

DOCTORAATSONDERZOEK - DOCTORATS

LORE COLAERT

History from the Grave. Politics of Memory in Exhumations of Mass Graves from the Spanish Civil War

Universiteit Gent, Vakgroep geschiedenis, 2015.

Promotor : Gita Deneckere.

The Spanish transition to democracy after the death of Franco in 1975 has long served as a model for researchers and practitioners of 'transitional justice.' This interdisciplinary field studies strategies by states and international institutions to deal with a legacy of human rights abuses. The Spanish transition entailed an agreement not to address the past of the Civil War (1936-1939) and dictatorship (1939-1975) in the political and judicial arena. This 'pact of forgetting' guided Spain relatively peacefully into a democratic welfare state. Due to a recent memory movement, the Spanish transition model seems to have broken down through 'the recovery of historical memory.' The practice that contributes to the rupture of the 'pact of forgetting' is the exhumation of mass graves of the Francoist repression during and after the Civil War.

This dissertation aims to assess the contribution of these mass grave exhumations to a new collective memory in Spain. The author critically questions the following ideas about the Spanish exhumation campaign : first, the idea that unexcavated mass graves are sites of forgetting and traumatic memory, and second, that the exhumation of mass graves is a natural and universal reaction to this. The third idea that the dissertation questions is that the exhumations contribute to the historical record of Spain through the revelation of unmediated, objective truth.

To this end, the author investigates what kind of representation of the past is constructed in the wake of the exhumations. The exhumations are studied as 'memory practices' and the exhumation teams as 'memory activists'. The study uses a diverse range of data such as popular and academic literature, documents and social media usage and participant observation and interviews conducted in the exhumation movement. The author carried out multi-sited research, following a major exhumation team, the Association for the Recovery of Historic Memory (ARMH). Within an ethnographic approach, this study applies historical theory to the 'practical past' or to how history is constructed by social actors in society.

The first findings of the study relate to the origins of the dominant ideas about exhumations outlined above. The author describes how the Spanish memory movement adopts some aspects of an international 'forensic turn' in memory. This turn regards a mass grave as both *corpus delicti* and witness of the past. The author argues however that the concepts of the forensic turn are somewhat incongruous in Spain. Francoism is not on trial and the exhumations are organized by associations of relatives and volunteers rather than by judges. Furthermore, the exhumations themselves do not always contribute much information about the victims in the graves, and genetic identification is not always possible. Lastly, forensic truth is usually limited to individual, factual truth about the cause of death.

This dissertation therefore contends that the forensic truth gathered in the exhumations

does not suffice to explain their perceived impact and dismisses other memory practices. Nonetheless, the author argues that the alliance between the Spanish case and the international forensic turn has been crucial for the Spanish memory movement.

What other elements could explain the perceived impact of the exhumations on Spain's collective memory? Subsequently, the dissertation first shows how the exhumations are at variance with the 'privatization' of memory. By aiming for public acknowledgement of the violence, the exhumations serve as 'mobile seminars' of public history. Because of their non-judicial character, the exhumations are very communal and turn the mass grave site into a public and participatory place. In that way, the exhumation associations transform knowledge, previously confined to the private sphere, into acknowledgement.

Second, the dissertation shows that the exhumation movement breaks with the time concept used during the Spanish transition. While the architects of the transition decided that this episode was 'passed,' the exhumation movement argues that this violent past is an 'open wound'. Influenced by international transitional justice discourse, this notion of temporality is called trauma-therapy-closure time (TTC time), a notion constructed and disseminated by an association like the ARMH.

The search beyond the production of forensic truth led to the identification of 'privileged representation' and 'privileged representatives' of the dead in the mass graves, ranging from apolitical and private

to political and collective. The ARMH puts forward relatives as privileged representatives and depict the dead as missing grandfathers, whereas other memory associations like the 'State Federation of Forums for Memory,' represent the dead as fallen combatants, represented by the political heirs of their struggle. These differences determine if the acknowledgement includes commemorative and symbolic reparation. Furthermore, the differences lead to different time concepts. The author indeed shows how the TTC-time of transitional justice, with its focus on healing and closure, is contested by both local communities and associations like Forums for Memory, that deploys a time concept of regeneration of the anti-fascist struggle.

To conclude, the author asserts first that the rupture with the 'pact of forgetting' caused by the exhumations goes in different directions. International trends such as the forensic turn and transitional justice help as well as constrain the 'recovery of historic memory' in Spain. Second, the exposed graves are subject to a 'politics of memory' between local communities, memory associations, transitional justice and the forensic turn. This leads to the conclusion that representations of the past in the exhumation movement are constructed by different memory activists. Therefore, this dissertation recommends to transitional justice and memory practitioners to take diversity and friction between different stakeholders into account, even when applying a memory practice with scientific and legal procedures such as mass grave exhumations.