Resisting Disappearance

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To the memory of Ángel Sayabera Haba

Libertad González Nogales was only a few years old when her father, José González Barrero, was killed by Francoist allies in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. In the turmoil that followed the conflict, rumors circulated about how her father, the socialist town mayor of Zafra, a village in the southwestern province of Badajoz (Extremadura), had been arrested on his way back from Madrid and later imprisoned in a concentration camp in the nearby locality of Castuera in the spring of 1939. Following the event, rumors circulated regarding how he had been removed from the camp and executed en route to his hometown. Libertad’s mother was never notified of her father’s death. She tried to find out what had happened to José by making visits to Castuera and writing letters to family friends, but nothing came from these efforts to clarify his fate and the whereabouts of his corpse. As a consequence, Libertad’s upbringing was marked by the fear and silence that shaped her family’s life and the hazy memory of her disappeared father. Like many other descendants of those who were killed, she bore the weight of an unsettling past that had never been made clear to her.

To speak about disappearances in relation to the extrajudicial repression carried out by Francoist forces during and after the Spanish Civil War in Castuera and its surrounding villages is to talk about more than just the how people were killed and their corpses erased. Instead, it is a way of referring to the manner in which victims’ traces were suppressed or effaced in the years that followed these acts of violence, as part of a continuous politics of oppression and concealment exercised by the emergent Francoist state. The families of those who were murdered were often intimidated, dissuaded and even threatened when they demanded to understand the fate of their missing kin. In the aftermath of the war, the memory of these killings remained quiet in family conversations and in those public spaces where references to violence could rarely be uttered. Some experiences were verbalised in intimate exchanges between members of different generations. Others, unable to be put in words, were transmitted through private gestures of sorrow, such as the desolate cry for lost kin or the bitter atmosphere that filled the domestic sphere, which could be sensed but not described out loud.

At the turn of the century, families like that of Libertad began a novel search for information about how their relatives were killed. Their initiative was entangled with the surge of an unprecedented social movement that first emerged in 2000 and that focused on the location and exhumation of the corpses of Republicans and other left-wing supporters killed by Francoist violence. Following the first scientific excavation of a mass grave to be carried out in Spain, a surge of exhumation campaigns sought to elucidate the mechanics of Francoist crimes, which were never investigated, acknowledged or atoned for after the death of the dictator. In Extremadura, where I conducted fieldwork between 2011 and 2012, these inquiries into the past had become a common undertaking carried out by local historians interested in documenting the extent of Francoist repression long before exhumations began. Historical research and kin-
base inquiries into the past became entwined, triggering shared acts of documentation and narration that aimed to undo the gaps and omissions that marked the historical record found in official archives and family biographies.

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In the early 2000s, Libertad obtained her father’s death certificate from historian José Maria Lama, who was writing a book about the development of the Spanish Civil War in Zafra. As a consequence, José Maria already had examined the contents of the village’s archives. Even though Libertad and her mother had listed José’s death in the local civil registry during the 1980s, over forty years after his death, neither of them was aware of the existence of a different death certificate, completed and signed by a local authority in 1947. When I met Libertad at her house in the autumn of 2011, she explained to me how the old certificate caused her much despair. A court officer had changed not only the date of her father’s death but also his surname, occupation and real cause of death. As I would later discover throughout my fieldwork in Extremadura, deferred inscriptions that often masked extrajudicial killings with euphemisms were a common practice by local courts during the post-war period. Following this logic, José’s death was depicted as a mere casualty of war-time conflict. It was not described as an intentional execution carried out after the war in retaliation for his previous political involvement.

Historian Antonio López Rodriguez is an expert regarding how the Castuera concentration camp where Libertad’s father was imprisoned operated in the years after the war. For him, false portrayals of deaths in the official record often act as markers that help researchers identify executions carried out away from battlefields. Many of the families I met during fieldwork – families that had never located the corpse of their imprisoned and later executed kin – referred to these deaths as disappearances. Antonio’s research has widely documented the distinct judicial and extrajudicial repressive patterns at play at this particular detention site. This, in turn, has elucidated the different mechanisms used for the classification, punishment and elimination of prisoners. While some records of summary sentences issued by the court that held jurisdiction over the camp do exist, extra-legal murders have remained unaccounted for through their non-registration or deferred inscription in official documents. Moreover, the often vague, false or incomplete content of these documents has led many to interpret them as an extension of the regime’s efforts to obliterate victims’ identities. Indeed, for some historians and activists I met in the field, this constituted yet another form of disappearance carried out from within the archive.

In response to the silences that emerged from civil registry ledgers and other camp files, Antonio searched for alternative historical sources that could help him make sense of the elusive nature of the extrajudicial violence exerted at the detention site. In the town of Castuera, a wealth of oral testimonies and documents from the personal collections of surviving kin aided the historian in his attempt to reconstruct prisoners’ experiences with ill treatment, famine, torture and death. At the same time, Antonio also collected information from camp guards, village neighbours and the families of those last seen at the concentration camp, in order to understand its often-arbitrary management and the relationships that prisoners developed with the space. Early in his inquiry, Antonio met Ángel Sayabera Haba and some of his older siblings, who had lost their father José Sayabera Miranda, their mother, Carolina Haba García, and three of their brothers, Francisco, Santiago and José in the spring of 1939. His father José and two of his adult sons, Francisco and Santiago were arrested when their train returned to
Castuera Station after abandoning the last remaining Republican strongholds. Upon their arrival, they were immediately taken to the concentration camp.

Ángel’s father, José Sayabera Miranda, was a successful blacksmith, famous for his invention of a new plough and his prosperous business in the town of Castuera. He was also a well-known communist figure, who held an important position in the Provincial Council between 1938 and the time of his death. Similar to the experiences narrated by Libertad, the violence that marked the Sayabera family story appeared intricately entangled with the kin group’s association with the Spanish left-wing during the democratic period of the Second Republic. In a letter written by his father while he was imprisoned at the camp, which Ángel preciously guarded for years, José expressed his trust in Franco’s justice, reasserting his innocence and his lack of participation in any crime. According to Antonio, this letter allowed him to discern the mood shared by prisoners, like José and his sons, who had been held in isolated barracks – spaces that were difficult to historically document inside the camp. In addition, the letter, handwritten and signed from barrack 79 on April 24th, 1939, pointed to the concentration camp’s existence and the extensive development of a repressive campaign in this area after the war. This specific reality had been long contested by other historians working in Castuera. In this way, the content of the letter and, more importantly, its material presence in Ángel’s personal collection of documents, images and recordings enabled both the family and the historian to challenge the denial of the camp’s complex history and to attest the idiosyncrasy of the experiences it brought into being.

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In the Spanish context, which is marked by persistent forms of impunity, in which the state refuses to sufficiently address victims’ demands for truth, justice and reparation, the emergence of official and familial trails of documents and objects, together with the invaluable enunciation of long-silenced survivor testimonies about the camp, have generated new social and scientific interventions that have marked Castuera’s surrounding landscape. In 2006, Antonio created, together with survivors of Francoist repression and relatives of the disappeared, the Asociación Memorial Campo de Concentración de Castuera, an organization that sought to channel the demands of those affected by the regime’s violence and to make public the history of the detention site. In recent years, the camp has been at the center of the association’s annual commemorative events. It has also been the subject of a didactic unit developed for local schools and has been defined as a protected Site of Cultural Interest recognized by the regional Heritage Office. Additionally, between 2010 and 2012, various archaeological campaigns analyzed the camp in order to make sense of its history by other means. These excavations explained details about the everyday life of the camp through an examination of the traces that remained below ground.

Archaeological campaigns have also occurred in other sites connected to the extrajudicial execution of prisoners. In 2011, the association, together with a locally funded research initiative known as the Proyecto para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica en Extremadura (PREMHEX) raised funds that would allow community members to search for, locate and exhume various mass graves thought to be located at the back of the village cemetery. After having gathered testimonies from the surviving kin of those detained in the camp, Antonio identified a recurrent pattern: the appearance of empty, dug-out holes in the road that connected the village to the detention site. According to these testimonies, the holes often were filled in
and covered up the day following their appearance, thereby suggesting the existence of a mass execution site. In the summer of 2011, a team of professional archaeologists and physical anthropologists, volunteers from the University of Extremadura and members of the association collaborated in the excavation of two of the nine mass burials that had been located in a previous prospecting campaign. This initiative aimed to shed light on the whereabouts of disappeared prisoners, who like members of the Sayabera family had lived in the area. At the same time, archaeologists and historians saw these interventions as an opportunity to prove a relationship between the extrajudicial repression experienced in the camp and the mass burials located in the cemetery.

During the course of three months, the team worked diligently. They unearthed, recovered corpses, documented stratigraphic units, located individual skeletons while by drawing and noting their anatomical positions and inventoried belongings and other objects found at the site. One of the burial sites, referred to as Mass Grave 1 in the scientific register, contained the human remains of eighteen men. The great variety of items found at the site, which were connected to both victims and perpetrators, indicated the location of a crime scene where prisoners were executed and their subsequent burial outside of the cemetery. Although the recovered remains had been poorly preserved by the clay soil that covered them, the presence of bullets and their casings, together with wires tying together corpses’ wrists and upper arms into pairs, marked the grave as kill site. Other objects, such as insignias from Republican unions, work-related attire, distinct jewels and religious medallions provided researchers with a rough estimate of the identity of each individual in the group. Moreover, objects such as spoons, can openers and utensils – material traces that had also appeared in excavations conducted within the camp’s perimeter a year earlier – established a direct link between the mass graves found in the cemetery and life at the detention site.

Following recent developments in the archaeology of conflict, these interventions considered the two sites in relation to their materiality as well as that of other war sites – such as bunkers, refuges or trenches – found in the area. It was only by observing associations between the camp, mass graves and other material nodes in the post-war landscape of Extremadura that knowledge about Francoist repressive strategies in Castuera could be produced. On their own, the human remains and objects found inside Mass Grave 1 could not securely and positively identify the victims whose bodies were recovered. Identification could only be accomplished if victims’ surviving kin could be located. The fact that more than 20,000 prisoners from regions across Spain and abroad passed through the camp in a single year made this an arduous task. In addition, the persistence of unclear details, regarding the whereabouts of those murdered in extrajudicial executions in both the camp and the town of Castuera, made it increasingly complex to establish clear associations between those found in the mass grave and the families from the surrounding area. The excavation of the mass graves, however, provided respite for victims’ kin, like Angel and Libertad, in that it opened a path that potentially could draw a life-long search to a close. Even if not achieved, their long-term dedication to recuperation continues to be a fervent form of resistance against an all-pervasive kind of disappearance.
Acknowledgements

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Suggestions for Further Reading


Biography

Zahira Aragüete-Toribio is a postdoctoral researcher in the project Right to Truth, Truth(s) through Rights: Mass Crimes Impunity and Transitional Justice at the University of Geneva. She holds an MA in Anthropology and Cultural Politics and a PhD in Visual Anthropology from Goldsmiths, University of London. Most recently, her research has focused on the role that human remains, documents, war remnants, oral accounts and expertise play in the production of knowledge about the Civil War past and the dictatorship and of sociopolitical claims about past political repression in the region of Extremadura in southwestern Spain. She is the author of the book Producing History in Civil War Exhumations. From the Archive to the Grave, published by Palgrave in 2017.
The concentration camp held Republican soldiers captured after the fall of the nearby Extremadura front, together with political detainees from the area.

This essay can be read as a companion piece to Lee Douglas’s *The Arts of Recognition* published in this journal in 2015. Other works have documented, in recent years, the development of these exhumations nationwide. For insights into the legal, political, social and affective character of these interventions in other regions of Spain, see the work of Francisco Ferrándiz, Leyla Renshaw or Jonah Rubin cited in the suggestions for further reading.

Recent developments in the field of international human rights law have seen the emergence of mechanisms of transitional justice as a tool for fighting impunity and guaranteeing the rights to truth, justice, reparation and non-repetition for those societies affected by mass violence. In Spain, the transition to democracy consolidated around the political silencing of the Civil War past and the dictatorship. These pacts crystallized through the passing of the Amnesty Law in 1977, which granted the release of the last political prisoners left from the Franco regime. However, it also enabled the impunity of those crimes committed by Francoist supporters during and after the war.

Association for the Memory of Castuera’s Concentration Camp

Project for the Recovery of Historical Memory in Extremadura
Image 1. The Castuera concentration camp today. During my research, I photographed the traces that remained of the camp, both in the site’s surrounding landscape and in the personal archives of those I met. My photographs aim to create a documentary trail of efforts to account for vestiges, documents and objects that evidence political crimes of disappearance. They are yet another trace of particular kinds of relationships that are generated with the materiality of what was left behind by Franco’s repressive campaign.
Image 3. José González Barrero’s death certificate issued in the 1980s. The cause of death reads “violent death caused by man’s action as a consequence of the Civil War.” The regime used euphemisms to describe and occult violent deaths in official documents. There are questions regarding if these patterns of describing death by other means continued during the transition period.
Image 4. Ángel Sayabera Haba’s collection of personal and official documents. Llera, Badajoz.
Camino de concentración
Nacieno nº 79
Casuera 24 de abril de 1929
A Lluvia Fabrelo
Selma del Bajo.
Estimado amigo; mucha me alegra que al recibir esta libera que en el campamento bien en compañía de mi familia, pues su hijo se sigue en mi vecino Francisco y Santiago que están con mis hermos. Le han visto desde, pero según ahora mismo乳腺

Dios se dé a que me aseguro, que mi [[...]

¿Qué en que mi hijo está o Dolores, quieren los dones, porque no se han escrito la presente carta y caso de no estar me lo comunicarás y la mandaré a tu madre de la Acta

Deseo que lo te diga por segundo las noticias que estoy
Image 6. The shaft of *La Gamonita* is one of the few remaining markers in the surrounding landscape that is recalled in oral accounts regarding repression in the area. Situated next to the camp, it was used to discard the bodies of executed prisoners.
Image 9. A flask located next to the hip of a prisoner.
Image 10. A cornet belonging to a stationmaster, found next to a lapel pin from the Rail Workers Union.
Image 11. A set of syringes, ampules and combs found inside the backpack of a nursing assistant who was a member the Republican Army.
Image 12. Cable wires.
Image 13. View from the interior of a bunker located near the town of Castuera in Badajoz.