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Mass Killings and Violence in Spain, 1936–1952

Grappling with the Past

Edited by
Peter Anderson and Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco

ROUTLEDGE

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Historians have only recently established the scale of the violence carried out by the supporters of General Franco during and after the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939. An estimated 88,000 unidentified victims of Francoist violence remain to be exhumed from mass graves and given a dignified burial. For decades the history of these victims has also been buried. This volume brings together a range of Spanish and British specialists who offer an original and challenging overview of this violence. Contributors examine the mass killings and incarcerations carried out in both zones during the Civil War. They also trace how the Francoist repression continued after the Civil War and also affected everyday life. A final section explores ways of facing Spain's recent violent past.

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Francisco Cobo Romero and
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During the first third of the twentieth century, the Catholic and anti-liberal Spanish right grew increasingly concerned by the growing public role claimed by women. These fears became particularly acute with the arrival of the Spanish Second Republic in 1931. In the first years of the Republic, women benefited from advanced social legislation that helped forge greater equality, and as they swelled the ranks of political organisations they became powerful actors in their own right. The outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936 brought women even further to the fore. A fresh and larger wave of women surged into a range of democratic, revolutionary and anarchist organisations in defence of the Second Republic. The victory of the Francoists in the Civil War, however, ushered in the reversal of reform and a concerted effort to use violence and repression to return women to the home. This chapter sets out to analyse the repression of women carried out by the new regime. It does so by first placing the repression in its historical context. It goes on to analyse a range of different forms of persecution suffered by thousands of women that included imprisonment, public humiliation, social marginalisation and, in some cases, death.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE FRANCOIST SOCIAL AND POLITICAL REPRESSION OF WOMEN

The struggle for women's liberation between the last decades of the nineteenth century and the outbreak of the Civil War in 1936 followed a slow and twisting path. Industrialisation and urbanisation brought new strains to bear on the old political system with the masses demanding radical change and a role for themselves in the political system.[1] The gradual rise of the number of women in the workplace and their ever-greater participation in parties, unions and strikes formed an integral part of the developing conflict that marked the period.[2] In turn, their growing prominence in public life turned the 'women's question' into a central issue of the day debated by politicians, philosophers, scientists, intellectuals and artists.[3]

The arrival of the Second Republic in April 1931 stands out as a turning point in the development of women's social and political rights.[4] Legislation passed in 1932 on civil marriage and divorce granted equality between husband and wife. Most decisively of all, the Republic gave women the vote.[5] The reforms gave serious pause to parties forged and designed exclusively with male voters in mind. The right, for instance, began to mobilise conservative women as shock troops against the forces of changes unleashed by the Republic.[6] At the same time, a rich variety of groups on the right repeatedly called for the return of women to the private sphere.[7]

A wide number of groups on the Catholic and anti-Liberal right believed women's essential roles revolved around raising children and carrying out housework. They also looked on women as bulwarks of morality and defenders of the faith against an ever-more materialist and corrupt world.[8] Unsurprisingly, the anti-parliamentary, authoritarian and fascist right began to demand the removal of women from the public sphere and these demands grew particularly acute in the Civil War.[9] In their view, with women ensconced once more in the home, the traditional hierarchical and patriarchal family would be re-established with its divinely sanctioned division of labour between the sexes fully restored.[10] Accordingly, in right-wing thought women would be mobilised to restore traditional values and become pitched against the materialistic and corrupt society they associated with the repudiated Republican forces.[11]

By contrast, in the government zone during the Civil War an array of political groups sought to mobilise women within a dense patchwork of popular committees and revolutionary organisations.[12] The anarchist feminist organisation Free Women (*Mujeres Libres*) brought together thousands of women in defence of the full equality of the sexes and the economic, social and cultural liberation for women. The organisation advocated total freedom of women from men's control and proposed new and more equitable relations in all areas, including sexual relationships.[13] The Spanish Communist Party (PCE), however, worked hardest to mobilise women behind the defence of the Second Republic. Its Association of Anti-Fascist Women (*Agrupación de Mujeres Antifascistas*) toiled to persuade women to back the democratic and progressive struggle against fascism.[14]

The defeat of the Republic presented the Catholic and Fascist right with the opportunity to reverse reforms and restore more traditional gender relations. Seeking to imitate Fascist regimes of interwar Europe, the Francoists set out to forge a totalitarian state. Part of this project involved recreating authoritarian and hierarchical families in line with the precepts of traditional Catholicism. The clear corollary was that women would become subordinate to men and would bring up children with religious values.

Carrying out a systematic programme of repression offered one means to achieve this goal.[15] In this regard, women perceived to have transgressed traditional gender norms, or who had openly supported the freedom and equality between the sexes proposed by left-wing organisations, were carefully

targeted by the Francoists.[16] Indeed, we can detect a distinctly gendered aspect to the repression carefully carried out by the Francoists. Its agents purposefully rooted out women thought to have transgressed gender norms. The state, however, did not act alone, and countless numbers of collaborators helped drive the repression by targeting women through denunciations and testimony offered to the authorities.

GENDERED REPRESSION: EXECUTION AND IMPRISONMENT

The Franco regime deployed the full force of the law to wipe out the social and legal equality achieved by thousands of women during the Second Republic. Beginning in 1936 in areas of Spain occupied by the Francoists in the Civil War, a series of decrees and laws helped restore traditional gender relations. In this legislation, women became identified as wives, mothers and the cornerstone of traditional Catholic spiritual values. Women were also praised for playing a vital role in forging the national spirit of the Hispanic race.

The Francoists began by suspending Republican legislation that allowed women to manage their own property or granted them legal equality with men. The regime also overturned the right to civil marriage, prohibited divorce and banned contraception. At the same time, the Francoists rewarded families with a large number of children. The regime further brought back a provision from the 1889 Civil Code, which denied married women independent legal rights and made them dependent on their husbands in legal matters.[17]

Particularly in the period of 'hot terror' between July and September 1936, the Francoists resorted to much more brutal methods: the summary executions of thousands of women. Many of the victims stood accused of having taken part in public politics and being members of Republican or left-wing workers' organisations. Others simply went to the firing squad in lieu of close left-wing relatives who had fled before the Francoist military columns occupied their towns or villages. In this early period of the war, in the province of Seville alone, rebels killed 744 women. Rebel death squads murdered a number of them, rebel firing squads executed others after summary trial and others still perished in overcrowded and insalubrious prisons. To this grim figure, we need to add a further 446 women who were wiped out from 1937 onwards in reprisal for the help they had given to relatives who had fled to the countryside. Here their loved ones were living rough and keeping their heads down in the hope they could escape the Francoist repression.[18]

Many of the women condemned to death by summary military tribunals stood accused of 'supporting the rebellion' (*auxilio a la rebelión*). The charge covered a multitude of sins from helping beat off rebel attacks to membership of political parties and trade unions that supported the Popular

Front government of the Second Republic. This was the case of Ana París, a 38-year-old married woman with two children. She had risen to become president of the women's section of the General Workers' Union (Unión General de Trabajadores) and had taken an active role as a trade unionist defending workers' interests in the village of La Roda in Seville province. Her trial documents also reveal she continued this work at the start of the war and helped organise the defence of her village against the rebel forces. After her village fell, she fled towards Málaga only to fall into the hands of Falangists in the town of Antequera in November 1936. From here she was taken to prison in Seville and placed on trial and condemned to death in August 1937. Following instructions laid down in her sentence, Ana París was executed on 5 February 1938 by a gruesome system of slow strangulation known as *garrote vil*.[19]

For female captives who did not suffer execution, the Francoists represented female political enemies in ways that would allow them to punish those who had allied themselves with the demands for reform. They began this process by constructing women who had strayed from the precepts of traditional Catholic thought as dangerous dissidents and mental degenerates.[20] This both made them hard to redeem and justified the harsh punishment judged necessary to reform them. Once redeemed, they would be allowed out of jail and into the new national community the Francoists believed they were constructing on firm Catholic foundations.[21]

The pseudoscientific theories put forward by Doctor Antonio Vallejo-Nájera aimed to explain the political dissidence and 'redemption' of those from the defeated side in terms of medical psychiatry. According to Vallejo-Nágera, all those women who had come to the defence of 'anti-national' principles or 'revolutionary' beliefs that in his view guided the Republic had been turned into criminals by Marxist, anarchist and Republican ideologies. This accounted for the innumerable crimes and bloody atrocities he argued they committed. These theories therefore demonised all women who had become identified with political organisations that came to the defence of the Second Republic.[22]

From such premises, Francoists concluded that their task was to regenerate those women who had become victims of their own emotional and ethical weakness and had allowed themselves to be dragged along by the Marxist revolution. For the Francoists, the harsh punishment of such women would provide the means for their redemption. Crucially, this redemption would mean restoring their femininity by inspiring these women once more with the values of Catholic spiritualism. Once returned to the faith, they would no longer fall into dissolute behaviour or be tempted to commit blood crimes. Ideas such as these would exert their greatest influence in the prosecution and incarceration of thousands of women.

To capture a large number of prisoners, from its birth the Franco regime established a wide array of organisations dedicated to the arrest, prosecution and punishment of political enemies. These organisations also drew

on the support of a large number of informants and collaborators. Among these collaborators, the widows of leading rightists murdered during the revolutionary period that marked the first months of the Civil War played a prominent role. Frequently driven by a desire for revenge, such collaborators often singled out women with whom their families had come into conflict over labour issues in the build-up to the Civil War.[23]

The record left by Franco's mass summary military tribunals of civilians show that a large number of women were accused of having helped resist the Francoist rebels. Even simply remaining passive in the face of this resistance rather than actively backing the rebels could lead to prosecution. Overall, however, the majority of 'red' women were accused of having confiscated the property of rightists judged by local revolutionary committees to have supported the revolt. A sizeable body of women was also accused of damaging church property or icons.[24] Some women were charged with taking part in violence against the clergy; an accusation that invariably led to harsh punishment. 'Red' women were also commonly prosecuted for denouncing, identifying and taking part in the arrests of numerous right-wing activists. In reality, most women were not accused of direct participation in many of these crimes but did face charges of inspiring, aiding and abetting the men who committed them. In Marbella, in the province of Málaga, for instance, a sizeable group of women dragged furniture from a parish church to the beach. In nearby, San Pedro de Alcántara a group of women supplied the petrol used to set ablaze a pile of altarpieces, sacred images and a variety of items used in religious services.[25] A large number of women were also accused of having hurled insults against the new Francoist authorities or of having shouted in protest against them. Another set of women was charged with passing on rumours or false news which undermined the new authorities. Another group faced prosecution for spreading propaganda or publishing stories which threatened the security of the Francoist New State.

Careful analysis of the sentences passed by summary military tribunal reveals that many convictions rested on little more than ideological and cultural stereotypes the Francoist relied on to identify 'red women'. The condemned women almost always became labelled as shameless militiawomen or degenerates who were also often charged with working in seedy cabarets or as prostitutes. They became branded as morally dubious and blood thirsty libertines who therefore embodied the classic enemies of the fatherland. In this sense, for Francoists, they became symbols of the sins that had led to the moral degeneration of the nation that had come about since liberalism arose in Spain.

Prison offered the Francoists one of the main means to bring about the 'redemption' they hoped to bestow on such 'criminal' women. Under a prison regime profoundly influenced by Catholic thought, time served in jail became equated with the redemption of sin.[26] The Church became directly involved in running and staffing the prison service. At first, it did so through its organisation the Trustees of Mercy (*Patronato de la Merced*) and later

through its Charity for Fallen Women (*Obra de las Mujeres Caídas*). According to the Catholics running such bodies, the redemption of women prisoners required their careful separation from society to be followed by a long process of moral regeneration.[27] During this period, female prisoners would be carefully supervised and tutored by religious personnel charged with tending to their spiritual needs. The prime goal of these mentors would be to guide women back to the principles of femininity which would guarantee their future behaviour.

In such ways, the Catholic Church came to play a significant role in life inside women's prisons. Female prisoners frequently came under the careful watch of nuns. The Church and the state also drew up a series of agreements which gave religious fraternities considerable sway over prison life. This meant that in the early 1940s, women's prisons became a key site in which the regime tried to bring about the redemption of female inmates who it believed had fallen into sin.[28] This redemption, however, relied on a system of punishment and humiliation designed to subjugate prisoners and 'redeem' their personalities.[29]

Despite a broad belief that some female prisoners could be reformed, the blanket criminalisation of women accused of embracing revolutionary, anti-Spanish left and Republican ideologies led to Francoists considering some of them unworthy mothers. In jail after jail in Francoist Spain, and in acts driven by hate which reveal a ghastly loss of humanity, guards beat the wombs of pregnant 'red' prisoners. In some cases, women were beaten until they aborted. Some Francoists argued that such acts extirpated evil at its very roots and helped purify the new fatherland.[30] Meanwhile, prison authorities frequently allowed imprisoned mothers with very young children to continue to care for their infants behind bars. On reaching the age of three, however, the infants would be separated from their mothers and taken into a care home run by the Trustees of St. Paul (*Patronato de San Pablo*).[31]

HUMILIATION, SHAME, POVERTY

Beyond executions and imprisonment, the Francoists employed a wide variety of other punishments that took a particularly gendered form. Many of these punishments relied on humiliation and the use of public shaming and symbolism aimed at restoring a moral order the female victims were judged to have transgressed. Hundreds of women, for instance, were forced to clean churches as well as the barracks of right-wing militia organisations and the paramilitary police service, the Civil Guard. Moreover, through shaming rituals the Francoists made women's bodies public sites for regeneration and purification. This worked through the tactic of ridiculing the 'perverse' attempt by women allied with the Republic to equate themselves to men by entering the public sphere of parties, organisations and politics.

The infamous cases of head shaving provide one of the most potent examples of this phenomenon. Carried out against communist, anarchist, socialist and Republican women who had backed the government in the Civil War, a whole series of punishments like this were conducted in ways which would never have been used against men accused of similar 'crimes'. Many of the women abused in this way by the new Francoist authorities first had their heads shaved, and in some cases even their eyebrows, and then suffered being paraded through the streets. Many were forced to don ridiculous garb or were obliged to carry symbols of the defeated Republic. Others were compelled to take the laxative castor oil to 'purify' them of the 'sin' they carried within them. Almost all of them were forced to march through central streets, sometimes half dressed, in their home towns. In many cases, these processions drew large crowds which took open pleasure in contemplating the lamentable spectacle the female prisoners presented. These crowds often threw taunts and behaved as if the women were being taught a lesson for their recent illicit and immoral behaviour.[32]

The principal motivation of all these humiliations centred on denying the victims any visible sign of femininity. Above all, however, the shaving of women's heads became violent acts carried out by neighbours of the victim. Almost always, the humiliations took place within communities where everyone knew one another, and in this context the processions served to signal publically those to be excluded from the new political and moral order created by the Franco regime. They also formed part of a reinterpretation of the demands for equality voiced by anarchists and the left in the Civil War. Catholics in particular portrayed these demands as the delirious ravings of masculinised women who had lost their moral compass and fallen into sin or rebellion. To stamp out these vices, and the wild demands they had voiced, it was deemed necessary to inflict harsh lessons by robbing the victims of their essential feminine traits.[33]

Events in the first days of the war in the village of Paterna de la Ribera in the province of Cádiz help illustrate these points. For the first six days of the conflict, villagers remained loyal to the government and large numbers of locals demonstrated their support for the Republic by taking to the streets. The presence of many women among these crowds singled them out for harsh punishment once the village fell to the rebels. On 23 July 1936 (a few days after the start of the conflict), groups of Falangists with the support of army columns headed towards the village from the nearby town of Arcos de la Frontera and proceeded to occupy Paterna de la Ribera. Ana Castejón Cote, a 39-year-old local and the wife of an anarchist, managed to escape to Málaga. She was forced to return to Paterna de la Ribera, however, after Málaga fell to the Francoists in February 1937. She then became subject to a series of humiliations. Forced to report to the Falange barracks she suffered having her head shaved. She was then marched through the village to the church while a crowd of neighbours hurled abuse at her. At the church, the local vicar awaited her and proceeded to carry out an exorcism on her

before she was locked up in the local jail. Sometime later, her captors placed her on trial and condemned her to several years in prison.

Francoists frequently persecuted women for being mothers, wives or daughters of activists who had swung behind the Republic. Another example offers further insight into the suffering involved. Juan Carrera Luque had belonged to the People's Committee (Comité Popular) in Almogía in Málaga province in the first months of the war. After the province's occupation in February 1937 he fled along the coastal road towards Almería. He arrived in the town of Motril and a short time later he decided to return home believing Francoist assurances that those who had not committed blood crimes would be safe. On returning to his village he learned that his wife and son had been arrested and he went into hiding. But he decided to hand himself over to the new Francoist authorities who immediately executed him. From this point on, his wife, Francisca Luque Muñoz, became victim to ceaseless persecution at the hands of local Falangists, members of the Civil Guard and the municipal authorities. In this regard, it is well worth citing the testimony of her son.

> We were in the home of an aunt in Almogía . . . when the barber arrived with a pair of civil guard offices. They shaved my mother and another woman on the spot. I was crying. I didn't know what to do and there was nothing else I could do except cry. They shoved a rifle in my side and then left me alone for an entire month. They said 'Señora, come with us'. They sat her down and shaved her. She was so scared and frightened that she broke out crying. It was the barber. When they shaved her they gave her castor oil and told her 'take it, it'll make your hair grow!' And she began to scream 'Ay, shoot me'. She even tried to kill herself and if she didn't manage to do so, it was only because my aunt was there watching over her. Later some Falangists came and took our things, some chickens and whatever there was to take.[34]

The testimony offered by Dolores, one of the many women who fled the advance of Francoist military columns towards the city of Málaga and its surrounding towns and villages, is just as revealing. Two of her brothers tried to escape from Málaga by fleeing towards Almería. When they arrived in Rio de la Miel (a village near Nerja in Málaga province) one of her brothers joined the Francoist army and the other fled towards the 'red zone' and enrolled in the Republican army in Berja (in the province of Almería). When this second brother returned to his home town, Dolores tells how Falangists humiliated her mother and sister. Together with many other women, they were obliged to parade naked through local streets. A short time later they were subjected to a further set of humiliations. She testifies that her mother and sister were forced to clean the church, the cemetery, streets and some abandoned buildings. The terrible repression led many women who had suffered reprisals to hide out in caves or in remote houses deep in the

countryside to try to escape the shame which the local authorities could visit on them.[35]

By robbing such women of their humanity, the Francoists paved the way for a whole series of abuses. Among the many horrific sufferings, the rape of women accused of behaving in ways ill-befitting members of the 'fairer-sex' stand out. The rape of such women was widely practised on the occupation of towns and villages and was used to restore masculine and what were seen as virile values. At the same time, rape operated to degrade its victims morally by robbing them of their dignity and subjecting them to repugnant sexual practices.[36] Terrible scenes, for instance, took place across a series of villages in the province of Seville after occupation by army units backed by Falangists and Carlist militia. To limit ourselves to just one example, in the village of Los Corrales, Victoria Macías Gutiérrez was shot while pregnant and her corpse violated by a former suitor.[37]

Great suffering also came about from the social exclusion, marginalisation and impoverishment that Francoists inflicted on thousands of women in the post-war years. The Law of Political Responsibilities enacted in February 1939 created a series of local tribunals that remained in operation until 1945. These institutions confiscated goods from a sizeable number of people accused simply of supporting democratic or Republican ideals or having belonged to one of the parties or unions that had backed the Popular Front subsequently declared illegal by Franco's New State. The expropriations and fines imposed first of all by the Central Confiscation Commission (in the first few months of the Civil War) and later by the Tribunals for Political Responsibility and the Settlement Commissions (*Comisión Liquidadora*) forced an innumerable number of working class or the lower middle class families into absolute poverty. The wives and partners of many of the men jailed or executed by the regime also became victims of the sentences passed down by the Tribunals of Political Responsibility. These tribunals enjoyed the full power to decree the expropriation of property that remained in the hands of relatives of people sentenced by summary military tribunals.

Francisca Liesa Liesa from the village of Argavieso (in Huesca province) provides a case in point. On 30 January 1941, the authorities began to investigate her for having hurled insults against police officers after she had learned that her son had been taken prisoner. This led to her being accused of inciting rebellion (*exitación a la rebelión*) and earned her a sentence of six years and one day in prison. On top of this, she suffered the confiscation of her property and a fine of 3,700 pesetas.[38] Such sentences condemned many prisoners' wives and women married to those executed by the regime to a life of poverty and misery. We know of many cases in which women like Francisca Liesa found themselves forced into theft or prostitution.[39]

To survive, many of these women resorted to humiliating labour or to trading small quantities of food or items of little value on the black market. Other women had to rely on charity or seek the help offered by the Falangist organisation Social Support (*Auxilio Social*).[40] This kind of suffering is

revealed by the case of the mother of Isabel Sánchez Alba from a village in Jaén province. Her husband, Santos Sánchez, was imprisoned in the first months of the civil war. This left Virginia Alba (Isabel's mother) in dire financial straits and with two small children and an elderly mother to support. Virginia also suffered the torments of the victors who inflicted on her the humiliations so often visited on women identified as Republican or as leftists. She was forced to drink castor oil and humiliated when she needed to defecate in the street after imbibing the laxative. In addition to this, she was reduced to such poverty that she had to eke out a living by trading a few objects of scarce value on the black market. Breaking the law in this way meant she always had to be on her guard and lived in fear of suffering either a stiff fine or imprisonment.[41]

NOTES

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