



# THE ASSASSINATION OF JOSÉ CALVO SOTELO: PRELUDE TO THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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Rather than trying to quell the rancor, the resentment and all the old hatreds, the leadership of the [Spanish Socialist Workers Party](#) (PSOE) chose instead, in 2004, to revive the culture war and foment social unrest. The lamentable message repeated *ad nauseam* by the official media made it clear that since Spaniards were unable to overcome the past, the [Transition](#) and the spirit of [reconciliation](#) were only cowardice. This meant that the [Spanish Civil War](#) could not be discussed outside the presuppositions of those who regard themselves as being on the side of the good.

These suppositions are that the Right remained Francoist, if not outright fascist; that the [Law of Amnesty](#) of 1977 (the foundational act of the new democracy) was nothing other than a convenient way to protect the Francoists (despite the fact that this law was passed in the Legislature by a vote of 296 in favor, 2 opposed and 18 abstentions – in other words, with the support of the entire political class, including the PSOE and the [Communist Party of Spain](#) (PCE), with the exception of a handful of Liberal-Conservatives and [Francoists](#). The purpose of this law was to eliminate punishment for the actions of anti-Francoist terrorists, such as, [PCE\(r\)-GRAPO](#) and [ETA](#)).

All these suppositions are nothing more than a tissue of false-assumptions, lies, and radically erroneous premises – all meant to foster a veritable fiction, with no connection to reality.

On December 26, 2007, PSOE got Parliament to pass a "[Historical Memory Law](#)," which originated in a proposal introduced by the Communist Party ([Izquierda Unida](#)). It rightly recognized and expanded the rights of those who suffered persecution or violence during the Civil War and during the [dictatorship](#). But at the same time, it promoted a Manichean vision of history. Strangely, it

was adopted because of the indifference, and consent for the most part, of the political class of the EU – even though this law undermines the most basic right of freedom of expression.

One of the fundamental ideas of the Historical Memory Law is that Spanish democracy is a heritage of the [Second Republic](#). This is a highly questionable point of view, given the fact that the process of Transition was conducted in accordance with the mechanisms provided by the Franco-regime and was managed by a King, who was appointed by the generalissimo, and by his prime minister, a former General Secretary of the [Movimiento](#) – as well as the nearly unanimous consent of the Francoist political class. According to the subjective reasoning of this law, the Second Republic (the foundational myth of Spanish democracy, as per the Socialist Left and the extremists) – should have been a nearly perfect regime in which all the Leftist parties would act beyond reproach.

This law also offers a questionable amalgam of military uprising, the Civil War, and the dictatorship of Franco, even though all three are distinct facts, with their own relevant interpretations and varying judgments. In effect, this law exalts the victims and the murderers, the innocent and the guilty because they all belonged to the [Popular Front](#) and because they are of the Left. Thus, this law confuses those who died fighting in the war with the victims of the repression. Further, this law promotes and justifies any and all effort that seeks to demonstrate that Franco planned and systematically carried out a bloody repression during and after the Civil War – all the while implying that the government of the Republic, and the parties that supported it, had no repressive projects of their own. Finally, this law recognizes and legitimizes the desire of many people to be able to locate the bodies of their family members – but it also implicitly refuses this right to those who were with the Nationalists, under the doubtful pretext that such people had plenty of time to locate their dead ones during the Francoist era.

We may recall the “[Garzón](#)

[Affair](#)," or the "Graves of Francoism," which particularly exacerbated tensions in 2006, given that the repression during the Civil War was equally ferocious and widespread in both the Republican and the Nationalist camps.

Judge [Baltasar Garzón](#) (friend of the socialists) claimed to undertake a sort of general inquisition, curiously reminiscent of the [Causa General](#) (General Cause), carried out by Franco's Public Ministry, between 1940 and 1943, and which the Democratic Constitution of 1978 formally prohibited.

The current Prime Minister, [Pedro Sánchez](#), faithful to the [revanchist](#) policies of his predecessor (the socialist, [José Luís Rodríguez Zapatero](#)), declared, as soon as he arrived at the [Palace of Moncloa](#) in 2018, that he would undertake to exhume, as quickly as possible, the remains of the dictator Franco, interred at the Basilica of the [Valle de los Caídos](#) (Valley of the Fallen).

Spain is still a nation of laws, with many men of the law who did not appreciate this behavior of the [Chekists](#). The result was an endless judicial battle, which was finally decided by the political will of the Socialist government, on October 25 of this year (by way of a royal ordinance). The Basilica, in effect, is a religious place, whose inviolability is guaranteed by an international treaty signed between Spain and the Holy See in 1979. The Benedictines, who look after the monument, are not directly dependent on the Vatican, but on the authority of their abbot and the superior of their order, who is the abbot of [Solesmes Abby](#).

But the improvised and sloppy drafting of this royal ordinance, adopted by the Sánchez government, was the source of other complications. No doubt given the notoriety of the name, Franco (a military man, a statesman and a polemical dictator), the national and international press omitted to mention that the application to the letter of this

ordinance will also require the immediate exhumation of 19 Benedictine monks likewise interred in the Valley of the Fallen, along with 172 other persons who died after the end of the Civil War. As well, we do not know the fate of the body of [José Antonio Primo de Rivera](#), imprisoned for three months before the uprising, but who was [still condemned to death](#) by a "People's Court" for participating in the uprising. And we do not know what will happen to the thousands of bodies, from both sides, buried in the crypt, which are the object of so much controversy.

This judicial imbroglio was finally resolved by an authoritarian political measure, and by the use of the forces of law and order, just like totalitarian dictators and banana republics.

The study of the evolution of the concept of reconciliation in Spain, from 1939 to our own time, does merit a thesis. The irony is that the government of the socialist Sánchez defends to this day the exhumation of Franco, in the name of "justice and reconciliation," and in a spirit that, after all, is not unlike that of the [Caudillo](#) (Franco) who expressed it in a decree of August 23, 1957, by which he established the Foundation of the Holy Cross of the Valley of the Fallen, at least if we put in parentheses the references pertaining to Christianity... "The Great Cross that presides over and inspires the monument, also gives it a profoundly Christian character... Thus, the sacred obligation of honoring our heroes and our martyrs must also carry with it the feeling of forgiveness, imposed by the Gospel message... It must be the monument of all the dead in battle, over whose sacrifice triumph the peaceful arms of the Cross."

To this, on May 23, 1958, [Alonso Vega](#), the Minister of the Interior, in a directive to civil governors, added that "this is to give a place of burial to all those were sacrificed for God and for Spain, with no distinction of the two sides that fought each other, like the spirit of pardon that the creation of this monument has now imposed."

But there is this substantial difference – through the magic of the inevitable words of political propaganda, the good and the evil have changed sides. And it is precisely this moral hemiplegia which the Founding Fathers of the Transition and of Spanish democracy rejected in its entirety.

A few year ago, Ian Gibson, an Irish "historian," with strong socialist convictions, declared that he was in [favor of placing a bomb](#) in the Valle de los Caídos and destroying the monument. Such European fanatics, whose concepts of justice and reconciliation are certainly worthy of the Afghan Taliban who destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan, are unfortunately not rare. They would certainly make us despair for humanity, were it not for strong personalities, in their own circles, who keep them in their place. One of the players of the Transition, the socialist [Felipe Gonzáles](#), declared in 1985, when he was Prime Minister: "We must accept our history...I am personally able to face the history of Spain... Franco... is in it... Never would I get the idea of toppling one statue of Franco. Never! I think it's stupid going about pulling down statues of Franco... Franco now belongs to the History of Spain. We cannot erase History... I have always thought that if anyone believes that it is meritorious to knock Franco from his horse, then he should have done that when the man was alive" (Juan Luis Cebrian, "[Interview with Felipe González](#)," *El País*, Madrid, November 17, 1985).

This is to say that a socialist government deciding to move the body of a Catholic, monarchist, conservative, anti-Marxist and anti-Communist dictator may perhaps be explained, but it cannot be understood. As we know, peace around the graves of revolutionaries and dictators is extremely rare. Unless I am mistaken, to this day, there are only two or three great exceptions (admirable for their serenity and their respect for the dead), which refute this immutable rule: In Russia, the [mausoleum of Lenin](#) in Red Square, and the [Kremlin Wall Necropolis](#), where Stalin is buried; and in France, the [tomb of Napoleon I](#) in the Invalides.

But behind this desire to exhume the ashes of Franco and to officially condemn his actions and his regime, there hides an important question, which is very thorny and very embarrassing for the powers that be – namely, the interpretation of the origins of the Civil War, which only highlights the considerable responsibility of the PSOE. Therefore, let us recall some well-established facts.

Both on the Right and the Left, the proclamation of the Spanish Republic, in 1931, was greeted with hope. But disillusionment quickly set in. In bringing about democracy and “progress,” Spain fell into disorder and anarchy. In October 1934, the PSOE, whose leadership had been entirely Bolshevized since 1933, deliberately triggered a general strike in all of Spain, which the police managed to contain, with the exception of Catalonia and especially the Asturias. In February 1936, the fragile victory of the Popular Front put an end to the chaos. In June 1936, in a speech to the Legislature (which was immediately declared to be a “catastrophe” by opponents), [José María Gil Robles](#), leading light of the moderate Right, tallied in four months 353 attacks, 269 political murders, and the destruction of 160 churches.

According to Communist historiography, popularized by the [Komintern](#), which is now regarded as canonical, or at least “politically correct,” this terrible tragedy was the direct result of a military *coup d'état* against a perfectly democratic and progressive regime. Then the army, backed by a handful of fascists, rose against the people who were defenseless, but who resisted courageously and drove back the rebels. Finally, it is said, Franco could not have won had it not been for the help of Germany and fascist Italy.

Along with the collaboration of several of the best specialists on this subject, I believe that I have demonstrated in my book,

[\*La guerre d'Espagne revisitée\*](#), and again in the special issue of [\*La Nouvelle Revue d'Histoire\*](#) (1936-2006: “La guerre d'Espagne,” no. 25, July 2006) – that this Communist legend

or mythology does not correspond whatsoever to the reality of facts. The American historian, [Stanley Payne](#), a great expert on the subject, brought forward precise, rigorous and dispassionate answers that are all-too-often ignored and passed over in France, in his book, [La Guerre d'Espagne. L'Histoire face à la confusion mémorielle](#), to which I wrote the Preface.

Further, this one single fact will suffice to refute, or at least lend nuance to, the premise of the military uprising against democracy: The great intellectuals of the time, the Founding Fathers of the Republic, [Ortega y Gasset](#), [Marañón](#) and [Perez de Ayala](#), and let us not forget [Unamuno](#) – they all unreservedly voted for the National side, and against the Communist, Socialist-Marxist and anarchist extremism of the Popular Front.

Among the numerous myths that could be mentioned here, for lack of space, I shall make note of only two, which were recently deconstructed. First, the victory of the Popular Front in the elections of February 1936, and the reasons and conditions for the assassination of [José Calvo Sotelo](#).

The question of whether the elections of February 1936 were regular or irregular, legitimate or illegitimate, legal or illegal, democratic or anti-democratic never ceases to foment debate. But in 2017, a crucial piece was added as evidence. It is the work of two historians at King Juan Carlos University, namely, [1936. Fraude y violencia en las elecciones del Frente popular](#) (1936: *Fraud and Violence in the Elections of the Popular Front*) by Roberto Villa García and Manuel Álvarez Tardío.

After a long and careful study, these two



researchers have shown, in a manner both rigorous and incontestable, that the frauds, falsifications, manipulations and violence of the *Frente Popular* (the Popular Front) were of a considerable magnitude. In the aftermath of the voting, the *Frente Popular* claimed 240 seats (out of 473), but deliberately stole 50 from the right-wing opposition. Without this plundering – a veritable parliamentary *coup d'état* – it could never have governed alone. The institutions of the Republic were deliberately violated; and it is perfectly right to question the legitimacy of the government of the Spanish Popular Front.

The assassination of Calvo Sotelo, which was the prelude to the Civil war, is in itself another good illustration of the reality of facts. [José Calvo Sotelo](#), at 43 years of age, was one of the most eminent figures in the Spanish conservative right. He was a member of the monarchist party (the [Renovación Española](#)), contributor to the intellectual revue, [Acción Española](#), and a former minister of the economy and finance. A courageous and eloquent parliamentarian, he attracted all the hate of the Popular Front. His speeches had a profound impact on public opinion, so much so that [Santiago Cesares Quiroga](#), head of government and minister of defense, did not hesitate to openly threaten him in the full sitting of the Legislature on June 16, 1936.

The response of the future victim is now legendary: "Mr. Cesares Quiroga, I have broad shoulders. You are a man quick to challenge and threaten... I take full note of your warning... I will answer you as [Saint-Dominique de Silos](#) did to the King of Castille, 'Lord, all you can do is take my life and nothing more.' Better to die with honor than to live without dignity."

On June 23, 1936, Calvo Sotelo was again threatened in the columns of the Madrid newspaper, [El Socialista](#). Then, in the evening of July 12, the Lieutenant of the Assault Guard, [José del Castillo](#), instructor of the militias of the [Young Socialists](#), was assassinated, in reprisal for the murders of José Luis Llaguno, a Carlist student and Andrés Saenz de Heredia, who was the cousin of José Antonio Primo de Rivera. The

Assault Guard was a special police force that was highly politicized. At their barracks in Ponteños, the comrades of Lieutenant del Castillo shouted for revenge. These were men, for the most part, who were also close confidantes of the government. Chief among them were Major [Ricardo Burillo Stholle](#), Lieutenant Maximo Moreno, and Captain of the Civil Guard, [Fenando Condès](#). The last two had already actively participated in the attempted socialist uprising against the Republic in October of 1934.

On July 13, 1936, around two o'clock in the morning, vehicle No. 17 of the Assault Guards left the barracks at [Ponteños](#). Sitting inside it were eight Assault Guards, and four hired men of the Socialist Party, under the command of Captain Fernando Condès. They were all in civilian clothes.

A few minutes later, a second commando unit rolled out into the night whose job it was to eliminate the other great leader of the right, [Gil-Robles](#), who was head of [CEDA](#) (a coalition of the conservative-right, liberals and Christian-democrats). Luckily, he was in Biarritz at the time, and so, miraculously, he escaped death.

Vehicle No. 17 went on its way towards Vélasquez Street, where the house of Calvo Sotelo was located. It stopped in front of number 89. Captain Condès and several of his men got out. They summoned the night watchman to open the door to the building, and he did so. The Guards went up the stairs, rang at the door of the Monarchist Deputy and demanded entry, under the pretext of a search. Awakened by the noise, Calvo Sotelo opened the door.

Quickly the Guards rushed into the apartment and cut the telephone. Captain Condès asked the politician to come with him to the [Security Directorate](#). Calvo Sotelo was wary. A deputy could not be arrested, unless

caught red-handed actually committing a crime. It would be necessary to call the Directorate General of Security, but the telephone did not work. His wife tried to go out to get help. The Guards stopped her. The resistance of the leader of the National Bloc was mollified by the assurances given on the Captain's honor. Calvo Sotelo got dressed, then kissed his children in their beds and his wife to whom he promised that he would telephone as soon as possible, "unless these gentlemen are taking me away to put four bullets into me."

He got into the bus. He sat down on the third seat, flanked by two Assault Guards. Behind him stood [Luís Cuenca Estevas](#), a known bodyguard of the Socialist leader, [Indalecio Prieto](#). Captain Condès took a seat behind the driver. The others went and sat at the back. The vehicle headed off and went only as far as about 200 meters, when at the top of the intersection of Ayala and Vélasquez streets, Luis Cuenca took out a pistol, pointed it at the back of Calvo Sotelo's neck and fired twice, killing him instantly. (According to other sources, the killer was Maximo Moreno, the Lieutenant of the Assault Guard). The body of the victim collapsed between the seats.

Unperturbed, the driver went down the road. At the crossroads of Vélasquez and Alcalá streets, a truck full of Assault Guards entered the flow of traffic. But for vehicle No. 17, the way was open. With their murderous mission accomplished, and having returned to the barracks at Pontejos, the assassins reported to their leader, Lieutenant-Colonel Sanchez Plaza. Downstairs, Guard Tomas Pérez removed bloodstains from inside the vehicle.

The wife of Calvo Sotelo had not sat idle. She immediately got in touch with her family and her loved ones. To all of their demands, the Directorate General of Security and the Minister of the Interior invariably replied: "Nothing has happened... There is nothing at any police station."

On the morning of July 13, the identification of a body dumped at the [Eastern Cemetery](#) roused disbelief and outrage. While the Socialist, Indalecio Prieto, demanded that arms be distributed to all "workers" organizations, funeral arrangements were made for the following day to be held before an enormous crowd.

The judicial investigation was hurriedly buried. The Civil War put a stop to any remaining pretense of legality.

On July 25, 1936, at 12:45 PM, in broad daylight, a dozen members of the militia of the Popular Front, entered the buildings of the [Ministry of the Interior](#), led by a man in civilian clothing. Inside the office of the judge charged with investigating the case, they seized by force all the records and files pertaining to the assassination, and took everything away. Thus disappeared all documents relating to the inquiry, including the scientific evidence of the medical examiners, and the reports of the interrogation of the chief suspects.

Most of those involved with the murder were rewarded after the uprising. For a good number of historians, the elimination of Calvo Sotelo is nothing more than revenge for the assassination of José del Castillo. But this explanation, partial and inadequate, has now been thoroughly questioned (in 2018) by the former Secretary General of the PSOE of Galicia, namely, [Francisco Vázquez Vázquez](#), the Deputy, Senator and Mayor of A Coruña (see, "[Memoria histórica de Calvo Sotelo](#)," *ABC*, April 9, 2018). Indeed, the shock produced in public opinion by the news of the elimination of a leader of the political opposition is completely incommensurate with any emotions stirred up by the murder of a Lieutenant-Instructor of the Assault Guard.

Vázquez, a well-known and respected politician, provided the original report – never before published because it had been lost – of a declaration made before a judge by one of who was directly

involved with the assassination. This is the statement of [Blas Estebarán Llorente](#), the driver of the ambulance-van that was responsible for transporting the body to the Eastern Cemetery. We learn in this crucial testimony that the militias of the Socialist Party, then under the direction of all the principal leaders of the movement, had planned the assassinations of Calvo Sotelo, José Maria Gil Robles, and the monarchist, [Antonio Goicoechea](#) at least three months earlier. Also implicated in the plot were [Jésus Hernández](#), the Communist leader and future Minister of Education during the Civil War, and a certain Antonio López. Then, Blas Estebarán went on to state that, as ordered by the Security Directorate, he met the vehicle at the top of Manuel Becerra Place, and that he followed it, before parking and taking charge of the corpse, which he took to the Eastern Cemetery.

The assassination of Calvo Sotelo became the detonator of the national insurrection of July 18, 1936. Conspirators had already been at work well before this terrible political crime, and the uprising would likely have taken place regardless of this assassination. But the shock of this event made a decisive contribution towards smoothing out the difficulties and dissipating the doubts of the conspirators. It accelerated the preparations and imposed a definite day and hour. It considerably increased popular sympathy for, and participation in, the plans of the military. Because of this crime, hatched and covered up by the State, it is clear that all the adversaries of the Popular Front felt themselves in danger of being killed. As Gil Robles said in Parliament, "Half of Spain will not agree to being killed."

One of the major observers of the time, [Julián Zugazagoitia](#), a minister of the Popular Front, told one of his visitors, "This attack is war."

We cannot repeat this enough –

it is not the military uprising of July 1936 that is origin of the destruction of democracy, as the leaders of the PSOE nowadays claim. On the contrary, it was because democratic legality was destroyed by the Popular Front that the uprising began. In 1936, no one, neither Left nor Right, believed in liberal democracy as it exists today. The revolutionary myth believed by the entire Left is that of an armed struggle. The anarchists and the Communist Party did not believe in democracy. The vast majority of socialists and most notably their leader, the very prominent, [Largo Caballero](#) (the "Spanish Lenin), who advocated the dictatorship of the proletariat and rapprochement with the Communists, also did not believe in democracy.

From this, we can conclude that the army of 1936, like Spanish society itself, was very divided, while both sides (the Left and the Right) enjoyed powerful popular support. If the legend fabricated by Spanish and Soviet propagandists of the *Frente Popular* is indeed correct, then there would have been no civil war because the army, entirely unified, would have risen up and the Nationals (not "nationalists" as they are always and erroneously called in France) would have had victory within 48 hours. And if the people all had been on one side, then the *Frente Popular* and its allies would have easily won. But it was not so.

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*This article was translated from French by N. Dass.*

*The [photo](#) shows a portrait of José Calvo Sotelo at the Bank of Spain.*

