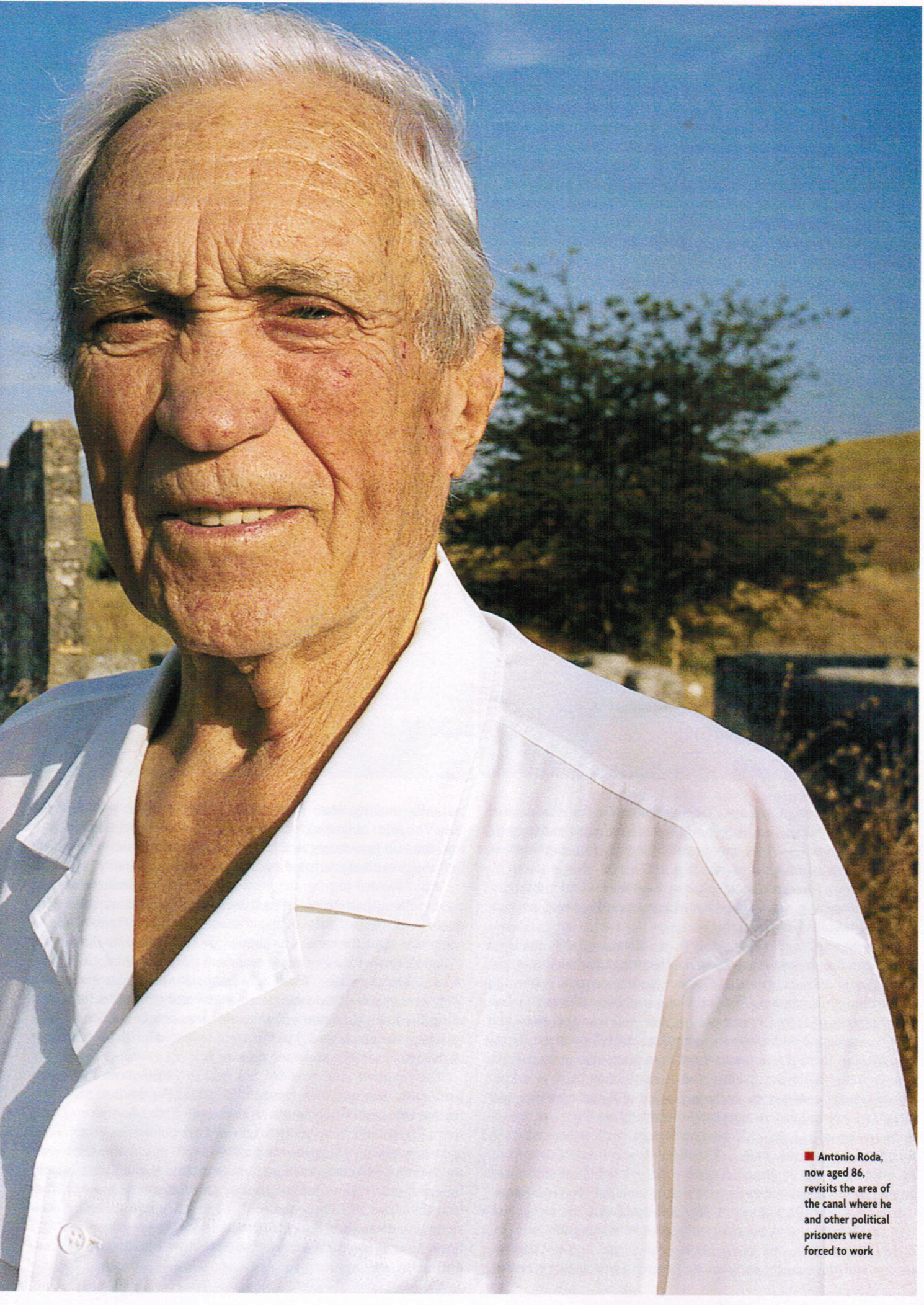
Franco's *slaves*

This man spent seven years in one of Franco's labour camps, hacking rocks for the Guadalquivir Canal. His daily food ration was one-third of a tin of sardines and a lump of bread. Franco is long dead, but only now is the story of his concentration camps emerging – a story that shows that modern Spain, and the fortunes of some of its greatest construction companies, was built using the forced labour of political prisoners. But, **Leslie Crawford** finds, many Spaniards are as reluctant to acknowledge this history as the companies are unwilling to admit their part. Photographs by **José Manuel Navia**



Antonio Roda, now aged 86, revisits the area of the canal where he and other political prisoners were forced to work

ANTONIO RODA IS STANDING BESIDE A LOCK OF THE GREAT Guadalquivir Canal, the most ambitious infrastructure project of General Francisco Franco's 40-year rule. The canal is 180km long, construction lasted 22 years and it was built by slave labour.

Trampling through a field of high grass, Roda stops before some abandoned concrete slabs. "I think this was the edge of the concentration camp," he says, peering through cataracts that cloud his vision. Slowly, the outlines of a rectangular military camp begin to take shape as we stumble over more discarded chunks of cement. "This might have been our dormitory, and over there, the officers' mess and in the middle, the patio where we were counted every morning."

Modernity has erased much of Roda's past. An EU-financed motorway dissects this stretch of the canal, just south of Seville. Factories have sprouted along one side of the motorway, dormitory suburbs on the other. There is no signpost or memorial to mark the site of the Merinales concentration camp, which housed the chain gangs who built the Guadalquivir canal.

For seven years, Roda laboured alongside thousands of political detainees on what became known as "the prisoners' canal". It was

back-breaking work. Each prisoner was assigned a daily tonnage of earth and rocks that had to be hacked out with picks and shovels and then removed on their bare backs. The daily food ration, Roda recalls, consisted of a tin of sardines and a loaf of bread – to be shared among three prisoners. Malnutrition and its attendant diseases, tuberculosis, typhoid and dysentery, were rife. Beatings were common, humiliation the norm.

Since the dictator's death, in 1975, politicians of all hues have hoped that time would erase this dark chapter of Spain's recent history. Spain did not put the Franco regime on trial after the restoration of democracy. Instead, it chose to bury its past, including a system of forced labour that lasted well into the 1960s and which catalogued and enslaved more than 280,000 political prisoners. Without them, Franco would not have been able to rebuild his war-shattered nation as quickly and as cheaply as he did. Neither would private contractors, including some of Spain's leading construction groups, be as immensely wealthy as they are today. Perhaps because of this, private contractors are just as anxious to forget the past as the state is. There has been no act of contrition, no offer of moral or financial reparation, on behalf of those who employed prison labour to those who were enslaved by the regime.

It is only now, 28 years after Franco's death, that a new generation of historians and political activists has, sometimes literally, begun to unearth the past. Mass graves are being exhumed throughout the country as Spaniards search for long-lost relatives. The survivors of Franco's concentration camps are also coming forward to tell their story. But are Spaniards ready to hear them?

Roda, now 86, was a hatmaker by profession. He joined the Republican army at the outbreak of the civil war, in 1936. He rose to the rank of captain and undertook many dangerous missions, including spying behind enemy lines. He was captured by Franco's forces in June 1939, after the war had officially ended, and court-martialled. His death sentence was commuted to 30 years hard labour, which was how he ended up in the Merinales concentration camp in Andalusia.

The Guadalquivir canal was at the time the largest infrastructure project ever attempted in Spain. It dissects Andalusia, from the village of Peñaflor to the port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, from where Columbus set sail for the Americas. It brought 80,000 hectares under irrigation, transforming a backward, swampy wasteland into a rich and fertile farming region. It also made fortunes for the proprietors of land that had previously been suitable only for grazing goats.

The question of who benefited from the labour of thousands of political prisoners can still be a sensitive subject today.

Antonio Miguel Bernal, a professor of economic history at the University of Seville, says: "Landowners along the canal became instantly wealthy when their holdings were brought under irrigation. The price of land sky-rocketed. We know who the families are: they are still immensely wealthy today. But no one wants to admit that this wealth was created with the use of slave labour."

Although the scale of repression and ideological gloss differed in each place, Franco's "solution" for his Republican prisoners shared much in common with the forced labour regimes adopted in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China

Bernal decided to raise the issue at a recent congress of farming communities that straddle the Guadalquivir. To his surprise, the question of whether they should acknowledge their debt to the prisoners who built the canal was greeted with a storm of indignation.

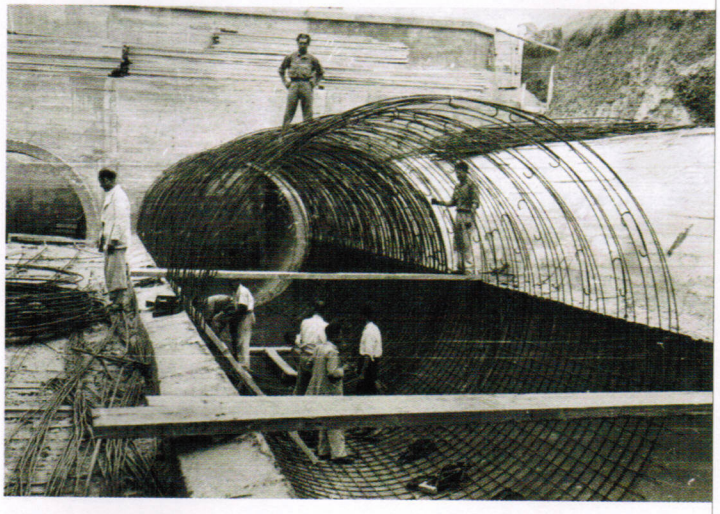
"Landowners rose from their seats and started shaking their fists at me," Bernal recalls. "I was called a muckraker and a scoundrel. They accused me of reopening old wounds and of wanting to undermine Spain's post-Franco democratic consensus. I knew I was raising a delicate subject, but I was not prepared for the vehemence of the response," the professor says.

"The Spanish civil war did not end in 1939," says José Luis Gutierrez, another historian and a colleague of Bernal. "The regime never talked about peace; it talked of "the first year of victory, the second year of victory", and so on. Spain became an immense jail, in which the vanquished were put at the service of the victors." Political prisoners were organised into military battalions and put to work for the greater glory of the regime – in the iron foundries of Bilbao, the coal mines of Asturias, in the construction of canals and electricity dams and the repair of railway lines, military academies, churches and other buildings destroyed during the war.

After the surrender of the Republican army, Franco remained obsessed with tracking down Spaniards who had fought on the side of the "reds". Laws were passed, with retroactive effect, to persecute those who had sympathised with the Republican government. As a result, schoolteachers, masons, trade unionists, liberal professionals and many others found themselves in jail for having supported a democratically elected government. Roda recalls sharing a prison cell in Madrid with the poets Antonio Buero Vallejo and Miguel Hernández. During his incarceration, Hernández wrote lullabies for a son he never met. He died of tuberculosis, at the age of 32, in the jail of Ocaña near Toledo.

The civil war had left half a million people dead and sent a quarter of a million Spaniards into exile. To that, Franco added 280,000 political prisoners – so many, that inmates were forced to build their own jails, such as Carabanchel in the south of Madrid, and concentration camps such as Merinales in Andalusia.

Because of an acute labour shortage – between 1939 and 1945, Professor Bernal estimates 10 per cent of Spain's male labour force was in jail – the regime began to catalogue prisoners according to their professional skills. By 1941, Franco's bureaucrats had files on 103,369 prisoners, including 10,000 women, grouped into 24 industries and 602 trades or professions. This allowed the regime to direct labour where it was needed, be it down coal shafts or into cement and steel plants. The regime also began to supply the needs of private sector employers who could not find qualified labour in the free market.



Archive photographs of the construction by political prisoners of the Gaudalquivir Canal, a huge operation that took place between 1940 and 1962

Nevertheless, Franco remained unsatisfied by his crushing military victory. He needed a moral justification for the continued persecution of the civilian population. He found it in the teachings of José Agustín Pérez de Pulgar, a Jesuit priest. Before the war, Pérez de Pulgar had championed workers' education as the best antidote to the growing influence of anarchist trade unions and Marxist notions of class struggle in Spain. He taught electricians at the Catholic Institute of Arts and Crafts in Madrid and, as a science graduate and electricity buff, was an early proponent of a national power grid for Spain.

When his institute was burned down by anarchists, Pérez de Pulgar went into exile in Belgium. From there, he returned to northern Spain, which surrendered to Franco's nationalist forces early in the civil war. Pérez de Pulgar befriended the general who ran Franco's prisons, and together they devised the moral, intellectual and economic justification for the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Spaniards.

"Up to now, some legal systems have sought the rehabilitation of prisoners, but none has considered the redeeming qualities of work – a new and entirely genial idea that has been conjured from the very entrails of Christian dogma by the Generalísimo himself," Pérez de Pulgar wrote, obligingly, in "The solution Spain gives to the problem of its political prisoners", a 1939 pamphlet published by Publicaciones Redención in Valladolid.

Franco himself, in an interview granted to Manuel Aznar, a journalist and grandfather of the current prime minister José María Aznar, explained the reasoning behind the new dogma: "We cannot return damaged elements to society, perverts who are morally and politically poisoned," he said. "But redemption is possible through work. This will require a profound transformation of the prison system, and it seems to me that redemption through work corresponds to a deep Christian concept which is, in addition, socially irreproachable."

"Prisons won't be lugubrious dungeons," Franco promised. "There will be workshops and prisoners will be free to choose their activity. After a time, if it is observed that his conduct is one of sincere repentance, and that he has incorporated true patriotism in his actions, then freedom will be his."

Shortly after the interview, the Trust for the Redemption of Jail Sentences – a kind of giant labour exchange for political prisoners – was born. Pérez de Pulgar was one of its directors. Fellow priests were initially nonplussed by the enthusiasm with which the Jesuit embraced his new responsibilities. Asked by a prelate what prisons had in common with teaching electricity, Pérez de Pulgar answered: "Obedience."

The Trust was conceived in order to allow prisoners to "redeem" through forced labour the "sin" of having sympathised with the Spanish Republic. The pseudo-religious analogy allowed Franco to disguise a system of slave labour by portraying it as a scheme for the moral and political rehabilitation of his enemies. Although the scale of repression and ideological gloss differed in each case, Franco's "solution" for his Republican prisoners shared much in common with the forced labour regimes adopted in Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union and Mao's China. The redeeming qualities of work were extolled in Nazi labour camps ("*arbeit macht frei*" – "work makes you free"), in Soviet gulags and in the practice of sending intellectuals to work alongside peasants during China's Cultural Revolution.

True, Franco's system was milder than its fascist and totalitarian counterparts. In what Pérez de Pulgar called "an admirable piece of Christian jurisprudence", volunteering for work allowed a prisoner to shorten his or her jail sentence, sometimes by a day for every day worked, sometimes more. If the prisoner was married and had young children, a small stipend was in theory paid to the family. "It is just that prisoners should, with their work, repair the damage done by their co-operation with the Marxist rebellion," he wrote.

The Jesuit priest was also concerned that prisoners should not pose unfair competition to free labour. He therefore proposed that private contractors should pay the government the full wage that a prisoner would otherwise have received in the free market. Pérez de Pulgar wrote: "It is just that the state should receive compensation for the cost of sustaining prisoners and their families". He also believed the state was justified in employing prison labour in public works given that "our penurious Treasury would be unable to finance these projects if it were obliged to employ free workers".

Spanish historians have yet to come up with a comprehensive figure for the economic contribution of Franco's prison labour, in spite of the fact that the Trust for the Redemption of Jail Sentences kept meticulous records of the number of prisoners employed in public works or hired out to private sector businesses. >>

>> At the end of 1940, according to the Trust's records, there were 280,000 political prisoners in Spain and more than 100 labour battalions spread throughout the country. By 1943, the Trust was hiring out more than 17,000 prisoners a month, with a further 8,320 working in prison workshops. The Guadalquivir Canal alone absorbed 5,000 prisoners a month. The Trust was satisfied with the zeal of its prison labour. A 1948 report sent to the Generalísimo reads: "In all the professional categories employed, prison labour has greatly exceeded the productivity of free labour."

Isaías Lafuente, author of *Esclavos por la Patria*, (Slaves for the Nation), a harrowing account of the lives of Republican prisoners, uses the Trust's records to estimate that between 1939 and 1946, prisoners contributed a minimum of 22.6m working days to the economy. Lafuente estimates their economic contribution at €612m based on the current minimum wage, although he admits this is a very crude measure of the value added generated by forced labour.

Many of the companies and private contractors that employed prison labour are still operative today. Yet in Spain – unlike Germany, where the state and private sector set up a €5bn fund to compensate survivors of the Nazi slave labour regime – the question of reparation – moral or financial – has never been discussed.

The attitude of big Spanish companies is first to deny any involvement, and then to reject responsibility for what might have occurred in the past.

Dragados, a leading construction group, is a case in point. The Trust for the Redemption of Jail Sentences praises the company in several annual reports for its judicious use of prison labour and the completion of hydroelectricity dams on budget and ahead of schedule. A 1952 report names Dragados as "a very important construction group that has made use of prison labour for the past 12 years".

Yet when contacted by the Financial Times, the reaction of Dragados was hostile. The company denied it had ever used slave labour, and questioned the newspaper's interest in dredging up the past. The question of financial compensation for the survivors of Franco's prison system had never arisen, the company said.

Contacted again, this time with copies of the Trust's annual reports, Dragados replied frostily: "As we had already indicated, the company has no record of the facts you mention, which is hardly surprising given that more than 50 years have elapsed since the events in question. As a result, it has been impossible to obtain information about the public works or people you mention."

In a surprising instance of selective memory, however, the company claimed that it had "demonstrable evidence of the great work undertaken by Dragados in hiring workers, administrators and even directors who had prison records and/or who were being discriminated against in other companies because of their ideology contrary to the regime".

Entrecanales, another large construction group now known as Acciona, built some of Franco's concentration camps in Andalusia. The company did not reply to letters sent by the Financial Times asking whether the directors of Acciona and its shareholders had ever considered acknowledging their debt to Republican prisoners.

Other companies that made use of prison labour include Babcock Wilcox, the engineering group, in Bilbao; Cementos Portland-Iberia in Toledo, Cementos Asland in Córdoba, and dozens of mining, engineering and construction groups that are no longer operative today. Of the businessmen who built fortunes on the back of slave labour, perhaps the most famous were two Catalan brothers, Juan and José Banús, who not only built Franco's mausoleum at the Valle de los Caídos, but also availed themselves of political prisoners to erect housing estates, ports, railways, industrial plants and even Puerto Banús, a luxurious marina near Marbella that became a playground for the international jet set during the 1960s and 1970s.

Professor Bernal believes Spanish companies will never be brought to account. He explains: "In Germany, companies became part of the war effort, they were militarised, and of course, they used slave labour. After World War II, the survivors were liberated. In Spain, no one was liberated. Spain remained a huge military barracks. A big jail."

Prisoners lost everything – their freedom, their health, even the right to practise their former profession or trade. The end of a prison sentence was often followed by a "*pena con destierro*" – internal exile. As a result, many former prisoners continued to work for the employer who had used them as slave labour

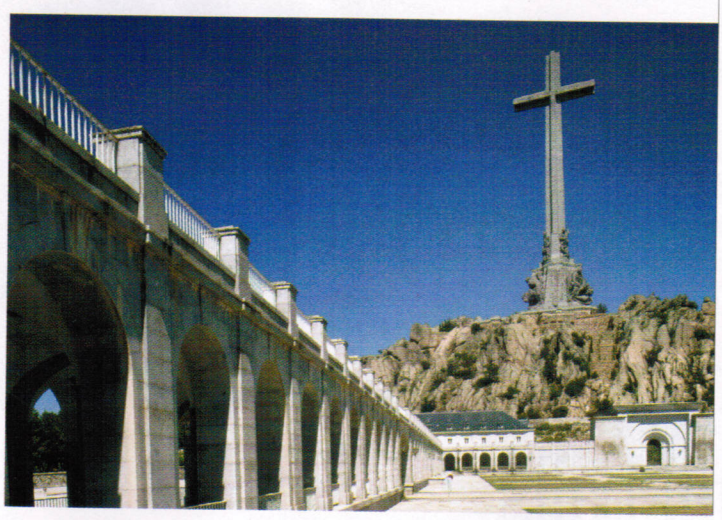
Although a few associations of former political prisoners exist, financial reparation does not form part of their demands. Given that most members are now in their eighties, the associations say it would be futile to initiate legal action that would take years, if not decades, to resolve. In addition, there is the stigma attached to having been a Republican prisoner and which has kept many survivors from coming forward. Former prisoners remained outcasts, barred from many professions, a permanently disenfranchised class.

"Franco instilled a deep fear in Spanish society, and that fear is still present with us today," says the historian Gutierrez. He speaks from personal experience. His mother-in-law, a civil war widow, only recently spoke of the circumstances of her husband's death. He had been shot in Cádiz by one of Franco's firing squads. It had taken her more than 50 years to summon the courage to bring up this fact.

"This part of our history is not forgotten," Gutierrez says. "It is perhaps silent, but it remains inside everyone who lived it." Spanish society would be healthier, he believes, if those memories were allowed to come out into the open. The fact that much of the Spanish establishment is still trying to suppress the collective memory of Republican prisoners has more to do with expediency than with the awkward questions these memories raise.

Professor Bernal says: "Politicians put a sell-by date on problems. During the post-Franco transition, left-wing parties agreed that there would be no human rights trials, no settling of accounts after 40 years of dictatorship." Although the Left initially argued for "*ruptura*", that is, a break with the past, the Socialist Party, led by a young Felipe González, came to accept that a peaceful transition from dictatorship to democracy would be possible only if it were carried out by the institutions of the previous regime. In that way, it would be more difficult for Francoists to repudiate democratic reforms. Perhaps the defining moment came during a secret meeting in early 1977 between Adolfo Suárez, prime minister of Spain's transitional government, and Santiago Carrillo, the historic leader of the clandestine Communist Party. At that meeting, Carrillo accepted the monarchy of King Juan Carlos, the national flag (rather than the Republican standard) and the unity of the nation. In exchange, Suárez legalised the Communist Party. Historians agree that this was one of the crucial events of the transition – and one which helped to draw a veil over the past.

Twenty-five years later, Bernal argues that it is still difficult for the Left to break this unspoken agreement. "Spain's recent history is still a hornet's nest – best left undisturbed," he says.



Antonio Roda in front of the Guadalquivir Canal today (far left). A cross towers over Franco's mausoleum (left), in the Valle de los Caídos. The monument was built using the forced labour of Republican prisoners

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Roda was not one of them. After being released from the Merinales concentration camp, he had had enough of the Guadalquivir canal. In February 1946, he was granted parole and went to work for an anchovy salting plant in Málaga. "I lost the best 10 years of my life and didn't even get a proper military pension as an officer because I fought for the defeated side," he says.

With time, he became a businessman in his own right. He managed a chain of furniture shops that remained faithful to the egalitarian principles of his Republican and revolutionary youth. "I chose to cap my profits at 10 per cent and to share this with my employees," he explains.

"I lost the war," Roda says, "but I won seven subsequent victories against the capitalist enemy. I earned enough to send six children to university, and I built a business of my own. With each property I acquired, I would say to myself: 'Another trench snatched from the Francoists'."

Roda is not interested in settling scores or in economic reparation. He knows his health is failing him, and he would rather spend his time writing courtly love poems – to his wife, to the beautiful women of Seville, and to his Mercedes Benz.

In 1990, the then Socialist government passed a law authorising compensation for political prisoners who had spent more than three years in jail. Compensation was for "loss of liberty", not for their years of hard labour.

Roda received 1.3m pesetas (€7,813) for his seven years inside the Merinales concentration camp. He is not bitter but, like many fellow prisoners, he would appreciate some form of official atonement for the injustices committed in the past. FT

Leslie Crawford is the FT's correspondent in Madrid

THE VALLEY OF THE FALLEN

El Valle de los Caídos (Valley of the Fallen) is perhaps the best-known monument built by Republican prisoners. Conceived by Franco as a tribute to nationalist soldiers killed during the civil war, it acquired the monstrous dimensions of the dictator's vanity.

Franco began talking about "a great monument to our victory" soon after the end of the civil war in 1939. He chose the site himself: a rocky outcrop of the Guadarrama hills north of Madrid, not far from where Philip II of Spain built his final resting place at the monastery of El Escorial. Franco's memorial was far more ambitious than that of the 17th-century monarch: it comprised a monastery, a military barracks, a basilica within a crypt, Franco's mausoleum and a 500ft-tall cross that can be seen 50 miles away.

Yet construction, which began in 1940, was painfully slow and three years later, an impatient Franco sent the first battalions of political prisoners to speed up the work. Three private contractors, including the Banús brothers, were assigned different projects within the Valley of the Fallen. The contractors employed 400 to 500 political prisoners a month. Teodoro García Cañas, a Republican prisoner, remembers Juan Banús chosing his chain gang from the inmates of Ocaña jail. "He looked at my teeth, prodded my muscles, but I was too weak so I was not chosen. Banús only picked the healthiest, well-fed men," García Cañas tells Isaías Lafuente in his book, *Esclavos por la Patria*.

Those drafted into service, Lafuente writes, formed a perfect cross-section of defeated Spain. Architects toiled alongside bricklayers, schoolteachers with those who could not read or write, and footsoldiers alongside officers who had refused to join Franco's uprising. The prisoners were crowded into wooden barracks, with 50 to 60 men sleeping in bunkbeds stacked on an uneven floor of beaten earth. Gregorio Peces Barba, rector of Madrid's Carlos III university and one of the authors of Spain's 1978 constitution, recalls slipping into the barracks as a young child to sleep with his father, a Republican prisoner. The families of prisoners often followed their men around Spain as they were moved between jails or construction plants.

Many prisoners died in the rush to build the valley, either from building accidents or silicosis. The granite of the Guadarrama range was difficult to bore and left a fine dust that affected the lungs of many of those who volunteered for the most dangerous jobs in order to shorten their sentences.

Franco's monumental complex took almost 20 years to complete. It became a symbol of many things: a reaffirmation of Franco's military victory, the regime's alliance with the Roman Catholic Church, and a vast tomb for a dictator who took another 16 years to die.

Even Franco's closest advisers had doubts about the usefulness of such an endeavour. Francisco Franco Salgado-Araujo, the dictator's cousin and private secretary, wrote in his memoirs after visiting the Valley of the Fallen in 1957, then still a work in progress: "There is no mood in Spain for this monument, for whereas fear of another civil war persists, a great part of the population is inclined to forgive and forget. I don't believe that either the families of the 'whites' or the 'reds' wish their dead to be buried there, and if the crypt is only for the 'whites', it will lead to the eternal disunity of Spaniards." *L.C.*