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The death of historical memory? Javier Cercas's *El impostor* versus the legacy of Spaniards deported to Nazi camps

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ABSTRACT

Javier Cercas criticizes what he calls “the so-called memory industry” in his 2014 book, *El impostor*. While delving into the life story of Enric Marco, who was unmasked in 2005 as a false survivor of the Nazi concentration camp Flossenbürg, Cercas pronounces historical memory dead in Spain. This article retraces Marco’s rise to fame against the backdrop of Spain’s relevance to the Holocaust as well as seven decades of narratives by actual Spanish survivors of Nazi concentration camps published inside the country. These narratives have given increased visibility to Spanish deportees, forming a core aspect of Spain’s historical memory. Countering Cercas’s claim of morbidity, this article demonstrates that the recuperation of historical memory has moved from a grassroots movement to a legislative initiative and back again in Spain, particularly as concerns the legacy of Spanish Republicans deported to Nazi camps. Cercas’s misplaced glorification of a false survivor and his narrow focus on the recuperation of historical memory as a collective memory of the Spanish Civil War and Franco dictatorship governed by the Law of Historical Memory notwithstanding, the movement has had a trickle-down effect on the visibility of the history of Spaniards deported to Nazi camps during World War II.

KEYWORDS

Javier Cercas; Enric Marco;
Nazi concentration camps;
Holocaust; historical memory

During Donald Trump’s first ten days in office, the White House released a statement commemorating International Holocaust Remembrance Day that omitted any mention of Jews or anti-Semitism (“Statement by the President” 2017). This absence glossed over – purposely or carelessly – the six million Jews who were murdered as a result of the Nazi program of genocide, causing an almost immediate public backlash (Bromwich 2017). Across the ocean, official commemorations in Spain included Jewish victims of the Holocaust and non-Jewish victims of Nazi persecution – in particular the ten thousand Spaniards who were sent to Nazi concentration camps during World War II – on el Día del Recuerdo del Holocausto seemingly without conflict. Delegates from the Amical de Mauthausen y otros campos y de todas las víctimas del nazismo en España participated in memorial events in Madrid, Barcelona and smaller municipalities in Catalonia that honored Jewish victims of the Holocaust alongside Spanish and Catalan deportees to Nazi camps. In contrast to Trump’s comments, denounced by groups such as the Republican Jewish Coalition and the Anti-Defamation League in the United States, Spain’s official inclusion of Jewish

and non-Jewish victims of Nazi aggression under the banner of the “Holocaust” has become de rigueur.¹ Nevertheless, studies have shown that Spain rates last among European nations in terms of its population’s knowledge of the Holocaust.² As Alejandro Baer and Natan Sznajder have examined, historical memory movements in Spain tend to revolve around unpacking Francoism in contrast to the pan-European drive to understand Nazism and the Holocaust: “For Spain’s memorialists, becoming a citizen in a modern democracy has meant a belated integration with western Europe’s memory of Nazi-fascism” (2017, 71).³ Spain’s focus on recuperating memories of the Spanish Civil War and Francisco Franco’s dictatorship has overshadowed the country’s confrontation of its role in World War II and the Holocaust.

These slippery conceptions of the Holocaust in Spain are evidence of the country’s difficulty in confronting a past marked by a trifecta of war, fascism and anti-Semitism. Spain has lagged behind the movement to establish a European culture of memory of the Holocaust, although the country’s relevance to World War II is irrefutable.⁴ Spaniards were not victims of the Holocaust, understood as the Nazi program of genocide of some six million Jews. Yet the Franco government denied entry to thousands of Jewish refugees during the war, while at the same time Spaniards in Nazi concentration camps witnessed violence against Jews.⁵ Speaking during the sixtieth anniversary commemorations of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps in 2005, the Spanish Buchenwald survivor Jorge Semprún made the argument that a transnational European memory of the Holocaust would only be collectively created, processed and applied to common democratic aims “when our memories have been shared and brought together as one” (Leggewie 2005). Yet decades of post-Franco Spanish governments have marginalized the country from the construction of a European culture of memory precisely because of a deeply rooted resistance to coming to terms with Spain’s participation in the Second World War and the consequent effects of this role on its citizens. Spanish democratic leaders have never officially acknowledged the Franco regime’s complicity in the deportation of its own citizens to Nazi concentration camps.⁶ The myth that Franco was a savior of Jews during the Holocaust continues to be prevalent (see Preston 1992; Rother 2010; Correa Martín-Arroyo [forthcoming]). Meanwhile, as Simó (2016) has explored, Spanish high school students maintain a tenuous grasp on the Holocaust, and Spain’s involvement in World War II is thoroughly excluded from their education.

The ongoing controversies surrounding the Holocaust and the way the Shoah has been remembered in Spain are laid bare in Javier Cercas’s 2014 book, *El impostor*. In his characteristically self-conscious narrative style, Cercas recounts the rise and fall of Enric Marco, who for decades in Spanish public discourse feigned having survived a Nazi concentration camp. Although Marco would appear to be the focal point of the book, *El impostor* is a work of dramatized nonfiction in which Cercas casts a version of himself as the true protagonist. Cercas details his quest to uncover Marco’s backstory throughout the book, positioning himself as a novelist-detective digging into Marco’s life story as a lens through which to examine Spain’s role in major historical events of the last half century – the Spanish Civil War, World War II, antifascist resistance movements, the Spanish Transition to Democracy and the tides of interest in the country’s historical memory. A highly engaging read, *El impostor* revolves around a series of interviews Cercas (author and character) conducts with his subject, as he attempts to draw Marco into confronting his impostor guilt, as well as Cercas’s fast-paced research quest, which culminates in the discovery of

the roots of Marco's original deception deep in the archives of a Nazi concentration camp registry book.

Spain's memory of the historical timeline Cercas covers in *El impostor* reached a turning point at the end of the twentieth century. While the 1980s and 1990s saw an uneven reckoning with Spain's legacy of violence and division as the country transitioned from Franco's thirty-six-year dictatorship to a parliamentary monarchy, at the turn of the century a number of events pulled the country into a public acknowledgement of the scars of its past. Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón's mission in 1998 to indict Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet for crimes against humanity spurred the Spanish public to question why Franco-era malfeasance in their own country had gone unadjudicated for decades. In 2000, Emilio Silva began to collaborate on the exhumation of the remains of his grandfather in Priaranza del Bierzo, a project that would become the linchpin excavation of a Spanish Civil War-era mass grave and spawn a new movement of the recuperation of historical memory. Silva subsequently cofounded the grassroots Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica that same year. This nascent movement – spearheaded by the efforts of a judicial representative of the Spanish government and a private citizen – would only gain momentum throughout the first decade of the 2000s, arguably coming to a climax with the 2007 passage of the Law of Historical Memory, which legislated how the country would move forward to address past crimes and their victims.

Cercas incorporates a strenuous criticism of the 2007 law and its effect on the historical memory movement throughout *El impostor*. Despite the Law of Historical Memory's failings, however, the legacy of the Spaniards deported to, imprisoned in and killed in Nazi concentration camps during World War II has been kept alive in the public consciousness with the aid of the very movement Cercas condemns. Moreover, Cercas turns a blind eye to the non-Jewish victims of Nazi aggression in *El impostor*, aligning the author more than he may have intended with the false survivor at the core of his narrative. Despite Cercas's misplaced glorification of Enric Marco and the author's narrow focus on the historical memory movement as a moribund collective memory of the Spanish Civil War and Franco dictatorship, the movement has in fact had an effect on the legacy of the Spaniards deported to Nazi camps during World War II.

Enric Marco and the creation of a victim

The titular impostor in Cercas's story is Marco, a Catalan born in 1921 who claimed for decades that he had been imprisoned in a Nazi camp during World War II like thousands of other Spanish deportees. He rode this false assertion all the way to the presidency of the country's most visible organization of Nazi concentration camp survivors, victims and their families: the Barcelona-based Amical de Mauthausen. Marco initially made his claim public in the pages of one of the first books to expose the stories of Spaniards deported to Nazi camps, Eduardo Pons Prades and Mariano Constante's *Los cerdos del comandante: Españoles en los campos de exterminio nazis*, published in 1978. In this volume, Pons Prades and Constante intermingled a broad historical overview of the camps with the testimony of survivors, including that of Marco. Identified alternately as "Enrique Marco Batlle" and "Enrique Marcos", Marco is the lone supposed Flossenbürg survivor included in the volume. He mentions the Nazi camp only briefly in his three-page testimony, claiming that "[e]n Flossenbürg estuve muy poco tiempo, y como me llevaban de un lado para

otro en plan de incomunicado, no podía entrar en contacto con nadie” (Pons Prades and Constante 1978, 89).⁷ Hedging his bets by asserting that he was uniquely isolated in the camp, Marco nevertheless sought to claim a stake in the memorialization of Spanish victims of Nazi persecution. His imagined passage through the Nazi concentration camp of Flossenbürg planted the seed of deception that he would allow to grow to enormous proportions in the decades that followed.⁸

After rising through the ranks of survivors, Marco assumed the presidency of the Amical de Mauthausen in 2003 (Toran 2008, 143). By 2005, questions about the authenticity of his claim – including those from other concentration camp survivors – had started to grow. Neus Català, who was imprisoned in Flossenbürg between March 1944 and May 1945 after being transferred from the women’s concentration camp of Ravensbrück, told a reporter: “Yo ya sabía que Marco no era un deportado, se notaba que no había estado en los lugares que decía, no conocía Flossenburg, sus descripciones obviamente no coincidían con la realidad” (as quoted in Cué and Antón 2005). Benito Bermejo, a historian and scholar of the Spanish deportation who had previously unmasked a different Spanish imposter, provided the Amical de Mauthausen with proof that Marco had falsified his concentration camp bona fides.⁹ This information arrived just days before a Spanish delegation, including then president José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, was to commemorate Spanish victims at the Mauthausen concentration camp in Austria for the sixtieth anniversary of its liberation. Marco subsequently admitted to his invention, writing in a press release: “Reconozco no haber estado internado en el campo de Flossenburg. ...” (as quoted in Cué and Antón 2005). He resigned his position before causing the Spanish Mauthausen delegation any further public embarrassment, though not without significant damage to the cause of the collective memory of the deportees. The treasurer of the Amical at the time, Jesús Ruiz, interpreted Marco’s actions as providing ammunition for Holocaust deniers at the expense of the reputations of actual deportees: “Esto es carnaza para los negacionistas” (as quoted in Cué and Antón 2005). Yet even after his unveiling, Marco defended what he characterized as his personal crusade to bring attention to a forgotten chapter in Spain’s past on Spanish television and in the press. He told a reporter soon after his unmasking that “[l]a gente me escuchaba más y mi trabajo divulgativo era más eficaz” (as quoted in “El ex presidente de Amical” 2005), casting his fictional tale as a more “efficient” means of communicating the underlying truths of the Spanish deportation to Nazi camps and, by extension, the Holocaust.

After a flurry of interviews in which Marco defended his tactics, if not his false claims, a pair of Spanish filmmakers told his story again in a 2009 documentary, *Ich bin Enric Marco* (Fillol and Vernal). The documentarians took Marco on a pseudojourney to his past in an effort to understand what lay hidden inside someone who not only claimed to have experienced something that he had not experienced, but then continued to defend his actions after he had been exposed. Even four years after his unveiling, Marco, standing in a park in Kiel, Germany, where he was – in actuality – a volunteer worker for the Nazi war industry and briefly incarcerated in 1941, was defiant. “Si tengo que pedirles perdón, es haberles dicho que yo había estado en el campo de concentración”, Marco told the filmmakers, but he continued to take credit for having brought more attention to the plight of Spaniards in the camp than other actual Spanish camp survivors. Marco’s star had almost entirely faded by the time Javier Cercas decided to resurrect his tale.

The construction and deconstruction of Marco's false story of imprisonment by the Nazis mirrors other notable instances of false Holocaust survivors. A particularly relevant case is that of Benjamin Wilkomirski, who published *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* in 1996 as a memoir of his struggle to survive the Majdanek Nazi death camp as a toddler. By the end of the decade, Wilkomirski had been unmasked as Bruno Grosjean, a World War II orphan who, despite living through desperate circumstances, was neither Jewish nor a survivor of the Holocaust. In Blake Eskin's thorough examination of the rise and fall of Wilkomirski, *A Life in Pieces*, he quotes the author's intransigent defense of what he continued to claim were memories based in fact: "I am not prepared to deny my memories because of external pressure," Wilkomirski/Grosjean states, adding that "[t]he reader was always free to conceive of my book either as literature or as a personal document" (as quoted in Eskin 2002, 114). Although *A Life in Pieces* at first glance seems to adhere in spirit to Cercas's own story of a false survivor's descent, Eskin ends his account with a more definitive dismissal of Benjamin Wilkomirski, writing that

to continue wrestling with this question [of why Bruno did what he did] on his behalf strikes me as wrongheaded. From the outset, this sort of speculation has breathed life into Benjamin Wilkomirski. Our interest has sustained him for too long, and it is time to put him to rest. (242)

While Cercas exudes anxiety about Marco throughout *El impostor*, he does not feel remorseful about returning Marco to prominence via his book. Indeed, the author admires his subject to a certain extent for creating an apocryphal life narrative, comparing him to Don Quijote as two narcissistic, invented and frustrated heroes. Cercas ends *El impostor* by agreeing with the words of his son, Raúl, who exclaims that Marco "¡Es el puto amo!" (425). In short, Cercas communicates throughout his book that the invented life of Marco – whom he disparages as a fraud while also extolling him as "nuestro héroe" (308) – merits thoughtful consideration.

Cercas's book includes not only a recounting of Marco's real and invented lives, but also an account of the gestation of the author's interest in the story. In 2005, around the time Marco was exposed, Cercas began to consider investigating the impostor's backstory. As Cercas turned the idea over, Mario Vargas Llosa told him he needed to write about Marco: "¡Pero Javier! ... ¿No te das cuenta? ¡Marco es un personaje tuyo! ¡Tienes que escribir sobre él!" (22). Cercas wondered if this comment, from a Nobel Prize-winning Latin American novelist no less, was an insinuation that he, too, was an impostor, and that "nadie puede escribir mejor sobre un impostor que otro impostor" (23). Vargas Llosa clarified, however, that Cercas had permission to lie: "La diferencia entre Cercas y Marco es que el novelista tiene licencia para mentir" (23).

In this exchange and Cercas's resulting existential crisis over whether he is also a fake, the author disarms the reader in a manner strikingly similar to Marco's: namely, with a narrative sleight of hand that permits us to feel sympathy for Cercas before he takes the entire historical memory industry (an industry from which, with the publication of this and other books, he has profited) to task. Sympathizing with his subject even before he begins delving into the details, Cercas thinks aloud, "Es como si todos tuviésemos algo de Marco ... Como si todos fuésemos un poco impostores" (22). This realization nevertheless fills Cercas with self-doubt. A number of his associates think that "el caso Marco" should be left well enough alone so as not to return an admitted fabricator to the spotlight. They echo Teresa Sala Savall (2005), the daughter of a Mauthausen deportee, who wrote a

letter to *El País* arguing that “buscar justificaciones a su comportamiento o minimizar el daño que ha hecho al conjunto de deportados es no entender y menospreciar el legado que nos han dejado [las verdaderas víctimas]”. Cercas disagrees. He argues in the book that Marco’s life story requires further examination in part because “nuestra primera obligación es entender” (20). Citing Primo Levi’s famous quandary regarding the Holocaust from the afterword to *Survival in Auschwitz*, that “Perhaps one cannot, what is more one must not, understand what happened, because to understand is almost to justify” (1986, 393), Cercas responds: “¿No es indispensable tratar de entender toda la confusa diversidad de lo real, desde lo más noble hasta lo más abyecto? ¿O es que ese imperativo genérico no rige para el Holocausto?” (21).

One of the underlying problems with Cercas’s central argument dovetails with the way the Holocaust has been remembered in Spain. The Spanish Republicans deported to Nazi concentration camps during World War II were not Jewish and were not, therefore, subject to a prolonged program of persecution and genocide by the Nazi state. Thus, the some ten thousand Spanish and Catalan men and women deported to Nazi camps may have been witnesses to the Holocaust, but they were not victims of the Holocaust, in the sense that they were slave labor for the Nazis and were killed in the camps in myriad ways, but were not collectively targeted for extermination. By bringing Levi’s words to bear on the case of a false survivor, Cercas focuses a great deal of attention on someone who was neither a victim of the Holocaust nor a witness to the Holocaust, veering toward just the sort of justification Levi questioned. Yet one of Cercas’s aims in *El impostor* is to ruffle the feathers of all of the memory scholars who take these distinctions seriously, who feel it necessary to parse out the survivors from the impostors, the Jews from the non-Jewish victims, the truth from the lies. Cercas has made a name for himself by pushing back against these conventions throughout his body of work. In *El impostor*, he moves beyond the realm of the historical memory of the Spanish Civil War captured in his “relato real”, *Soldados de Salamina* (2001), and past the Spanish Transition to Democracy, which he surgically dismantled in *Anatomía de un instante* (2009), to confront a historical truth that has evident repercussions not only on a European culture of memory but on a global understanding of history. Whether Marco’s story is worth retelling is not the central issue, however: *El impostor* is a page-turner that renders one man’s imagined past a thrilling detective story. Rather, it is the way Cercas picks and chooses which aspects of the historical memory movement to highlight and which to ignore or disparage; central too is his provocative claim that historical memory is dead in Spain, which, if true, would mean that the country’s conceptions of World War II and the Holocaust are even more hazy than is currently the case. By writing *El impostor*, the author implies that the creation of the myth surrounding a false survivor is more engaging and worthy of examination than the real memories of the thousands of Spaniards who did pass through Nazi camps. But it is his takedown of the historical memory industry – the same apparatus that has brought increased attention to the actual Spanish victims of Nazi violence, not to mention fed Cercas’s own body of work – that raises the most questions in the book.

Cercas’s coup de grâce in *El impostor* is his assertion that “[l]a industria de la memoria resultó letal para la memoria” (307), a statement that quickly piqued the ire of scholars of Spanish collective memory inside and outside of the country (see Aragonese 2014; Faber 2015; Martín Alegre 2015). After referring to the collective memory movement in Spain as “la llamada memoria histórica” (293 and throughout) for some three hundred pages,

Cercas digs in. He argues that there was no forgetting; on the contrary, to be able to form a stable democracy, Spain's political parties actively remembered the war and the dictatorship, in part by distancing themselves from these historical periods and inventing new pasts to be able to forge a democratic future: "La democracia española se fundó sobre una gran mentira colectiva, o más bien sobre una larga serie de pequeñas mentiras individuales ..." (299). Cercas succinctly summarizes the events of the first decade of the twenty-first century in Spain – what he calls "la apoteosis" – that led to a resurgence in interest in historical memory (302–303). But, as the author correctly points out, this fascination with historical memory in the first decade of the 2000s was not new: the five-year period after Franco's death in 1975 – when Enric Marco inaugurated his false claim – saw a boom in interest in the recent past. Cercas captures the spirit of collective memory in these early years of the Transition as:

un gran interés por la historia o al menos por esa parte de la historia [la guerra, la posguerra y sus víctimas]: se publicaron numerosos libros, se escribieron multitud de artículos y reportajes, se filmaron películas y se organizaron abundantes congresos y cursos sobre la Segunda República, la guerra civil, el exilio republicano, los consejos de guerra franquistas, las cárceles franquistas, los muertos y las guerrillas antifranquistas, la oposición al franquismo y mil asuntos más. (300)

If anything, Cercas writes, the silence, whether it came in the form of a "pact" or a vacuum, came in the 1980s, when "nos habíamos saturado de pasado" and reexaminations of the past ran counter to the interests of both the political Right and Left in Spain (301).

Cercas succeeds in capturing the debate over an implicit "pact of silence", which many scholars agreed quieted any examination or debate over vestiges of the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s. The birth of the historical memory movement in Spain that the author pinpoints so clearly was also accompanied by a chorus of dissent regarding the efficacy – or, indeed, the existence – of a "pact of silence" in Spain.¹⁰ On this point, Cercas is late to the game; the pact of silence had already been dismantled by scholars such as Santos Julià, who has voiced his objection to the idea that there was ever any collective forgetting in Spain (2003, 17). Yet Cercas's criticism evidences a blind spot regarding the Spanish deportees to Nazi concentration camps, a curious omission given that the central figure in *El impostor* claimed for decades to be a member of this group. Representations of the Spanish experience of the Nazi camps were particularly marginalized during both the Transition-era movements of the recuperation of historical memory and their twenty-first century counterpart. Yet those representations have been available in Spain since 1946, and a wave of survivor memoirs arrived at the turn of the twenty-first century.

It is noteworthy that Cercas, in listing the topics that provided the inspiration for articles, films and conferences during the later movement of recuperation in the 2000s – Spain's Second Republic, the Spanish Civil War, the exile of Spanish Republicans, the Francoist military tribunals, the death sentences and Francoist prisons, the anti-Francoist maquis or resistance fighters, the opposition movement and so on – does not explicitly mention the deportation of Spaniards to Nazi camps. Being the least famous of Spain's recent historical traumas does not mean that the Spanish deportation has not had an effect on the country's collective memory. A brief overview of the texts and films committed to telling the personal histories of the Spanish deportees to Nazi camps since

the end of World War II makes clear that the topic has never entirely disappeared from Spain's consciousness. Indeed, by the time Cercas made his unorthodox foray into the experience of Spaniards in Nazi camps, it had become a well-worn narrative that was beginning to catch the attention of a new generation of politically committed Spaniards. As Sebastiaan Faber argues, Cercas lacks authority, offering a "perezosa" interpretation of the historical memory movement and its associated organizations in *El impostor*, consequently "[perdiendo] de vista lo que estos actos de asociación tuvieron de regeneración democrática" (2015).

A chronology of survivor narratives

Carlos Rodríguez del Risco was the first Catalan survivor of a Nazi concentration camp to publish an account of his ordeal. He wrote twenty-nine serialized installments based on his experiences in Mauthausen for the Falangist newspaper *Arriba* in 1946. In "Yo he estado en Mauthausen", Rodríguez del Risco negotiates historical accuracy in a complex manner; writing during the most repressive years of Franco's dictatorship, he at once provides a verifiable account of the Austrian Nazi concentration camp complex of Mauthausen while also serving as an anti-Semitic apologist for Hitler and Franco (Rodríguez del Risco 1946; see also Brenneis 2013).

Although Rodríguez del Risco's articles would be followed by a period of silence in the Spanish press, other Spaniards who had survived Nazi camps labored for years to pen their own accounts. The majority focused on Mauthausen, a camp in Austria where approximately seven thousand of the ten thousand total Spanish deportees were imprisoned. Joaquim Amat-Piniella began writing his novel, *K. L. Reich*, based on his experiences in Mauthausen at the same time as Rodríguez del Risco, but he was only able to publish the work in Spain in 1963. *K. L. Reich*, though a fictionalized account of the Austrian slave labor camp, captures the hierarchy of international prisoners, prisoner-Kapos and SS guards in the camp, focusing on the resistance organization of the Catalans and Spaniards.

By the 1970s, and particularly after Franco's death in 1975, there were a number of books that addressed the experiences of Spaniards in Nazi camps – among them the first in which Marco made his false claim.¹¹ The Mauthausen survivor Mariano Constante published three separate accounts of his imprisonment over the course of the decade, each one building the myth of the author himself as central to the Spanish resistance organization inside the camp.¹² Nevertheless, Constante's ubiquity in the Spanish media during the 1970s and 1980s – one reviewer called him a "piedra filosofal para todo aquel que quiera saber algo acerca de la peripecia de nuestros hermanos republicanos que fueron objeto de la locura nazi" (Monegal 1976) – meant that a Spanish memory of the Nazi camps continued to be visible on Spanish television and in the press during the early period of Spain's Transition to Democracy. Constante's rise to prominence coincided with the birth of Enric Marco's false claims, though one must differentiate exaggeration from pure fabrication. Despite his penchant for hyperbole – and among Spanish Nazi-camp survivors Constante is not alone in this regard – Constante was deported to, imprisoned in and survived Mauthausen. The truth of those facts, as distinct from Marco's imaginary passage through Flossenbürg, is fundamental to the protection of an historical memory rooted in the testimony of actual survivors as opposed to purely fictional constructs.

In the world of clandestine cinema, Llorenç Soler's 1975 documentary, *Sobrevivir en Mauthausen*, was the first opportunity for Nazi concentration camp survivors to speak and be seen onscreen in Spain, despite the limits imposed by censorship and under the threat of retaliation. Soler's film was not widely released, however. It was in particular Montserrat Roig's formidable oral history of Catalans in Nazi concentration camps, published in 1977, that brought renewed attention to all of the Spanish deportees. *Els catalans als camps nazis* remains the most comprehensive collection of survivor testimony about the deportation and victimization of Catalans and Spaniards by the Nazis to date. Roig also gave Spanish Nazi-camp survivors visibility on television and in the press, interviewing Neus Català in 1978 for the Catalan series *Personatges* and the Mauthausen survivor Joan de Diego in 1984 for the RTVE program *Los padres de nuestros padres*, as well as publishing articles in Catalan newspapers and magazines about Catalans deported to Nazi camps.¹³

A number of other ex-deportees added their voices to the growing corpus of survivor testimony in the latter half of the 1970s and the early 1980s. Jorge Semprún had published his seminal account of his deportation to Buchenwald in French as *Le grand voyage* in 1963; it was released in Spain as *El largo viaje* after Franco's death, in 1976. Amadeo Sinca Vendrell, a Mauthausen survivor, finally published his personalized historiography of the camp, *Lo que Dante no pudo imaginar*, in Spain in 1980, after releasing it first in France in 1946. Mercè Núñez Targa published an account of her imprisonment in Ravensbrück, *El carretó dels gossos: Una catalana a Ravensbrück*, in Barcelona in 1982. Neus Català followed with her authoritative compendium of testimony of Spanish women who fought in the French Resistance and were deported to Ravensbrück, *De la resistencia y la deportación*, in 1984.

A decade of silence followed the relative boom during the 1980s and 1990s in memory texts dedicated to the Spanish experience of the Nazi camps. By the late 1990s and well into the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, there was a resurgence in memoirs devoted to the Spanish deportation. Dozens of survivors – the majority of Mauthausen – published their life narratives covering the period of their incarceration and liberation from Nazi camps during this period (see Brenneis 2018, 188–205). In small printings supported by regional cultural institutions and municipal governments, these memoirs added to the overarching narrative of the Spanish deportation with the individual details, historical perspective and personal voice unique to each survivor. Although they were published on a relatively small scale, books such as José de Dios Amill's *La verdad sobre Mauthausen* (1995), Raimundo Suñer's *De Calaceite a Mauthausen: Memorias de Raimundo Suñer* (2006) and Marcial Mayans' *Testimoniatges i memòries (1936–1945): Una nit tan llarga* (2009) succeeded in maintaining the story of the Spaniards in Nazi camps as part of Spain's collective memory of its past.

By the time of the publication of *El impostor*, the history of the Spaniards in Nazi camps had become primarily the domain of journalists and documentary filmmakers, particularly given the diminished population of survivors. Montse Armengou and Ricard Belis's *El comboi dels 927*, which aired on Catalan television in 2004, was perhaps the most visible of a body of television documentaries treating the Spanish deportation during World War II. Other efforts to preserve the memory of the Spanish victims of Nazi aggression included collections of edited survivor testimony by the journalists Montserrat Llor

(*Vivos en el averno nazi*, 2014) and Carlos Hernández de Miguel (*Los últimos españoles de Mauthausen*, 2015), published at more or less the same time as *El impostor*. Hernández de Miguel also spun his work with Mauthausen survivors into the first Twitter narrative to address the Spanish experience of the camp, @deportado4443, the same year.¹⁴ An anachronistic survivor memoir based on the life of the author's uncle, Antonio Hernández, who spent four years in Mauthausen but never wrote his own life story, Hernández de Miguel's Twitter account integrates the interactive tools of social media – hyperlinks, YouTube videos, hashtags – with the sequential storytelling present in Rodríguez del Risco's serial account published nearly seventy years earlier.

To be sure, Cercas mentions many of these publications in passing in *El impostor*, as they were also some of the tools Enric Marco used to educate himself on how to look, act and think like a concentration camp survivor. Yet Cercas's failure to recognize this decades-long corpus of Spanish texts and films focused on the Spaniards in Nazi camps as crucial to a larger living movement of historical memory turns a blind eye to the legacy of those who, unlike Marco, actually lived the trauma of a Nazi camp. He largely ignores the narrative trail left behind by Spanish concentration camp victims, which are fundamental to their entry into a memory collective forged by World War II and will produce lasting repercussions in the Spanish imagination.

Legislating memory

The Law of Historical Memory, passed in 2007 under Rodríguez Zapatero's Socialist PSOE government, sought to codify how Spain would interact with its legacy of war and repression. The grassroots movement that spawned the recuperation of memories of the Spanish Civil War in the early 2000s with the disinterring of mass graves of Republicans and the appearance of obituaries in the Spanish press honoring long-dead victims of the war and dictatorship led directly to this legislation. It includes twenty-two articles addressing reparations, the creation of state archives, governmental support for further excavations of mass graves, the custody of public monuments, and issues of citizenship related to exiles and International Brigade volunteers, among other matters. However, the law mentions the deportation of Spanish nationals to Nazi camps only once. In the preamble, victims are identified as including "quienes perdieron su libertad, al padecer prisión, deportación, confiscación de sus bienes, trabajos forzados o internamientos en campos de concentración dentro o fuera de nuestras fronteras" (Ley 52/2007, 53,410). The deportation is not mentioned again in the following articles, remaining on the margins of a law designed to recognize all the victims and their memories of the war and dictatorship.

The law's glossing over of the very situation Marco feigned having suffered, however, does not concern Cercas. Rather, the author takes issue with the underlying governmental impetus itself. Cercas argues in *El impostor* that the Spanish government is not responsible for legislating history, as he wrote in a 2008 *El País* editorial days after the law came into effect, "porque la historia deben hacerla los historiadores, no los políticos, y la memoria la hace cada uno" (304). Indeed, he finds the government's actions embarrassing and quasi-totalitarian, but, admitting that the law must now be followed, he chastises the government for leaving its implementation to the courts.¹⁵ Cercas seems not to recognize his own contradiction: denouncing the government – and a Socialist government, at that,

writing that “hubiera sido bonito que lo hiciese [José María Aznar]”, the conservative Popular Party prime minister who preceded Rodríguez Zapatero – for mandating a new approach to the country’s historical memory while complaining that the government wasn’t following the letter of the law quickly enough (304). Cercas summarizes the sequence of events, spearheaded by the PSOE government, that took place in the years after 2008: the removal of Francoist statuary throughout the country, the alteration of streets and plazas commemorating prominent members of the Falange and Nationalist victories and the establishment of state funding for exhumations. To be sure, the author pinpoints the practical downfall of this legislation: state support of the Law of Historical Memory and its statutes dried up with the political turnover in 2011. Underwriting these continued historical memory activities was anathema to the PP (see Encarnación 2014, 170–174; Ferrándiz 2016, 244). Yet Cercas’s claim that other organizations, such as the Amical de Mauthausen, “han desaparecido o manotean en dique seco, sin fondos y quizá sin futuro”, is entirely inaccurate (306).

On the heels of the passage of the Law of Historical Memory, Cercas’s argument turns to his criticism of the “industria de la memoria”, which he labels a business, a “prostitución de la memoria” and of history, “el kitsch histórico; vale decir, la mentira histórica” (305). He plants Marco in the middle of this commercialization of memory as a figure who shuts down the nuance of remembering. Instead of Levi’s “gray zone”, Cercas argues, Marco offers the public “el discurso tranquilizador, empalagoso y embustero que la gente estaba deseando escuchar” (306). He claims that by 2014, “ya pocos se acuerdan de la llamada memoria histórica” (306), particularly after the economic crisis of 2009. The Law of Historical Memory, according to Cercas, “se reveló como ... una ley insuficiente y fría con las víctimas” (306). Cercas’s presumption that the Spanish public is more interested in a whitewashed version of their own history, one that the hyperbolic tales of Marco can provide, than the true-life accounts of their compatriots found in publications beginning in 1946, disparages the historical curiosity of his readers. It also casts a pall over the many ways the stories of Spaniards deported to Nazi camps have been told and retold over the decades. Certainly one approach the Spanish educational system could take to combat the widespread lack of clarity about the Holocaust and Spain’s role in World War II would be to provide students with greater access to the voices of those who suffered deportation, incarceration and torture at the hands of the Nazis with the implied consent of Franco.¹⁶

Although Cercas argues that the Spanish government’s involvement in the historical memory movement was at best ill placed and at worst quelled this grassroots activity altogether, one can argue that, if in the thirty years after Franco’s death the movement had stagnated to the extent that it had not been able to systematically exhume the victims’ graves, remove the last physical vestiges of Francoism from the Spanish landscape or establish state archives to foment continued study of the war and the dictatorship, perhaps the Law of Historical Memory was the last best hope to do so. Although Spain’s other preoccupations – the economic crash, the migratory crisis, governmental corruption, Catalan nationalism – have since come to the forefront of the public’s consciousness and the law is now teetering between being defunded by the PP and resurrected by the PSOE government that assumed control in 2018, the historical memory movement is still very much alive. One need only look to the continued prominence of groups like the Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica – which won,

among other accolades, the Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives/Puffin Award for Human Rights Activism in 2015 – and the Amical de Mauthausen, to the wealth of conferences and scholarly work devoted to Spain’s collective memory and to the continued artistic production trained on Spain’s past to see that the historical push has returned to what Cercas had hoped for in the first place: a grassroots memory movement mandated by the people, not the government. Without government backing, the movement may progress more slowly, it may be relegated to the back pages of the Spanish media, yet it endures – and has perhaps even become more internationally visible in the last decade.¹⁷

Beyond its inaccurate characterization of the historical memory movement, Cercas’s novel also contributes to the dehistoricization of Spain’s past, casting a spotlight on a false survivor instead of on one of the thousands of individuals whose tales are accurate in the eyes of historians and memory scholars alike. Cercas – the author/character’s self-doubts, anxieties and dismissals of Marco’s lies notwithstanding – bestows a legitimacy on Marco that he was not in a position to claim in any other way. Marco never wrote his own memoir; his false tale existed primarily in the Spanish media, an entity that Cercas blames for his subject’s rise to “rock star” fame (293). By casting *El impostor* as essentially a work of nonfiction, Cercas blurs the line between the testimony of the survivors of Nazi concentration camps and the many fictional attempts to capture the experiences of Nazi aggression.¹⁸ Cercas himself admits this point:

Esta clase de errores factuales tiene mucha más importancia de lo que parece, porque un solo dato ficticio convierte un relato real en ficción y, al modo del germen causante de una epidemia, puede contaminar de ficción todos los relatos que se derivan de él. (187)

That Cercas labels Marco “puro kitsch” does not so easily dismiss the prominence of the false survivor’s tale, now forever associated with a best-selling Spanish author. The “relato real” of *El impostor* – the web of invention constructed by Marco, its basis in the historical facts of Spain’s twentieth-century timeline, including its references to the experiences of Spanish Republicans deported to Nazi camps – thus becomes Marco’s lie, the true story of thousands infected by one man’s fiction. Cercas, consequently, has become what Faber (2015) calls “un traficante de verdades” whose weakest authority is trained on “la filosófica-ética” component of Marco’s story and its historical context. Under these conditions, Marco and Cercas are forever conjoined as impostor and imposture-trafficker.

The actual Spanish survivors of Nazi aggression have labored for decades to join their experiences to Spain’s collective memory of its Civil War and dictatorship. Their evolving body of narrative is a rebuttal to Cercas’s claim, demonstrating how, for these Spanish deportees, the so-called memory industry has been consequential in their entry into mainstream media. As the legal scholar Aragonese (2014) has written, “[L]a memoria colectiva, contra el parecer de Cercas, sí existe”, if only as a metaphor for a complex movement populated by real people doing grassroots work to revive the memory of those individuals and groups who have been lost to oblivion. By focusing on a false survivor and tolling the death knell for the historical memory movement, Cercas fails to see what has actually been happening in the hearts and minds of Spaniards. The preservation of the legacy of Spaniards deported to Nazi camps lives on, not because it has been decreed by the Spanish government, but because it is an integral part of Spain’s collective past. As the country continues to find its place in a wider European culture of memory of World War

II and the Holocaust, Spain can learn fortitude and the will to remember from these actual – not “so-called” – Spanish concentration camp survivors and victims.

Notes

1. Baer (2011, 100–105) traces the origins of this inclusion of non-Jewish victims in Spain’s official Holocaust commemorations since the year 2000.
2. Simó reports that 57.4 percent of the population has a basic understanding of the Holocaust (2016, 305).
3. For a comparative perspective of Spanish historical memory of the Civil War and the Holocaust, see Baer (2011) and Diner (2010).
4. For historical studies that investigate Franco’s involvement in the war and his relationship with Hitler, see Avni (1982); Rother (2005, 2010); Preston (1992); Pike (2008); and Payne (2008).
5. Haim Avni and Bernd Rother are authoritative sources on Spain’s implication in World War II, particularly as it pertains to Jewish refugees. A small number of Spanish diplomats – mainly in Hungary and France – operated against the Franco government’s explicit orders in providing Jews with passports or letters of protection that facilitated their escape from Nazi persecution: see Lisbona (2015); and Baer, de Tuesta, and Román (2008). A number of Spanish Republicans imprisoned in Nazi camps wrote or spoke about the violence against Jews they witnessed, including Raimundo Suñer Aguas (2006); Mercè Núñez Targa (1980); and Francesc Boix in his testimony at Nuremberg (see *Trial of the Major War Criminals* [1947]).
6. This despite attempts such as Montserrat Roig’s confrontation of Ramón Serrano Suñer in 1979 and a motion to apologize for the deportation of Spanish Republicans to Nazi camps in the Spanish parliament in 2015 (see Roig 1979; Torrús 2015).
7. Flossenbürg is frequently spelled without the umlaut in Spanish publications.
8. For a summary of Marco’s false claims and their reception in Spain, see Russell (2010, 102–105).
9. Bermejo and Checa (2004) revealed that Antonio Pastor had invented his imprisonment in Mauthausen.
10. See Brenneis (2014, 13–14) and Encarnación (2014, 27–30) for overviews of the notion of a “pact of silence”.
11. The publication of Pere Vives i Clavés’ collected letters, *Cartes des dels camps de concentració*, in 1972 motivated a number of later publications – Roig’s 1977 oral history included – but stopped short of portraying the experience of Mauthausen, as Vives i Clavé was killed by lethal injection shortly after he entered the camp.
12. These memoirs include *Los años rojos: Españoles en los campos nazis* (1974), *Yo fui ordenanza de los SS* (1976), and *Triángulo azul: Los republicanos españoles en Mauthausen, 1940–1945* (1979) with Manuel Razola. Constante published his fourth and final Mauthausen memoir, *Tras Mauthausen*, in 2007.
13. Many of these articles have been posthumously collected in Roig (2001).
14. Hernández de Miguel and Ensis used these tweets as the basis of a graphic novel, *Deportado 4443: Sus tuits ilustrados*, published in 2017.
15. Cercas notes that only a day after the law’s passage, Judge Baltasar Garzón filed an ultimately unsuccessful petition for information about the Spanish “disappeared” in order to tie Spain to international questions of human rights.
16. The Amical de Mauthausen, Triangle Blau, and Memorial Democràtic, three Catalonia-based organizations devoted to the preservation of the memory of Spaniards in Nazi camps, achieve this kind of nuanced learning experience by organizing visits to the Mauthausen Memorial commemoration activities in Austria specifically designed for groups of high school students.
17. The abundant coverage of the movement to disinter Federico García Lorca, reported prominently in the American press (see, for example, Anderson [2009] and Abend [2009]), along with high-profile residencies of the documentary filmmaker Montse Armengou (2016–2017), novelist Antonio Muñoz Molina (2009–2010) and Judge Baltasar Garzón (2004–2005) at New York

University's King Juan Carlos I Center, figure among evidence of the international prominence of Spain's historical memory movement.

18. In Spain, these fictional approaches include *El violí d'Auschwitz* (Anglada 1999), *Velódromo de invierno* (Salabert 2001), *El violinista de Mauthausen* (Pérez Domínguez 2009) and *Prisionero de Mauthausen* (Carbos and Cosnava 2011), all guilty, in my opinion, of dehistoricizing the Holocaust and/or the Spanish experience of the Nazi concentration camps to a greater or lesser degree.

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