

Published on Friday, September 8, 2006 by CommonDreams.org

The Deafening Silence About Franco's Genocide

by Vincent Navarro

The Spanish Civil War, which began 70 years ago, was the first chapter of World War II. It was a fight by the progressive and democratic forces of Spain against the axis of evil of that time: Nazism, fascism, and right-wing forces that opposed the much-needed reforms established by the Second Republic (1931-1939). These reforms included women's suffrage, land reform, expansion of labor union rights, establishment of the public school system, and many others. The powerful groups affected by those reforms – the Church, large landowners, banking interests, and large employers – encouraged a military coup against the democratically elected government, which took place in July of 1936.

The coup, led by General Francisco Franco, was actively supported by Hitler and Mussolini, who provided military assistance. But the western democracies did not provide any military assistance whatsoever to those fighting for democracy.

Despite being extremely poorly armed – on some fronts, the Republican Army had one rifle for every two soldiers – the majority of the Spanish population resisted the fascist coup, which is why it took three years and enormous costs for Franco, Hitler, and Mussolini to win the war.

Their victory and the establishment of the dictatorship started a campaign of terror and mass killings that, as British historian Paul Preston has noted, reached genocidal proportions. According to figures provided by the Spanish dictatorship itself, nearly 200,000 people were assassinated (by executions and deaths in concentration camps) in just five years, 1939-1945. These assassinations continued throughout the dictatorship. Just a couple of months before his death in 1975, Franco signed execution orders for five political opponents. The Franco regime was one of the most brutal dictatorships in Europe. For every political assassination that Mussolini ordered, Franco carried out 10,000. After World War II, the U.S. government and the Vatican became the major supporters of the dictatorship.

This genocidal history has been silenced nationally and internationally, in part because of the Amnesty Pact signed in 1977. In this pact, all killings, robberies, and other violations of human rights by the dictatorship were forgotten, and the perpetrators remained immune from prosecution. Such a pact is in violation of international laws that challenge whether such immunities can be granted. Besides the Amnesty Pact, during the transition from dictatorship to democracy there was also an agreement between the winners and losers of the Civil War to remain silent about what had occurred, not only during the War, but during the dictatorship. But this pact was respected only by the losers, not by the winners.

Across Spain there are monuments to Franco and other generals responsible for the genocide. As recently as four months ago, homage was paid to the general of the Moorish troops who supported Franco and were known for their extreme cruelty. As British historian Helen Graham comments, it is paradoxical that "the Crusade to save Christian Civilization" (as the fascists defined their cause) was led by Muslim mercenaries, who invaded southern Spain along with the Foreign Legion led by General Franco. The Spanish Ambassador in Morocco and two Spanish generals attended the recent homage, and none has been sanctioned by the Spanish Socialist government. Even today, a statue of Franco stands at the entrance to the Spanish Military Academy. And not one major newspaper has yet published an article calling for the annulment of the Amnesty Pact. There is still a fear of the Francoist forces and the right in

Spain.

The Army has refused to welcome back the military personnel who supported democracy during the dictatorship, and the judicial system has opposed condemning the military courts that ordered the assassinations of democratic leaders who opposed fascism.

The democratic forces of Spain need help: they need a campaign of international pressure on the Spanish government to denounce the Francoist state and to reinstate the rights of its victims, bringing to justice those responsible for the crimes committed by the dictatorship. It is an offense to the values of liberty and freedom that the only country in Europe where the anniversary of the coup (July 18) is not considered a day to denounce the Spanish dictatorship, as instructed by the European Parliament, is Spain itself.

Vincent Navarro is professor of Political Science and Public Policy at Johns Hopkins University and previous recipient of Spain's Anagrama Prize (equivalent to the Pulitzer in the U.S.).

###