

## Spain's civil war: a story of shame and secrecy

My interest in the Spanish civil war, the backdrop for *The Return*, was ignited during a trip to the city of Granada in southern Spain and specifically on a visit to the summer home of Federico García Lorca, the poet and playwright. Lorca was a major celebrity in Spain during the early 1930s, charming, handsome, clever and versatile, and was adored by liberal-thinking Spaniards. His visits from Madrid to see his wealthy and well-connected family would even be reported in the local papers. On my walk around his house, which is something of a shrine, I learned that Lorca was one of the civil war's most famous victims. He was arrested during the first month after it broke out in 1936 and executed a few days later, shot in the back (some say in the backside) near a village outside Granada, and hastily buried in an unmarked grave. The event caused a national outcry.

Lorca may have had left-wing ideas, but he was not an active member of the Socialist party and it was always suspected that his critics were those who despised him for his homosexuality rather than his politics. Being gay made you an easy target under the brutal and deeply conservative regime that was to come into power under Franco.

My curiosity about the civil war was aroused by what I discovered that afternoon, and I learned soon after that around six thousand other people had been assassinated in Granada alone during the first few months of this three-year conflict. Given that this is a very small city (you can walk from one end to the other in not much more than twenty minutes) I realised that the war must have been a cataclysmic event. It was puzzling to realise that I had visited Spain so many times and not been aware of it.

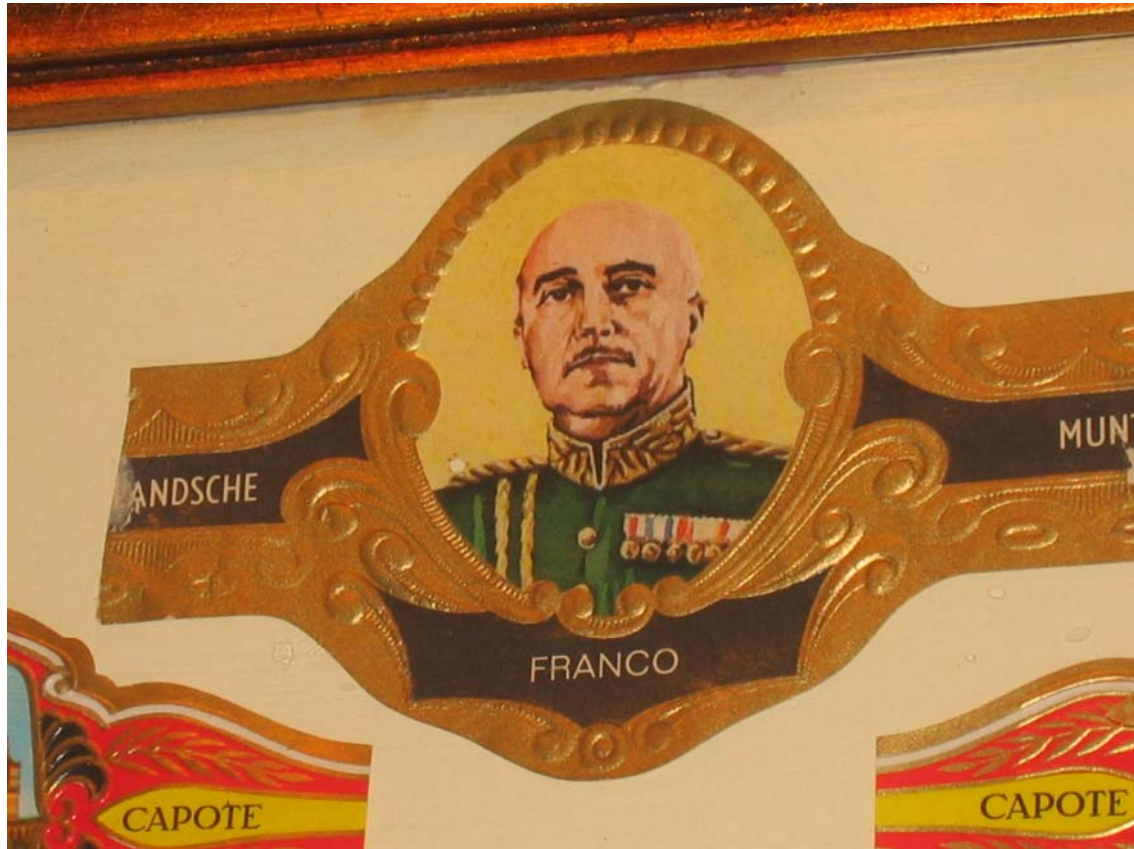


A Granada street, 2008

When I began researching for *The Return* in 2005, I was told that something in the region of fourteen thousand books had been written about the conflict. It's a daunting figure and makes it even more curious that so many English people, even those who live in Spain, are largely ignorant of it.

Until I began my reading (starting off with histories of the war by Paul Preston, Hugh Thomas and Antony Beevor), the only knowledge I had of this conflict had been sketchy. We learned nothing about it in school history lessons and, as is still the case now, the syllabus was dominated by the two wars of the twentieth century in which Britain was directly engaged. The Spanish civil war is scarcely a footnote in the textbooks. I had read Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and in 1995 saw Ken Loach's film, *Land and Freedom*, about an idealistic Englishman who goes to fight with the International Brigades against Franco, and I think my knowledge was reasonably typical. I am not even sure I realised that, unlike the two other European fascist leaders of the same period, Hitler and Mussolini, General Franco was in power for nearly forty years.

Wandering around in the city of Granada, I began to look for other monuments connected with the civil war, particularly to the victims. I could not find even one. I did however find a monument to José Antonio Primo de Rivera, who was the founder of the right-wing Falangist movement whose beliefs were adopted by Franco for his fascist regime. Primo de Rivera was sentenced to death by the Spanish Republican Government and executed on 11 November 1936, and his body is now buried next to Franco's. Somehow the existence of his monument in Granada seemed less surprising once I had been told that the Falange party still exists in Granada and that, every 4 January, a group of uniformed members of this right-wing party still hold a ceremony (I am told with goose-stepping) to celebrate the handing over of the keys of the city by the Moors to the fifteenth-century monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand. I realised that there must still be mixed feelings in Spain towards Franco and that there were many people in Spain alive today who must have fought on his side.



An image of Franco in a Granada café

I made a few enquiries with the Spanish friend with whom I was staying, who bluntly told me that he knew of no monuments in Granada to those who had been on the losing side and in fact the civil war was not something anyone really talked about, himself included. I was rather chastened by his response and realised I was not going to get any more information out of him. I subsequently learned that Spaniards in towns and villages all over Spain, especially people of the generation who were alive at the time of the war, still refuse to talk about it, almost to the point where they pretend nothing much happened. I found all these conflicting attitudes fascinating.

Once I had begun to read up on the war, it became apparent that it had become a source of shame for many people. When Franco died, and democracy and the monarchy were restored, there was to some extent a quiet agreement to carry on, to build a solid future and not to mention the past. A few generations later, people began to question what had happened to their relatives and in which unmarked grave they might lie, and bodies are now being exhumed. It is a delicate but nevertheless very current issue and only recently

has an act been passed which actively encourages the putting up of memorials to commemorate the Republicans who lost their lives fighting for the legal government.

Simultaneously with this movement to remember those who were on the losing side, revisionist historians (most famously a man called Pio Moa, whose books are bestsellers) maintain that Franco was not such a bad thing and that the Republic he overturned was corrupt. The two sides are bitterly opposed and hostile to each other, and paint very different pictures of certain events. An illustration of this is the destruction of Guernica. One historian claims only seventy-three people were killed there, and others maintain that thousands were massacred. They can't both be right and both accuse the other of ridiculous claims.

Early on in the course of my research for this novel, I knew that I was not going to be persuaded by the revisionists. Even if there were books that gave both sides of the story, I came across some episodes and places that evoked the extreme cruelty of the Fascist regime and profoundly influenced me. They meant that I could not have adopted anything other than a 'left-wing' approach.

On another trip to Granada I spotted an advertisement in the local paper for an exhibition of photographs taken during the civil war. It was taking place in a small village outside the city and on a wet Saturday afternoon something compelled me to make the trip. My friends and I were the only visitors in the hall where they were on display. The pictures were taken by a Canadian, Norman Bethune, an idealistic left-wing doctor, who had pioneered a mobile blood transfusion service that he was using to help wounded Republicans in Spain. In February 1937 he encountered the exodus from Málaga by 150,000 people who had fled from the Fascists overrunning their city. He rescued many wounded adults and children and helped them to reach Almería in his vehicle, and his photographs are an extraordinary visual record of the reality of this conflict: ordinary citizens reduced to terrified, destitute, ragged refugees. As well as the pictures, the exhibition displayed written testimonies, by children as young as nine or ten, of their experience on that road, during which they were bombed and strafed from the air. Bethune's images encapsulate the horror of this war and when, a while later, I found myself travelling on that same very exposed road, from Almería to Málaga, the brutality of the way in which these people had been attacked was easy to imagine.

Then there was El Valle de los Caídos, the Valley of the Fallen, Franco's grand burial place where many labourers died during its twenty-year construction. The taxi driver who drove me out there from Madrid was positively hostile when I told him that I was not interested in the nearby burial place of the Spanish monarchs at El Escorial but only in Franco's tomb. It was a startlingly clear April morning and there was a stirring and

dramatic beauty about the landscape and the sight of the massive cross that could be seen sitting on a mountain top from many kilometres away. The basilica is said to be bigger than St Peter's in Rome; it is underground, dark and chillingly damp, and has literally been gouged out of the mountainside.



The basilica at El Valle de los Caídos



Franco's tomb

As I walked in and my eyes got used to the gloom, I could see a priest conducting a mass. In a semi-circle around him was a choir and several worshippers on their knees in the pews. And there, on the floor of this huge space, was Francisco Franco's tomb, strewn with flowers. I was really sickened by the sight of it and by the reverential atmosphere. I watched some nuns crossing themselves and wondered to myself how they could have reconciled any of Franco's actions with their religious faith, and realised I would never begin to understand. Outside, against the bright blue sky outside, the huge cross appeared to reach higher than ever into the sky. Marking a dictator's tomb with such a symbol seemed a mockery.



The cross above Franco's tomb

Another thread of the story of this war which took me to a specific location concerned the people who fled over the Spanish border to France when Barcelona fell. They were given refuge on the beaches along the Côte Vermeille at Argelès, Barcarès and St Cyprien.

As I describe in the story of my character Antonio Ramírez, thousands of them were herded into pens on these vast, open sandy beaches where they stayed for months. Many of them died there. Nowadays these places are holiday resorts, but I could not help but feel their desolation and think of the lack of humanity with which the Spaniards were treated and the cruel irony of them being housed on beaches which today are places of recreation. However golden these sands may be, they are strangely haunted. At certain places along the sea front, there are monuments to commemorate the camps and those who died in them, and each name represents a life whose story will probably never be told. These plaques look incongruous next to the rows of deckchairs for hire, and ice-cream sellers.

Something else which I had to go and see for myself rather than rely on a reproduction in a book was Picasso's painting of Guernica in the Reina Sofia Museum in Madrid. For many people, this is the quintessential image of the Spanish civil war and it is a truly iconic work of art. Standing in front of the huge canvas is like being in front of a cinema screen and seeing the whole of the war being re-enacted in front of you – animals, people, buildings, landscape, a whole country being torn apart, turned upside down. It is a powerful and almost raw portrayal of terror. It almost says everything there is to say about those three years. The real thing has an aura that holds your attention and will not let you look away.

Another aspect of the war which I read about and to which I was able to add another dimension was the story of the four thousand or so Basque children who were evacuated to England from Bilbao in May 1937. I was fortunate enough to meet some of them who have lived here ever since, because it was not safe for them to return. They described to me what it was like to leave their parents for an unknown country and to live with total strangers. Those children who were kind enough to share their experiences with me are now in their eighties and are all truly exceptional and brave people. Nothing I might have read could have provided such a vivid insight into the way people suffered during the Spanish civil war or during the period following it, when the aftershocks continued to be felt.

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