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25. RC – Recensioni e critica
Lorca: 80 Years in a Mass Grave*



Federico García Lorca

Along with Cervantes, poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca is one of Spain's most revered literary figures. However since his assassination by Fascist forces his body still lies undiscovered in a mass grave near Granada.

«Dadle café, mucho café!»

When José Valdés Guzmán, the Gobernador Civil of Granada phoned General Queipo de Llano in Seville to ask him what was to be done with the prisoner Federico Garcia Lorca, the general's reply was unequivocal.

The café in question was not coffee – Quiapo de Llano was in fact referring to «Camaradas Arriba Falange Española», the triumphant cry of the Falangist firing squads in “the performance of their duty”. In the period from 1936 when Francisco Franco's Nationalist troops invaded Spain from Morocco, until 1945 when the Civil War had been over for 6 years, hundreds of thousands died in summary executions carried out by the victorious rebel troops. Known as the “White Terror”, the repression of political opposition at every level was a calculated tactic by the Nationalist command to terrorize the general population into submission.

Lorca's final days are clouded in mystery and myth-making and the evidence for the phone conversation above relies solely on the testimony of the telephone operator in Seville who put the call through. However, what is certain is that on the 19 August 80 years ago, the poet was taken from his prison cell and then shot and thrown into a mass grave in the area around the town of Viznar near Granada. The body of Spain's national poet apparently remains there to this day, his grave still unidentified, as is also the case for many thousands of the victims of Franco's regime.

Lorca was only 38 when he was killed, but he was already a literary celebrity in Spain and the Hispanic world. He had made his name with a book of poems “Gypsy Ballads” and his plays, including classics like “Blood Wedding” and “Yerma” had been performed internationally. But during the Fascist dictatorship Lorca and his assassination became a taboo subject, the ban on his writings only being lifted in 1953 when a censored version of his “Complete Works” was released. Lorca's biographer Ian Gibson's first book “The Assassination of a Poet” which won the Prix International de la Presse in 1971 had to wait until after Franco's death before it became freely available. For Fascism Lorca was not only a “rojo” (a red) but also a homosexual. It is reported that one of his assassins gave him two shots “up the ass” for being queer.

His life and his assassination did not disappear from view however. H G Wells as president of the London PEN Club sent a telegram to the military authorities anxiously inquiring as to Lorca's whereabouts when news of the poet's death begun to circulate in Spanish and European newspapers. His murder became enshrined in myth, even becoming an "affair of state" in 1959 when US President Eisenhower confronted Franco with evidence from his Secret Services that Franco had been in league with his assassins. The power of the poet's mythology grew and grew.

Despite the return of democracy in Spain there are certain subjects where collective amnesia is quietly recommended – the assassination of Lorca is one of them. Nevertheless, there have been a couple of (unsuccessful) attempts to find his body following the approval of the Ley de Memoria Historica by Zapatero's Socialist government in 2007. This law provided for government funding for the exhumation of the victims of Franco's regime still lying in mass graves. Opposition from Lorca's family to his exhumation, which was finally withdrawn in 2008, also complicated matters for the archeologists and historians searching for his burial site. The search has up till now been concentrated in the fields and gullies between the two small towns of Alfacar and Viznar, based on testimony from the surviving members of the firing squad and the man who claimed to have been in charge of the burial.

Further speculation about the whereabouts of Lorca's body has in recent years been fuelled by rumours that the poet's family removed the body from the grave in the days immediately after the assassination and placed it in the family tomb in the cathedral of Granada. The mysteries and difficulties facing researchers are undeniably contributed to by the marked lack of political will to unearth Lorca's body -and the implications such a find would have. The conservative Partido Popular government, in power since 2011 (currently in a caretaker capacity due to an electoral stalemate) have effectively rescinded the Ley de Memoria Historica by cutting funding for exhumations to zero.

However, on 19 September of this year a third attempt is to be made, with the search to be focussed on some unused wells in the town of Alfacar. Lorca was shot with three others – two anarchist banderilleros, Francisco Galadi and Joaquin Arcollas, and a one-legged primary school teacher named Dioscoro Galindo. It is the descendants of this last who have provided the impetus for the latest search, providing DNA samples to be matched with any remains discovered.

If an indicator were needed as to how much of the Spanish Civil War remains unresolved in the national consciousness, one only has to remember that Queipo de Llano, the Head of the Army of the South during the Civil War who was responsible for mass killings and repression – is lying in state in the Basilica of the Macarena in Seville, while the national poet lies unidentified in a mass grave to this day.

*Then I realized I had been murdered.
They looked for me in cafés, cemeteries and churches
.... but they did not find me.
They never found me?
No. They never found me.*

*From "The Fable And Round of the Three Friends",
Poet in New York (1929), Garcia Lorca*

*By courtesy [The Golbal Dispatches](#), 2 settembre 2016