decade prior to the events of the Civil War and is therefore not in violation of memory laws. More recently, doubts have been raised over whether the depicted male figure portrays Franco, with supporters of its preservation arguing that the monument depicts an unidentified soldier, noting that there is no reference to Franco at the site. The fate of this monument is the subject of ongoing debate and legal and political claims, with its designation as an approved object of cultural interest not approved to date.

7. Attempts at reinterpretation and contextualisation

Between these approaches of destroying material heritage and, alternatively, advocating for its permanence as part of the historical record, sit a wide range of other strategies that seek to contextualise contested sites in different ways. A first step in this regard is often the installation of a commemorative plaque acknowledging the heritage of a particular monument or site, while in some cases more detailed explanatory material is provided to contextualise a site's legacy in greater depth. There are also examples of more ambitious attempts to comprehensively reinterpret monuments and other sites, such as the installation of counter monuments and artistic interventions. All of these measures serve to make visible elements of a contested past but also often spark controversy and debate.

An example of a deliberative approach to contextualising multiple sites of memory in a city is found in Valencia, with a "historical memory route" guiding visitors to different places, all of which are marked with boards giving details of each site's history, often including historical photographs. This is a fairly comprehensive attempt to focus on the city's historical memory and some of its difficult heritage via a pedagogical approach. One of the sites included is the Santa Clara convent which was used after the Civil war as a women's prison, to provide additional capacity to the overflowing Provincial Women's Prison. The commemorative board at this site features a photo of some of the women prisoners held there after the war, but the board has been the victim of vandalism, with the faces of the women in the photo being specifically targeted, again evidencing the fraught nature of such memorialisation.

Similar vandalism has targeted a commemorative board outside a building in Barcelona that is now the headquarters of the National Police, located at number 43 of the central street of Via Laietana. This building was an infamous site of Francoist repression during the dictatorship, when it housed the Brigada Político-Social (BPS), an entity tasked with the repression of political dissidence. Referred to as a *"house of torture"* (Fernández Guerrero), survivors have recounted horrific experiences of humiliation and violence in the building through to the end of the

dictatorship. In the post-Franco era, the building has continued to serve as police premises, leading to a long and contested campaign by numerous memory groups for the building's repressive past to be acknowledged and for the police operations to be relocated. This advocacy has led to some changes; in 2019, the city council installed an information board outside the building, acknowledging its history of repression, and in 2023 the site was designated a "space of memory" in alignment with the 2022 Democratic Memory Law. Despite this, the building has continued to house the National Police, angering memory activists who argue that the continued use of the building for the work of law enforcement is incompatible with its new designation. More recently, in early 2025, it was announced that the building would become a Centre of Historical Memory with an educative focus. Despite this, there is a continued intention for some police functions, albeit of more limited scope, to take place there, outraging memory associations and supporters who have signalled ongoing protests and campaigns to ensure that the work of the police is moved elsewhere. The building at 43 Via Laietana remains a contested site in contemporary Spain, evidenced also by the fact that the information board outside the building has been the target of numerous instances of vandalism since it was installed.

8. Recommendations for Future Research

While there has been increased attention paid to the material legacy of Francoism in recent years, there remain many opportunities for further scholarly work to be undertaken. Many of the current debates in Spain are centred around efforts to protect remaining physical vestiges of the dictatorship, using a clause in the Democratic Memory Law of 2022 that permits the preservation of Francoist monuments and symbols if they are deemed to hold particular artistic and/or historical value. The Law established an expert technical body, the "Technical Commission on Symbols and Elements Incompatible with Democratic Memory," to compile a nationwide inventory of such material and to evaluate cases for exceptions. This body is currently creating this register and evaluating next steps for some key sites that are highly controversial, including the Valley of Cuelgamuros (formerly the Valley of the Fallen) and the Victory Arch in Madrid. There is scope to analyse the findings of this group to date and to examine any proposals they put forward.

In addition, there are opportunities to consider the extent to which sites of gendered repression have been memorialised, given the scant attention that has been paid to sites of women's incarceration in discussions about the material legacy of Francoism. This is indicative of a broader marginalization of women's histories and experiences in the public memory landscape. A fruitful area of scholarly research would be to analyze sites where the violent repression of women took place under the dictatorship and to examine the extent to which these are publicly recognised and historically preserved places in 21st-century Spain.

9. Conclusion

As is the case in many countries around the world, Spain continues to grapple with how best to deal with the physical reminders of a contested past. Despite legislative intervention and the intense advocacy of civic associations, some material markers of the Francoist

dictatorship continue to occupy public spaces, pointing to the complexities of "de-commemorating" difficult heritage. From attempts at elimination through toppled statues, renamed streets and exhumations of public figures, through to attempts to preserve material heritage for its aesthetic value, disregarding its political origins, the memory landscape continues to be highly contested terrain, half a century after the death of Franco. Current attempts to reframe and re-signify sites of memory to provoke critical reflection as part of the commemorative events of 2025 have further thrown into relief the ways in which the remnants of Spain's "dissonant" heritage of dictatorship continues to provoke fierce contemporary battles.

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