



John Patrick Thompson\*

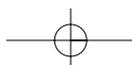
## ⇒ The Civil War in Galiza,<sup>1</sup> the Uncovering of the Common Graves, and Civil War Novels as Counter-Discourses of Imposed Oblivion

**Abstract:** This article examines three inter-related phenomena of the Spanish Civil War with an emphasis on the Autonomous Community of Galiza. The first part explains the nature of the fascist takeover of Galiza in July 1936, and points out the crucial role of this community in helping Franco win the war. The scars left by fascism in Galiza manifest themselves today through, for example, the popularity of the PP government of Manuel Fraga, one of the last living fascists to govern in Europe. The second part of the article analyzes the effects that the current exhuming of common graves throughout the State is having on Spain's collective memory. This uncovering of suppressed historical facts and memory is polarizing the two Spains, which the Pact of Oblivion (imposed during the Transition to democracy) attempted to unite. The last section of the article explores the beneficial function of narrative fiction written about the Civil War in transmitting the facts and memory of this traumatic event. Many novels offer praxis-oriented frameworks that can help Galiza and the rest of Spain overcome and marginalize pro-Franco ideology, which still remains a part of society's mainstream.

**Keywords:** Fascism; Memory; Civil War Novels; Galiza; 20th Century.

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to use "Galiza" and "Galizan," as opposed to the official English spellings, "Galicia" and "Galician," given that English obtained the name for this community from Spanish. "Galiza" is found in the initial texts written in the Luso-tongue, but was gradually replaced by "Galicia" as this kingdom was ruled, practically since the beginning of its existence, by the Leon-Castile crown. Though "Galicia" has been the name in the official orthographic standard, *o galego oficial*, since its institutionalization in 1982, the recently passed *normativa da concordia* (July 2003) now accepts "Galiza," but only in literary use; "Galicia" remains the official word for all other uses. My objective behind promoting the use of "Galiza" in English dovetails with that of many Galizans who also use "Galiza" in all contexts. My objective is to draw attention to the linguistic and cultural difference of this community (or nation) within the Spanish State. In *O galego (im)possível* Rodrigues Fagim analyzes the linguistic proximities between Galizan and Portuguese, and alludes to a valuable study by Montero Santalha, which shows the progressive replacement of "Galiza" by "Galicia" in judicial texts beginning in the Middle Ages: "O estudo de Montero Santalha documenta Galiza de forma sistemática nos textos literários que vam de meados do s. XIII a fins do século XV. Polo contrário, naqueloutros de carácter jurídico aparecen 30 Galiza e 7 Galicia no período entre os séculos XIII-XIV. No segundo período, séculos XV-XVI o panorama é outro: 5 Galiza e 34 Galicia. Isto é, simplesmente, um reflexo fidelíssimo do que sócio-culturalmente se passou naquela altura. Nos séculos seguintes, a Galiza só lhe restou desaparecer" (2001: 168).





Despite the plethora of bibliography (both Spanish and foreign) produced on the Spanish Civil War, very little has been dedicated to the Autonomous Community of Galiza – an ironic phenomenon given, on the one hand, the prominent political leadership from this community during the Republic, and, on the other hand, its fundamental role in Franco’s winning the war. Galiza, it is agreed, symbolized the Republic in that certain key political figures of all ideologies were Galizan: Daniel Alfonso Castelao, a Partido Galeguista member, embodied the motor behind Galiza’s statute of autonomy; Santiago Casares Quiroga, a member of Izquierda Republicana, was the president of the Council, the second highest political position after the President of the Republic; Portela Valladares was a prominent centrist figure; Calvo Sotelo, the highest ranking member of the reactionary party Renovación Española, became the fascist proto-martyr when assassinated shortly before the military uprising in a state-organized crime; and, finally, Franco himself was from Ferrol. Galiza, as the saying went at the time, brought to the Civil War traitors, martyrs and saviors. In this article I begin by explaining the nature of the rapid fascist takeover of Galiza in July 1936. I then analyze the current uncovering of common graves in Spain and relate, in the final section, these events to the role of “uncovering” traumatic memory that Spanish Civil War novels (and, more concretely, Galizan Civil War novels) have been fulfilling in lieu of political initiative.

### The Dirty War and Galiza’s Tribute of Blood

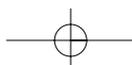
Galiza did not host a war in the conventional sense of a well-defined battlefield and two armed forces in conflict. What took place constituted what we would call today a dirty war, such as those during the 1970s and 80s in Latin America; or, in the words of Ramón Villares, “unha guerra xorda.”<sup>2</sup> Once the uprising triumphed in Galiza (within five days it had fallen completely into rebel hands), this community became the rear-guard of the fascist forces and served Franco, in the words of General Cabanellas, as “despensa y criadero,” providing food, as well as soldiers. During the three years of the war, it is estimated that the Francoists murdered approximately 5000 political dissidents,<sup>3</sup> while silencing most of the living witnesses and destroying most of the written testimonies. It is most likely because of this factor that Galiza has remained, until recently, relatively invisible within the Spanish Civil War. In other words, the absence of battlefronts in this community during the war has obstructed the transmission of historical memory much more than elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

Besides the immediate triumph of the Franco forces, another crucial factor contributing to the massive repression was the community’s geostrategic situation. Unlike other

<sup>2</sup> Ramón Villares, personal interview, July 17, 2002. The adjective “xordo” (in Spanish “sordo”) signifies both the silenced aspect of the repression, as well as the sordid (the English cognate of “xordo”) nature of it.

<sup>3</sup> This is the number Bieito Alonso quotes in *Historia de Galicia* (1996: 271). Fernández Prieto also uses Alonso’s figure (1993: 51).

<sup>4</sup> Marc Wouters describes the information void that inevitably kept Galiza outside the post-war common research ground: “Con movementos de tropa e subministro de munición, roupa e patacas non se describe unha guerra. O sufrimento non queda reflectido debidamente nas poucas fontes de que dispomos” (1993: 8).





regions, where the instability of the borders during the beginning stages of the conflict (as in Northern Castile and those of western Andalusia), allowed anti-fascists to escape the repression, Galiza was completely sealed off: the ocean did not provide an escape for many; the western strip of Asturias, which extends north and south along Galiza's eastern border, fell immediately into Franco-Falangist hands; to the southeast in the Bierzo, the military rebels had also triumphed; and to the south, Salazar's Portugal, loyal to Franco, also impeded politically committed exiles from seeking asylum. The Galizan historian Lourenzo Fernández Prieto describes how this geostrategic enclosure and the military takeover in Galiza "convierte al país en una ratonera sobre la que se ceba una represión que tiene diferentes fases y adopta variadas formas, de las más evidentes y brutales a las más sutiles y administrativas" (1993: 50-51).

In this article, Fernández Prieto accounts for the peculiar characteristics of the fascist repression in Galiza, and more importantly, how this repression still manifests itself today in the collective consciousness. In this scholar's words the war:

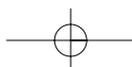
tiene consecuencias que llegan hasta el presente en la mentalidad colectiva y que contribuyen a explicar la actual relación del gallego con la política o las formas de su manifestación pública. Porque aquella represión modificó actitudes sociales aprendidas como normales y connotó negativamente, casi como enfermedad social peligrosa, lo que antes no lo era: la asociación por ejemplo (51).

According to this author, the immediate triumph of the fascist forces in Galiza left deeper scars on Galizans than those left in the parts of Spain that resisted the initial fascist uprising: "Las condiciones de esta guerra confieren, por lo tanto, unas características peculiares a la represión en Galicia, haciendo que su reflejo en la mentalidad colectiva y sus consecuencias sociales a largo plazo sean más radicales y profundas" (51).<sup>5</sup>

The stigma of Galiza as passive and tamable had long existed before July of 1936, but the almost immediate overtaking of this community at the outbreak of the war provided the Francoist propaganda apparatus with a prime example for re-fueling their stereotype of a people whom they claimed to be inherently docile and even thankful for the intervention. The two main Galizan Francoists who first wrote about the war when it ended were the Falangist Luis Moure Mariño and the churchman, Silva Ferreiro. The former claimed that "uno de los mayores méritos de Galicia fue la naturalidad con la que se sumó al Movimiento [...] se sumó al alzamiento de una manera espontánea, sencilla y reposante de naturalidad" (qtd. in Fernández Santander 2000: II, 731). This perception still holds clout in many a politician's and layman's ideology despite the fact that studies have proven that this community, by and large, did not willingly accept the Franco-Falange takeover. The Frente Popular had decisively won the elections on February 16, 1936, and more than two-thirds of Galizans had voted in favor of the Statute of Autonomy on June 28 of that same year, less than a month before the uprising.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In accordance with this idea, Luca de Tena and Carballa describe this immediate post-war in Galiza as "(o)s *corenta anos* foron para Galiza *corenta e tres anos*, con particularidades raramente atendidas na bibliografía do caso" (1987: 4).

<sup>6</sup> Fernández Naval's Civil War novel *O bosque das antas* provides a passage that describes the pre-Statute period in which Republicans such as the character Claudio Naval (who represents the author's grandfa-





## The Uncovering of Common Graves throughout Spain

The psychological consequences of the fascist terror of the war and the dictatorship are especially dramatic in villages, where the remaining witnesses of the war are still, by and large, frightened to talk about the repression they, or others they know, suffered. The pact of oblivion and the taboo it imposed on reviving historical memory has not helped this situation at all. In the eyes of many rural Spanish folk – most of whom do not have access to the artistic realm which, as I said above, has kept the memory alive – the democratic system has not changed significantly from the fascist regime. Most of these rural people, as testimonies have revealed, are still afraid to talk about the war and denounce the past crimes because they fear that the authorities of the present will harm them and their loved ones.

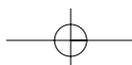
Fortunately, this blanket of fear is beginning to disintegrate thanks to the uncovering of common graves, which the Association for the Recuperation of Historical Memory has been undertaking for over three years now. Emilio Silva, one of the Association founders, had spent years searching for his disappeared Republican grandfather, and finally discovered his body in October 2000, in a common grave in the Bierzo region in León. But this event did not break the media's inclination to suppress historical memory. It took until June 2002, when the Association began uncovering another common grave in the same region, which holds over thirty corpses, for the media to cover the event. Finally, after more than twenty years of democracy, the pact of oblivion had begun to dissipate, and images of bullet-shattered skulls and skeletons piled on top of each other showed Spaniards and the rest of the world that Spain's tragedy caused by fascism has yet to be reckoned with.<sup>7</sup>

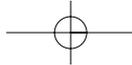
The Association is now trying to find out where every grave is located in order to uncover them and give the disappeared dignified burials. They have located over forty throughout Spain and estimate that there are over thirty thousand unidentified bodies. Although this event has catalyzed the progressive sectors throughout Spain to begin facing the past (including the PSOE, which until recently showed little interest in revisiting the past), the rightist party, El Partido Popular (PP), and its affiliates are very unwilling to continue exhuming the historical truth. Indeed, I discovered in July 2002 when I was in Spain doing research for my dissertation<sup>8</sup> that not all media dealt with these events of the common graves. When I arrived in Compostela at the beginning of July, I immediately related this question to Spanish Civil War novels, and thus decided to carry out a mini research project on these exhumations. I read the different main Spanish and Galizan

ther), handed out propaganda entreating people to vote in favor of the Statute: “Logo dos discursos, dos eslogans entusiastas, de toca-lo himno que ninguén coñecía e que algúns tentaban bailar, el repartía oitavilas que chamaban ás urnas e a votar “SI”, como medio para conquistar un novo país, e Asún prendía bandeiriñas que ela mesma facía, coas cores azul e branca nas lapelas da xente. Gañou rotundamente a vontade de se autogobernar, mais de pouco valeu. Os poucos días uns militares con ambición histórica, iniciaban en África unha aventura que remataría nun tráxico e inútil enfrentamento civil. En Galicia non houbo fronte de batalla. Entregada ós golpistas, desencadeouse unha represión animal, causante de mortos, exilios e fuxidos” (1989: 50).

<sup>7</sup> These events were covered here in the States by *National Public Radio* in December 2002 and the *New York Times* in the article “Spaniards at Last Confront the Ghost of Franco” published on November 11, 2002: A3.

<sup>8</sup> Thompson (2003).



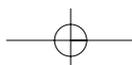


daily newspapers during the month of July in order to see how they covered, if they did, these events. I discovered that while the more progressive newspapers, such as *El País* and the Galizan paper *La voz de Galicia* covered the exhumations regularly, the main newspapers associated with the right (*ABC* and *El Mundo* at a national level, and *El Correo Gallego* of the Compostela area) neglected them completely. *ABC* was even so bold as to publish – on July 5, when the exhumations were extensively covered in progressive media – an article on the discovery of *homo erectus* skulls in Dmanisi, Georgia. The article, which displays photos of the skulls at different angles, must have had the intention of either deviating the attention of the public from the images of skulls from the Bierzo common grave, or perversely attempting to make the reader associate the skulls of the victims of fascism with those of the *homo erectus*, which, incidentally, as the article points out conspicuously, did not have as big a brain as *homo sapiens*.

The United Nations is helping the Association for the Recuperation of Historical Memory achieve its goal of uncovering the graves, but its jurisdiction is restricted to those cases of atrocities after 1945 when this entity was founded. Though the Partido Popular finally condemned the Franco dictatorship in November 2002, it rejected shortly after a proposal from the opposition to allocate a million euros to the uncovering of the graves. However, the Partido Popular gives generous economic support to a foundation managed by the Franco family, which – as Scilino and Daly affirm in “Spaniards at Last Confront the Ghost of Franco” – “is accused of restricting the access of historians to some 27,000 public and private documents” (A3). These examples of the right’s disinterest in facing the past show that Spain is far from overcoming its political divisions, and that fascist ideology has not yet been surmounted. In Galiza the president of the Autonomous Community, Manuel Fraga, not only continues to be an outspoken admirer of Franco, but also wrote an epilogue of acclaim for the book *La mentira histórica* (1994), which denies the Holocaust and Spain’s genocide in the Americas.<sup>9</sup>

The pact of oblivion was designed to suppress memory of the war and the Franco regime, but also inherent in this pact was forgetting the Republic. In accepting equal guilt, the representatives of the left were, in fact, admitting that this political system was defective and, in part, responsible for the Civil War. That is why the crafters of the constitution in 1977 almost superstitiously avoided copying anything from the previous Republican constitution; and that explains why, though many of the fascist names and symbols of Franco’s regime have been gradually removed (though not all by any means), the Republican ones have not been put back into place. Where is the Plaza de Azaña in Madrid or in any other city? The pact of oblivion has erased any commemoration of this key Republican figure.

<sup>9</sup> I quote from Fraga’s epilogue the third paragraph, part of the fourth, and last paragraph: “No se ha aprovechado el 500 aniversario y la Exposición de Sevilla para hacer una gran reflexión colectiva sobre todo ello. Ha sido una nueva ocasión perdida. Por ello, hay que agradecer y felicitar a los que sí están dispuestos a hacer su propia reflexión, como el autor de este libro [...]. Los juicios sobre el pasado han de ser esperanzas de futuro, y autocríticas para mejorarlo. Creo en el futuro del mundo hispánico, no en un futuro utópico, sino realista, en este valle de lágrimas [...] Nos une el cristianismo, una gran lengua universal, un sentido profundamente humano de la vida. Por supuesto hemos de aprender de todos, pero ha pasado la hora de los complejos. En la era de la postmodernidad podemos enlazar mejor que otros con los nuevos tiempos” (1994: 591). For interesting critiques of this book and Fraga’s epilogue see Gustavo Luca de Tena (2000); González Gómez (2000) and Núñez Seixas (2000).





There also exists an amnesia vis-à-vis Galiza's democratic political role on the Spanish national level during the Second Republic (a role that this community has drastically lost in the present) with two strong leftist parties (Izquierda Republicana and Partido Galeguista), and prominent figures such as Casares Quiroga (the most prominent representative of IR), Castelao (of PG), or centrist figures like Portela Valladares. Furthermore, of the three peripheral historical nations, Galiza is today the only one with the double anomaly of, on the one hand, not having a center-right nationalist party, and, on the other hand, never having had a nationalist formation in power.

### Galizan Civil War Novels as Counter-Discourses to Oblivion

The artistic realm has constituted the bulwark of memory of the Civil War. Artists, movie producers and novelists have systematically disobeyed the Pact of Oblivion. Those who write Civil War novels seem to be realizing, as time passes, the vacuum that is opening up between, on the one hand, the witnesses who will soon be gone, and, on the other, the young generations who are alarmingly ignorant of their country's recent history of fascism. This is the idea that Dulce Chacón, who recently published the Civil War novel *La voz dormida* (2002), expresses in Sciolino and Daly's article. She is quoted as saying: "Perhaps my generation feels it must tell the story now because if we don't, our children will never hear it, and because those who remain to tell it are getting old and if we don't get their testimony now, we never will" (A3).

As transmitters of this memory, Civil War novels offer praxis-oriented conceptual frameworks that can help Spain transform its future. Indeed, the projects of many of these novels consist of representing history in a genealogical fashion, and also in an imaginative way that inevitably projects the forgotten and unorthodox fragments of history onto the present and into the future. While some Civil War novels depict exclusively the war and the horrors of fascism, some of them portray the democratic achievements of the Republic and implicitly invite the reader to juxtapose this lost democracy with the current political status. They attempt to explain the effects of fascism in modern day Spain. In other words, they contradict the imposed fallacy of the defective Republic and depict this political system as the most progressive moment in Spain's history.

In the case of the Galizan novels – which belong to the *nueva novela histórica* family that has proliferated for over three decades throughout Spain and Latin America – they strive to debunk the official discourse, which claims that never has Galiza lived as peaceful and progressive a moment as now. Indeed, the Partido Popular in Galiza presents itself as having delivered this nation from its past hardships through modernization. For example, just before the last Community elections in November 2002, the government-controlled newspaper, *El Correo Gallego*, published two pro-PP articles on the *opinión* page. The title of the first one reads "Ningún tiempo fue mejor" and that of the other, written by president Manuel Fraga, reads "Desafíos na Galicia do novo milenio." In this article Fraga praises his community for having overcome the primitiveness of its past history, as if the past were all one amalgam of backwardness.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> He declares at the beginning of the article: "[P]ara os que coñecemos-la Galicia da primeira metade do século xx non resulta difícil apreciar-los cambios a esgalla que viviu esta terra, que agora encadara con



Two Galizan novels that recover memory of the Civil War and strive to reveal this fallacy of “there never was a better time than now” are *Pensa nao* by Anxo Angueira and *Amor de tango* by Maria Xosé Queizán. These two docu-fictions dedicate most of their text to depicting the democratic achievements of the Republic with its social and political effervescence, and they portray the arrival of fascism not only as the destruction of people, but also of a system, which, despite its defects, provided the foundation for an egalitarian and democratic society. They attempt to show that the years of the Republic were, in many respects, more progressive than present society. In *Pensa nao*, for example, the author – who used recent historical research on the rural community during the Republic – describes through his third person narrator the technological and agricultural advances that Galiza was undergoing. The novel portrays a society that is opening up to the world and embracing progress. The fascist takeover is then described as reversing all of these technological and democratic achievements. *Amor de tango*, which presents the progress of the Republic from an urban point of view, offers a feminist perspective by depicting the hardships of working women in a patriarchal society. By presenting the lost Republic as a valuable conceptual framework for recovering in the present, these two novels create an additional praxis for Galiza’s political present and future. Especially with Angueira’s novel, the reader is left with the idea that the Galizan community has the potential to be self-sustaining and autonomous from Spain. The idea of rebuilding the Galizan nation by using the lost Republic as a utopian concept becomes, at least in appearance, a possible reality.

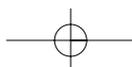
In June of 2002 when the uncovering of the common grave in the Bierzo shattered the silence imposed by the pact of oblivion, I believe that the novelists from all over Spain who have written on the tragic consequences of the Civil War saw their collective dream begin to materialize: their written memory was finally overflowing into the public sphere in literal images of skulls and skeletons. The exhuming of history through words and concepts is now taking place in physical actions that reach those who do not read. But reading is the essential key for learning about the democratic successes of the Republic and the horrors of Francoism; and novels allow the reader to experience the past vicariously and enter into the realm of emotions, seemingly absent in the historical text. The Civil War novels act, one could argue, as time machines for traveling to a historical period, which the powers that be have tried to sweep under the rug. Perhaps the recent uncovering of the graves will incite larger proportions of the population to read, especially the younger generations.

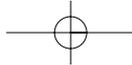
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ilusión unha etapa apaixonante”. Towards the end he is as bold to proclaim: “Galicia ten unha lingua, unha historia e unha cultura de seu, e acadou o máis elevado volume de autogoberno que ningún devanceiro foi quen de imaxinar. Recuperámo-la fachenda que nunca se debería ter perdido e dispoñemos de instrumentos cos que crea-las condicións máis favorables para afronta-lo futuro.” He then ends by affirming that the bases for this progress are already set in place: “Os alicerces sobre os que se edificará esa puxante realidade están xa construídos” (2001: 3).





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