



***Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War: History, Fiction, Photography* by Sebastiaan Faber**

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Reflecting on a contentious conversation captured in a Catalan documentary, Sebastiaan Faber exclaims: “They don’t seem to acknowledge the sheer pastness of the past” (59). The conversation he recounts took place between three non-participating observers who witnessed a historical reenactment of the Spanish Civil War’s first few days. Faber’s statement reveals more than just an acknowledgement of the immediate circumstances of the reenactment, it scrapes the surface of what he calls Spain’s memory battles.

In the aftermath of conflict and repression, how a society deals with human rights abuses affects its ability to move beyond its traumatic past, and potentially avoid similar conflicts in the future. Following an incredibly tumultuous twentieth century, Spain has had quite a lot to reckon with concerning its past. Faber’s *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War* uses photography, history, and fiction to explain how Spain has confronted the legacy of the Civil War (1936–1939), Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939–1975), and Spain’s subsequent transition to democracy. A remarkably relevant work, Faber delivers an important message about the current-day memory movement and its relationship to Spain’s young democracy. How the Spanish deal with the violent legacy of the war and dictatorship is not merely a problem of narrative, but instead, is a political problem in need of a democratic solution. In order to support his argument, Faber presents a diverse set of evidence and viewpoints that range from photo archives to conversations with activists and filmmakers. But he does not stop there. Faber pairs this problem with potential solutions that emphasize the need for historians to be more socially active, and for everyone else to stake a greater claim to their history. Only when Spaniards universally embrace their past—in all its ugliness, will they shatter the institutional legacies of Franco’s dictatorship.

As Faber himself proclaims, this is not your standard academic monograph. What makes *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War* so appealing is the

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refreshing way Faber organizes the book's five parts. Each part is stylistically unique; Faber uses a mix of traditional historical analysis, dialogue, intellectual essays, and literary critique to round out his portrayal of the memory movement. It is not just the organizational style, but also Faber's compelling prose that makes the book a pleasure to read. His writing is engaging, vivid, and often cheeky, which accomplishes his goal of making the text accessible to those outside the academy. For Faber, engaging a larger audience is a crucial component in translating the book's messages into civic action. The book's first part, for instance, analyzes visual representations of the Spanish Civil War: photography, photo exhibits, and documentaries. In the first two chapters, Faber emphasizes how objectivity in photojournalism functioned differently within the context of the Spanish Civil War where photographs became tools in the war's ideological battles.

Parts two and three contribute the most to our understanding of the aftermath of human rights violations in Spain. In chapter four, Faber takes on the trial of Baltasar Garzón to shine a light on the Spanish judicial system. Spain's Tribunal Supremo charged Garzón, an investigative magistrate, with overstepping his judicial boundaries when he launched proceedings against former Franco officials in October 2008. The thirty-five accused officials were suspected in the death or disappearance of 114,266 Spaniards. Contrary to what one might expect, Garzón, not Franco's representatives, was sentenced in the end. During the trial, what most unsettled the court was Garzón's challenge of the amnesty laws put in place during Spain's transition to democracy. Garzón argued the amnesty laws did not apply because the massive forced disappearances that took place during and after the war, as human rights violations, are not subject to amnesty and have no statute of limitations – a point also made by the United Nations. The court cited a myriad of unconvincing reasons why it disagreed with Garzón, but neither the court's rhetoric nor the sentence was the most alarming aspect of the trial. Instead, Faber shows how the trial itself managed to challenge Spain's transition period, and in turn, to undermine Spanish democracy itself.

In part three, Faber skillfully recounts a series of conversations with historians and other contributors to Spain's memory movement. Social anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz and citizen activist Emilio Silva discuss the exhumation of mass graves. Ferrándiz's work helps historicize the mass graves and also provides assistance for families confronted with the exhumed body of a lost loved one. In one of the most memorable quotes from the book, Ferrándiz explains how "the mass graves are an underground landscape of terror, sewn to politically paralyze the Spanish population. To dismantle that landscape is an absolute necessity" (112). By including this conversation, Faber shows how the memory of Spain's violent past is part of its physical landscape, which is why moving forward is such a challenge for some Republican descendants. Emilio Silva adds to this discussion by pointing out how the exhumed bodies serve as forensic evidence, and as such, help ward off denial and also empower victims. Silva and Ferrándiz show the contemporary relevance of Spain's efforts to grapple with its violent history.

The book's last two parts contain intellectual review essays and an analysis of fiction related to the Civil War. While at times part four drags on, Faber picks up steam in part

five where he demonstrates his passion for literature on the war and postwar period. Since historiography was tightly controlled under Franco, novelists stepped up to account for what really happened – in a strange reversal of traditional roles.

Through a discussion of the Spanish organization *Contratiempo*, Faber concludes his book with a call to action. Like *Contratiempo*, he believes history should not remain solely in the hands of academic historians, but instead should be embraced by everyone. An important lesson Faber tells his readers is that, in the aftermath of human rights violations, it takes a fully democratic effort to confront the truth, accept responsibility, and promote future education. If not, people will always struggle to escape their own “landscape of terror.”

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