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EUROPE

A Village Named for Spanish Dictator Tries to Erase Its Origins

As Spain prepares to exhume Franco, a place bearing his title moves to expunge him

By Pietro Lombardi and Oliver Griffin

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GUADIANA DEL CAUDILLO, Spain—A little over four decades since Gen. Francisco Franco's death, Spain is wrestling with the dictator's legacy, no more so than in this village named in his honor.

Laid out in neat rows of mostly one or two-storey whitewashed buildings, Guadiana del Caudillo bears Franco's self-imposed title of Caudillo, or Leader. Construction began in the late 1940s, in the first decade of Franco's 36-year dictatorship, alongside other villages also named after Franco or people close to him.



A sign at the entrance to Guadiana del Caudillo, Spain, in March shows an attempt to erase Franco's legacy in the village

PHOTO: SUSANA VERA/REUTERS

While Spain's highest court in September cleared the government in Madrid to exhume the long-dead dictator, a battle in this rural village has inflamed passions between those who would strip his title from its name and those who say it should remain.

“It’s a historic memory, it’s part of the town and part of its past,” said Rosa Vásquez, 44 years old, who has lived here her whole life. She said the long-running dispute has turned neighbor against neighbor. “It’s starting a war between people,” she said.

Mayor Francisco Moreno, a Socialist who campaigned to change the village’s name and erase the historical link to Franco, kicked off the process after his election in May.

The move sparked outrage in some quarters, including among local supporters of the far-right Vox party, which previously governed this village of roughly 2,500 people near the border with Portugal.



A visitor holds an image of Gen. Francisco Franco in October at the mausoleum near Madrid where he was buried after his death in 1975. PHOTO: ALFONSO RUIZ/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Anger has been fanned by the national government’s plans to move Franco’s body from a monumental mausoleum to a more modest cemetery, with exhumation set to begin by Thursday, according to the government.

Vox’s top leader Santiago Abascal called that decision a way for Spain’s Socialist government to strengthen its own support base ahead of national elections on Nov. 10 after a previous vote failed to deliver a government.

The Socialists’ campaign, Mr. Abascal said, is based on “desecrating graves, unearthing hatred, and questioning the legitimacy of the monarchy.”

Controversy over how to manage Franco’s legacy comes as support for the far-right increases. Support for Vox has climbed in opinion polls to more than 10%, mirroring inroads made by the right in countries from Hungary to the U.K.

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said that removing links to Franco was a necessary step to consolidating democracy in Spain, as has previously happened in Germany and Italy.

“We don’t talk about the Hitler Foundation or the Mussolini Foundation because they do not exist,” said Eduardo Ranz, a lawyer who is working to remove statues and other memorials to Franco.

There are nearly a dozen other Spanish towns or villages still named for Franco or people connected to him, said Mr. Ranz. There are thousands of plaques, street names or other commemorations that must be removed, he said.

Mr. Moreno, seated at a desk in his modest office overlooking Guadiana del Caudillo’s main square, makes a point of calling himself the mayor of Guadiana, dropping the Caudillo.

“There are people who lost their parents during the civil war and here is a place that pays homage to the person who killed them. It’s a bit much,” he said.

Changing the village’s name, however, is mostly about being in accordance with the law, he said. Spain’s 2007 Historical Memory Law condemned the Francoist state and ordered the removal of symbols associated with the regime.

During a consultation process for the planned name change, Mr. Moreno said, just 3% or 4% of voters registered in the village had voiced opposition.

He didn’t have a timeline for the official re-christening, citing potential for opposition forces to delay the process. The previous mayor, Antonio Pozo, who supports keeping the name, didn’t respond to requests for comment.



Franco's grave, near Madrid. The former dictator is set to be exhumed this week. PHOTO: OSCAR DEL POZO/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Some symbols of the Franco regime have already been removed. A plaque commemorating a visit to Guadiana del Caudillo by the dictator and a Francoist eagle of the kind also displayed in Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy were torn from the town hall early in October.

"I was lucky enough to be there and felt like justice was being done," said Ana Plaza, whose family has lived in Guadiana del Caudillo since her grandparents settled here when it was founded.

Ms. Plaza is a member of Guadiana Despierta, a citizen-led platform that is campaigning to end the village's connection with Franco once and for all.

"The Caudillo' is the same as 'the Fuhrer' in Germany," said Marco Antonio Carreño, another member of Guadiana Despierta. "Imagine there being a village in Germany called something-Fuhrer," he said.

"It's something I have found insulting all my life."

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