

Civil war grave exhumation brings closure to Manchego village

M. ELKIN, Fontanosas

The whole village knew that in 1941 seven men were executed and buried near the old cemetery, but until the anonymous letter arrived on the desk of the mayor of Fontanosas — a town of 242 people near Ciudad Real in Castilla-La Mancha — the memories of the post-war period had remained silent.

The veil lifted, however, over the weekend, when archaeologists and anthropologists working with the Association for the Recovery of the Historic Memory (ARMH) exhumed the skeletons of brothers Manuel, Ramón and Mateo Escribano, the latter's 19-year-old son Francisco, brothers Leoncio and Julián del Álamo, and Félix Polo.

José Escribano, 72, came down from the mountains where he tends his sheep and goats to see his father, two uncles and elder brother for the first time since he was eight years old. His mother never spoke much about what happened, he said. When the scientists finished their work on Saturday, Escribano hugged and kissed each one on the cheeks.

The person in charge of the exhumation was Francisco Etxeberria, a forensic doctor from the University of the Basque Country. Since October 2000, he and other volunteers have been working with the ARMH and similar groups to uncover the mass graves around the country holding the remains of people killed by the Franco regime during the 1936-1939 Spanish Civil War and the 36-year dictatorship.

The executioner's letter

Two years ago, a man in Barcelona sent the mayor of Fontanosas, Emilio Valiente, a letter saying that his military unit from Alcalá de Henares had been ordered to shoot seven men from Fontanosas after they were accused of assisting the anti-Franco guerrillas — known as the maquis — who lived in the mountains.

He described the exact location of the burials. The villagers had always known more or less where the seven were, but this letter proved to be the catalyst for action. Valiente called Julián López, an anthropologist who lives in nearby Almodóvar del Campo, who in turn called Francisco Ferrandiz, another anthropologist who has worked in the past with the ARMH and Etxeberria. Once the families of the deceased gave their approval, a team of diggers was formed and the excavation began.

The scene was unlike any other civil war exhumation Etxeberria had seen. Instead of the bodies being tossed into a pit, the skeletons were buried in two long trenches, face-down. Catholic tradition dictates that people are buried face-up, so this was a way of disgracing the victims as unbelievers, a common insult lobbed at the Republicans by the Franco regime. Some of the remains still had their shoes on — rural clogs made of car tires.

The scientists removed the bones to study them and, using archival evidence, aim to identify them and rebury them together in the cemetery of Fontanosas in a few months.



Mariano Rajoy signs the Popular Party petition in León. / EFE

Rajoy's million signatures for a referendum: a futile gesture?

Popular Party leads campaign against Catalan home rule plan

LOLA GALÁN, León

Since Mariano Rajoy started traveling the country two weeks ago bearing a petition for a nationwide referendum on the unity of Spain, the Popular Party (PP) leader has been greeted by swarming crowds of supporters from Cádiz to A Coruña. But the conservative politician's atypical methods of drumming up opposition to the Catalan bid for extensive home-rule powers will probably prove less effective than his party would like to believe.

In the first place, it is virtually impossible that such a referendum will be held, no matter how many people put their signatures on Rajoy's petition. Only the government can call a plebiscite, and so far there are no indications that Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero will permit one to go ahead. The only referendum in the foreseeable future will be in Catalonia — if the region's new autonomy statute obtains final approval from Congress, where it is currently being reviewed by a committee.

Rajoy and other PP members are asking people to support a referendum asking: "Do you consider it right for Spain to continue being a single nation, in which all citizens have equal rights, duties and access to public assistance?"

Something in the region of a million signatures have been gathered since the campaign was launched in Cádiz on January 31. Last Friday saw Rajoy in León, the Castilian city where both Zapatero and the PP leader spent part of their childhoods, and where divisions between the left and right run deep.

The PP leader arrived to cheers — and even hugs and kisses — from the mostly elderly crowd which had turned up at a central hall to sign his peti-

tion. On the table outside hung a banner, the campaign's motto reading: "We all have a right to express our opinions."

"There may be a lot of elderly people here, but the other day we went to the university and the response was also positive," says Eduardo García, the 26-year-old leader of the PP's youth branch in the city. The PP's provincial leader, Isabel Carrasco, notes that in the week before Rajoy's visit, 20,000 people in León had signed the peti-

Dubious methods

Popular Party officials say they have gathered around a million signatures so far in their petition for a referendum on the unity of Spain, but the methods they are using have been left open to question.

Their website permits a single person to sign more than once, and attempts to use computer programs to write in false names en masse have crashed the site on several occasions since the campaign began two weeks ago. False web pages which copy the PP's petition have also been created in an attempt to dupe the public.

The situation led PP Secretary General Ángel Acebes to argue yesterday that "99 percent" of the signatures the party has received are from "honest people."

"The method we are using to gather signatures on the Internet is perfectly valid and legal, in spite of what some people say," Acebes told reporters in Madrid. "This campaign is democratic and decent."

tion — a significant number in a city of 150,000.

"People are disappointed with Zapatero; he comes from here but we're worse off than Catalonia and other regions. León is losing inhabitants, it's been forgotten about, and Zapatero's promises seem hollow because he governs with the votes of the Catalans," exclaims Cristina Gómez, a PP councilor.

According to the PP's communications chief, Gabriel Elorriaga, a feeling that wealthy and politically powerful Catalonia is being favored to the detriment of other areas is not confined to León.

"Between a third and half of Socialist voters feel closer to our position toward the statute than to the government," he says, citing recent opinion polls. "We would have preferred a parliamentary pact but it wasn't possible. The government rejected our offer to negotiate reforming the state."

Elorriaga points to a precedent for taking the unusual, even drastic, step of campaigning for a referendum: the petition carried out by the Socialists and Communists in 1981 for a plebiscite on Spain's entry into NATO. The government of the time shelved the request, and only when the Socialists came to power in 1982 was a consultation held once Spain had already joined the Alliance.

Rajoy's petition will also probably be of little consequence in the greater scheme of things. Although it may serve to gauge public support for the PP's opposition to the Catalan statute and put the government on edge, even PP officials admit that the campaign is not without risks for the conservative party itself. "We've barely had 18 percent of the vote in Catalonia for some time. Although it's true that hostility towards us has increased," Elorriaga says.

Firework factory blast damages dozens of houses in Galician town

STAFF REPORTER, Madrid

A large explosion in a fireworks factory in the early hours of Sunday morning whose cause has not been confirmed damaged up to 40 houses in the Galician town of Teo, and was heard 10 kilometers away. The noise of the blast woke up neighbors across the town and beyond, breaking windows, tiles and blinds of nearby houses, authorities reported. A series of smaller explosions were heard immediately afterward.

A team of Civil Guard explosives experts studied the remains of the factory throughout the day in an attempt to find out what caused the explosion. There were no injuries, as nobody was in the factory, although two dogs that were guarding the building were killed.

The owner of the establishment, Alfonso Calo, suggested that an electrical fault might have caused the blast. Some locals initially believed the noise was lightning, while others were convinced it was an earthquake or the explosion of some gas canisters.

Parts of the houses that were damaged by the explosion were found all over the town, and even caught in the branches of trees. Blown-up debris from the factory itself was found up to 200 meters away.

Calo added that he had always taken great care to avoid accidents of this kind, traveling to similar sites to study the causes of such blasts and ways of avoiding them.

Police boost numbers of organized crime arrests in 2005

STAFF REPORTER, Madrid

Spanish police forces last year dismantled 290 groups linked to organized crime, arresting 3,925 people, a 15-percent increase from 2004, according to figures released on Monday by the Interior Ministry.

The majority of these groups were involved in drug trafficking, money laundering, forgery and armed robbery. The police also launched 768 operations against drug trafficking, the ministry said.

One of the biggest busts from last year was Operation White Whale, in which police arrested 56 people who are suspected of participating in a massive money laundering scheme that injected funds from illegal activities into real estate projects on the southern Costa del Sol. Operation Red Marble broke up a money laundering ring created by Eastern European gangsters who cleansed their cash made from contract killings, extortion and bribery.

Spain has several police teams that focus on organized crime. The national police's Greco unit works on the Costa del Sol, the eastern coast and Galicia; and the Civil Guard organized crime unit in Alicante and Málaga.