A Massacre at Valdediós

Valdediós, Asturias, October 27th, 1937. Just a few days after the city of Gijón was taken by the “Nationals” and the region of Asturias surrendered to Franco’s troops, a tragic event took place in a monastery that was at the time being used as a psychiatric hospital. It was only one in thousands of similar incidents taking place in the recently defeated Asturias and all throughout Spain, as part of a systematic repressive policy involving “the annihilation of the defeated,” a policy carefully designed to produce and extend a regime of terror necessary to consolidate the emerging political and military power (Juliá 13).¹ Seventeen members of the hospital staff, twelve women and five men, many of them nurses, were shot to death by soldiers in the outskirts of the monastery-hospital, after a “death list” reached the hands of the military authority that was positioned there. The list was read aloud and those named were separated from the rest. Emilio Montoto, 38-years old, was one of those listed. When they were taken away to be shot Emilia Carolina Ricca, age 32, ran after them. According to what her then two year old daughter Esther Cimadevilla was told by her aunts many years later, she managed to see “something” of what happened in a neighboring meadow. Something that “traumatized” her to the point of leaving Spain for Cuba about one year later with her three year old daughter.²³ Her mother and her two sisters had lived there, where she had met her husband in 1933 before both moved back to Asturias in search of better employment possibilities.

According to Esther, the Valdediós killing condemned her family to “stumble around the world”. Six years after arriving in Cuba, Esther’s mother married again. Later, in 1962, due to the “political problems” in Cuba, they moved to the US⁴ Esther told me that her mother barely talked about her time in Valdediós or about the killing of her father, and that during a period of about eight years, her aunts told her, she had not even mentioned it. “She did not want to talk about it.” She wanted to “block it out” from her memory, “as if it had never happened”. “I could only get occasional glimpses that something strange had happened to my father, scattered in conversations here and there. . . . Even the letters we got from my aunts in Asturias were hidden by my mom,” said Esther. Until she got married at eighteen, she did not even know that her father had been shot, that her mother and grandfather had managed to obtain in Villaviciosa a Death Certificate of her father, which alleged that he had died in a “war accident,” or
that her mother had a picture of her father she had never showed to her. “Before one of my aunts gave me that picture after I married, I did not even know how he was.”

Image 1: ‘I never understood the reason for my mother's silence.’ This photograph of Emilio Montoto was showed in La Habana (Cuba) to her daughter Esther when she was twenty by her aunt Enriqueta, Emilio’s sister. This was around eighteen years after his death. The picture had been taken in La Habana before Emilio and Emilia Carolina Ricca married and travelled back to Asturias (Spain) in search of new opportunities, a life project which ended tragically with his murder in Valdediós during the Spanish Civil War. In the picture, according to Esther, Emilio was ‘around thirty’. Courtesy of Esther Montoto.
Yet her father’s death already became an obsession for Esther. Sixty-six years after the shooting, she had traveled all the way from Tomball, Texas, to be present at the exhumation of the mass grave where her father had been dumped in 1937 along with sixteen others. "When I learned that this was going to take place, I had to come. If I had stayed there in the US while this was going on, I would have been agonizing about it for ever. I had to make this effort and be present, even if they do not find him, if they do not identify him, in order to rescue and vindicate his memory." Even after all these years, the traumatic event was neatly inscribed in the landscape. When Esther got to Valdediós in July of 2003, the path which came down the hill from the upper meadows made a noticeable turn to the right, avoiding the reasonable straight line, to prevent passing people and cattle from stepping over what turned out to be the location of the mass grave. 

According to recent historiographical research, the number of people executed by Franco’s troops and collaborators during and after the Spanish Civil War, have been estimated at between 70,000 and 100,000, or even more. Methods of execution included occasional massacres, such as the one that took place in Badajoz’s bullring in 1936, where between 1,000 and 1,500 prisoners were allegedly shot, and the so-called sacas or paseos ["strolls"], a generalized and well designed terror and death technique where prisoners, drawn from jails and concentration camps, or citizens, deemed collaborators of the defeated Republican government and therefore included in execution lists by local Franco agents, were driven in trucks at dawn and shot in isolated places, abandoned on the spot, or dumped into ditches. Extreme forms of vengeful violence took place on both sides of the Civil War. The debate surrounding who was first, who was reacting, who was more systematic and cruel and, in summary, what were the different logics behind both “extermination machineries” are not unusual in Spanish historiography (Juliá 25-29). Yet while a good deal of the numerous war victims on the winning side, the caídos por España [Fallen for Spain], including those illegally executed either by irregulars or popular tribunals on the Republican side, were in good part named, located, exhumed, and commemorated in due course during the first years of Franco’s dictatorial rule—the peak of which was the building with forced labor, between 1940 and 1959, of the monumental and currently extremely controversial ‘Valley of the Fallen’ or Valle de los Caídos, where Franco’s body now rests— the corpses of many of the defeated still remain in unmarked graves by roadsides, cemeteries, shooting walls—many times right outside of the cemetery’s perimeter—, mining galleries, sunken submarines or battlefields, transforming many of them into “disappeared,” who in complex ways still disturb the country’s social, political and symbolic foundation. Burials range from individual graves to full-scale mass graves with more than 1,500 individuals in them, such as the Fosa Común de Oviedo in Asturias. Many of the graves have themselves disappeared below urban developments or freeways, along with the traces of the massacres. Yet many others, like the one in Valdediós, are still preserved and spread throughout Spain’s geography. Until recently, with the exception of exhumations that had mostly regional, local or just family impact, a screen of silence has surrounded Spain’s mass graves. Politically, the repression that took place during the War and the dictatorship had been neutralized— it now seems that only partially and temporarily— with the 1977 Amnesty Law issued during Spain’s prestigious transition to democracy. According to Santos Juliá, with this crucial law, excesses by both sides of the conflict were not forgotten, but rather “thrown into oblivion” (“Echar” 14-24; Ranzato 63-65). Thus, in this logic, for the generations that had lived through the War and its aftermath, Civil War massacres and their associated mass graves would remain as a sort of public secret that had been successfully blocked out from the generation of the grandchildren of the conflict, in order to consolidate Spain’s emerging democracy. During Francoism, especially during the early postwar years, many ‘nationalist mass graves’ product of violence on the Republican side were opened by the Government within a ; then, in the late fifties, there was an astonishing array of corpses flowing from mass graves across the country with destination Valle de los Caídos, where Franco built his megalomaniac shrine to the ‘martyrs’ of the Civil War
Relatives of victims of the Francoist repression had also organized exhumations, particularly in the late 1970s and early 1980s in regions such as Navarre and La Rioja, although they had no relevant political or technical support, their mediatic impact was limited, and did not trigger a chain effect as the one provoked by the most recent exhumation cycle. Then, in October 2000, with the opening of a mass grave in Priaranza del Bierzo, León, containing thirteen bodies, a new chapter of Spain’s memory politics regarding the Civil War was set in motion, with still unknown consequences. This is no small operation. Since Priaranza, which started the latest wave of exhumations, more than 171 graves have been opened, containing over 4,000 bodies. In what follows, I will reflect on the impact that the production, circulation and consumption of images and narratives of Civil War terror—specially as it relates to the opening of mass graves containing corpses of disappeared resulting from Franco’s repression but including also many other scenarios (González-Ruibal 206-207)—is having in contemporary Spain, as part of a broader process of revision of the traumatic past. I will argue that the current exhumations are bringing to Spanish society, fully engaged in important debates regarding the uniqueness or multiplicity of our identity and the structure of our territorial organization, rather disturbing information regarding our past, our present, and probably our future as well. The opening up of what might be called “crime scenarios” in diverse parts of the country is provoking heated debates in politics, historiography, the media, as well as in civil society at large. The public exposition of skeletons, skulls and bone fragments bearing the marks of violence—from “perimortem” tortures to bullet wounds to coups de grâce—is powerfully bringing back tragic stories that were largely silenced or only whispered for decades. The meaning and social impact of these exhumed remains depends, in turn, on the cluster of memory plots that organize and compete around them, from political initiatives to expert discourses, to media reports, to artistic expressions, to the local, fragmented and fugitive memories that barely survived silence and fear in the interstices of the hegemonic versions of the Victory (Steedly 119-143). Exhumations, very importantly, can be also understood and interpreted as a road map linking the political production of terror with the intimate experiences of the victims of repression.
The Re-emergence of Traumatic Memories

Writer Luis Mateo Díez called *Fantasmas del invierno [Winter Ghosts]* the characters of the tragic social, symbolic, and emotional landscape of Spain’s postwar years. A landscape saturated with hallucinations, suspicion, fear, blood, silence, madness, lies, tortures, murders, orphans, disappeared, etc. The Ghosts of the victory, recovered, honored and glorified in the postwar years. Others, those of the defeated, partially vanished in the accumulations of years of silence. Blurred by time, repression, stigma and the authoritarian commemorations and narratives of the War victor’s. Yet, if we are to analyze what has been happening in the country in the last few years, especially the strong rebound of the images, narratives, experiences and places of defeat, these memories never stopped roaming the scarce spaces left for them to articulate and evolve during the dictatorship. In a rather interesting contribution to the reevaluation of formerly disregarded aspects of social life in social sciences, Gordon has emphasized the importance of haunting by ghosts to the understanding of social life. To Gordon, the pressure exerted by traumatic memories is a “constituent element of modern social life” (7). Ghosts are “social figures” that lead to “that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). The tension and uncertainty provoked by
“systematic injury” offers the analyst a privileged space to explore the relationship between power, knowledge and experience, an entryway to what Caruth called “unclaimed experience” (10-24). The swift return of the defeated of the Civil War, the generations of silence, after decades of repression and forgetfulness and after what many are now considering the false exorcism of the Spanish transition to democracy, is not accidental or capricious. The juggling of debates regarding the nature and meaning of the traumatic past such as the one Spain is undergoing now, reveals important shortcomings in the collective management of the “dirty linen” of the past. Although this was predictable during the dictatorship, it seems less so during the transition to democracy and the following decades. The major political pacts, such as the Amnesty Law, and the abundant historiographical work critical of the Francoist versions of the events do not seem to have been enough to contain this impulse.

According to Alexander, when a given society reaches a historical moment when a revisit of a particularly painful event of the past becomes necessary, we can then talk about the beginning of a “social process of cultural trauma,” being the “trauma process” the gap between “event and representation” (10-11). Within this framework, societies generate fresh narrative plots on the nature of social suffering in the past which influence in relevant ways the identity politics of the community affected. This social process of memory upsurge, whose success depends on the efficacy with which it resonates with the public sphere and with the presence of attentive and sympathetic—as well as refractory—audiences, has as a consequence the reallocation in the hegemonic and subaltern narrative plots of the past, of the nature of social suffering and the profile of the “victims,” and of the perceived convenience for possible reparations and attributions of responsibility. It is important to establish that this is a very complex and controversial process which evolves over time, that it is possible to identify “phases” in the “memory work,” and that each society has its own rhythms of absorption, overdose and saturation of the traumatic past. This is also a very delicate process, politically, symbolically, and emotionally charged, which mobilizes many different social collectives and agents in different points in time and with different “horizons of expectations,” from the State and its institutions to small local associations or even individual initiatives, and has as a foreseeable consequence the consolidation of a competitive as well as transformative “meaning industry” around the traumatic past and the nature of social suffering in the context of the Civil War (Jelin 4; Sztopmka 455).

Is it fair to say that Spain is immersed in such a trauma process? I believe it is, although it is still too soon to evaluate its scale and, it seems reasonable to believe, it does not affect all social and political collectives uniformly and with the same intensity, if at all. There have been very important efforts to keep alive the memory of defeated since the very moment the events took place. This, in spite of the tough repression and the cascade of historiographical, commemorative, and propagandist work produced during the dictatorship—especially during the early years—to establish and nourish the authoritative versions of the victors in parallel to the prosecution, stigmatization, and asphyxiation any spaces of articulation of the defeated at all levels. From political organization to the public and even private expression of mourning. The latest sprouting of the memory of the defeated, which anchors its roots in all these previous efforts and
challenges the political and legal closure agreed upon during the transition to
democracy in the country, cannot be dissociated from the wave of grave exhumations
we have referred to, closely linked to the emergence of the so called movement “for the
recovery of historical memory,” in good part led by the generation of grandsons and
granddaughters of those defeated (current President Zapatero being one of them).
Although heterogeneous and not exempt of internal controversies, this social movement
is based on the commonly shared perception that victims in the Republican side—
already crushed during the war and the post war years—had been abandoned and
betrayed again during the transition in exchange for political stability. Then, during the
following thirty years, very little was done, and it is not uncommon to hear deeply felt
complaints about Felipe González’s political inaction regarding the war and dictatorship
victims even when he was invested with an absolute majority in 1986 and 1989.
The Intimacy of Defeat

The “work of memory” taking place around mass graves, whether they are exhumed or not, has been progressively making very visible a formerly neglected cartography of terror and repression which encompasses many landscapes and localities throughout the country. Exhumations, in particular, have thrown into the face of Spanish society a series of very uncomfortable and dramatic images of skeletons bearing the imprint of violent death. These images have swiftly circulated throughout Spain, and also internationally, mostly due to their media impact. Media reprocessing of the diverse components of the memories of defeat—as expressed in exhumations, narratives, personal objects, bodily affects, art exhibitions, commemorations, academic acts and so on—redimension and resignify them through the different media formats, and also through the consolidation of an horizon of consumers of social suffering associated with the war. Although some authors have issued a word of caution regarding this process by noting how the “clash among globalizing discourses and localized social realities so often ends up prolonging personal and collective tragedy” (Kleinman, Das, and Lock xi) and some associations linked to the “memory recovery” effort in Spain consider that media coverage mostly encourages a commercial “televisual pathos” and a “mushy” manipulation of suffering,13 not all media expressions are the same, and without the media impact, possibly, the “trauma process” would run in a much slower course.14

In parallel to the media flow of social trauma, and linked to the location of mass graves, the establishment of commemorative landmarks and rituals, and the exhuming of graves, there has been a rush to record the voices and narratives of the defeated, which have increasingly come into high demand. For many in the “memory recovery” movement, the progressive death of the oldest generation of victims would have as a consequence the disappearance of the mostly unrecorded and “unclaimed,” yet crucial, experiences of those defeated in the war, thus impoverishing the quality of Spanish democracy (Ferrándiz “The Return” and “Cries”; Aguilar). The resulting revaluation of the suffering of the victims and witnesses of Franco’s repressive actions has transformed it into one of the principal aims of the recovery of historical memory. In this process, the thick silence inscribed by Franco’s regime on its terror victims in the postwar years was definitely shaken. I argue in this text that we should pay attention to the many expressions of suffering and social trauma, and not only to the testimonies. Yet these narratives, commonly expressed in local idioms of distress and entangled in culturally bound emotions and feelings, have increasingly acquired special relevance as necessary companions of the exhumed bones.15 Stories that were voiced rarely if at all, and then mostly in whispers, hints or passing references—in family settings and civil society alike—during decades, suddenly found in the exhumations and the disturbing caches of bones the resonance box they had lacked during more than six decades. For example, the postwar narrative genre known in Spain as the “batallita del abuelo” [“grandfather’s battle”], which during some time symbolized the lack of communication between generations, as expressed in the disinterest of the younger generation in the tales of the war by their elders, has been increasingly transforming into a first rate form...
of social knowledge bearing a renewed legitimacy. Particularly in the form of the defeated grandparent, the incarcerated grandparent, the traumatized grandparent, the short-on-words-out-of-necessity grandparent.  

Anthropology has long been interested in recording and deciphering the “memory of the vanquished,” including prominently the indigenous forms of social memory (León-Portilla; Wachtel). There is a general consensus among many of the authors devoted to this task that each cultural group has specific entryways and plots for the management of their social memory, including culturally relative rituals, languages, and other tangible and intangible mediums—places, artifacts, songs and music, food, daydreaming, emotions, diseases, and so on. The interest in the “memory of the subaltern” also encompasses the analysis of the way in which they manage to endure in the interstices of dominant versions of the past, whether colonial, postcolonial, or, in our case, interstate and civil war related. In the introduction, following Steedly, we referred to the memories of the Civil War, particularly what we might term “first wave memories” as “fugitive” (43). This term was used by Steedly to capture the slippery and unstructured nature of a kind of narratives—we expand the use here to include all means of memory flow—that can be better depicted as unsteady conglomerates of partial voices necessarily characterized by their indeterminacy. Their emergence, circulation, and interpretation, usually intertwined with personal, intimate stories, objects, feelings as well as local contexts of reception and deciphering, does not rely upon a globalizing interpretive framework. Rather, they produce meaning only in their fragmentation and lack of closure. 

By “first wave memories of defeat” I refer to those accounts and expressions of the past traumatic experience that have not yet entered into a full-fledged feedback relationship with other memories and discourses of the Civil War defeat within the memory industry that is taking shape in contemporary Spain. That is, I refer to memories on the wane. Although this topic is only noted here and requires further research, we have noticed that, for example, once the initially fugitive memories circulate in the media in the form of narratives, landscapes, bodily plots, personal objects, etc., they become a different kind of commodity set for massive consumption. By being exposed to larger audiences while being inserted in more cohesive interpretive frameworks, they are transformed in nature and lose a good part of their “fugitiveness.” This is not good or bad, it is just inevitable. Although in the context of this analysis all expressions of defeat are of undoubted interest if their context and circumstances of emergence, circulation, and consumption are properly understood, I argue that the “first wave” examples reflect best the long lasting effects of fear and terror, as a clear illustration of the shortage of proper and articulated languages and memory-anchors bearing public legitimacy to express suffering in contexts of extreme social, political, and symbolic repression.

Following Norbert Elias we consider violence and fear as two fundamental political operators linking the repressive activities of the State with the most intimate spaces of experience, particularly in a context of harsh repression of those defeated in a fratricidal war. In Elias’ model, external social coercion steadily transforms into internal
coercions (social constraint towards self-constraint), resulting into a continuous process of fear-based self-control, both conscious and unconscious—“automatic” or “blind” (443). The stability of the self-repressive apparatus is linked to the crystallization of monopolies of violence and other parallel forms of coercion. In this context, when we refer to the Civil War and to the social modeling of the “intimacy of defeat,” about anaesthetized or mutilated emotions, screams or silences, hidden pictures and letters, silent tears and self-contained mourning, sickness and emotional disability, or about a traumatic vision or the anguish for the disappeared, a song or a sound, a poem or a nightmare, a flavor or a scent, we are also referring to complex spaces of political action. We are talking about the enormous power of political structures to infiltrate, colonize, injure, and disable the intimate structure of an important sector of the population, to “ruin the collective and intersubjective connections of experience,” gravely damaging subjectivity (Kleinman, Das, and Lock x). Yet, in many cases, we are also referring to multiple acts of more or less clandestine resistance and survival strategies ranging from tiny domestic routines, to protective silence, fugitive telling, decisions to join the resistance or proscribed political parties, and going into exile.

Esther was barely three years old when she left Spain for Cuba. Her mother Emilia, as noted in the introduction, tried to block her from the memories of the tragedy that took place in Valdediós, while starting herself a new life for herself. In 1996, Esther, who had been struggling to get more information throughout her life, trying to fill what she calls “an immense emotional hunger” for her past and her homeland, interviewed in New Orleans her then ninety-year old mother on tape (see note). This mother-daughter conversation, a family tape intended to record Emilia’s fainting voice and recollections at the very end of her life, is paradigmatic of the “fugitive memories” of the civil war. It is an example of the waning memories of Emilia’s generation, as she herself passed away a few months after recording the tape. On the tape Esther managed to “pull out of her just a little bit more” of what they had “suffered” in Valdediós. In a testimony filled with unanswered questions and memory fissures, she recalls that Asturias had fallen, some soldiers came, there was a mass, there was a meal and, then, “there was death.” The closest Emilia gets to the killing is when recalling that her husband told her, when his name was called, “do not worry, nothing is going to happen to me just for taking care of mad people.”

Esther herself has very faded memories of her first hand experience in Asturias before leaving for Cuba, and none of her father. After returning to the US from the Valdediós exhumation, she was so anguished at having no reminiscences of her father that, after watching a TV program on hypnosis, she considered the possibility of resorting to it in a last attempt at reaching this black hole of her early childhood experience. She remembers, “I was there with him and my mother. I must have heard or seen something”. Then later she recalls, “Maybe what I need is a psychiatrist to explain to me why I have always missed him so much. I was a girl who did not overcome not having a father”. Her family dissuaded her from pursuing this. Although her father is blocked out from her childhood memories, she can remember her grandparents, a man with a big moustache always wearing a beret, and a tall and strong peasant woman. She also recalls a little stool that her father had carved for her
so she could sit and see the rain falling outside of the window with her grandfather. The Asturias of her early childhood was for her falling rain. Then, it was exile. She and her mother went to Portugal and took a ship to Cuba. Esther can recall some images of the journey and especially of the ship’s arrival to the harbor at La Habana, where her grandmother and her two aunts were “waving their hands at them to show their happiness. I was three years old at the time and I wondered, who are these cheerful people? I was only three at the time”.

As mentioned at the beginning of the paper, throughout her childhood in Cuba and until her marriage, she only knew that there was something strange regarding her father’s disappearance from their lives. Responding to her perplexity, she resented her mother’s new marriage and “imagined things created by my childish mind,” like the recurrent daydream of her father ringing their home’s bell to reclaim his wife.

Others in her generation stayed in the Valdediós’ area and grew with the fantasies, rumors and stories emanating from the shooting and the grave in the war and postwar years. One important fact about a good part of the narratives of the war that have been registered in the last few years is that, given the lapse of time that has passed, many of them convey childhood or early youth memories. Children’s imagination is a toolbox full of powerful metaphors that act as vehicles for fear and suffering. One important challenge for research in the Spanish case in comparative perspective is, precisely, the recollection and deciphering of these childhood memories. Rosa, an old woman I met on the exhumation scene in Valdediós, who was also a child when the shooting took place, conveyed to me a number of stories that still terrified her. Rosa remembers that the bodies were only superficially buried, and that people in the vicinity realized that there were dogs pulling parts of the bodies out of the grave and feeding on them. Her father went to the site and buried them deeper. She also told me three interconnected stories that show the ways in which a traumatic event such as the one in Valdediós penetrates the fantasy world and the play repertoire of children, a neat example of how regimes of terror bluntly infiltrate these emerging spaces of creativity and action.

All of them referred to elaborations of the fear of death associated with the ghosts of those massacred, which both attracted and kept children away from the grave. When they played in the area, they would always run quickly when bypassing the grave site, particularly if it was at nighttime. Stories were circulated that claimed that hands of those murdered in the shooting would come out of the grave to grab passing people by the ankles. One also ran the risk of running into a raising corpse. A second story talked about a puzzling river of blood that some had assured to have seen sprouting and flowing downhill from the grave. A third one claimed that, during certain years, the place irradiated a terrible smell. The childhood stories emanating from this “space of death” (Taussig3-36) or “gray zone” (LeviChap 8) metaphorically contained some fugitive clues to a massacre that was intended to remain confusing and politically, socially, symbolically, and emotionally paralyzing. Robben has noted the important amount of disorder, anxiety and division that the very existence of mass graves and collectives of “disappeared,” in all their forms, have in the social fabric. On the one hand, the quality of being hidden, anonymous, covered by the scorn of the victors and the silence
imposed on victims, all preventing the emergence of socially legitimate narratives and spaces of mourning. On the other, their exemplary quality, by gearing in a full scale and criminal machinery of death and fear production. Yet, childhood stories, emerging from within this ambiguity of the mass grave as a space of death, managed to keep alive the memory of the massacre in a political regime based on the imposition of obedience, silence and fear on the defeated. As is the case with Rosa, some of these stories have lingered in the memory of those who were children in 1937 and still live in the valley, investing the grave with a mysterious attribute which protected it from possible intentional damage as well as potentially intrusive rural paths.

**Commemorating the Victims**

Let’s move now from the intimacy of defeat, as expressed in children’s fears, to more public spaces of political action. Elsewhere, I have outlined the current process of institutionalization of the “historical memory” and the impact that it may have on the way in which Spain confronts the ghosts of the Civil War. Let me just gloss over what is a very complex and multiedged issue which is rapidly evolving, which responds to a “continuous refinement of the understanding of the consequences of state terror,” and requires further long-term research (Robben 107). Initially, exhumations were mostly organized by relatives and NGOs with little institutional support. Yet, gradually, different initiatives coming from institutions at local, regional, autonomic and national level have been set in place to provide political and economic frameworks for the many and diverse actions related to the memory of the civil war, mostly the memory of the defeated. Among other actions, we have seen budgets assigned to the academic research of those who disappeared during the war (Basque Country) or to the very exhumation process (a call for projects was opened in January of 2006 by the Ministry of the Presidency with a 2€ million fund attached to it), working groups designing full scale and complex political projects for the management of the memory of the war (i.e., the “Memorial Democràtic,” or “Democratic Memorial” in Cataluña), the creation of archival and research centers (Andalucía), political actions by Congress, and even an Interdepartmental Commission constituted in October 2004 and presided over by the Vice-President of the Spanish Government, María Teresa Fernández de la Vega, which committed to issuing a wide ranging political proposition to coordinate efforts nationwide in order to “honor those who suffered imprisonment, repression or death of liberties during the Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship.” Under fire by many of the NGOs and some parties in the political left, the Government promoted some spectacular initiatives, like the return of the controversial “papeles de Salamanca” [“Salamanca papers”] to the Autonomous Government of Catalonia in 2005, or the night time and pseudo clandestine removal of one equestrian statue of Franco in Madrid in March of 2005. Too little and too timid for parties on the left, too much and unnecessary for the main party on the right, PP. In this cascade of schemes, on April 27th, 2006, Congress approved, after a law proposition by IU-ICV and with the only opposition of PP and the abstention of ERC, this year as the “Year of Historical Memory” and also the year of the victims of the Civil War and Franco’s dictatorship. In this proposition, the 2nd Republic is also recognized as the “first truly democratic regime of Spain” and thus, the direct precursor to the Constitution of 1978. Finally, after
difficult negotiations and tough controversies, on October 31st, 2007, the ‘Law for the recognition and widening of rights, and the establishment of measures in favour of those undergoing prosecution and violence during the Civil War and the Dictatorship’ (popularly known and the ‘Historical Memory Law’) was approved by parliament, although its unfolding in normatives and rules is still quite behind. On October 16th, 2008, Judge Baltasar Garzón issued a judicial decree declaring himself competent to judge the ‘crimes against humanity’ committed by Franco and the leaders of the rebel forces and later ruling elite during the war and the postwar years. At the time of closing this text, the Fiscal had issued a judicial remedy against Garzon’s decree, which is still to be resolved in court. At the very least, even if Garzón’s decree is finally filed away, the mediatic, symbolic and political effect of starting a legal cause against Franco and his military and political allies for ‘crimes against humanity’ is not to be demised.

The appearance of these official commissions, working groups and legal provisions specialized in the management of the memory of the civil war and the dictatorship may, with the support of academics and technicians, have incorporated to the “memory recovery” agenda initiatives (inevitably controversial and problematic) difficult to achieve from civil society alone. To mention a few, the judicial and economic, not only “moral” rehabilitation of the defeated, the systematic support and standardization of processes of localization, commemoration and, if appropriate, exhumation of mass graves, including the management of the remains, the officialization of diverse commemorative actions celebrating the memory of the victims of the war, the “erasure” of symbols and monuments of the dictatorship and the repression—the most controversial being the final destination of the colossal Valle de los caídos—, the return of public and private property pillaged during the war, or the musealization of memory. Yet this very institutional impulse necessarily has as a counterpart attempts—from the different political parties behind the initiatives—at the instrumentalization and control of the diverse measures taken and the budget allocations, of the social trauma plots in all formats and, more generally, of the important social, cultural, and political capital now stemming from the memory of the victims of the Civil War.
The Valdediós killing has been also “touched” by this process. The grave opening activated a crucial connection between massacres, silences and childhood fears, the intimacy of defeat, and official celebrations of those murdered in 1937. On October 10th, 2005, the very President of the Principado de Asturias [The Principality of Asturias], Álvarez Areces, a member of the socialist party, presided over the inauguration of a monolith by Asturian sculptor Joaquín Rubio Camín nearby the area where the mass grave stood unmarked and unnoticed for decades. Along with the monolith, a brand new signal reading “Valdediós mass grave” was placed in the parking lot by the monastery access road, announcing the presence of the grave site. The act of inauguration and homage was part of the events linked to the celebration of the XIVth “World Day of Mental Health.” The President of the Principality was accompanied by relatives of the victims, different political representatives and members of associations linked to the recovery of historical memory, and a sizeable escort of TV cameras and journalists. The open condemnation of this killing in 1937 by top ranking public officials, after decades of fear, forgetfulness and indifference, has a clear relevance in order to rescue and rehabilitate for the present and the future the memory of the victims, and affects both the most public and intimate spaces of political action. In his speech,
Antonio Piedrafita, representing the relatives of the victims, recognized that the monolith and the act “symbolized, honored and praised” those killed in that “fateful date.” Justo Rodríguez, from the socialist Trade Union UGT, in representation of the many associations behind the initiative, remarked how important it was to be able to transmit to children “the true history of the Spanish Uncivil War,” uncivil precisely because of acts as horrific as the one that took place in Valdediós. President Álvarez Areces, on his part, defined the act as one important piece of “historical justice” which, in coordination with similar acts that should be celebrated throughout Spain, was intended to honor the victims and show the rejection by society of acts of terror and politics of fear. The four ton monolith was for him a monument to freedom and solidarity expressing the “respectful and blunt” collective will to remember past injustices but also to look forward. After almost seventy years, for many these political claims and commemorations had already come too late. For those on the political right, they are divisive, vengeful, and rancid.

To conclude, let us move back again from high-level autonomic political acts and discourses to transverse processes taking place within the intimacy of defeat, a space that we have discussed in this text as a crossing point for individual biographies, evolving social and political processes and a dictatorial regime founded on the systematic production of silence, fear and repression for the war’s losers. Some time before this political act and the inauguration of the monolith provided some kind closure to a long memory recovery process, in August 2004, when the bodies of the seventeen people shot in Valdediós were returned from the laboratory of Francisco Etxeberria (professor of Forensic and Legal Medicine at the University of the Basque Country), some relatives and associates decided that fifteen bodies were to be buried together—although in separate boxes—in a niche in a neighboring cemetery in Valeri, with views of the monastery. The list of those killed was not definitively closed, and some families decided not to claim the remains of their relatives or attend any ceremony. Two others—including Antonio Piedrafita’s father who, according to local versions of the events, tried to escape the shooting running uphill and was hunted to death—were taken away to be reburied in family pantheons elsewhere near Oviedo and in Gijón.

Even before the bodies appeared, when efforts to locate the grave were at a standstill in July 2003, Esther had already decided that, in case they were found, she did not want to bury her father in the US. He had never showed any interest in that country. Her residence in the US was, in fact, the unintended endpoint of an exile that was direct product of his killing. Furthermore, the identification of the body by the forensic team was non-conclusive for her father, who could be one of two corpses with similar age and characteristics. Esther went to Valeri’s cemetery two months after the bodies were placed in the niche, which was not sealed, waiting for her to make a final decision regarding her father’s body. As she wrote to me in an email, “once in the cemetery, Antonio Piedrafita gave me the plastic box that supposedly contained the remains of my father. That was a very difficult moment for me. . . . To have in my hands the remains of that person I have always loved and I barely knew. Can you imagine? Yet I say ‘supposedly’ because I do have every imaginable doubt that those were with all certainty the bones of my father.” Finally, Esther dropped the possibility of
incinerating the body of her father and carrying the ashes with her, and her father was definitely buried in Valeri along with most of those he died with in the neighboring monastery of Valdediós. The plaque closing the niche reads, below a reproduction of Picasso’s dove: “Remains of Claudia Alonso Moyano, Luz Álvarez Flores, Rosa Flórez Martínez, Emilio Montoto Suero, Soledad Nieto Arias, Oliva Fernández Valle, and nine more. PEACE. Valdediós, October 27th, 1937.”

Esther left her father’s body back in Asturias, but she was anxious about recovering and keeping some objects that might have belonged to him. “A watch, a wedding ring, a shoe… Even the bullets. The ones that might appear in his body, I do want them!”38 In the emails we exchanged after the exhumation, she insisted in having a bullet from the shooting, perhaps her childhood’s most terrifying and slippery treasure, no matter how deteriorated it was. I had no access to the objects recovered in the exhumation, so I finally sent her via email a picture of one of the detonated bullets. In a paper on the importance of understanding the evolving nature of the imaginary networks of political terror, Roger Bartra stressed the crucial importance of deciphering the “black boxes” of fear, like the ones belonging to the commercial planes that were crashed by Al-Qaeda suicidals on the 9-11. And the same can be said of the rest of the “black holes” and objects linked to the production of mass violence and terror, such as the SIM cards of the mobile phones the detonated the bombs in Madrid on March 11th 2004,39 or even the mass graves. It is a reasonable guess that this bullet exchanged transnationally in digital format, a bullet among the hundreds of thousands of bullets of the repression, is an entryway to the intimacy of defeat of the Civil War victims and their mutilated structure of feelings. Leaving a ripping trace through a space of death, it surely represents and expresses the tragedy and the suffering that was shot through the lives of generations of Spaniards, both in the internal and the external exile, from the cruel and repressive political will behind the trigger to the deepest sentiments of the defeated.
Image 5: Detonated bullet from the Valdediós shooting photographed on location, to be later sent to Esther by email. Courtesy of Francisco Etxeberria.
Notes

1 See also Casanova and his contribution to this volume. For an account of postwar repression in Asturias, see Solé i Sabaté and Villaroya 208-220.

2 My ethnographic fieldwork in the Valdediós exhumation, including interviews with relatives and neighbours, took place in July 2003. I had a long interview with Esther during the exhumation process before the bodies were found. After she left for the US, I continued to have email correspondence with her. The testimonies by Esther transcribed in this text come from three sources: (a) the interview that I conducted in Valdediós on July 23rd, 2003, a day before the grave was located (‘Graveside interview’); (b) the email correspondence we exchanged when I was writing the first version of this paper, from April 29th to June 1st, 2006 (‘Personal email’); and (c) a short taped conversation that she had with her sick mother on summer of 1996 (‘Esther’s interview’). Emilia finally died on February 1997. I transcribed this latter interview from a copy of the original tape recording, although it was later published in de la Rubia and de la Rubia 95-102. The expressions in this sentence in the text come from the graveside interview. I would like to specially thank Esther Cimadevilla, Pedro de la Rubia and Antonio Piedrafita for their invaluable help during the exhumation in 2003, and also during the process of writing this paper, swiftly attending my telephone calls and emails.

3 In Fernández de Mata’s expression (this volume), that would be the moment of convergence in Emilia of the “double rupture of the world,” individual and collective, as a result of the direct experience of extreme violence during the Civil War.

4 Taken from Esther’s interview to her mother.

5 This is the municipality where the monastery of Valdediós is located.
Graveside interview. The full report on the circumstances leading to the shooting according to historical reports, witnesses and relatives of the victims, and written by P. de la Rubia and J.A. Landera, can be consulted in http://www.memoriahistorica.org/alojados/periquete/paginas/valdedios.html. The same account, as well as the archaeological and forensic report on the exhumation and the analysis of the remains of the seventeen people found in the mass grave, written by Francisco Etxeberria, Lourdes Herrasti and Javier Ortiz, can be found at http://www.sc.ehu.es/scrwwwws/Medicina-Legal/valdedios/valde.htm.

See Juliá and Casanova. Pio Moa, who is currently leading a revisionist approach underlying the inevitability and constraint of Franco’s rebellion, an approach expressed in well sold books, has denounced what he calls “myths” about Franco’s repression and follows organic historian Ramón Salas Larrazabal in proposing way more conservative figures for Franco’s repressive policies (183-215). For Salas, the total number of victims of the war was at around 625,000, including 159,000 due to postwar hunger and sickness, 23,000 due to postwar shootings, and 10,000 related to the activities of the maquis—guerrillas—and to the participation of Spaniards in the II World War. Thus, the total for the Civil War is 433,000. From these, 165,000 were related to sickness; so, violent deaths were at about 268,000. 160,000 died in combat, and 108,000 in repression. This would be the total for all sides. According to Salas, 72,500 were shot by Republicans, and 58,000 by Franco, including the 23,000 shootings in the postwar period. However, in Víctimas de la Guerra Civil, Republican shootings are calculated at around 50,000 whereas the list of those repressed by Franco’s troops might rise to 150,000, considering that at least half of them went
unregistered in the Civil Registers during the war.

8 The scope of this massacre in the bullring is one of the most contentious aspects of the conflicting memories of the Civil War. For the winning side, it was just a legend. In some versions cherished by the loosing side, it was a horrendous bloody party. See Espinosa 205-250.

9 The controversy regarding the consideration of the victim’s of Franco’s repression, both during the war and afterwords, as ‘disappeared,’ has raged after on October 16th of 2008, Judge Baltasar Garzón legally defined these forced disappearances as crimes against humanity. For a comparison with the case of Argentine’s disappeared and the intense social and political debates taking place around them and their exhumation, see Robben.

10 The memory of these individuals has been kept and commemorated by the Asociación de Familiares y Amigos de la Fosa Común de Oviedo (AFAFC), an association opposed to exhumations and in favor of the location, preservation, and commemoration of the mass graves sites.

11 See Ferrándiz, “Memoria”; and Ferrándiz, “Return.”

12 See El País, Domingo (14-09-08), “¿Dónde acabaron?” 1-4.

13 As expressed, for example, in a manifesto by the association Archivo Guerra Civil y Exilio (AGE). See http://www.galeon.com/agenoticias/. See also Loureiro, for a more recent argument aganist the use of ‘pathetic rethorics’ by many in the recovery of the historical memory movement, in order to replace knowledge and reflection (233).

14 See Armengou, this volume; Ferrándiz and Baer Art.35; and Herrmann 193-212.
See Jelin.

For an evaluation of the political importance of this testimony giving process, see Ferrándiz, “Cries.”

For some classic examples, see León-Portilla; Wachtel; Price; Rosaldo; Hill; or Rappaport.

See also Jelin 16-20. She emphasizes also the central role of forgetting and silence in narrative memory.

For the body as a crucial site for the crystallizing of social memory, see White.

It is also important to note that once these fugitive memories have circulated widely in the media, they may become second or third hand memory plots to be used by other victims or relatives. On the incorporation of “second hand experiences” into lived experiences, see Jelin 4.

Personal email, 10-05-06.

Graveside interview.

Personal email, 05-05-06.

Personal email, 08-05-06.

She was around nine. She later worked as a guide in the monastery from 1965 to 1973. It was hard for her even to show up in the exhumation site, for she had been receiving threatening telephone calls since she started to cooperate in the location of the grave site with the ARMH.

See Ferrándiz, “Memoria”; Ferrándiz “Cries”; and Ferrándiz, “Return.”

For example, on November 2002, the Spanish parliament unanimously passed
an unprecedented proposition condemning Franco’s uprising in 1936 as an illegal rebellion against a legitimate government.

29 See Fernández de la Vega’s declarations at the press conference following the Consejo de Ministros at http://www.lamoncloa.es/ConsejodeMinistros/Ruedas/_2004/r2307040.htm

30 These are documents confiscated after the fall of Cataluña by Franco’s regime, some of which were used in the subsequent repression. They were kept in Salamanca’s Archive, and amounted to 5% of the total collection. PP defended the “unity” of the Archive, resisting the transfer of the documents and the Mayor of Salamanca, from this same political party, organized demonstrations and even changed the name of the street where the archive is located to “Street of the Pillaging.”

31 During the celebration of his midterm in office on the 23rd of April of 2006, President Zapatero challenged the opposition party PP, whose official line regarding this process is that it represents the unacceptable opening of old wounds, the breaking up of the consensus of the transition, and an attempt at establishing a new hegemony of the defeated opposed to the agreement of all, to put it back on its pedestal when they return to office (El País (24-04-06) 16.

32 See Boletín Oficial de la Cortes Generales, 12-12-05.

33 October 27th, 2008.

34 I videorecorded this commemorative act in full. All testimonies in the text are direct transcriptions from this videorecording.

35 The Executive Director of the Health Service in Asturias, who introduced the act, named the following entities behind the lobbying for the monument and the act: the
Federación de Servicios Públicos de UGT, the Asociación de Enfermería Comunitaria, la Asociación de Descendientes del Exilio Español, the Asociación para la Memoria Histórica Asturiana, the Asociación Asturias por la Memoria, the Archivo Guerra y Exilio (AGE), the Monumento de la Colladiella, the Asociación de Amigos y Familiares de la Fosa Común de Oviedo, and the Asociación de Amigos y Familiares de Represaliados de la II República. He stressed also the importance of historical research carried out by Pedro de la Rosa and J.A. Landera, and the forensic and archaeological research carried out by Francisco Etxeberria, Lourdes Herrasti, and Javier Ortiz.

36 An important challenge for future analysis is to evaluate the long lasting effects of these institutional revisits of the landscapes of traumatic memory in the framework of conflicting memory politics, including victimhood politics, in the country.

37 Personal email, 29-04-06.

38 Gaveside interview.

39 See Ferrándiz and Feixa.

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