

Notes on Political Repression in the War and Post-War Asturias



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Previous considerations on the “Democratic Memory” in Asturias

Amid Franco’s regime, Rafaela Lozana, an 84-year-old profoundly religious woman whose son had been executed, managed at the last minute to prevent the destruction of the mass graves containing the remains of all those executed in the Ceares cemetery. She succeeded in erecting a funerary monument in 1960 with the remains of those who were executed in Gijón after the end of the war [1]. On the contrary, in that same decade, relatives of those executed and buried in the mass grave at the San Salvador cemetery in Oviedo tried to dignify the space by announcing in the press a public subscription aimed at this purpose. The initiative was prohibited, and the Oviedo city council will assume its minimal improvement [2].

These two exceptional examples demonstrate that the emergence of the memorialist phenomenon that occurred in the last years of the 20th century and, more clearly, in the early 21st century has precedents dating back to the Franco dictatorship. Of course, those precedents did not have more social projection than the one that concerned a few direct heirs of the victims buried in many mass graves scattered throughout cemeteries, ditches, mountains, or meadows. It is also worth noting that even before the dictator’s death, some people, under cover of darkness and treachery, unearthed the graves of their relatives, giving them a dignified burial following their convictions...

During the Transition, various entities and associations considered the dignification of mass graves and the recovery of the names of the victims of Francoist repression buried there. In Asturias, the Association of Widows of the Republic and the Civil War promoted a tribute book titled “Mass Grave of the Oviedo Cemetery,” which they self-financed and published in 1984. As a researcher of the documentation about those executed in Oviedo after the end of the war, the task was thorny, semi-clandestine, and highly complex since I had to work directly in the Cemetery Section of the Oviedo City Council among seas of folders, cards, and files without any order or pattern. This material was as rich as it was varied and heterogeneous, with documentation typed, handwritten, duplicated, amended, redone, and modified at different times and by other hands... In short, there was no archive in this Section. However, I found a true documentary gem: the Execution Register Book of the Oviedo cemetery, which covered the period from May 1938 to October 1952 [3].

Similar initiatives were undertaken in other territories, always at the behest of a few initiators, true entrepreneurs of memory, who, with little recognition, dedicated their time and often their financial resources to reclaim and honor the forgotten victims of Francoist repression. Publications, tributes to those repressed, plaques in cemeteries, and exhumations of mass graves abounded in those years of the Transition. However, all that feverish activity

1. Véase El Paredón. Las fosas comunes de “El Sucu” Ceares, Folletos del Ateneo Obrero de Gijón, Gijón, 1991.

2. Refer to the monographic work on the common grave in the Cemetery of Oviedo by Carmen García (ed.), *Volver la vista al pasado. Violencia masiva y memoria en Japón y en España* (Universidad de Oviedo, 2019) in particular the chapter “Notas sobre la Fosa Común del Cementerio de Oviedo y el proceso de recuperación de la memoria histórica en Asturias” p. 71-80.

3. This book, the Execution Register, was recorded by the chaplain who collected the personal information of all the executed individuals day by day and month by month. Additionally, the chaplain would note whether the prisoner had confessed and received communion, as well as their burial location. Later on, the Cemetery caretaker continued the task of recording the list of those who were executed. Currently, this book is already deposited in the Municipal Archive of Oviedo.

had little temporal, social, or media impact. It seemed only to concern a few nostalgics, the victims, relatives, and not all of them.

Several decades had passed before the “memory recovery” phenomenon erupted for various reasons. In that context, the Principality of Asturias and the University of Oviedo signed an agreement in 2003, perhaps under pressure from those memory entrepreneurs who had worked almost alone for so many years, to locate, identify, and dignify the mass graves in the region.

A Brief Introduction to the Analysis of Repression in Asturias

With the occupation of the province of Oviedo by nationalist troops, massive and bloody repression was unleashed on the defeated; imprisonments, “paseos” (forced walks ending in execution), summary trials and executions, as well as the implementation of purification mechanisms, were the modalities that political violence took in the immediate post-war period in a region considered hostile and predominantly leftist. From the first days, groups of uncontrolled individuals exercised systematic terror, especially in the recently conquered areas of Gijón, Avilés, and the mining basins. Meanwhile, in Oviedo, even though the first cleansing of the rear guard had been carried out since the siege was broken, once definitively freed from the militias that surrounded it, the first unidentified corpses began to appear in meadows and open areas around the city and nearby towns. Almost a hundred victims of “paseos” were counted in November and December of 1937. The expedited murders did not disappear in the Oviedo council until May 1938; thus, legal and uncontrolled repression coexisted harmoniously, at least in the first months of the post-war period [4].

The overflow of the prisons forced the authorities to use convents, barracks, concentration camps, or industrial buildings to accommodate a prison population that numbered in the thousands. For example, in the El Coto prison, with a capacity

for 200 inmates, 2,342 individuals were crammed in during the last months of 1937 [5]. In addition to those who were arrested early on, some had fled and were subsequently caught, as well as those who had initially hidden in more or less improvised shelters and were eventually discovered, and those who chose to turn themselves in to the authorities after the authorities' conciliatory calls promising to spare their lives [6].

Testimonies, memoirs, and reports generally agree on the harsh living conditions in prisons, concentration camps, and work battalions. In addition to overcrowding and extreme poverty, a strict prison regime with complete control over the inmates and disciplinary rules gave officials and guards unlimited power.

During the war, thousands of death sentences were handed down in summary military tribunals held in liberated areas such as Cangas del Narcea, Castropol, Tineo, or Valdés, and in the post-war period, in many parts of the region, including Aller, Langreo, Mieres, Ciaño, San Martín del Rey Aurelio, Llanes, Somiedo, or Pravia, before finally concentrating in Oviedo, Gijón, and for a few months in Avilés. Executions were massive and uninterrupted, primarily in the year 1938. That year, 929 people were shot in Oviedo and 849 in Gijón. In 1939, 223 death sentences were carried out in Gijón and 177 in Oviedo, mainly after the end of the war in Spain. Executions continued to take place in the early 1940s as a result of the war. Still, death sentences were mainly related to guerrilla activities or successive attempts to rebuild left-wing political organizations in later years.

With the data available to us, the number of legal executions amounted to 1,366 in Oviedo and 1,323 in Gijón, to which should be added the political prisoners who died in jail: around a hundred in El Coto prison and 251 in the Oviedo one [7]. The total number of Asturians executed in the region and neighboring provinces where they were tried amounts to 3,372 people shot after expedited Councils of War; of those sentenced to death, 21 were women.

4. Vid C García (1990) “Aproximación al estudio de la represión franquista en Asturias: ‘Paseos’ y ejecuciones en Oviedo (1936 1952)”, en *El Basilisco*, Oviedo 2(6): 76.

5. Vid. R. Vega y B. Serrano, *Represión, clandestinidad y lucha política: el movimiento obrero gijonés durante el franquismo (1937 1962)* Gijón, 1998. In a report by the PCE (Spanish Communist Party) on the situation in Asturias, it was stated that around 25,000 people had been taken prisoner in the early post-war period. According to the informant, around 1,500 prisoners were still being held in the El Coto prison awaiting trial in 1940-41. Processed individuals for whom mild sentences of 6 to 12 years were requested were sent to the Workers' Battalions. Vid. «Información sobre Asturias» (undated, possibly 1940 41), AHPCE NR(A), Cj. 79, 3/2.

6. According to Santullano's C “La huida a los montes. De espaldas al mar” in the General History of Asturias, Gijón, since 1978, volume 11 (pp. 65-80), by the end of November 1937, after various clean-up operations, more than 1,000 individuals had been taken prisoner (p. 68). Falangists and Civil Guard actively participated in the apprehension of hidden “reds” in cities and towns. According to information from *El Comercio*, in January 1938, 1,048 arrested individuals had been brought before the courts, while 209 had been killed because “they tried to confront the public force.” Meanwhile, in May 1938, the Military Government was pleased that more than 500 escapees had presented themselves with weapons and ammunition to the authorities. See J. A. González Muñiz, “Ocupación de Asturias por los nacionales. Vida diaria y represión”, in General History of Asturias, Gijón, since 1978, volume 11 (pp. 11-12). In the first forty, there was a drip of surrender by people in hiding and fugitives; see AHA GC, Parts of the Civil Guard, between 1940 and 1941.

7. The Information about Oviedo can be found in the Association of War Widows of the República's book, *Fosa Común del Cementerio de Oviedo* (Oviedo, 1984), and C. García's aforementioned work (pp. 69-82). Regarding Gijón, see E. Ortega's work, *La represión franquista en Asturias. Ejecutados y fallecidos en la cárcel del Coto* (Gijón, 1994), and J. Rodríguez Muñoz's first comprehensive study on political repression in Asturias, “La represión franquista: paseos y ejecuciones. La izquierda ‘en capilla’”, in *Historia General de Asturias, Gijón, desde 1978, tomo 11* (pp. 225-240). The most complete documentation on the Councils of War held in Gijón can be found in Marcelo Laruelo's valuable research, *Roa, La Libertad es un bien muy preciado. Consejos de guerra celebrados en Gijón y Camposancos por el ejército nacionalista al ocupar Asturias en 1937. Testimonios y condenas* (Gijón, 1999).

However, the dimension of uncontrolled repression exceeds that of regulated repression. Vengeance, reprisals with exemplary character, torture, and murders that sometimes meant the liquidation of entire families proliferated everywhere, without adhering most of the time to the legal procedures established by the Francoist Regime itself. And it is that, in the central area of Asturias, and especially in the mining basins, derogatorily called red, it was not only a matter of making the working population pay for their loyalty to the government of the Popular Front; it was necessary to root out the support they provided to fugitives and the widespread complicity of the neighborhood with the guerrillas.

On the other hand, in towns and villages, where according to a local Falange leader, "there still existed a frank spirit of rebellion (...) that is more frequently expressed than in cities", [8] there were many who used the victory of their side to settle old scores with political or personal adversaries. Thus, there was a proliferation of informers and denunciations, and on numerous occasions, the Civil Guard itself had to report on the falsehood of many of them [9]. There were also cases of revenge that led to murder. In this sense, the search for fugitives and the fight against counter-parts and guerrillas served most of the time as an excuse to commit all kinds of excesses, to which, of course, the law enforcement forces were not immune [10].

Everything suggests that uncontrolled repression must have worked with few restrictions, especially in remote councils, villages, and places where prominent Falangists, mayors, or local bosses could practically exercise the only effective authority. For example, in the towns of Pola de Lena, F. Gomez Villota, searching for oral testimonies, provides a figure of 120 murders, all carried out by Falangists and members of the contrapartida, a task in which some authorities of the Villa reportedly collaborated enthusiastically; to this large number of victims, the 111 shot in the Council of Lena in Oviedo and Gijón after a previous trial would have to be added [11].

And irregular repression, according to our database, reached the high figure of 4,195 deaths over a period that covers from the early days of the war to well into the 1950s. And while the executions of women were limited, irregular repression claimed the lives of 354 women. Adding the executions, we have a figure far exceeding our previous estimates: 7,572 deaths due to the dictatorship's repression in red Asturias [12].

Studies conducted at the University of Oviedo: The Map of Mass Graves and the Database of Victims of the Civil War and Francoist Repression in Asturias. An overview

Counting and naming the dead from armed conflicts, massacres, and other traumatic historical events is not easy even today, let alone when nearly forty years of military dictatorship intervened. Locating a significant portion of the victims resulting from irregular repression ("paseos") and hundreds of soldiers who died on the front lines and, on many occasions, were poorly buried in improvised graves or trenches presents even more significant difficulties. Counting, naming, and, as far as possible, locating burial sites were the primary objectives of the research project that we have been carrying out at the University since the end of 2003 under the direction of the author of these pages.

The academic research project's approach was from the outset to determine how many, who, where, when, under what circumstances, and why every violent death resulting from the war in Asturias occurred. This naturally included combatants from both sides, civilian victims, and, of course, those resulting from the repression carried out during the course of the conflict in both the loyalist and rebel zones, as well as those that were the result of the merciless Francoist repression unleashed amid the clamor and fury of the victors over a broad temporal space that spans from the fall of the Northern Front in October 1937 to the mid-1950s. We began with an exhaustive review of the civil registers of the 78 Asturian municipalities and that of Lugo, systematically emptied

8. The local leader of the Falange in Cangas de Onis made these statements regarding a complaint made by the parish priest against a neighbor. The Falangist indicated that the accused was "an undesirable person morally and politically"; the suspicions that weighed on the involvement of her husband and son in the looting of the church had not been proven "due to the complicity of the neighborhood, as undesirable as she herself". AHP GC, Public Order, Year 1941, File of E. V., Leg. 224, Expte. 22.075.

9. The denunciations, which number in the hundreds, were generally of a political or moral nature. The accusations were quite varied, ranging from the act of listening to foreign radio stations and spreading rumors, to being propagandists for communism and spies for Spanish refugees in France. In other cases, the denunciations detailed meetings held "to conspire against the Regime and celebrate the victories of the Russian army"; or they alleged that they had been threatened, such as that the Soviets "would soon be in Spain to finish off the scoundrels of the Falangists." In political accusations, Falange played a prominent role and on occasion even denounced members of the Civil Guard for collusion with the Reds. These accusations, after investigation by the Civil Guard, were archived upon discovering the personal motives of the informants and the falsity of the denunciations. See AHP GC, Denuncias, 1941-1942, 1943-1944.

10. For example, the death of a young man in February 1941, "a member of the Cíaño Counterparty", led to the arrest and delivery to the Military Judge of no less than 31 residents, most of them miners. AHP-GC, Parts of the Civil Guard, year 1941.

11. Vid. E. Gómez Villota, *Represión clerical franquista en el concejo de Lena, 1937-1975*, Gijón, 1995, passim. However, it should be noted that there are a large number of unidentified individuals, some without even an approximate date of death, and others for whom it is only specified that they died at the end of October 1937. Although we include them in the count of Francoist repression victims, there is always the doubt that they could be the remains of combatants buried in mass graves near the place of their death.

12. As a clarification, I must point out that until now we have not distinguished between the irregular repression derived from the policy of revenge against the defeated, and the repression against the guerrillas, which I believe we should distinguish in the immediate future in the database.

from July 1936 until 2010. The information from the death records served as a guide for establishing the 24 fields of the Database to which we added three more: Fuentes, Bibliography, and Concept.

In the "Sources" field, we list all the documentary and oral references we have gathered about each person; in the "Bibliography" field, we have included all references that provide information, however scarce it may be, about any of the deceased. In the "Concept" field, we have classified the deceased according to 10 criteria: War Action, Civilian Victim, Republican Repression, Francoist Repression (murders and shootings without any judicial process), Executed by Republicans, Executed by Francoists (shot after being sentenced to death), Republican Prisoner, Francoist Prisoner, Guerrilla Repression, and finally, Undetermined Cause, for cases in which it was not possible to establish the circumstances surrounding numerous deaths.

Of course, there is no doubt that this primary source has limitations because, as is well known, not all victims were registered at the time of death or afterward. Of course, there are obvious missing records of many of those killed in irregular repression. In this regard, the very few losses of "Moorish" soldiers or militiamen who died in combat, especially in the last months of the war, are very striking. Of the 27,497 individuals in the database, around 7,000 were never recorded in the civil registers as required. Approximately 3,000 Republican soldiers who died in combat had to be included based on the voluminous but incomplete internal documentation of the popular army (battalion lists, casualty reports, lists of deceased and missing, etc.) preserved in the Archive of the Spanish Civil War in Salamanca, whose microfilm copy is deposited in the Historical Archive of Asturias.

Another problem with death certificates, and not a minor one, is that they do not always accurately refer to the causes of death. The blank space often appears, or it has been crossed out, or it refers to "cardiac failure," "respiratory failure," "collapse," or "traumatic shock," and in the numerous inscriptions made sometime later, it is frequent to note as the cause of death "the fight against Marxism" or "the past war," annotations that often conceal what had been a result of the irregular repression.

It was necessary to complement, compare information, cross-check sources, add data, names, dates, and burial places, and clarify the circumstances of deaths... Without going into a detailed analysis of all the consulted archives and sources, I would like to mention some that were especially valuable for the research; for example, parish and municipal archives or cemetery registry books. Due to its rarity, the most exceptional one is undoubtedly the Execution Registry Book of the Oviedo Cemetery. As if it were an accounting ledger, the cemetery administrator chaplain records the list of those executed and their burial place day by day.

The prison archives were consulted systematically; prisoner files, records, or fragmentary documentation related to concentration camps such as the Vidriera camp in Avilés. Information from the actions of the People's Courts was also incorporated and, on several occasions, provided by Military Tribunals. The Register Books of the Provincial Hospital, integrated into the Historical Archive of Asturias, also clarified the circumstances of many deaths during the war.

The National Historical Archive holds the collection generated around the so-called General Cause (Causa General), which the Francoist judicial authorities instructed to uncover the outrages committed during the "red domination." The voluminous information in the Causa General of the province of Oviedo has been fundamental to profoundly understanding the Republican repression. This source was also compared with various local documentation. In this regard, the collection preserved in the municipal archive of Gijón is especially rich.

On the other hand, the documentation from the Archive of the Holy Cross of the Valley of the Fallen and its complementary records preserved in the Historical Archive of Asturias allowed us to learn in detail about the transfers of remains from cemeteries and mass graves to the crypts of the basilica of the Valley. The remains of about 3,000 fallen in the war, mostly belonging to the Francoist army, ended up there. However, it also houses some Republican soldiers, not ruling out the possible presence of victims of repression buried as "unidentified corpses" in their day.

We have also used hemerographic and bibliographic sources and documents and information provided by associations and collaborators. In this regard, oral testimonies have provided decisive and precious information for the research. In addition to providing valuable data on names, places, or the circumstances surrounding so many unexplained deaths, survivors of the war and direct family members of the repressed have recounted their experiences, recalled traumatic events, and relived painful experiences that allow us to glimpse the oppression to which the defeated were subjected.

Not in vain, one of the projects was precisely called "Voices of the Past. Oral testimonies of repression and political violence in Asturias," in which Rubén Vega, an oral history specialist and responsible for the Oral Sources Archive for Social History of Asturias (AFOHSA), actively collaborated. The series of interviews conducted by the research team in recent years were deposited in this archive. Along with the oral sources, we have edited a documentary titled "Under Valleys and Mountains. Geography and Memory of Repression in Asturias," with a script and direction by Amaia Caunedo [13].

13. Funded by the Ministry of the Presidency, it was edited in Asturias in 2014 and produced by Latigazo Cooperativa Cinematográfica under the direction of Juan Caunedo Domínguez.

Since the end of 2010, the Map of Common Graves in Asturias can be consulted online [14]. It is an interactive map where 343 burial sites have been located, primarily graves of those repressed by the Franco regime, although some graves of combatants are also included. We have not marked the graves of the Republican repression since many of them were exhumed by the victors in the immediate post-war period.

It was necessary to review the Map of Mass Graves after realizing that some graves we learned about later were missing. Additionally, I finally found in the Municipal Archives of Oviedo the plan for the provisional war cemetery of San Pedro de los Arcos, in which many of the city's fighters were buried and later exhumed and transferred to the Valley of the Fallen. I thought it was important to add this plan due to its enormous dimensions, of which no trace is left. The review of the Map of Mass Graves was concluded in 2019.

It is worth noting that the large mass graves of Francoist repression are located in the cemeteries of Oviedo and Gijón, and to a lesser extent in Avilés, while a good number of municipal cemeteries and some parish cemeteries also contain graves. In addition, we have tried to locate as accurately as possible, based on sources and testimonies, all the other scattered graves throughout the region. Of course, we cannot exclude other burial sites covered by the thick veil of forgetfulness.

The database of the Spanish Civil War victims and Francoist repression in Asturias has been published on a CD [15]. The still not definitive figures, as we are still incorporating and reviewing new data, show us the harshness of the war and repression in Asturias, measured by the very high number of victims that, with revisions in recent years, reach the staggering figure of 27,497 and certainly not all are included. We indeed record all the deceased in Asturias and also Asturians who died in combat on fronts far from the province, and of course, the executed and disappeared in other Spanish regions of which we know.

Grouping the total figures by concepts, we can clearly see that the largest number of deaths were, undoubtedly, a consequence

of the war, with almost 15,000 [14,938] killed in action and 1,010 civilian victims. Another indisputable fact is the magnitude of Francoist repression; if we add "paseos" (extrajudicial killings) and executions, we find a total of 7,572 deaths, considerably more than previous estimates and far from the "exact figures" given by the historian Ramón Salas Larrazábal, who categorically stated that the number of deaths attributable to Francoism in all of Asturias was 2,037.

Regarding the volume of Republican repression, of which we can offer practically definitive figures, it was characterized by an irregular character. Of the total of 2,080 victims, except for 54 executions ordered by the People's Courts and 23 violent deaths of prisoners, the rest were the result of "paseos," "sacas," and assassinations without any judicial procedure.

On the other hand, fugitives and guerrillas were responsible for at least 354 deaths among members of the security forces, Falangists, Somatenes, and other regime figures actively committed to the fight against those who were fighting with weapons in hand against the dictatorship.

There are still many unexplained violent deaths, specifically 1,218, which we must include under the "cause not determined" heading for now. Another deficit in the investigation is the number of prisoners who died in Francoist prisons in Asturias, Galicia, and the Basque Country. We have 320 deaths in prison, but many of those who died in various penitentiary centers, whether convicted or awaiting trial, have not been included. The investigation owes much to many people. Although this is not the time to name them all, it would be worth mentioning a long list of informants and collaborators whose contributions and support were essential to complete the work.

Nevertheless, we cannot consider the task completed. Despite the scale of the investigation, which has taken two decades, we cannot even claim that these are the exact and definitive data on the victims and their locations... it is a project in progress, and we have only laid the foundation; nothing more and nothing less.

14. The URL is: <http://tematico.asturias.es/fosas/index.htm>. Later it was reviewed and published on CD (Oviedo, 2011).

15. Short edition (University of Oviedo, 2011) which is deposited at the Historical Archive of Asturias for free consultation.



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