

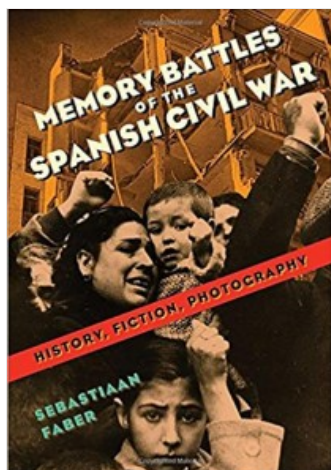
Richard Baxell

Historian, lecturer, author



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Review of Sebastiaan Faber's Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War



When General Franco died in November 1975, he was convinced that his regime would continue after him, that 'everything is tied down and well tied down' (*todo está atado y bien atado*). Yet within three years, Spain had – surprisingly peacefully – been transformed into a democracy. This transition, however, demanded a huge sacrifice from the victims of Francoism, asking them to set aside their grievances and sign up to *el pacto del olvido*, the pact of forgetting. Fearful of sliding back into dictatorship, Spaniards kept the pact, though two generations later the consensus has essentially broken down. Grandchildren of the victims, far removed from the years of civil war and dictatorship, are proving to be less restrained than their parents and are demanding answers. For them, difficult and painful memories, like the thousands of unmarked graves by Spanish roadsides, are something to be unearthed, not forgotten.

Unsurprisingly, efforts to establish the truth behind the murder and persecution of thousands of victims has encountered considerable resistance from certain quarters in Spain. Consequently, battles over very different historical interpretations, the so-called 'memory wars', are currently being heatedly fought out within Spanish culture and society. It is onto this battlefield that Sebastiaan Faber, co-editor of *ALBA*'s excellent magazine, *The Volunteer*, and author of *Anglo-American Hispanists of the Spanish Civil War* has bravely ventured.

Laid out in five main sections, *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War* is an attempt to find answers to three key questions: How have fiction and photography shaped memory? How has democratic Spain dealt with the legacy of the civil war, the dictatorship and the transition and, finally, how have media producers and academics engaged with the process of ensuring that Spain progresses as a unified functioning democracy?

Sebastiaan begins an erudite, wide-ranging and thought-provoking discussion with a re-examination of the work and impact of Robert Capa, Gerda Taro and David Seymour (Chim), and the great Catalan photographer Agustí Centells. He amply demonstrates how the meaning of an image changed dramatically during the war, depending on its use and its context within a photographic montage. However, the author is no doubt correct when he argues that fascinating though they are, the images are unlikely to actually change historians' view of the civil war.

The second section of the book tackles the central theme of historical memory and the conflicting narratives that exist in Spain, the argument between the value of recovering historical memory and the dangers of reopening of old wounds. As the author states, witnesses to the past, including historians, can also be witnesses in a trial of Francoism. Books such as Paul Preston's *Spanish Holocaust* certainly provide ample evidence for the prosecution.

Alongside Helen Graham, Angel Viñas, Gabriel Jackson, and Pablo Sánchez León, Paul Preston appears in the third section, an examination of how current historians are interpreting, or 'reframing' the past. As you'd expect from this stellar collection of voices, there's much of interest here. Angel Viñas is in typically bombastic form and I enjoyed Helen Graham's optimistic assertion that history 'is the ultimate antidote to any kind of over-simplification.' While all historians choose the stories they want to write about, that doesn't necessarily prevent them from doing so fairly and – relatively – objectively.

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After a discussion of the contribution of three Spanish intellectuals, the book's final section examines the role of fiction. It concludes with a look at some of the work of [Javier Cercas](#), who has been widely translated into English. Cercas offers good advice, noting that 'the first thing to do when reading a novel is to distrust the narrator.' The same could be said of history itself, of course, where the eminent [E.H. Carr](#) famously advised students to 'study the historian before you begin to study the facts.'

This book should prove to be of great interest to anyone interested in the history of (the history of) Spain and provides ample evidence that artists and writers are not neutral bystanders in these contemporary 'memory wars'. It also asks intelligent questions of historians and academics: What is their role in all of this? Should they just comment from afar? Or should they positively engage? Sebastiaan Faber's involvement with the [ContraTiempo](#) collective and the open-access [Universidad del Barrio](#) in Madrid show his views clearly enough and will, I suspect, chime with many members of the [IBMT](#). As the author states, 'fields like history and politics are not just too important to leave to the experts; they are fields that should be of interest to everyone because they are everyone's concern.'

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