What is the historical significance of the Spanish "Generation '27"?



Portrait photo of Generation '27 (including Rafael Alberti, Federico García Lorca, Juan Chabás, Mauricio Bacarisse, Jorge Guillén, José Bergamín, Dámaso Alonso and Gerardo Diego). Taken in Seville, 16th December 1927¹

Word Count: 2192

¹Rondón. J. M (2017), *Misterios en torno a la foto del 27* (Available at: https://cronicaglobal.elespanol.com/letra-global/cronicas/misterios-foto-generacion-27 107105 102.html, Accessed 27/08/2021)

Identification and evaluation of sources

The Spanish 'Generation27' is a group of poets that came together between 1923 and 1927 that tackled social issues through their art. This investigation will focus on the following question: What is the historical significance of the Spanish "Generation '27"? To keep the scope of this study manageable, I will investigate Spain's political and social conditions prior to, during, and after the Civil War, while focusing on the role of Generation '27 poets. Aside from the two sources chosen for evaluation, this study will make use of a range of other sources. Some of these include Federico García Lorca's play; *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*², Miguel Hernandez's poem; Nanas de Cebolla (Onion Lullabies)³ and a passage of Ian Gibson's biography book on Lorca; *Vida, pasión y muerte de Federico Garcia Lorca*⁴

Source 1: Photograph of Generation 27 in Los Galayos (1936) – Appendix 1

The first source selected for detailed evaluation is a photograph taken of Generation '27's last dinner together in the bar, now known as, Los Galayos (Appendix 1). This source is particularly relevant to my investigation because it visually shows the goodwill and friendship amongst the men and women of the group. The origin of this source is of an anonymous photographer, who captures the dinner held to commemorate the publication of Luis Cernuda's 5th poetry book. That night was April 29, 1936. From this, we can deduce that its purpose is to capture a cherished moment for the group. On this basis, it is valuable

² Malone, R (10/04/2011) *The House of Bernarda Alba Study Guide*. Classic Theatre [Online] (Available at: https://www.classictheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The-House-of-Bernarda-Alba-Study-Guide.pdf, Accessed 28/08/2021)

³ Emeritus. F, *Miguel Hernandez – Nanas de la Cebollas lyrics + English translation* [Online] (Available at: https://lyricstranslate.com/en/nanas-de-la-cebolla-onion-lullabies.html#songtranslation, Accessed 27/08/2021)

⁴ Gibson, I (2020), *Vida, pasion y muerte de Federico Garcia Lorca*. Spain: DEBOLSILLO. Page 536
⁵Adrian Delgado (03/05/2017). *La última cena de la Generación del 27*. ABC

https://www.abc.es/plan-b/comer/abci-ultima-cena-generacion-27-201705031959 noticia.html

Accessed 27/08/2021

for this investigation because it provides visual evidence for historians to compare the membership of the group before many of these were executed or exiled: for example, Lorca was killed, Hernández died in jail, and others (Alberti, Bergamin, Cernuda...) exiled to countries like Mexico or Argentina. Nevertheless, the source does have some limitations for this particular investigation, as this photograph does not include every key member of the group. Miguel Hernández, Concha Méndez, Josefina de la Torre and several others are not present here. Perhaps this even misleadingly understates the importance of the non-present members, as it excludes them from this valuable historical evidence.

Source 2: Extract from Alberti. R, Redoble lento por la muerte de Stalin (1953) – Appendix 2

The second source selected for detailed evaluation is a poem Rafael Alberti wrote during his exile in Argentina to commemorate Joseph Stalin's death in 1953; Redoble lento por la muerte de Stalin.⁶ This source is particularly relevant to my investigation because it demonstrates how the exiled poets continued to create art expressing their political views, without fear of censorship or incarceration. ⁷ The origin of this source is Rafael Alberti, a poet from G27 and also a member of the Communist Party in Spain. From this, we can deduce that the purpose of this source is to express through literature his sorrows towards the death of the Communist leader, Stalin. On this basis, it is valuable for this investigation because it demonstrates the ideologies for which many members of Generation '27 stood for. Alberti directly criticises the rate at which Republicans were being incarcerated under

⁶Alberti. R (1953), *Redoble lento por la muerte de Stalin* (Available at: http://archivo.juventudes.org/rafael-alberti/redoble-lento-por-la-muerte-de-stalin Accessed 27/08/2021)

⁷ Togores. L.E (14/01/2021) *Rafael Alberti, Comunista antes que poeta*. La Razón. [Online] (Available at: https://www.larazon.es/memoria-e-historia/20210114/za662kzp5rgcbnwzowysy6bcvm.html, Accessed 27/08/2021)

Franco; "And in the prisons of Spain and in its most lost towns. They will say that you have not died". Nevertheless, the source does have some limitations because this poem provides the personal political beliefs of one individual. For a full understanding, we would have to investigate the beliefs of other poets.

Investigation

It has been 85 years since the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and 46 years since the death of Francisco Franco. After decades of fascist dictatorship, a new generation of government officials decided it was better to face the past than bury it – this included Generation '27. This investigation will firstly look into the direct significance of these intellectual poets' lives and deaths, as well as the short- and long-term effects of their influence on society. Secondly, a broader conclusion will be drawn based on the debate surrounding the 'historical memory law' and whether the lives of G27 suggests that history should be buried or confronted.

The immediate cultural importance of Generation '27 was that the theme of their poetry reflected the developing divisions occurring in Spanish society, while also advocating a younger, more progressive trends of art. Gerardo Diego (poet) described the different equilibria that characterises their poetry; "Between the intellectual and sentimental, between the purity and revolution, between the minority and the majority, between the cultured and the popular, between the universal and the Spanish, and, finally, between the tradition and renewal." Generation '27 faced a period of political and social upheaval. The group first met in December 1927 (hence the name "Generation '27) at the Athenaeum of Seville to commemorate the third centenary of the death of Luis de Góngora (poet). They shared passions and ways of thinking on how poetry should be written. They approached poetry through a humanised, and sentimental perspective.

⁸ Paco (2015) *La Generación del 27: características, autores y obras esenciales*. Gobierno de Canarias [Online] (Available at: https://www3.gobiernodecanarias.org/medusa/ecoblog/oaloper/files/2015/11/Generacion-del-27.pdf, Accessed 28/08/2021)

In a political sense, the reaction to their work highlights how increasingly reactionary the right-wing of Spanish politics was becoming. The Second Republic was proclaimed on April 14, 1931. This new government highly encouraged performance art - "La Barraca" is an example of such support. Formed in 1931 and directed by Eduardo Ugarte and Federico Garía Lorca, La Barraca was a travelling theatre group that visited small villages and cities across Spain. Society was intrigued by the art, as the majority had never witnessed a play before. Ian Gibson (an Irish historian), however, points out in his biography book on Lorca that; "the right-wing wanted to convince themselves that La Barraca was not simply a cultural initiative whose mission was to offer plays to the people, but a propagandist machine that serve the interests of "Marxist", "Jewish" and "communist" agitators determined to bring Spain the Red Revolution."9Ian Gibson had written other books concerning the Spanish Civil War, meaning that this source is particularly valuable, as it provides key pieces of information on how extreme political thinking in Spain had become. Nonetheless, it has some limitations because Gibson provides us with a rather biased research into Lorca's life, as he is sympathetic towards the Republican side of history. As well as giving information on right-wing opinion, Generation 27 additionally, in a political sense, helps historians understand the preoccupations of the left, as they addressed a variety of social and political issues, including feminism, which was particularly prominent in Lorca's work. His popular play: La Casa de Bernarda Alba (1945), is an example of that. Lorca targets topics like family honour, authority, and oppression towards women. 10 The storyline shows the hardships society dumped on women in villages. Aside from male artists creating

⁹ Gibson, I (2020), Vida, pasion y muerte de Federico Garcia Lorca. Spain: DEBOLSILLO. Page 536

¹⁰ Malone, R (10/04/2011) *The House of Bernarda Alba Study Guide*. Classic Theatre [Online] (Available at: https://www.classictheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The-House-of-Bernarda-Alba-Study-Guide.pdf, Accessed 28/08/2021)

feminist work, Generation '27 included a group of intelligent women known as "Las Sinsombreros". They were around 10 women, some of them being Concha Méndez, Margarita Manso, Maruja Mallo and Rosa Chacel. They who challenged the sexist norms in society, taking a firm stand against them. Méndez, jokingly, expressed; "every time I get serious, I feel like I'm growing a moustache, and I tell myself: what barbarity!". Although they tend to be left out of conversation, they were a crucial step in the Spanish feminist movement, and show the nature of Generation 27.

Ultimately, political tensions and polarisations erupted into a civil war in 1936, meaning that the right wing took direct action against the left – force and violence was used to silence the voices of Generation 27, leaving them in a vulnerable position. The group disintegrated after the tragic execution of Lorca for homosexuality and for being a Republican. Other poets, like Miguel Hernandez, chose to fight in the Popular Front. However, Hernandez was persecuted in 1939 and received a death sentence. During his time in prison, he wrote several poems, such as *Onion Lullabies*¹², which were heartfelt verses dedicated to his son and wife. His wife had sent him letters describing how she had been feeding onion and bread to their child; thus, the title *Onion Lullabies*. Here, Hernandez expresses feelings of loneliness, and longing for freedom; "Your laughter makes me free, gives me wings. Takes loneliness away, rips jail away from me". Nonetheless, most members of Generation '27 chose to exile in other countries. Some of them continued to create art in opposition to the regime; however, in Spain, these voices were completely silenced and viewed as a national threat.

¹¹ Balló, T (2016), *Las Sinsombrero: Las pensadoras y artistas olvidadas de la generación del 27*. Spain: S.L.U Espasa Libros.

¹² Emeritus. F, *Miguel Hernandez – Nanas de la Cebollas lyrics + English translation* [Online] (Available at: https://lyricstranslate.com/en/nanas-de-la-cebolla-onion-lullabies.html#songtranslation, Accessed 27/08/2021)

In the long term, however, subsequent debate over how the fate of G27 should be commemorated reveals the deep fault-lines that continue to torment the modern-day Spain. Ultimately, censorship continued after Franco's death. 'The Pact of Forgetting' was a political agreement between parties to avoid confronting the actions and war crimes of the Franco regime, ensuring that the post-Franco Spanish society would transition smoothly into a democratic system¹³, meaning that society continued to evolve, and past actions were not faced.

An issue that directly targets the ongoing dispute on war victims is the recent debate over the exhumation of Lorca's grave. Although Federico's exact body has never been found, it is said that it rests in a mass grave in Viznar, Granada. Lorca's family highly encouraged the preservation of it to provide a place where individuals can visit to remember the unjustified murders of Franco. Lorca's niece, Laura, expressed in a Michael Portillo's documentary the following: "we would prefer to preserve the mass grave as it is [...] we would like the place to be protected as a place of historical memory". However, the families of two other men who are also buried in this mass grave wish the excavate their remains. Although they accept any outcome, Lorca's family is a strong supporter of preserving such place to commemorate victims. However, we can also understand how other individuals would rather move forwards and commemorate victims through other means.

To conclude, the Generation 27 significance in life was nurtured by the left-leaning

ideologies of the Second Republic, which allowed them to publicly produce expressive art.

The intense polarisation of politics in Spain encouraged the extreme right to battle these

¹³ Aleksandra Hadzelek (9/18/12) *Spain's'pact of silence' and the Removal of Franco's Statues* [Online] (Available at: http://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p200721/pdf/ch091.pdf Accessed 29/08/2021)

¹⁴ Michael Portillo (2009) *Digging Up the Dead*. BBC Spanish Civil War [Online] (Available at: (974) Michael

Portillo: Digging Up The Dead (BBC 2009 Spanish Civil War) - YouTube Accessed 21/09/2021)

artists, meaning that G27's significance in life resulted in them producing art as a direct response against the nationalists' actions of hate. The schism between the left and right erupted into a Civil War, resulting in the death and persecution of these intellectuals.

Therefore, in the short-term, their revolutionary expression was silenced. This had a long-term effect, as the 1975 'Pact of Silence' further censored the war crimes against these artists. Moreover, Lorca's exhumation proves the debate evoking around the prime means of commemorating these wronged individuals. However, it is important to bring to light these past events, as G27 depicts very vividly the Republican struggle and the silence war crimes.

Reflection

One issue raised relating to the challenges faced by historians is the lessons one can draw from history. This issue manifested itself as I was investigating the exhumation of Lorca's grave, as I thought about a historian's duty to analyse whether past actions should be faced or kept silent. However, in this specific case, I was confused on whether or not historians had a say in for Lorca's exhumation. I tackled this issue by researching Ian Gibson's opinion on the matter. He stated, "The Lorca family is a disaster. Laura has even said that she does not want her uncle's remains to be found". Ultimately, here we see how a historian's personal views clash with those of the victim's family, as Lorca's family wanted to preserve it as it was. Through this process, I reached the conclusion that different lessons can be learnt through different perspectives. In this case, Gibson believes Lorca's remains should be extracted, meanwhile Laura Lorca wants to use his 'supposed' resting place to remember Republican victims.

A second issue raised by the study relating to the methods used by historians is the values and limitations of using art as a source. This issue manifested itself as I was analysing Lorca's play; Casa de Bernarda Alba and Hernandez's poem; Onion Lullaby. I found it difficult to interpret such sources from a historical standpoint. I tackled this issue by altering my approach to the sources. I concentrated on its origin, the topics discussed, and how it affected society. That allowed me to understand the level of impact of such piece. I reached the conclusion that art is a type of source historians must depend on, as it depicts historical events from a humane standpoint. Professor Terrie Epstein argues that through the usage of

¹⁵ Laura García Lorca (2019) *A vueltas con la búsqueda de Lorca*. GranadaHoy [Online] (Accessible at: https://www.granadahoy.com/granada/Busqueda-Lorca-Tribuna-Laura-Garcia-Lorca-criticas-lan-Gibson 0 1355265109.html Accessed 23/09/2021)

art in the teaching of history, students are able to develop a more "human-like" knowledge, compared to the analytical one gained through classroom textbooks. 16

A third and last issue raised by this study relating to the challenge faced by historians is approaching a subject with scientific objectivity but also trying to impart meaningful lessons and judgements to the reader. This issue manifested itself as I was covering the "Pact of Silence". I believe it was a mistaken decision, therefore I found it difficult to incorporate arguments in support of the opposing viewpoint. I tackled this issue by, from a factual standpoint, understanding the origins and reasons that led to that decision to be made. Through that, I was able to justify the context without necessarily having to agree with the actions. Through this process, I reached the conclusion that biased opinions create tensions that affect the discipline of history.

_

¹⁶ Suh, Y (2013) *Past Looking: Using Arts as Historical Evidence in Teaching History*. Old Dominion University. [Online] (Accessible at: https://www.socstrpr.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/MS_06372_Spring2013.pdf Accessed 23/09/2021)

Appendix 1



Appendix 2

REDOBLE LENTO POR LA MUERTE DE STALIN (Rafael Alberti)

Ι

Por encima del mar, sobre las cordilleras, a través de los valles, los bosques y los ríos, por sobre los oasis y arenales desérticos, por sobre los callados horizontes sin límites y las deshabitadas regiones de las nieves

Adrian Delgado (03/05/2017). *La última cena de la Generación del 27*. ABC (Available at: https://www.abc.es/plan-b/comer/abci-ultima-cena-generacion-27-201705031959_noticia.html Accessed 27/08/2021)

¹⁷ Banquet offered to Luis Cernuda (presiding over the table) in Los Galayos, then Casa Rojo, on April 29th, 1938. Seated, from left to right: Eugenio Imaz, (unidentified), Helena Cortesina, Manuel Fontanals (hidden behind Cortesina), Santiago Ontañon, Maria Antonieta Agenaar, Conche Mendez, La Argentinita and JE Morena Baez. Standing, from left to right: Vicente Aleixandre, Federico Garcia Lorca, Pedro Salinas, Rafael Alberti, Pablo Neruda, José Bergamin, Manuel Altolaguire, Maria Teresa Leon and Victor Maria Cortezo – F. Federico García Lorca

va pasando la voz, nos va llegando

tristemente la voz que nos lo anuncia.

José Stalin ha muerto.

A través de las calles y las plazas de los

grandes poblados,

por los anchos caminos generales y

perdidos senderos,

por sobre las atónitas aldeas, asombradas campiñas,

planicies solitarias, subterráneos

corredores mineros, olvidadas

islas y golpeados litorales desnudos

va pasando la voz, nos va llegando

tristemente la voz que nos lo anuncia.

José Stalin ha muerto.

Va cruzando las horas oscuras de la

noche,

la madrugada, el día, los extensos

crepúsculos,

todo lo austral y nórdico que

comprende la tierra,

y no hay razas, no hay pueblos, no hay rincones,

no hay partículas mínimas del mundo

en donde no penetre la voz que va llegando,

la voz que tristemente nos lo anuncia.

José Stalin ha muerto.

ΙΙ

(A dos voces)

1. Padre y maestro y camarada:

quiero llorar, quiero cantar.

Que el agua clara me ilumine,

que tu alma clara me ilumine

en esta noche en que te vas.

2. Se ha detenido un corazón.

Se ha detenido un pensamiento.

Un árbol grande se ha doblado.

Un árbol grande se ha callado.

Mas ya se escucha en el silencio.

1. Padre y maestro y camarada:

solo parece que está el mar.

Pero las olas se levantan,

pero en las olas te levantas

y riges ya en la inmensidad.

2. Cerró los ojos la firmeza,

la hoja más limpia del acero.

Sobre su tierra se ha dormido.

Sobre la Tierra se ha dormido.

Mas ya se yergue en el silencio.

1. Padre y maestro y camarada:

vuela en lo oscuro un gavilán.

Pero en tu barca una paloma,

pero en tu mano una paloma

se abre a los cielos de la paz.

2. Callan los yunques y martillos.

El campo calla y calla el viento.

Mudo su pueblo le da vela.

Mudos sus pueblos le dan vela.

Mas ya camina en el siencio.

1. Padre y maestro y camarada:

fuertes nos dejas, Mariscal.

Como en las puntas de la estrella,

como en las puntas de tu estrella

arde en nosotros la unidad.

2. Vence el amor en este día.

El odio ladra prisionero.

La oscuridad cierra los brazos.

La eternidad abre los brazos.

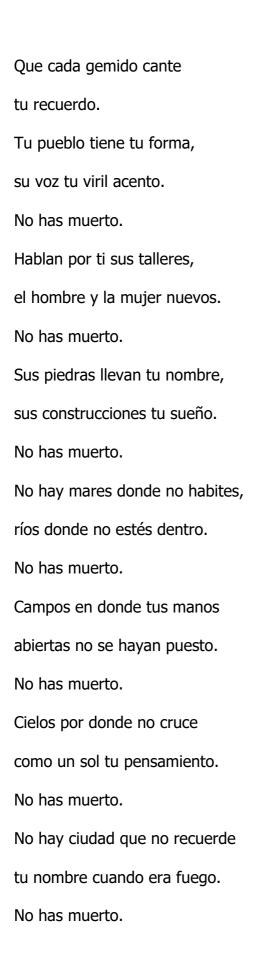
Y escribe un nombre en el silencio.

III

No ha muerto Stalin. No has muerto.

Que cada lágrima cante

tu recuerdo.



Laureles de Stalingrado siempre dirán que no has muerto. No has muerto.

Los niños en sus canciones

te cantarán que no has muerto.

Los niños pobres del mundo,

que no has muerto.

Y en las cárceles de España

y en sus más perdidos pueblos

dirán que no has muerto.

Y los esclavos hundidos,

los amarillos, los negros,

los más olvidados tristes,

los más rotos sin consuelo,

dirán que no has muerto.

La Tierra toda girando,

que no has muerto.

Lenin, junto a ti dormido,

también dirá que no has muerto.

Buenos Aires, 9 de marzo de 1953¹⁸

¹⁸ Alberti. R (1953), *Redoble lento por la muerte de Stalin* (Available at: http://archivo.juventudes.org/rafael-alberti/redoble-lento-por-la-muerte-de-stalin Accessed 26/09/2021)

Bibliography

Adrian Delgado (03/05/2017). La última cena de la Generación del 27. ABC [Online]

https://www.abc.es/plan-b/comer/abci-ultima-cena-generacion-27-

201705031959 noticia.html Accessed 27/08/2021

Alberti. R (1953), Redoble lento por la muerte de Stalin (Available at:

http://archivo.juventudes.org/rafael-alberti/redoble-lento-por-la-muerte-de-stalin Accessed 27/08/2021)

Aleksandra Hadzelek (9/18/12) Spain's'pact of silence' and the Removal of Franco's Statues

[Online] (Available at: http://press-

files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/p200721/pdf/ch091.pdf Accessed 29/08/2021)

Balló, T (2016), Las Sinsombrero: Las pensadoras y artistas olvidadas de la generación del 27. Spain: S.L.U Espasa Libros.

Emeritus. F, Miguel Hernandez – Nanas de la Cebollas lyrics + English translation [Online]

(Available at: https://lyricstranslate.com/en/nanas-de-la-cebolla-onion-

<u>lullabies.html#songtranslation</u>, Accessed 27/08/2021)

García Lorca. F (1947) La casa de Bernarda Alba

García Lorca. L (2019) *A vueltas con la búsqueda de Lorca*. GranadaHoy [Online] (Accessible at: https://www.granadahoy.com/granada/Busqueda-Lorca-Tribuna-Laura-Garcia-Lorca-

criticas-lan-Gibson 0 1355265109.html Accessed 23/09/2021)

Gibson, I (2020), Vida, pasion y muerte de Federico Garcia Lorca. Spain: DEBOLSILLO

Hernández. M (1958) Cancionero Y Romancero De Ausencias

Luis E. Togores (14/01/2021) Rafael Alberti, Comunista antes que poeta. La Razón. [Online]

(Available at: https://www.larazon.es/memoria-e-

historia/20210114/za662kzp5rgcbnwzowysy6bcvm.html, Accessed 27/08/2021)

Malone, R (10/04/2011) The House of Bernarda Alba Study Guide. Classic Theatre [Online]

(Available at: https://www.classictheatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/The-House-of-

Bernarda-Alba-Study-Guide.pdf, Accessed 28/08/2021)

Paco (2015) La Generación del 27: características, autores y obras esenciales. Gobierno de Canarias [Online] (Available at:

https://www3.gobiernodecanarias.org/medusa/ecoblog/oaloper/files/2015/11/Generacion
-del-27.pdf, Accessed 28/08/2021)

Portillo, M (2009) *Digging Up the Dead*. BBC Spanish Civil War [Online] (Available at: (974) Michael Portillo: Digging Up The Dead (BBC 2009 Spanish Civil War) - YouTube Accessed 21/09/2021)

Rondón, J.M, Misterios en torno a la foto del 27 [Online] (Available at:

https://cronicaglobal.elespanol.com/letra-global/cronicas/misterios-foto-generacion-

27 107105 102.html, Accessed 27/08/2021)

Suh, Y (2013) Past Looking: Using Arts as Historical Evidence in Teaching History. Old

Dominion University. [Online] (Accessible at: https://www.socstrpr.org/wp-

content/uploads/2013/09/MS 06372 Spring2013.pdf Accessed 23/09/2021)