

The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory

The Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory began in October 2000, when a small group of people gathered at the site of one of the Spanish Civil War's bloodiest civilian massacres.

There, in the remote village of Priaranza del Bierzo, in Spain's northern region of León, their mission was to locate and exhume a mass grave containing the remains of 13 Republicans, known to history as the Priaranza 13. They had been executed by a group of the Falange, the pro-Franco fascist movement, on 16 October 1936.

The exhumation broke the silence surrounding the fate of thousands of civilians executed during the 1936-39 Civil War and the 1939-75 Franco regime. It is estimated that 200,000 men and women were killed in extrajudicial executions during the War, and another 20,000 Republicans murdered by the regime in the post-war years. Thousands more died as a result of bombings, and in prisons and concentration camps...

In the spring of 2002, the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances called on the Spanish Government to comply with international law, calling on Spain to: undertake a proper exhumation of the bodies; return the remains to family members; arrange for their proper burial; and undertake a judicial investigation of the facts surrounding the disappearances.

The UN has also requested that Spanish courts not apply limitation periods to crimes against humanity. In 2009, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that, as a general principle, an amnesty law is incompatible with states' duty to investigate acts of torture or barbarity...

Remembering the past

In many other countries, recognising those who have died in war, and the pain of those left behind, is supported by governments of all persuasions... In Spain, however, despite the transition to democracy, which began in 1975, this topic has been taboo. The Spanish Transition has been lauded as peaceful, but this has been at the cost of remembering...



Exvacation of a mass grave by the Association for the Recovery of the Historical Memory (ARMH) of a pit of Spanish Civil War victims, around 2007. Source: Wikimedia Commons, Foro Cultural Provincia de El Bierzo.

Our achievements so far

There is a single, overarching purpose to ARMH's activities of historical research, search, exhumation, and identification: the return of victims' remains to their families...

To date, we have:

1. Submitted 1300 cases to the UN Working Group on Enforced Disappearances. Each case has been rigorously documented with birth, marriage and death certificates, proof of military service and other documents. The cases date back to the start of the Spanish Civil War on 18 July 1936. They include an unconfirmed 1956 case of a man shot in Madrid's Almudena Cemetery (Madrid) and buried in a mass grave within the cemetery.

2. Collected and analysed handwritten letters from relatives of the Disappeared, relating to approximately 200 cases. These personal accounts were sent to our association from people who have known their relatives were missing, and more than 70 years later, are ready to initiate a search for their loved ones and want their stories heard.

3. Gathered and analysed some 15,000 emails from relatives protesting against disappearances, as well as informants recounting cases of mass graves located in their towns. ARMH's work is to piece together this information to provide a name to those buried in hundreds of mass graves across Spain.

Thanks to these informants, we have information on more than 400 mass graves, many still awaiting exhumation. Other graves, for various reasons, have been destroyed...

What happens to the remains?

The remains are extracted and separated, and placed in a box marked with information identifying the grave and the individual, for transfer to the laboratory for forensic analysis and identification... Where necessary, the Association orders DNA tests to identify victims. This requires us to remove a fragment of the femur and two molars, which, together with the saliva of a living relative, are sent to a private laboratory for genetic analysis. As these laboratories charge for their work, the Association covers the cost of these tests. We cover all costs incurred in opening a mass grave on the premise that families should not have to pay for the search for their loved ones...



Public acts delivering the victims to their relatives, without date. Source: Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory.

Our legal status

ARMH is an incorporated, not-for-profit, non-government organisation. The Association is legally incorporated under the Organic Law 1/2002, of 22 March, as a not-for-profit entity...

Since 2011, ARMH has received no government funding for its activities. This is despite United Nations statements that exhuming and returning remains is a responsibility of the Spanish state...

From 2007-2011, ARMH received grants ranging from 45,000 to 65,000 euros from the Ministry of the Presidency (the Prime Minister's department) for activities relating to the victims of the Spanish Civil War. This funding helped us conduct 10 exhumations, covering about 20 per cent of the cost — the remaining 80 per cent came from the work of hundreds of volunteers.

Source: Unknown author, What is the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory? <http://memoriahistorica.org.es/who-are-we/> (last retrieved on 12 January 2017).