

Exhuming Franco: Spain's second transition

by Sebastiaan Faber, Nashville, TN, Vanderbilt University Press, 2021, 276 pp., \$14.95 (paperback)

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A year later, the French occupation of Spain in 1808 triggered the colonial power struggles that ultimately led to the independence of Spain's American colonies.

However, no historian is uniformly equipped to write a history that covers multiple continents and disparate regions across the globe. It is understandable then that not all chapters derive from archival research. The opening chapters rely heavily on secondary sources, and there is little new or fresh insight provided in these sections. Furthermore, a harsh critic might highlight several campaigns and events that have received little to no attention within the narrative. The British expeditions to the West Indies in the 1790s, and the brutal violence that took place during the Haitian Revolution, could have received greater consideration. Without the benefits of modern medicine, microbes are frequently more lethal than musket or cannon, and this reviewer feels that Mikaberidze could have better accounted for the appalling human cost of disease in campaigns across the globe.

While this book should be praised for illustrating the global ramifications of the war in impressive detail, the narrative rarely pauses to reflect on how viewing the war in a global context might change our understanding of the conflict. Despite the global approach to the subject, Mikaberidze tends to ask overly familiar questions that have been posed by earlier scholars: Was Napoleon integral to the failure of the Peace of Amiens? Was he justified in rejecting peace proposals in 1813? Was the legacy of Napoleonic reform a positive one? Greater attention could have been paid to how war acted as a medium for intellectual, cultural, and technological exchange between different military bodies stationed around the world.

Despite these faults, the expansive breadth and depth of Mikaberidze's account will satisfy popular and scholarly audiences. It is a strong single-volume account of the Napoleonic Wars.

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Exhuming Franco: Spain's second transition, by Sebastiaan Faber,
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Sebastiaan Faber's scholarship is unique among hispanists, bringing together the rigor of academia with the incisiveness of journalism. Few scholars of contemporary Spain have taken the role of writing for a learned but nonspecialist

readership as seriously and successfully as Faber has, not in one country, but in at least three, the US, Spain, and the Netherlands. His regular contributions to periodicals based on each side of the Atlantic, including *The Nation*, *Jacobin*, *La Marea*, *CTXT*, or *De Groene Amsterdammer*, supplement and bring into sharper focus his more recent academic work, for example, in the book *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War. History, Fiction, Photography* (Vanderbilt U.P., 2018), and other refereed publications. The dramatic socio-political changes and turmoil in the last twenty-five years of Spanish history – from “memory battles” and mass graves exhumations, to the irruption of *Podemos* after the global economic crisis of 2008, to the Catalan independence movement, and without forgetting the monarchic crisis – have provided fertile ground for Faber to develop these parallel writing and intellectual practices. *Exhuming Franco* brings both strands aptly together.

The book combines succinct expert introductions to the most salient conflicts facing Spain today with interviews – 10 in-depth, plus interspersed references to several more – to Spanish journalists and academic experts on Spanish history, including social, legal, political, and philosophical approaches. For the most committed, each chapter concludes with suggestions for further reading. The central discussion of the book concerns the unfinished business of Spain’s traumatic 20th-century past, namely its civil war and ensuing 36 years of dictatorship, at the end of which there were no reparations paid to its victims nor prosecution of its perpetrators. So insufficiently challenged, the Francoist legacy lives on, consisting of “a series of ideas, attitudes, institutions, narratives, social relations, legal structures, and practices that may still be discernible across Spanish society” (16).

With admirable clarity, the book shows this question to be at the core of all the main challenges facing Spanish democracy today, an explanatory paradigm radiating its malign influence on institutional corruption, territorial, constitutional and cultural problems, and the judicial and media spheres. As the book title suggests, the discussion is triggered by the massively symbolic removal in October 2019 of the dictator Francisco Franco’s remains from its exceedingly public location in the Valley of the Fallen, on the outskirts of Madrid. However, as indicated as well in the subtitle, it is the transitional period to democracy, covering roughly from the death of the dictator in 1975 to the coming to power of the social-democratic Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) in 1982, that constantly returns for critical scrutiny. Some of those interviewed by Faber view this as a wasted historical occasion to break with the toxic past and to allocate guilt and reparations where they were due. Others cherish the period as the best possible starting point for reconciliation, bearing in mind the very delicate balance of progressive and reactionary powers at the time. All recognize that the agreements of the Transition, the “Pact of Oblivion” not to open the wounds of the past, were broken somewhere around the turn of the millennium, triggering the to-this-day unresolved turbulences of the so-called Second Transition.

Faber extracts from his interviewees a kaleidoscope of positions: causes, consequences, and solutions to the Spanish puzzle: how does a country come to terms successfully with a violent past? Is it through education, memorial museums, truth commissions, reparation laws, all or none of the above? While there is no closure or imposition of a single view on the answers to these questions, the book covers the ideological spectrum from the Left to the conservative liberals. Faber has drawn the line on apologies for the dictatorship coming from the Right, so the reader is spared arguments defending the view that democracy could not have been achieved without Franco's regime or that workers' organizations started the civil war, all of which, unfortunately, are alive and well in today's Spain. Last but not least, *Exhuming Franco* concludes by contextualizing the Spanish case within the global arena, drawing parallels with difficulties encountered by other Western nations, such as the US, Germany, or the Netherlands – dealing with a past of conflict and violence in less than satisfactory terms, witnessing the rise of the far-Right – in this way dispelling the view that Spain is fatalistically different and incomplete, while other nations are mature, normal, and whole.

All in all, *Exhuming Franco* is a most welcome addition to the already existing introductory bibliography on contemporary Spain. It is an ideal book for undergraduate students to become acquainted with present-day Spain, and it will satisfy all those who welcome some guidance to understand the reasons and to get to know the protagonists behind the stories that, in the last two decades, have brought Spain to the forefront of news media around the world.

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Dark lens: imagining Germany, 1945, by Françoise Meltzer, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2019, 240 pp., \$35.00 (hardback), ISBN 9780226625638

Confronted with photographic images of Germany's vast ruins at the end of the Second World War, how should we feel? Do we pity the hungry civilians pushing rubble off the streets? Or, with the crimes of the Third Reich in mind and in light of everyday Germans' complicity, do we feel righteous indignation? This is a question perhaps not for a historian but rather for a philosopher, which this