



Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War: History, Fiction, Photography

by Sebastiaan Faber.

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What do Spanish Civil War documentaries produced for Catalan television, a novel by Javier Cercas, and the 2007 Spanish Law on Historical Memory have in common (184)? This question lies at the heart of Sebastiaan Faber's new collection of case-study essays on the state of memory of the Spanish Civil War (1936–39), Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939–75), and transition to democracy in the late 1970s. For Faber, a professor of Hispanic Studies at Oberlin College, these are more than purely academic questions. For him, how one understands and remembers the past sheds light on the current state of a democracy, a matter of concern for historians, but also anthropologists, literary scholars, and fiction writers.

Faber presents his subject from a number of perspectives, including literary and journalistic, with a purview extending from the late 1990s thorough the economic disaster of 2008–9. The result is a book the author describes as "eclectic" (7), one that may be read cover-to-cover or in discrete sections as desired. Faber's studies seek to answer three key questions. What is the nature of Spain's memory of its difficult and violent past? How has that past influenced the structures of Spain's present-day democracy? And how has the process of "creating" memory shaped its citizens' sense of their history for good or ill?

The first of the volume's five parts, "Memory and the Visual Archive," considers how photographs of the Spanish Civil War have been interpreted and used. Faber assesses the work of war photographers like Robert Capa, Gerda Taro, and David Szymin ("Chim"). He discusses not only their revolutionary depictions of battles, but also the various uses to which their photographic images have been put. These range from informing readers of popular magazines like *Time* and *Life* to advancing propaganda agendas. Faber discusses, for example, an anti-Nationalist photo-montage poster combining the image of a bombed-out building in Madrid with that of a crying mother and child in Barcelona. It bears the question: "What are you doing to prevent this?" Besides the disparate sources of the photographs, Faber discovered that the mother and child image was not taken during a bombing at all. In short, he maintains, the photographer's lens does present truth, but also reflects a certain political commitment (24). He warns us of what he calls the "sliding scale" where photography, the historical record, and propaganda are linked (31–32).

Regarding the goal of objectivity, Faber stresses the need to understand everything as, in one way or another, constructed; in memory-work, there is no "pure" history. Historians' debates about the impossibility of true objectivity have reinforced this point. Faber's interviewees (part III) also emphasize that historical memory—however messy, constructed, or deconstructed—is essential to understanding contemporary society and our place in it.

In part II, "History and Memory," the author examines Spain's Socialist Government's 2007 Law on Historical Memory, which was largely put aside by the conservative Popular Party government elected in 2012. Much of the debate here centered on comparing Spain's situation to other cases abroad. Did Spain, for instance, need truth commissions like the one in Argentina after

its military dictatorship? And what of judge Baltasar Garzón's 2008 courtroom inquiries into Francoist crimes? These were suspended in 2010 and Garzón removed from the bench in 2012 for violating Spain's 1977 Amnesty Law prohibiting such criminal investigations of past offenses. Is Spain unique in its dealings with the past? Should it follow patterns established elsewhere? Faber is less concerned with the particulars of the Law on Historical Memory itself than with the debates it sparked.

Part III, "Reframing the Past," includes a fascinating discussion of the results of Faber's interviews with five historians of Spain, two Spanish and three foreigners: Ángel Viñas, Pablo Sánchez León, Gabriel Jackson, Paul Preston, and Helen Graham. The discussions focused on their personal interest in Spain and its history, especially with regard to the question of objectivity and their consensus belief that the Republican, not the Nationalist, cause was morally right in the Civil War. This by contrast with other historians and writers, such as Pío Moa, who find value in the Nationalist and Francoist position. Sánchez León's conclusion that historians see the past neither exclusively in relation to the present nor as altogether divorced from it should strike a chord with anyone interested in the links between history and memories of the past (108).

Faber's interview with a forensic anthropologist and Emilio Silva, President of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, concerns the excavation of mass graves of civilians murdered by both sides, but especially Franco's Nationalists. Begun in 2000, these dig sites, now totaling over six hundred, have formed the basis of much recent grassroots memory work. Anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz has called the graves "an underground landscape of terror, sewn to politically paralyze the Spanish population" that should be opened up so society can "process those facts" (112–13). Silva observes that the revelation of the graves has allowed Spain to "finally discuss what needs to be discussed" (116).

Parts IV and V, respectively "Intellectuals at War" and "Fiction as Memory," concern nonfiction and fictional works centered on the Spanish Civil War and the Franco regime as objects of memory. Faber is also concerned with the Spanish transition to democracy, a process once seen as ideal but now criticized by many writers for the role it gave proponents of the dictatorial government. Moreover, many today criticize even the left for its role in the transition and its collusion in a forgetting of the past. Faber notes, approvingly, journalist Gregorio Morán's judgment that "post-Franco democracy was built on a toxic waste dump" (137). Spanish historians and commentators have exposed the lasting harm done by the dictatorship's repressive regime to Spanish cultural and intellectual life. The system rewarded arrogance and dishonesty during and even after the transition. As a result, Spain suffered in the 1980s and after from a weakened and impoverished culture and society (140). Some have seen the hedonistic aspects of post-Franco Spain as a distraction from the real work of rebuilding a progressive, democratic society (149). Though the author finds some of these arguments to be unconventional and "careless" (141), they nonetheless underscore how the past and our understanding of it continues to shape our present.

An epilogue sketches Faber's academic work and involvement with civil society in Spain, particularly through the collective organization *Contratiempo*, which promotes a conscious effort to engage in the construction of the past in order to ensure a healthy contemporary civil society. With *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War*, Sebastiaan Faber has performed a valuable service by surveying the diverse ways in which history, memory, and controversy have manifested themselves in Spain over the last twenty years. His readers will appreciate his use of various methodologies to clarify the need to reflect deeply on the formulation of memories of war and violence.