

GALICIA, 1936-2020

NINE CROSSES BEND: ONE VILLAGE'S RESISTANCE TO FALANGIST BARBARISM



In 1936 the Civil Guard and Falangist thugs from Baiona murdered nine innocent anarchists in retaliation for the death of one of their own. Under Francoist rule, the neighbours marked the killing in a ditch. One example of the lingering subversion of remembrance.

Nine crosses scratched into the dirt. Baredo, the bend in the road, a place of ill repute. Seven seamen, a blacksmith and a farmhand. Anarchists, innocents, murdered. Due to the thirst for revenge of a heartless Civil Guard corporal and some Falangist goons. The village was silenced but always refused to forget. Over a forty-year period they had a marker in the ditch to commemorate the killings.

The locals would scratch it into the earth and the *fuerzas vivas* who paradoxically sowed death made it their business to erase the horizontal line intersected by nine vertical lines immediately. This went on time and again throughout the endless night of Francoist rule. An example of symbolic resistance and a subversive memory that has endured to this day.

These days, those carved crosses where republicans from Baiona and Panxon fell in the Val Miñor area of Pontevedra, are dried blood-red crucifixes daubed on a rocky verge beside kilometer 58 on the Pontevedra-Camposancos road. Somebody has been daubing the rocks red, the way other hands previously used to carve into the soil. *A volta dos nove*, they call it – Nine-Men's Bend.

The murder of these seafaring CNT members was revenge taken by blue-shirts from Baiona. In a raid on the house of an elderly blind man nursed by a housekeeper in her seventies, Falangist Luis Refojos was shot by '*los ineses*' who then attempted, unsuccessfully, to escape the scene. Both were killed; so too was the house-keeper, for sheltering the *fluxidos* (on-the-runs).

“Every day the housekeeper would fetch him the *Faro de Vigo* newspaper and do a *lot* of shopping for a man on his own. And what did he want with a newspaper anyway, with him not being able to see?”, was one remark made by the witnesses in the documentary *A volta dos nove*. Both these facts raised the suspicions of the forces of repression who were out to lay hands on brothers Luis and Pepe López, whose progressive ideas made them targets following the coup in 1936.

Luis was a socialist. Pepe had been deeply involved in the anarchist movement in Argentina where he had been active in the FORA, written for *La Protesta* and set up the very first drivers’ union in Buenos Aires. Deported, both of them, following the army coup that hoisted General José Félix Uriburu into power, they went home to Galicia where the younger of the brothers wrote for *Solidaridad Obrera*.

“He wrote very up-to-the-minute articles about co-operativism, because he was a co-operator himself. He had a poultry farm. And designed an irrigation scheme. And taught Esperanto in order to spread the use of a world language. He looked upon education as the most important element of any human being. He lived a modest life after they confiscated all his assets. And in mid-winter, he would go around in patched clothing”, says Antonio Caeiro, the director of *A Volta dos nove*. That documentary tries to revive memories of those murdered on that bend in Baredo and, in passing, the killing of the two López brothers, the hunt for whom triggered the killings. “I delved into their story because hardly anything was known about them”, the director of the *tristeología* (this being the name given to the sad trilogy, alongside *Aillados* and *A memoria nos tempos de wolfram*). “The two brothers were much loved. So too was their mother, Inés.” Hence their nickname, *los Ineses*.

Like a lot of the locals from the Val Miñor comarca, Caeiro had a fuzzy notion about the murders. One oral account that had captivated him ever since he was a boy had more to do with tragic than magic realism. “After their deaths, crosses scratched into the dirt began to appear, up until the building of the highway led to their being daubed on a rock in red paint, opposite the sculpture by the artist Fernando Casás that commemorates them today.”

There were more vicious killings in Galicia, albeit that the scratches marking this execution site ensured that this dark tale-turned-legend continued to be told. Who drew the crosses? In answer to that people suggested family members, the dairy maids that used the road, one woman who had lost her mind, but not her sense of justice ... Hypotheses bordered on the supernatural: some said that there were nine hands behind the crosses.

“It is the remembrance of memory: tell others that something happened here. An unspoken social resistance and a very effective one too”, Caeiro explains: and he mentions something else that makes for an even more dramatic scenario. It is not as if the butchers had travelled far in order to avoid the bloodshed’s poisoning relations between acquaintances. “Folk from Baiona killing Baiona folk. People from Van Miñor killing people from Val Miñor. Neighbour killing neighbour.”

This singular circumstance stripped away the anonymity: everybody *knew* who the killers had been. And whilst silence prevailed for a long time, with only the crosses to speak for them, with the passage of time a few of the widows or orphans began to point them out. “Once the relatives lost their fear, the wall of impunity sheltering the killers came tumbling down”, the documentary director points out; he collected Manuela Lijó’s courageous testimony.

One man, on his way to see his in-laws in Sabarís, used to cycle past her house and would call out that he was going to run over one of her hens. Until she mentioned the anecdote and was told by her mother: “Don’t talk to that fellow. He’s the one who killed your father.” Within days, he called out to

her again: “One of these days I’m going to kill one of your hens.” To which she retorted: “It’s all the same to me, since you killed my father ...” He never passed that way again.

The granddaughter of another of the victims, Generoso Valverde, recalls that the family never spoke of the matter, except among themselves: “My grandmother was just waiting for Franco to die so that she could go herself. And when the dictator did go, she passed away too”, Rosa Mari admitted to *Público*. She was critical of the dire straits in which Generoso’s widow, Aurelia had been left, with all those mouths to be fed.

Her husband had been a 37 year old seaman living in Panxón. “They had nothing and she was left with six children to support. They were forced to move away to Uruguay because they were marked down as communists, especially my father, and because of how tight things were, financially”, Rosa Mari Valverde explains, mentioning that her grandfather had done nothing that might have justified his being jailed. “The priest turned him in because he was an atheist, didn’t go to Mass and didn’t baptize any of his kids. That stuck in his craw.”

The repression

On 24 July 1936 the Army entered the Val Miñor comarca and a lot of people took to the hills, although some of them would eventually hand themselves in. “Hardly anyone got away. The ones that became turncoats did. Overnight, they donned a Falangist shirt and shaved their heads. But the men of ideas did not change and that pissed them off. They were the ones with the guns”, recalls Vicente Valverde, Generoso’s son.

The *Ineses*, on the other hand, remained on-the-run and took refuge in the home of the old blind man where Dolores Samuelle aka *Perfecta* (71) was housekeeper: the Falangists murdered her too. In the course of the raid, one of the *Ineses* was fatally wounded. The López brothers did not get far, although Luis tried to leap the wall of the cemetery in Sabarís where his mother’s remains repose.

And that was where the brothers were also to be buried, but even underground, the contempt carried on: three corpses packed one on top of the other, with *Perfecta* sandwiched in the middle.

“Refojo’s death was the trigger for the brutality and the craving for revenge, the idea of teaching people a lesson and terror”, wrote Xosé Luis Vilar and Carlos Méixome in *A Volta dos nove: notas para unha historia do represión franquista no Val Miñor*, published in the history review *Murguía*. Corporal Manuel González Pena and his henchmen tried to snatch the Villafines brothers (leading republicans) from the jail in Vigo, as Agustín Villafines had been mayor in Baiona and, together with his brother José, had tried in vain to stall the rebels’ take-over of the town.

However, a Civil Guard officer refused to hand the prisoners over and so the gang headed for a handball court where some other detainees were being held. There they loaded nine of the men into a van; these were to be tortured in Baiona and later murdered on the side of a nearby highway. There were no eye-witnesses, although the gunshots were heard by seamen working out to sea and by some labourers making their way to a quarry by cart.

“God knows how they killed them and what they did to them before that”, we hear in the documentary in which it is stated that a women found some fingers at the location, wrapping them in a handkerchief and burying them in the cemetery. “We were on our way to school and along came a lorry; a man covered in blood got off and told us: *Fetch us a bucket of water to wash ourselves off; we’ve just killed nine pigs*. Off we went to see the nine pigs, which turned out to be nine men”, Liberata González recounts.

She knew the only thug that she managed to spot, as he belonged to “the richest family in Baiona”. Eugenio Rodriguez also points a finger at the perpetrators of this and other crimes, be they the masterminds or the executioners, “All of those who set about killing folk were big wheels. There wasn’t a poor person among them as the latter had all gone on the run”. Vilar and Méixome note that in August 1936 “mass arrests” were replaced by “selective murders designed to strike fear into the population.” The aim was “the elimination of social leaders loyal to the Republic.”

Symbolic resistance

Herminio Ramos, who was mayor in Baiona after the coup d’état, recorded in his diary for 16 October 1936: “Today nine dead men who turned out to be residents of this town and described as Red prisoners from Vigo turned up dead on the side of the road out beyond the San Roque fountain and they were buried in the cemetery. Also laid to rest there was the Falangist Luis Refojos who died from injuries inflicted by the López brothers.”

Ramos referred to the burial as an “event” on account of the “many wreaths” and the turn-out by Falangists and Balilla youth groups from Vigo, Cangas, A Guarda and Sabarís. It was a matter of some note, invoking the complete victory that the rebels sought”, writes Ana Cabana in *Sobrellevar la vida. Memorias de resistencia y resistencias de las memorias al franquismo*.

“Killing the enemy off physically was not enough; he had to be annihilated psychologically as well. The absence of the usual rites and protocols at the time of burial [see the ungodly fashion in which the *Ineses* and the blind man’s housekeeper were buried] was one way of doing this, a style of repression that was added on to depriving him of life through physical repression”, adds Cabana, a historian from the University of Santiago who, in her investigation, refers to “equally allegorical devices to which communities turned in attempting to alleviate things.”

Over four decades the crosses were a token of symbolic resistance, not merely in tribute to the victims but also in defiance of the repressors. “Luis Refojo was a louse. Corporal Pena, well, don’t get me started as to what he was. Civil Guard Baltasar, another dog. And *el Negro* from Sabarís, the self-appointed Falangist who was his best mate, set out to kill them”, Eugenio Rodriguez says of the killers of the *Ineses*.

After they were cornered, one of the López brothers decided to surrender but he was shown no mercy and was shot in the head. Once he was dead, they kicked his body and dragged it outside like a dog.” Others who appear in the documentary not only have things to say about the attackers but make it clear that they were shunned by the community, in the sort of move which – along with failure to attend their funerals – mentioned by Cabana, author of *Entre a resistencia e a adaptación. A sociedade rural galega no franquismo*.

“The failure to wish someone a good death and to wish the deceased eternal life was tantamount to a very important rift, as such things were deeply embedded in their behaviour”, the historian explained in her report on peaceful resistance in the Galician countryside. Thus Manuela Lijó refers to the repressors from Baiona as “four villains” and recalls her mother saying: “You are going to make them pay.” And make them pay she did. Because that fellow who was forever taunting my mother came to a gruesome end. What is more, they all came to the end she wished on them.”

Corporal Pena “promoted to lieutenant in recognition of his cruelty” died of cancer, aged 65. Some of the killers suffered painful illnesses, others were involved in road accidents and a lot of them died of cirrhosis as alcoholics, according to Caeiro who recalls one demented sailor, overcome by memories

of the past and starting to scream from his boat that the dead were after him and rowing away as fast as he could to escape the repression in which he had been involved.

“Divine justice does not come into it. Murder should lead to a trial, not to some sort of heaven-sent ailment. It would lead to some of them catching diseases but others enjoyed a steely health immunity”, is Caeiro’s view, although he reckons that their criminality must have weighed heavily on their minds.

“When it came to harassment, they were real thugs and had no scruples, albeit that they had the odd tinge of remorse. They were still seeing the victims’ families and a lot of them took to the drink, as things must have been unbearable for them.”

Cabana stresses that in Baiona and elsewhere “there were plenty of visible indications of repudiation of the power structures that had been imposed by force”. So those nine crosses were a form of “dissent” akin to symbolic resistance and betokened what the historian from the University of Santiago terms “subversive memory”. It was the way that the defeated had of generating myths to refresh “the symbolic universe proper to rural communities” and indicating their rejection.

Double oblivion

Despite the occasional notion to the contrary, the historian Carlos Méixome dismisses the possibility that there was no handing-on memory “It was there, but it was hidden”. On other occasions it was furtive, as in the case of the crosses that started to appear on that bend in Baredo. “The Falangists or those who felt that they were being challenged made it their business to remove them lest the memory of those executed be passed down. Only for them to pop up again right after that.”

Nevertheless, there was the paradox that in the early days of democratic rule in Spain the crosses began to vanish, until, with the construction of the new highway, they popped up again, daubed on the side of the road, carrying on a tradition that had died out. “The killings were cordoned off and that is part of the disgrace associated with the transition process in that it implied a double oblivion.” The former director of the Institute of Miñor Studies (IEM) insists that we were emerging from the dictatorship but lapsing into amnesia.

The testimonies collected by Caeiro would blow the dust off the massacre decades later. “He was a disgrace, an abuser of women”, Cándido Alonso claims when he mentions the merciless Corporal Pena, a terrifying figure famous for the beatings he doled out. “We were afraid of him”, it is admitted in the film, the gathering of source documentation for which ran up against the Baiona Council, which at the time was in Partido Popular hands, as it refused the director access to its archives.

Other testimonies catalogued the savagery of Pena’s henchmen, whilst using the adjectives “humane” and “decent guys” for the López brothers, whose mother’s coffin was draped in a republican flag when she died. She had a massive, silent funeral procession in Sabarís, with neither clergy nor music. Rumours seeped through the walls of the houses, regaling whoever was prepared to listen with tales of the ferocious repression unleashed in late July 1936 that resulted in so many republicans’ ending up in jails or in ditches.

Méixome stressed to *Público* that, to appreciate the persistence of those crosses, one needs to go back to their origins. “A brutal criminal revenge for the death of a Falangist. Punishing the alleged friends of the on-the-run brothers, innocent or not. Executions preceded by torture that had a huge impact on the population, because they were intended as a warning shot.” The historian points to Pena as the instigator as he was the representative of the military command, in this instance, of the Civil Guard. “He was unscrupulous”, Rosa Mari Valverde pronounces.

Unnamed hands

The writer Xosé Luís Méndez Ferrín stumbled on the crosses back in 1972 and reported how sensational he found them, the moonlight suggesting that they might have been drawn by hand. The moonlight revealed a dismal scene of which he had known nothing but which had been maintained over some generations. “Night after night a hand or many nameless hands had been tracing nine crosses on the site of the shootings in memory of the dead”, he recalled in *El Faro de Vigo*.

“Legend has it that neither the Civil Guard nor the fascist authorities ever managed to catch or identify whoever was tirelessly tracing out the nine crosses year after year and virtually every night, crosses that would then be swept away by the wind or trampled by totalitarian boots”, he wrote on a column called *Na Volta dos Nove*, where he highlighted the tenacity of those who were “moving commemorating the lives sacrificed.” And before he quit the area, he himself picked up a spade and pick, honestly carrying on the tradition.

Vicente Valverde cites the courage of people under Francoism. “You have to give it to them because when they started to appear there was a stiff crackdown.” According to Liberata González, the Civil Guard “went crazy searching for whoever was painting them and never did manage to catch anybody.” Manuela Lijó insists that they were on the look-out for a woman but could never catch her red-handed. “The poor thing ... She was talented.”

There is a different view, that folk took it in turns. Every time the creator was nearing death, he/she would pass the baton to someone else. And, for fear that the shoulder of the road might be tarmacked over, the last woman ordered that the crosses be daubed on a rock, according to Evaristo Cabral, godson of one of the victims. “Everybody marked out the crosses. Not just one woman. Some people did not take kindly to the incident and there was tremendous opposition. Why did they have to kill them? It was just Corporal Pena taking revenge”, concludes Teresa Cabral, the sister of one of the men executed.

Méixome insists that no one ever found out the name of the perpetrator or perpetrators. “A commemoration signed by who knows whom? An exercise in collective remembrance. A sort of a Fuenteovejuna gesture”, the historian notes as he describes the rushed handiwork of the “unnamed, secret hands” that never grew weary of drawing a long horizontal line intersecting with other smaller lines, the sign of the cross. “As far as we know, no one was arrested, but the wrath of the new authorities was considerable.”

“Had this story come to the attention of Bertolt Brecht, it might have been added to his selection of images illustrative of the horrors of the Third Reich. It’s a story that awaits a great epic-lyric poem”, wrote Méndez Ferrín, author of *Arraianos* and former director of the Galician Royal Academy “crosses dealing with the fury and remembrance of the Galician holocaust” and daubed by those who had stayed loyal to their dead.

Modesto Fernández, 47, seaman, married with six children.

Generoso Valverde, 37, seaman, married with six children.

Manuel Francisco Lijó, 34, seaman, married with five children.

José Rodríguez, 45, seaman, married with five children.

Manuel Aballe, 41, seaman, married, with two children.

Felícísimo Antonio Pérez, 44, seaman, childless.

Fidel Leyenda, 51, seaman, married, childless.

Elías Alejandro Gonda, 36, farmhand, married with three children.

Manuel Barbosa, 30, blacksmith, married with four children.

Most of the orphaned children were under-age.

Their crime? Being Anarchists

Almost all of those murdered were members of the *El Despertar* Panxón Valley Fishing Industry Union and the Baiona Seamen's Union, linked to the Regional Fishing Industry Federation, part of the CNT, in which Pepe López (whose arrest would trigger the massacre) was also active. In those days the National Confederation of Labour (CNT) counted hundreds of seamen from Val Miñor among its members and they made no bones about their anarchist beliefs.

On his brand-new *gamela* (a typical Galician boat) Manuel Lijó had daubed the initials UHP (*Uníos Hermanos Proletarios*/ Come together Proletarian Brothers). He had lost a previous boat in a storm and his comrades had had a whip-round to buy him a new one. "Those initials were one of the pretexts on which he was arrested for having flaunted his politics, albeit that all the information regarding the CNT members is indirect, as the rebel troops burst into their locals and impounded all their records", historian Xosé Luís Vilar explained to *Público*.

The CNT membership lists never resurfaced, because once the troops had passed through no documentation remained. The deputy director of the Institute of Miñor Studies points out that the crackdown on them was savage, however. After Baiona was captured, those who had gone on the run were arrested or turned themselves in, except for the *Ineses* and **Manuel Prado**, nicknamed *Lolito*. Prado was an anarchist too and even though he belonged to the Panxón Seamen's Union, he was working as a carpenter-coachbuilder on the trams in Vigo.

It was in Vigo that he was executed at the end of the civil war, having been sentenced to death for military rebellion after service in a guerrilla band operating in the Gondomar hills. "He must have done something, but up until he was arrested in 1938, they used him as a scapegoat, crediting him with all manner of thievery, hold-ups and murders", insists Vilar who remembers that Prado was arrested along with three women who had been harbouring him: a elderly blind woman, her daughter and her niece. Somebody had spotted men's clothing on the washing-line and as there was no man living in the house, had reported as much.

"One of the women, Rogelia Cabreira, was given a fifteen year sentence for aiding and abetting the on-the-runs and was locked up in Tarragona prison", the historian notes, drawing parallels with the case of Pepe López, also of the CNT, who had sought shelter in the home of a blind man until he and his brother were discovered there. The Falangists, not content with killing the blind man's house-keeper, came back to put his library to the torch. "He had a fine collection, albeit not exactly Sunday missals", Vilar remarks. As an archaeologist, Vilar was involved in the efforts to exhume the nine murder victims in Baredo.

Their remains have not been located. "That corner of the cemetery was an ossuary. None of the skulls we found there showed any signs of violence and we knew that they had been shot from a distance and then finished off with a bullet in the head. In fact, a mock autopsy carried out on them found haemorrhage injuries in different parts of their bodies", the historian explains.

The nine victims were dumped into a common grave and time erased all traces of them. The attempt to exhume them proved pointless as the likelihood is that they were moved by family members back

in the day. “Their story is that in the 1940s, the widows came up by tram and the children by *gamela* in search of their remains, which are said to have been released to them by the grave-digger”, the historian speculates about a hypothesis passed on by oral sources.

Therefore nothing is known about their bodies, but the memory of them lives on at that bend in the road where unknown hands started commemorating them in the form of crosses, in the dirt as well as on a wall that fades into the horizon.



The sculpture by Fernando Casás in tribute to the murdered anarchists

by Henrique Mariño <https://twitter.com/solucionesalina> First published in *Público* newspaper.

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