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Franco's invisible legacy: books across the hispanic world are still scarred by his censorship

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Spanish practices. Dani Oliver

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Languages

- Español
- English

It's exactly 80 years since the end of the Spanish Civil War, when General Francisco Franco's populist forces finally overcame the leftist resistance and plunged the country into full-blown dictatorship. Decades after his death, Franco continues to cast a long shadow over Spain, from the rise of the far-right Vox party to the hundreds of mass graves of people who died in the war that are still waiting to be exhumed.

One other hugely important legacy that few people are aware of is the **continuing effect** on books, both in Spain and throughout the Spanish-speaking world. To this day, translations of many world classics and works of Spanish literature are being reprinted using expurgated texts approved by the dictator's censors – often without publishers even realising it, let alone readers. It has had a chilling effect on freedom of speech over the years, and must be addressed as a matter of urgency.

Between 1936 and 1966, every single book published in Spain had to be submitted to a national board of censors for examination. The censors would decide whether the text should be banned altogether or was fit for publication, in which case they would stipulate any necessary changes. After 1966, when a new law that partly liberalised freedom of speech was introduced in the country, publishers could voluntarily decide whether to submit a text for censorship. However, the authorities still retained the ability to withdraw any book from circulation that they deemed unacceptable.

Franco's censorship laws sought to reinforce Catholicism and promote ideological and cultural uniformity. The censors enforced conservative values, inhibited dissent and manipulated history, especially the memory of the civil war. Sexually explicit material was banned, as were alternative political views, improper language and criticisms of the Catholic church.



El caudillo. Wikimedia

Spain abandoned these policies after Franco's death in 1975, yet most of the same texts are still widely available today. Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* is available in more than 20 different Spanish-language editions, for instance, including an electronic one, all of which lack two extended passages that according to the censors glorified Satan. James Baldwin's *Go and Tell it on the Mountain* is only available in a version with cuts that include references to birth control and details about the sex lives of the main characters. The publication of this expurgated text is sponsored by none other than UNESCO.

Many literary works by some of Spain's most important 20th-century writers have suffered similar fates, including those by Ana María Matute, Camilo José Cela, Juan Marsé and Ignacio Aldecoa. In some cases, such as George Orwell's *Burmese Days* and Ian Fleming's *Thunderball*, censored parts have even survived in retranslated and restored versions.

With no one under the age of 40 even alive during the dictatorship years, few people are even aware of the problem. Public libraries are encouraging people to read thousands of volumes without realising they are censored. Many of these texts have been imported to Latin America, sometimes even being republished in different countries with their censored parts intact. It means that a fairly large

proportion of the world's population is being routinely denied access to literature as it was intended to appear.

Why censorship never ended

It is a well known fact that Spaniards have found it difficult to confront their traumatic recent history. The so-called “pact of forgetting”, a tacit decision among the Spanish political elites not to question or examine the past, was seen by many as vital to make the transition to democracy possible in the late 1970s and 1980s. For years, this included a general amnesia about Franco's cultural policies: even when books were retranslated to restore censored parts, few people said anything about it.

Spain's 2007 Law for the Recovery of the Historical Memory was a **major step** away from these years of forgetting. It condemned the dictatorship and established compensations for people who endured political violence during the regime. It also initiated the removal of statues and other public symbols which glorified Franco's reign. Yet other cultural artefacts, such as books, were overlooked.

The upshot is that Spain's literary censorship problem is alive and well today. Indeed, it is arguably getting worse: it is easy to release digital versions of these classics, so Franco's hand even reaches into Kindles and tablets. We are talking about one of the most long-lasting yet invisible legacies of his regime. The effect on culture in Spain and in other hispanic countries is almost incalculable. Censorship has certainly distorted many people's perception of the civil war and its consequences. Many readers will also be ignorant of writers' real points of view regarding important social issues such as gender roles, birth control and homosexuality.



Vox leader Santiago Abascal on the campaign trail. EPA

The question is how to deal with this complex problem – particularly now that the Vox party, which is expected to do well in the upcoming election, has promised to repeal the Law of Historical Memory on

the grounds that it manipulates the past.

The most important task is to raise awareness among the reading public. This needs clear support from the Spanish government, plus serious engagement from the whole literary sector, including libraries, publishing houses, translators, archives, cultural publications and writers themselves. The technologies that are giving new life to the problem could be used to help: a public database of restored texts, for instance, could become an important tool.

The point is that while Spain has increasingly been addressing the impact of Franco's regime in the country's social and historical memory since the early 2000s, the process of coming to terms with the past is far from complete. The pact of forgetting has not only marred Spain's democratic progress, it has severely damaged the country's cultural heritage. Spain and the rest of the Spanish-speaking world will not be free from Franco's censorial shadow until this issue is publicly and decisively addressed. With people on the ascendant who would prefer to turn back the clock, there is no time to lose.

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