

Kerry, Matthew (2019). The Bones of Contention: The Secularisation of Cemeteries and Funerals in the Spanish Second Republic. *European History Quarterly* 49(1): 73-95. Copyright 2018 The Author(s). Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

## **The Bones of Contention:**

### **The Secularisation of Cemeteries and Funerals in the Spanish Second Republic**

#### **Introduction**

In March 1932, Cardinal Vidal i Barraquer wrote to Spanish Prime Minister Manuel Azaña raising concerns over a law to secularise cemeteries recently approved by the constituent parliament of the Second Republic (1931-1936). He warned that:

The law on the secularisation of cemeteries will have to be interpreted and applied by Mayors, and, if they do not show great tact, serious conflicts will emerge locally, that will inevitably have effects in the provincial capitals and dioceses. To prevent this, prudent rules are urgently needed from the executive which respect the traditions and feelings of all citizens and avert the use of force in the intended change to the status quo.<sup>1</sup>

The law was one of a number of secularising measures introduced by the governing Republican-Socialist coalition as part of its drive to modernise Spain, through a focus on education, the army, land reform, regional autonomy, labour relations and the Church. Such reforms met opposition. The principal rightist party during the Republic (CEDA: Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas) had its origins in a campaign to revise the Republican constitution and defence of the Catholic faith was one of its core values.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, secularising efforts were important points of conflict across Spain during

---

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Vidal i Barraquer to Manuel Azaña, 5 March 1932, in Miquel Batllori and Víctor Manuel Arbeloa (eds), *Arxiu Vidal i Barraquer: Església i estat durant la segona republica española 1931-1936*, vol. II, (Montserrat 1975), 614.

<sup>2</sup> The classic study of reform and resistance is Paul Preston, *The Coming of the Spanish Civil War: Reform, Reaction and Revolution in the Second Republic* (London 1978).

the Republic. This included attempts to transfer parish cemeteries to municipal control and impose restrictions over Catholic funeral processions. As Vidal i Barraquer predicted, the nature and extent of tensions and conflict varied at the local level depended on the political nous of mayors, but also the correlation and militancy of citizens, the clergy and political groups.

This is a study of the texture of this neglected facet of religious and political conflict during the Second Republic. Funerals and cemeteries were an important way in which Republican reform could touch the daily lives of citizens and become a source of bitter conflict, given how intimately practices around death are linked to individual and collective identities. The article asks how secularising measures played out at a municipal level and argues that a focus on the battles over cemeteries and funerals allows the rethinking of the nature of municipal politics during the Republic. A recent wave of historians have conceptualised such politics through the notion of ‘intransigence’ and the ‘politics of exclusion’, whereby leftist, and particularly socialist, politicians at all levels—from the municipality to the national government—were incapable of governing democratically; rather they imposed their politics on society.<sup>3</sup> However, far from intolerant,

---

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Fernando del Rey (ed.), *Palabras como puños: La intransigencia política en la Segunda República española* (Madrid 2011). See also Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Roberto Villa García, *El precio de la exclusión: La política durante la Segunda República* (Madrid 2008). This revisionist turn is not without its critics, though this has tended to be limited to critical articles and book reviews rather than essays expounding alternative visions of Republican politics. See Chris Ealham, ‘The Emperor’s New Clothes: “Objectivity” and Revisionism in Spanish History’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 48,1 (2013), 191–202; Alejandro Quiroga, rev. of Manuel Álvarez Tardío and Fernando del Rey Ruguillo (eds), *The Spanish Second Republic Revisited: From Democratic Hopes to Civil War (1931–1936)*, *European History Quarterly*, 43,3 (2013), 519–20; Ricardo Robledo, ‘De leyenda rosa e historia científica: notas sobre el último revisionismo de la Segunda República. La Segunda República demonizada, rehabilitada

local Republican authorities played a key role in negotiating competing pressures while attempting to safeguard Catholic sentiment. In addition, the article examines how these struggles can contribute to extending the concept of ‘culture wars’—a term used in European history to nineteenth-century conflicts between the state and Church (and also to conceptualise polarisation between traditionalists and progressives in the contemporary US)—to the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> The conflict over secularisation was a battle over the occupation of physical space, involving carefully calibrated challenges versus deference to legal frameworks and property rights. Parish priests and mayors were at the centre of this ‘culture war’ which combined the nineteenth century secular desire to ‘privatise’ Catholicism with the much more militant and higher stakes politics of the 1930s.

The Second Republic and Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) saw the culmination of secular-religious struggles which had their roots in the previous century.<sup>5</sup> During the Restoration monarchy (1875-1931), the Spanish Church strengthened its hold over many aspects of Spanish society and adapted to shifting economic, political and social

---

y de nuevo denostada’, *Cahiers de civilisation espagnole contemporaine*, 2 (2015), <http://ceec.revues.org/5444> [accessed 28 March 2018]. A more contextualised and nuanced vision of democracy in Tom Buchanan, ‘Anti-fascism and Democracy in the 1930s’, *European History Quarterly*, 32 (2002), 39–57.

<sup>4</sup>Todd Weir, ‘A European Culture War in the Twentieth Century? Anti-Catholicism and Anti-Bolshevism between Moscow, Berlin, and the Vatican 1922 to 1933’, *Journal of Religious History*, 39,2 (2015), 280–306. In the American context the term was first used by James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York 1992).

<sup>5</sup>Joseba Louzao Villar, ‘Catholicism Versus Laicism: Culture Wars and the Making of Catholic National Identity in Spain, 1898-1931’, *European History Quarterly*, 43,4 (2013), 657–80. See also Feliciano Montero and Julio de la Cueva (eds), *La secularización conflictiva* (Madrid 2007). For the long view, see William J. Callahan, *The Catholic Church in Spain, 1875-1998* (Washington 2000).

circumstances yet remained staunchly conservative and integrist in outlook.<sup>6</sup> The Church turned to the press to propagate its message, saw growth in Marian cults and the number of religious communities, expanded its charity and educational initiatives, and created the lay organisation Catholic Action and Catholic trade unions. The latter produced disappointing results. The socialist UGT and anarchosyndicalist CNT were far more successful in attracting working class adherents. The Spanish left, which included socialism, anarchism and Republicanism, was secular and even anticlerical. Secularism and the powerful mobilising ideology of anticlericalism encompassed a range of different positions, from the more limited desire to separate Church and state to the atheistic anticlericalism espoused by self-consciously rational and materialist ideologies. Republican secularism combined with the interwoven nature of Church and state meant that the new Republican regime would inevitably reshape the relationship between the Church and state.

Much of the scholarship on the Spanish ‘religious question’ during the 1930s has tended to focus on the high politics of reform and resistance, yet insights from anthropology and the sociology of religion have enriched our understanding of Catholicism and secularism at the local level, particularly with respect to gender and violence during the

---

<sup>6</sup> Frances Lannon, *Privilege, Persecution and Prophecy: The Catholic Church in Spain 1875-1975* (Oxford 1987), 42–3. An emphasis on the changing practices of Catholic devotion and the adaptation of the Catholic Church to the changing political, social and economic landscape in Clark, ‘The New-Catholicism and the European Culture Wars’ in Christopher Clark and Wolfram Kaiser (eds), *Culture Wars: Secular-Catholic Conflict in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Cambridge 2003), 45-76. For Spain, e.g. Julio de la Cueva Merino, ‘The Stick and the Candle: Clericals and Anticlericals in Northern Spain, 1898–1931’, *European History Quarterly*, 26,2 (1996), 241–65.

Civil War.<sup>7</sup> For the Republic, much has been written on educational reform, while cemeteries and funerals have barely featured. A recent historiographical review on the ‘religious question’ failed to mention cemeteries and López Villaverde’s synthesis of local and regional studies retreated into hypothesising that ‘there were probably disputes over the property and custodianship of keys to cemeteries all over Spain’.<sup>8</sup> Some have recognised the importance of struggles over death; Radcliff notes that ‘[o]f all the ritual battles in the city [of Gijón], perhaps the most intensely contested was the sacred territory of burial grounds’, and for the Restoration (1874-1931) these struggles have recently been examined in detail.<sup>9</sup> Republican legislative efforts provided a new impulse to these conflicts, yet cemeteries occupy a cursory paragraph in studies of religious-secular tensions during

---

<sup>7</sup> An appeal for a local focus in Ángel Luis López Villaverde, ‘El conflicto católico-republicano “desde abajo”, 1931–1936’, in Julio de la Cueva and Feliciano Montero (eds), *Laicismo y catolicismo: El conflicto político-religioso en la Segunda República* (Alcalá de Henares 2009), 389–90. His *El gorro frigio y la mitra frente a frente: Construcción y diversidad territorial del conflicto político-religioso en la España republicana* (n.p. 2008) marshalls examples of conflict from across Spain, but is patchy in coverage. See also María Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury: Popular Anticlerical Violence and Iconoclasm in Spain, 1931-1936* (Eastbourne 2013). Key in-depth regional studies are Mary Vincent, *Catholicism in the Second Spanish Republic: Religion and Politics in Salamanca, 1930–1936* (Oxford 1996) and María Pilar Salomón Chéiz, *Anticlericalismo en Aragón: Protesta popular y movilización cívica (1900-1939)* (Zaragoza 2002). In terms of the Civil War, important contributions include: Bruce Lincoln, ‘Revolutionary Exhumations in Spain, July 1936’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 27 (1985), 240–60; Manuel Delgado Ruiz, ‘Anticlericalismo, espacio y poder. La destrucción de los rituales católicos, 1931-1939’, *Ayer*, 27 (1997), 149–80; Julio de la Cueva, “‘Si los curas y frailes lo supieran...’ La violencia anticlerical”, in Santos Juliá et al (eds), *Violencia y política en la España del siglo XX* (Madrid 2000), 191–233; José Luis Ledesma, *Los días de llamas de la revolución: Violencia y política en la retaguardia republicana de Zaragoza durante la guerra civil* (Zaragoza 2003); Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury*; Mary Vincent, ‘Made Flesh? Gender and Doctrine in Religious Violence in Twentieth-Century Spain’, *Gender & History*, 25,3 (2013), 668–80.

<sup>8</sup> José Ramón Rodríguez Lago, ‘La Iglesia Católica y la II República Española. Resistencias, progresos y retos pendientes’, *Hispania Nova*, 11 (2013), 333–64; López Villaverde, *El gorro frigio*, 211–12.

<sup>9</sup> The only full length treatment of cemeteries in Spain, though essayistic in style, haphazard in coverage and lacking historical rigor, is José Jiménez Lozano, *Los cementerios civiles y la heterodoxia española* (Barcelona 2008 [1978]). There is some extended analysis in Salomón Chéiz, *Anticlericalismo*. The quotation in Pamela Radcliff, *From Mobilization to Civil War: The Politics of Polarization in the Spanish city of Gijón, 1900–1937* (Cambridge 1996), 208. On the Restoration, most recently, Miguel Martorell Linares, “‘The Cruellest of all Forms of Coercion’: The Catholic Church and Conflicts around Death and Burial in Spain during the Restoration (1874–1923)”, *European History Quarterly*, 47,4 (2017), 657–78.

the 1930s and the only sustained academic study of cemetery conflict and funeral rites is an edited collection international in scope.<sup>10</sup>

The wider historiography of death is extensive and diverse, exploring subjects that include public health, industrialisation, the development of modern capitalism, historical understandings of grief and loss, as well as changing cultural norms and rituals.<sup>11</sup> Broad chronologies permit the capturing the slow change or consolidation of beliefs or practices. Kselman's ranging study of death in nineteenth-century France captures changes in rites, practices and beliefs that led to conflict among families, the clergy and anticlerical groups, and also the commercialisation of funeral practices.<sup>12</sup> Scholars have also shown how the politics of death affirmed and reproduced social and political hierarchies.<sup>13</sup> Analysis of state funerals, for instance, provides a window onto the evolution of political cultures and the stories a regime projects about itself.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> For brief discussion of cemeteries, Thomas, *The Faith and the Fury*, 57–8 and Salomón Chéiz, *Anticlericalismo*, 347–56. Jesús Casquete and Rafael Cruz (eds), *Políticas de la Muerte: Usos y abusos del ritual fúnebre en la Europa del siglo XX* (Madrid 2009). Cruz's recent overview of the politics of protest in twentieth-century Spain makes frequent reference to funeral processions as scenes of political mobilisation. Rafael Cruz, *Protestaren España, 1900–2013* (Madrid 2015).

<sup>11</sup> E.g. Christian Herriot, *Scythe and the City: A Social History of Death in Shanghai* (Stanford, CA 2016); Michael K. Rosenow, *Death and Dying in the Working Class, 1865–1920* (Urbana, IL 2015); Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870–1914* (Cambridge 2006). Pioneering for its historical treatment of death, but much criticised, is Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death* (London 1981).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Kselman, *Death and the Afterlife in Modern France* (Princeton, NJ 1993).

<sup>13</sup> For Spain, e.g. Javier Rodrigo and José Luis Ledesma Vera, 'Caídos por España, mártires de la libertad: víctimas y conmemoración de la Guerra Civil en la España posbélica (1939–2006)', *Ayer*, 63 (2006), 233–55; Zira Box, *Año cero. La construcción simbólica del franquismo* (Madrid 2010); Mary Vincent, 'The Martyrs and the Saints: Masculinity and the Construction of the Francoist Crusade', *History Workshop Journal*, 47 (1999), 68–98. There is less research on the Republic, but see Brian D. Bunk, *Ghosts of Passion: Martyrdom, Gender and the Origins of the Spanish Civil War* (Durham, NC 2007).

<sup>14</sup> Avner Ben-Amos, *Funerals, Politics, and Memory in Modern France 1789–1996* (Oxford 2000); Matthew D. Esposito, *Funerals, Festivals and Cultural Politics in Porfiriato Mexico* (Albuquerque, NM 2010).

Rather than tracing evolving beliefs and practices around death over the long term, this article focuses on conflict over burials and funeral during the Second Republic. The most detailed examples are drawn from the northern region of Asturias and its central coal valleys in particular, which were a hotbed of strike action and leftist militancy integral to understanding radicalism and polarisation in Spain prior to the Civil War. This area was the scene of the revolutionary insurrection of October 1934, when the entry into government of CEDA, with its dubious democratic credentials, sparked a socialist-initiated two-week revolt.<sup>15</sup> Leftist militias fought government troops in the streets of the provincial capital Oviedo and reorganised life in the coalfields along socialist lines, while an outburst of violent anticlericalism claimed the lives of 33 male religious, priests and seminarians.<sup>16</sup> Asturias is consequently an excellent case for examining the nature of religious-secular conflict during the Second Republic and for exploring notions of intransigence at the level of local politics.

### **Tearing down the walls**

Deceased Spaniards were buried in either Catholic or civil cemeteries. During the nineteenth century cemeteries had been slowly constructed to inter bodies previously destined for burial inside churches. The first move on the Church's hegemony over

---

<sup>15</sup> On labour politics and radicalism in Asturias, Adrian Shubert, *The Road to Revolution in Spain: The Coal Miners of Asturias, 1860–1934* (Urbana, IL 1987); David Ruiz, *Insurrección defensiva y revolución obrera: el octubre español de 1934* (Barcelona 1988); Matthew Kerry, 'Radicalisation, Community and the Politics of Protest in the Spanish Second Republic Asturias, 1931–1934', *English Historical Review*, 132,555 (2017), 318–343.

<sup>16</sup> On anticlericalism in the Asturian October, Paco Ignacio Taibo II, *Asturias, octubre 1934* (Barcelona 2014), 375–81; Matthew Kerry, 'Painted Tonsures and Potato-sellers: Priests, Passing and Survival in the Asturian Revolution', *Cultural & Social History*, 14,2 (2017), 237–55.

practices of burial came in 1871, during the ‘Democratic Sexennium’, when the government decreed spaces within Catholic cemeteries for non-Catholics. The strong reaction from the Church forced the government to backtrack and order the creation of separate civil cemeteries less than eight months later. During the Restoration, these civil cemeteries were often an unkempt, undignified annex. The parish clergy decided in which cemetery the deceased were buried, which was a contributing factor to the frequent conflicts between non-believers, their families and clergy during the Restoration, even if civil burials were far from widespread by 1931.<sup>17</sup> Parish cemeteries, although controlled by priests, could be the property of the Church or the municipality.<sup>18</sup> In response to pressing demands for burial grounds in the nineteenth century, municipal governments had funded the construction of cemeteries. The separation of Church and state by the Republic placed cemetery control and ownership in question.

At the proclamation of the Republic in April 1931 the new Minister of Justice declared a desire to ‘secularise’ cemeteries and ensure freedom of conscience at the birth of the.<sup>19</sup> Three months later a government decree intended to guarantee an individual’s choice of burial, affirm municipal responsibility for civil cemeteries and to remove the parish priest’s control of the keys to civil cemeteries.<sup>20</sup> Even before the decree appeared, municipal authorities across Spain were already agitating for secularisation—from

---

<sup>17</sup> See Martorell Linares, “‘The Cruellest of all Forms of Coercion’”.

<sup>18</sup> A smaller number of cemeteries, which will not be discussed in this article, were privately owned.

<sup>19</sup> *El Sol*, 16 April 1931.

<sup>20</sup> *Gaceta de Madrid*, 10 July 1931.



Valencia's support for Lérida's pressure on the national government for legislation to Cartagena's agreement to secularise the local cemetery, even if it is unclear what secularisation actually meant here.<sup>21</sup> Such accords reveal the enthusiasm for the secular Republic by municipal authorities led by Republicans and socialists and also their desire to collaborate in state-led reform and the construction of the regime from the level of the town and village.<sup>22</sup>

Enthusiasm was such that in the autumn and winter municipal councils pushed or even transgressed the bounds of legality. The wall dividing the Catholic cemetery from the adjacent civil cemetery was at the centre of municipal council debates on secularisation and the energetic embrace of Republican state building from below. Removing this wall became a litmus test of Republican reform. Nothing would be more illustrative of the transformative, modernising effects of a Republic in which all citizens were free and equal. After parliamentary debate on the draft constitution turned to religion in October, the council of Langreo, located in the heart of the Asturian coalfields, subsequently decided to remove the dividing wall, but not without misgivings as to whether this was legal or premature.<sup>23</sup> Other councils in the coal valleys followed soon after.<sup>24</sup> The authorities governed in accordance with the reforming, secularising zeitgeist in a context in which mass Catholic political opposition to the Republican project was only beginning to reorganise. An Asturian Republican daily criticised the councillor in Langreo who opposed

---

<sup>21</sup> *Heraldo de Madrid*, 12 June 1931; *Región*, 7 May 1931.

<sup>22</sup> Municipal enthusiasm is acknowledged by López Villaverde in *El gorro frigio*, 204ff.

<sup>23</sup> Archivo de Langreo, Actas del ayuntamiento. 17 de septiembre de 1931 al 21 de abril de 1932, f. 43.

<sup>24</sup> E.g. Mieres and San Martín del Rey Aurelio, *El Noroeste*, 4 November 1931; *Región*, 7 November 1931.

the decision to remove the wall for basing his arguments on ‘tyrannical legality’.<sup>25</sup> He was out of step with public opinion and the irresistible train of history.

Municipal decisions to tear down the walls were not limited to Asturias, although the coal valleys acted in relative haste compared to other areas. Elsewhere municipal authorities’ were moved to act by the publication of a draft law on cemeteries and the approval of the Constitution by the Cortes in early December. This lent a further veneer of legitimacy to removing the walls, even if the legislation only existed in bill form. While in Cuenca the authorities approved the removal of the dividing wall in November, in Aragón, Vizcaya, Santander and Catalonia motions and demolitions occurred in December.<sup>26</sup> In Barcelona, city councillors arrived by official car preceded by macebearers and the mayor struck the first blow with a pick in a ceremony attended by representatives of political parties, freemasonry and secular groups.<sup>27</sup> The pomp accompanying the demolition served to signal the importance accorded to secularism by the young Republic.

Yet there were limits to this enthusiasm for secularisation that transgressed the limits of law. Even if councillors anticipated the Constitution, their secularising efforts were limited to municipal property and avoided violating Church land. In the Asturian capital of Oviedo, councillors refused to extend their decision to demolish cemetery walls

---

<sup>25</sup> *El Noroeste*, 30 October 1931.

<sup>26</sup> López Villaverde, *El gorro frigio*, 409, n. 94. Salomón Chéliz, *Anticlericalismo*, 349; *La Libertad*, 13 December 1931; *La Vanguardia*, 12, 15, 19, 29 December 1931.

<sup>27</sup> *ABC*, 8 December 1931. In Santa Cruz de Mudela (Ciudad Real), the wall was demolished as the Republican hymn was played. Fernando del Rey, *Paisanos en lucha. Exclusión política y violencia en la Segunda República española* (Madrid 2008), 169.

to the cemetery in Trubia as it belonged to the Church.<sup>28</sup> Church property was to be respected. This, along with the restraint counselled by the mayor of Bujalance in the southern province of Córdoba, who argued against a ceremony to celebrate removing the wall to avoid harming religious feeling, reveals a subtler approach taken by local politicians than an emphasis on intransigence suggests.<sup>29</sup> Republican local authorities throughout the Republic attempted to mediate between anticlerical and Catholic pressures, as will be explored below.

The reaction of the Church to the decision to remove walls varied, both amongst the hierarchy and parish clergy. The Bishop of Oviedo's carefully worded circular declared his 'painful surprise' at the council agreements to remove walls and highlighted that the Constitution was not yet in force.<sup>30</sup> His counterpart in Barcelona voiced his criticism much more strongly. Declaring the decision illegal, he threatened them with divine wrath, while members of the clergy offered a more moderate criticism based on the violation of property rights. They claimed that those buried in the cemeteries had acquired the space on the basis of separation of the dead.<sup>31</sup> In Asturias, several parish priests voiced their protest directly—and discreetly—to the authorities, in accordance with instructions laid out by the bishop.<sup>32</sup> In contrast, the parish priest of Sama de Langreo openly admitted to not having

---

<sup>28</sup> Archivo de Oviedo, Actas del Ayuntamiento. 30 de octubre de 1931 a 12 de agosto de 1932, ff. 15-16.

<sup>29</sup> Rafael Cañete Marfil and Francisco Martínez Mejías, *La Segunda República en Bujalance (1931–1936)* (Córdoba 2010), 308.

<sup>30</sup> Circular n. 10, 'Sobre cementerios', *Boletín oficial eclesiástico del Obispado de Oviedo*, 21, 2 November 1931, 310–11.

<sup>31</sup> *La Vanguardia*, 2, 4 December 1931.

<sup>32</sup> Archivo de Mieres, Actas del ayuntamiento. 8 de agosto de 1931 al 10 de marzo de 1932, ff. 100–1, f. 125.

approached the mayor as this would have been 'ineffective' and voiced his 'most energetic protest at the violation of the Catholic cemetery' via a provincial Catholic newspaper, inviting the mayor to 'correct the offence'. His challenge was underlined by his airy request that the mayor ignore any comments in the letter that possibly broke the law, as he only intended to 'staunch the wound opened by the [...] agreement' with the 'balsam of truth'.<sup>33</sup> The provocative letter sparked the anger of the municipal authorities who were irritated that the cleric had used a public forum rather than privately.

The problem in leaving these conflicts in the hand of local politicians and parish clergy was how the situation unfolded depended on the relationships between individuals locally, as Vidal i Barraquer had warned. The potential for conflict in Sama de Langreo appears evident. Prada Morán was a young priest who had recently arrived and praised frequently by the Catholic press for his rhetorical ability. Faced with Republican authorities determined to secularise Spanish public life, the councillors' decision provided an excellent opportunity for Prada Morán to prove his militant mettle in defence of the Catholic faith.

Walls were not removed immediately or everywhere, even in the leftist stronghold of the Asturian coalfields. Frustration increased with a new cemetery law at the beginning of 1932. As was lamented in *La Rebollada*, the surviving wall 'in the middle of a Republic, with a law secularising necropolises in force, is an unforgivable offence'.<sup>34</sup> In March 1932—barely a month after the legislation had been introduced—an article from Chelva (Valencia)

---

<sup>33</sup> *Región*, 5 November 1931.

<sup>34</sup> *El Noroeste*, 10 February 1932.

asked why the mayor had done nothing about the wall or religious symbols at the cemetery.<sup>35</sup> Other walls remained standing over the coming months and years.

The new law published in 1932 supplanted the July 1931 decree and was part of wider legislation that served to separate the Church and state. The law extended the Republican-Socialist government's attempt to create a level playing field for all Spaniards based on notions of modernity, progress, and Republican citizenship. Burials would be civil by default; only individuals who had completed forms stating otherwise would be allowed Catholic interment. This reshaped an important practice that marked Spaniards' lifecycles. The secularising legislation meant 'the Church was to be a voluntary association for those willing to subscribe instead of guardian of Spain's identity and conscience'.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, the 1932 law on cemeteries was not envisaged as an attack on Catholics because the right to different ceremonies at the graveside was recognised. For Catholics, however, death was 'bureaucratized'.<sup>37</sup> It is difficult to see how they could have interpreted state-led secularisation as anything other than an attack on Catholic traditions and rituals that marked lifecycles in local communities, even if it is doubtful that the legislation was strictly followed in areas controlled by conservative councils.

The 1932 law was more important for its muscular assertion of state-led secularisation through determining that parish cemeteries could now be transferred to the

---

<sup>35</sup> *El Pueblo*, 12 March 1932.

<sup>36</sup> Lannon, *Privilege*, 181.

<sup>37</sup> Vincent, *Catholicism*, 188.

municipal authorities, in terms of both control and ownership.<sup>38</sup> However, even as the legislation facilitated the possibility of secularisation, implementation—the transferral of control and expropriation of parish cemeteries—was left undefined until directives were published fourteen months later. In the meantime the law legitimised municipal authorities’ efforts in secular state building at local level through wresting cemetery keys from parish priests and attempting to expropriate burial grounds, which will be explored below.

### **‘Wrongful burials’ and Funeral Processions**

The first year of the Republic revealed Republican municipal authorities’ desire municipal power to promote secular values and saw the beginning of a legal framework for secularisation. As authorities put policies and legislation into practice, the secularising Republic began to have an impact on everyday life. The first civil burials on record occurred in many towns and villages across in Asturias and were celebrated by the leftist press as victories for progress and enlightenment, in a similar way to civil marriages.<sup>39</sup> Conflict emerged between Catholic and secular opinion, as the former resisted, for example, the removal of crucifixes from schools.<sup>40</sup> Such tensions over religion constituted a central way in which the Republic was experienced at the local level.

In spring 1932 a number of ‘wrongful burials’—as termed by the diocesan authorities—occurred in the central area of Asturias, whereby bodies were interred civilly

---

<sup>38</sup> Bill and decree in *Gaceta de Madrid*, 5 December 1931, 6 February 1932.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. *Avance*, 21 January, 13 May, 16 September 1932.

<sup>40</sup> For Salamanca, see Vincent, *Catholicism*, p. 185.

in Catholic cemeteries without the consent of the priest. One case caused a particular stir in the local press. In San Pedro de los Arcos, on the outskirts of Oviedo, the body of Santiago Álvarez, a prominent socialist, was buried against the will of the priest in the parish cemetery in a ceremony presided over by a socialist councillor and attended by a large number of representatives from Asturian socialist organisations.<sup>41</sup> Further ‘wrongful burials’ occurred in Lena, Laviana and Olloniego in Asturias, and also in Barbastro, in Huesca.<sup>42</sup> In Olloniego, three individuals jumped over the wall and opened the door to the cemetery in order to bury María Fernández. The mayor authorised the burial, but the Asturian Catholic rightist daily *Región* accused him of doing so retrospectively and declared the burial disrespectful towards law and Catholics (although the provisor of the diocese did later authorise the burial).<sup>43</sup> ‘Wrongful burials’ took advantage of the pressing need for interment of a corpse to force de facto secularisation through de-sacralising consecrated ground.

There was no civil cemetery in San Pedro de los Arcos, but as those supporting a civil burial in the Catholic cemetery argued, in a secular Republic individuals and families should not have to travel a large distance to the civil municipal cemetery when there was a local parish cemetery nearby. By conducting a ‘wrongful burial’, the cemetery was symbolically recoded as belonging to the local community as citizens of a Republic, not as members of a parish. They asserted that the balance of power had shifted at the local level in the Republic and as citizens they would determine where their dead were buried, not the

---

<sup>41</sup> *Avance*, 2 April 1932.

<sup>42</sup> *Región*, 28, 30 April 1932; Salomón Chéliz, *Anticlericalismo*, 350-1.

<sup>43</sup> *Región*, 4 May 1932.

priest. ‘Wrongful burials’ not only disputed clerical authority, but whether the cemetery was a public or private space—to be administered by the Church or controlled by the local community, or through its elected representatives. Space was central to the secular-religious culture war in Spain in the 1930s, as it had been in the European culture wars of the nineteenth century when political and religious groups had frequently used funeral processions to express collective identities and values.<sup>44</sup>

These burials were also intended to pressure the local authorities to secularise cemeteries as they occurred shortly after legislation was published permitting municipal seizure of parish burial grounds. They also coincided with the reorganisation and growth of the Spanish right between late 1931 and 1932. For Acción Nacional (later Acción Popular, which would be the backbone of CEDA), Catholicism was one of its core values, along with defence of property, family, and Spanish nationalism. It was unsurprising that attention from would turn to blocking religious processions, including Holy Week, local festivals and funerals. The stage was therefore set for conflict in streets and squares across Spain.

‘Wrongful burials’ were the latest iteration of a much longer tradition of disputes over who should decide where a body was to be interred. Historically there had been struggles between families and the clergy in Spain and Europe more widely when the priest

---

<sup>44</sup> As evident in Casquete and Cruz, *Políticas de la muerte*.



denied access to the Catholic cemetery for the deceased.<sup>45</sup> Such conflicts were not necessarily motivated by secular or anticlerical beliefs. The reverse situation could also occur; accusations of priests “stealing” bodies and burying them according to Catholic rites against the wishes of the deceased or their family continued into the Republic.<sup>46</sup> Within this longer context, ‘wrongful burials’ were also a form of historical revanchism. Mayors were at the centre of disputes, as they bore responsibility for public order and they enjoyed authority to ban public acts of faith, but the situation was far from clear as to whether funeral processions violated the constitution. Anticipating the possible differences of interpretation, Cardinal Vidal i Barraquer had looked to Prime Minister Azaña in March 1932 for assurances that the clergy would be allowed to accompany bodies to the cemetery.<sup>47</sup> Leftist groups put pressure on the local authorities to restrict funerals, as in Aller, where the Socialist Youth demanded that the municipal council enforce article 27 of the constitution, warning they were ‘not prepared to permit the infringement of any of the articles of the Basic Law of the State’. The municipal council decided to consult the civil governor on the matter, refusing to give into the pressure.<sup>48</sup> Civil governors of different provinces interpreted the Constitution in contrasting ways. Catholic funeral processions

---

<sup>45</sup> Cruz, ‘El sabor funébre de la política española entre 1876 y 1940’, in Cruz and Casquete, *Políticas de la muerte*, 81.

<sup>46</sup> Highlighted by Thomas, *Faith and the Fury*, 57. In Gijón in 1933 a priest, backed by a judge, ordered the exhumation of a body in the civil cemetery and its transferral to the Catholic cemetery, though this contravened Republican legislation. Raddiff, *Mobilization to Civil War*, 209.

<sup>47</sup> Letter from Vidal i Barraquer to Azaña, 5 March 1932, in Batllori and Arbeloa, *Església i estat*, 614.

<sup>48</sup> Archivo de Aller, Actas del ayuntamiento. 30 de mayo de 1932 al 9 de febrero de 1933, ff. 38–9.

were banned in Teruel, but in the province of Seville, the civil governor ruled otherwise and ordered mayors had to stop prohibiting them.<sup>49</sup>

The first municipality in Asturias to place restrictions on funerals was Langreo in June 1932. Citing the constitution, the mayor requested that Catholic rites be confined to the cemetery and parish priests abstain from accompanying bodies through the streets. The following day the parish priest of Sama challenged the order by leading a funeral procession to the cemetery accompanied by two coadjutors. Municipal police arrested them as they left the cemetery, which led to a scuffle. The mayor fined the protestors for trying to prevent the jailing of the three men. Hours after their detention the civil governor ordered the clergy be freed. The mayor received the support of his fellow councillors, who congratulated him on his ‘virile gesture’ in the ‘exact fulfilment’ of the Constitution. Religious expression was not banned in this case, but it was restricted and ‘privatised’, in the sense that it was moved to the cemetery from the streets, from public space to semi-public space. But as these rites were central to religious expression—and popular religiosity—restrictions were perceived as an attack on Catholicism, projected as representative and consubstantial with the local community.

According to reports, the priest—who had already protested publicly at the demolition of the wall the previous autumn—had defied the mayor’s order despite the

---

<sup>49</sup> Salomón Chélez, *Anticlericalismo*, 348. José Manuel Macarro Vera, *Socialismo, República y revolución en Andalucía (1931–1936)* (Seville 2000), 252.

family of the deceased requesting he refrain from doing so.<sup>50</sup> The priest claimed to have proceeded after having received legal advice. His dramatic, combative depiction of events was undermined by the more prosaic accounts given by the coadjutors and the mayor's report that he and Prada Morán had held a lengthy private conversation afterwards.<sup>51</sup> Private conversations contrasted with public confrontation. Two contrasting conceptions of power were evident: that the mayor should have precedence over the parish priest, while the latter—in this case—only recognised ecclesiastical authority. Though the contrasting versions of events make interpretation difficult, it seems clear that the parish priest had used the funeral as an opportunity to test the enforcement of municipal authority over funeral processions.

The prohibition in Langreo sparked other bans, including in the neighbouring municipality of San Martín del Rey Aurelio. Further up the Nalón valley, in Laviana, funerals also occurred without the raised cross (though in the presence of two members of the clergy).<sup>52</sup> Yet Catholic funeral processions were not banned in the Asturian coalfields as a whole: a motion was defeated in Siero and in Mieres the measure was not introduced.<sup>53</sup> Thus despite the leftist, strongly secular culture of the Asturian coalfields, not all municipal authorities pursued hard-line anticlericalism. Yet the contrasting situation in different municipalities provided ammunition for *Región*, which responded to municipal decisions to

---

<sup>50</sup> *Región*, 14, 17, 18, 25 June 1932; *El Noroeste*, 18, 19 June 1932; Archivo de Langreo, Actas del ayuntamiento. 28 de abril de 1932 al 17 de diciembre de 1932, f. 55.

<sup>51</sup> Accounts in *Región*, 26 June 1932 and *El Noroeste*, 25 June 1932.

<sup>52</sup> *Región*, 22 July 1932; *El Noroeste*, 2 July 1932.

<sup>53</sup> *Región*, 5 August 1932. Though there were rumours that it would be introduced in Mieres. *Región*, 26 July 1932.

restrict Catholic funeral processions by citing the decisions by other governors around Spain that the raised cross did not contravene article 27.<sup>54</sup> This was an attempt to mobilise Catholic opinion against perceived injustice and put pressure on the civil governor.

Local and provincial authorities tried to tread a fine line between respecting the constitutional framework and managing the pressures from both anticlericals and Catholics in an intensely politicised climate. This, along with the reorganisation and mobilisation of the political right and growing discontent amongst the labouring masses, served to drive the process of polarisation in the Republic. The unclear legal context was far from helpful in this process. As *El Noroeste* remarked:

The worst that can happen in a state is that the authorities are disoriented when interpreting the law...In terms of the banning of religious personnel at burials is making for a very sad spectacle. Every day there is something new and article 26 [27] of the Constitution is interpreted according to the criteria of each mayor [...].<sup>55</sup>

### **Seizure and Expropriation**

The 1932 cemeteries law permitted the expropriation of parish cemeteries and their transferral to municipal ownership, but the process was undefined. Municipal authorities attempted to seize control of parish cemeteries using the vague 1932 law without much success, although the outcome of these cases is not always clear from available sources. In Asturias, the first attempt occurred in the coastal municipality of Castrillón in April 1932, where the municipal authorities agreed to seize the cemetery of San Martín de Laspra. The

---

<sup>54</sup> *Región*, 22 July, 4, 6 August 1932.

<sup>55</sup> *El Noroeste*, 4 August 1932.

Church disputed the decision and, after losing its case at the lower court, was backed on appeal in early 1933. The higher court determined that it was ‘clear, extremely clear’ that a cemetery could not be the ‘object of particular ... appropriation’ and labelled the previous decision a ‘clear error bordering on juridical absurdity’. Such an admonishment ran counter to the spirit of the 1932 law, given that it did permit the state expropriation of Church property.<sup>56</sup>

During the summer, municipal authorities in central Asturias tried to gain control of the keys to parish cemeteries. In Soto de Agues the parish priest was arrested for refusing to hand the keys over and freed on orders of the provincial authorities without having relinquished them.<sup>57</sup> Parish priests in Laviana also refused to hand over the keys and the municipal authorities allowed them an extra 48 hours to do so.<sup>58</sup> As with Soto de Agues, it is unclear whether the municipal authorities did gain control of the parish cemeteries, but it does seem unlikely, not least given the lack of support from the civil governor at the provincial level.

Municipal authorities, uncertain as to their legal right to seize parish cemeteries, contacted the Ministry of Justice to request clarification of the 1932 law, which arrived by way of an extensive list of regulations in April 1933.<sup>59</sup> This defined the process of transferral through first *incautación* (seizure/taking control of the keys) and then

---

<sup>56</sup> ‘Sentencia de la Audiencia Provincial a favor del cementerio de San Martín de Laspra (Castrillón)’, *Boletín oficial eclesiástico del Obispado de Oviedo*, n. 1, 2 January 1933 – 1 March 1933, 11–13.

<sup>57</sup> *El Noroeste*, 6 September 1932.

<sup>58</sup> *Región*, 21 August 1932.

<sup>59</sup> For Oviedo’s decision to contact Madrid, Archivo de Oviedo, Actas del Ayuntamiento. 30 de octubre de 1931 al 12 de agosto de 1932, ff. 195–6.

expropriation. The preamble recognised it was a ‘very delicate question’ and testament to the complexity was the length of the regulations, which ran to 45 articles rather than the four in the 1932 law. These articles set out the mechanisms for secularisation, including the seizure and expropriation of parish cemeteries.<sup>60</sup> The regulations provided a new stimulus for municipal attempts to gain control of parish cemeteries. By 1934, a number of parish cemeteries had been seized in Asturias, including in Laviana, La Rebollada, Ciaño and Tiraña in the coal valleys, and in Proaza, Porrúa and Llanes in the wider province, as can be gleaned from a combination of press reports and legal proceedings.<sup>61</sup>

Litigation followed seizures, as parish priests followed the diocesan authorities’ instructions by relinquishing the keys but presenting documents that supported the Church’s claim to the cemetery.<sup>62</sup> Municipal authorities soon became mired in legal proceedings. In Langreo, the authorities fixed 22 August 1933 for the transferral of the sole parish cemetery in the district. The following day the provincial socialist newspaper celebrated that the ‘inhabitants of Ciaño could see their cemetery free of clerical custody’, but the matter was far from settled.<sup>63</sup> On 9 September the priest sent a letter to the municipal council maintaining that the cemetery belonged to the church, cited documents

---

<sup>60</sup> *Gaceta de Madrid*, 12 April 1933.

<sup>61</sup> Evidence of seizure can often be gleaned from later reports of priests’ efforts to defend the Church’s claim to the property of the cemetery during the expropriation phase of secularisation. E.g. *Avance*, 5 August 1933, 14, 18 February 1934; *Boletín oficial de la provincia de Oviedo*, 2 August 1934. Other seizures were cited in the case defending the Church’s claim to the Ciaño cemetery. See ‘D. Manuel Valcárcel Díaz, párroco de Ciaño, contra el Ayuntamiento of Langreo, y el Estado, sobre Dedaración de pobreza, 1934’, Archivo Histórico Provincial de Asturias, Audiencia Territorial, Box 78202.

<sup>62</sup> ‘Circular del Provisorato sobre cementerios parroquiales. Instrucciones relativas al Reglamento publicado en al *Gaceta* de 12 de abril’, *Boletín oficial eclesiástico del Obispado de Oviedo*, n. [blank], 15 April 1933 – 15 May 1933, 41–3.

<sup>63</sup> *Avance*, 23 August 1933.

in the parish archive in support and litigation ensued.<sup>64</sup> Undeterred by the ruling of early 1933, the municipal council in Castrillón had six judicial cases open with different parish priests by June. The council lost the cases in early 1934, but tried to seize the cemeteries again.<sup>65</sup>

Even though the 1933 regulations boosted attempts at secularisation, the clarification of the legal procedures served to channel secularising energies within the confines of law. After the transgression of legality in 1931 and 1932, it appears that both sides respected the rule of law in the process of seizure and expropriation from 1933. Other measures attest to a more restrained attitude by leftist municipal authorities towards the Church. Despite secular or anticlerical councillors pursuing seizure and expropriation, councils did not seek to prohibit all expressions of religious identity. Despite the long running struggle in Langreo over the Ciaño cemetery, crosses were still allowed on tombs and niches after the authorities seized the cemetery.<sup>66</sup> In Aller, a tax was imposed on (non-wooden) crosses in cemeteries, but a specific allowance was made for political and religious symbols to be displayed on funeral corteges. Taxes targeted wealth, not symbols.<sup>67</sup> Such decisions belie the image of radical, anticlerical coal valleys in Asturias. Not all authorities

---

<sup>64</sup> Archivo de Langreo, Actas del ayuntamiento 24 de diciembre de 1932 al 30 de septiembre de 1933, ff. 180-1. See 'Manuel Valcárcel Díaz, contra el Ayuntamiento of Langreo'.

<sup>65</sup> Pablo Martínez Corral and Rubén Chimeno Fernández, *El Castrillón de la Segunda República y la Guerra Civil* (Piedras Blancas[?] 2008), 113–14.

<sup>66</sup> E.g. Archivo de Langreo, Actas del ayuntamiento. 7 de octubre de 1933 al 16 de junio de 1934, f. 36.

<sup>67</sup> Archivo de Aller, Actas del ayuntamiento. 18 de febrero de 1933 al 6 de junio de 1934, ff. 182–3.

acted in the same way in other areas of Spain. In Almeria on the southern coast, large fees were levied on funeral processions with the raised cross.<sup>68</sup>

Such snapshots from the archival record paint a subtle image of Republican secular policy on the ground. The example of the cemeteries also throws the case of funeral processions into sharp relief. The latter were much more susceptible to clashes, both in the streets and in the press. An article in the socialist *Avance* accused the mining company in Castrillón of wanting to use a funeral as a ‘political banner’, after the company appealed to the civil governor to overrule the mayor and allow a Catholic funeral procession, and alleged the governor ‘trampled’ on the authority of the mayor.<sup>69</sup> Militant rhetoric defending secular values had been a common feature of speeches at civil burials, but now political funerals of such individuals took on a different style, reflecting the shift towards uniformed militia-style youth politics, whether the Fascist Falange’s joint cry of ‘Present!’ imported from Italy or the raised fists and marching ranks of the Socialist Youth. Conflict reached its apex at the funeral of a Civil Guard killed during the Republican anniversary parade in Madrid—the centre of militant youth politics—in 1936. Five died and 170 were arrested at a funeral that turned into an anti-Republican demonstration.<sup>70</sup> Funerals reflected the increasingly fractured nature of politics during the Republic, the militant desire to defy political opponents through occupying public space.

---

<sup>68</sup> *Región*, 9 November 1932.

<sup>69</sup> *Avance*, 19 April 1934.

<sup>70</sup> A summary of these episodes in Cruz, ‘El sabor fúnebre’, 94–5.



After the collapse of the Republican-socialist coalition in September 1933, the right-leaning Radicals formed a new temporary government ahead of national elections in November. The national elections constituted a defeat for the left Republicans and socialists, but no party returned a majority. It fell to the Radicals to lead governments dependent on the support of the rightist, Catholic CEDA, who had obtained the highest number of deputies and had a dubious, ‘accidental’ attitude towards the Republic. Radical governments slowed, paralysed or else reversed previous legislation, while there was a wider shift to a recovery of the public expression of Catholicism in 1934, including the return of Holy Week processions, as in Seville.

Even as the cases of seizure and expropriation continued, the change in the political winds was palpable. Prior to the 1933 elections, the new civil governor in Asturias marked a shift by overruling the decision of the municipal authorities of San Martín del Rey Aurelio to prohibit a Catholic funeral procession.<sup>71</sup> The next civil governor, appointed in the wake of the November elections, was similarly critical of the secularising attempts by municipal authorities. He was unsupportive of the mayor of Castrillón in his attempt to secularise the cemeteries and expressed his frustration at his inability to force the mayor of San Martín del Rey Aurelio to authorise a religious funeral procession as the mayor could cite ‘public order’ concerns. However the governor did overturn a similar ban and an

---

<sup>71</sup> *Avance*, 8 November 1933.

attempted blanket prohibition of Catholic funeral processions in Castrillón.<sup>72</sup> The perceived change in the dynamics of power and the political climate is evident in *Región*. Rather than criticising the “sectarianism” of leftist politicians, *Región* ridiculed leftist responses to Catholic mobilisation, betraying a sense of triumphalism. Protest at secularising measures was substituted by the taunting of the newspaper’s political opponents for the way in which graffitied crosses had appeared on the cemetery in Luanco to replace those that had been removed.<sup>73</sup>

The wheels of litigation over cemetery property turned slowly and were soon overtaken by political events. The case brought by the parish priest of Ciaño to obtain free legal assistance to litigate against the municipal authorities over the parish cemetery was heard in September 1934—the priest lost—but the judicial process was cut short by the two-week revolutionary insurrection of 1934, which provoked a significant rupture in the Second Republic, particularly in Asturias.<sup>74</sup> The insurrection had been planned by the socialists, but poorly prepared. Projected as a national movement in reaction to the entry of the CEDA into government, only in Asturias did the movement evolve into a full-blown revolutionary insurrection, during which approximately 1,500 died. The coal valleys were revolutionary strongholds governed by the socialists, communists and anarchists, with

---

<sup>72</sup> *El Noroeste*, 28 January 1934; *Región*, 21 March 1934; *Avance*, 19 April 1934. A new ministerial order in February seemed to actually strengthen mayoral autonomy in this area, with public order still a reason to refuse authorisation for a Catholic funeral procession. This provoked the consternation of the national Catholic daily *ABC*, although as the Asturian example demonstrates, it appears that mayors had less freedom than the order decreed. *Gaceta de Madrid*, 24 February 1934; *ABC*, 1 March 1934.

<sup>73</sup> *Región*, 31 May 1934

<sup>74</sup> ‘Manuel Valcárcel Díaz contra el Ayuntamiento of Langreo’.

militias fighting government forces in the streets of the provincial capital. The Church bore the brunt of the backlash against the perceived enemies of the new order. Revolutionaries searched churches for alleged arms, detained dozens of priests, seminarians and religious brothers, and killed 33 of them.<sup>75</sup>

Prior to the insurrection, the government had responded to agitation and protest by some municipal authorities by appointing new councils. This was accelerated by the revolutionary insurrection. The defeat and heavy repression of the left opened an opportunity for the local right and Catholics to reassert their own image of the local community. Parish priests certainly identified the new context as an opportunity to recover control. The parish priest of Ciaño requested that the on-going litigation process over the cemetery be suspended while his counterpart in La Rebollada (Mieres) asked for the cemetery to be returned to him. However, the new councillors were cautious. In Mieres, the municipal authorities demanded to see documents demonstrating the Church's claim to ownership and in Langreo councillors decided to consult lawyers.<sup>76</sup> This emphasis on respecting due legal process is perhaps surprising in the context of mass detentions, torture and extra-judicial murder by the military authorities to repress the revolutionary insurrection. But even as councillors were determined to follow the law, the law was reinterpreted to suit their agenda. In Oviedo right-wing councillors called for the cemetery chapel to be reopened in accordance with the religious freedom espoused in the 1932 law

---

<sup>75</sup> The principal accounts are Shubert, *Road to Revolution*; Ruiz, *Insurrección defensiva* and Taibo, *Asturias*.

<sup>76</sup> Archivo de Mieres, Actas del Ayuntamiento. 2 de noviembre de 1934 al 5 de junio de 1935, f. 185; Archivo de Langreo, Actas del Ayuntamiento. 23 de junio de 1934 al 12 de septiembre de 1935, f. 80.

and its 'wide liberal sense, in accordance with the doctrines from which the legislator took inspiration'.<sup>77</sup> This interpretation of religious freedom was very different from the ethos of the 1932 law, which sought to secularise the burial ground. In Langreo, the cemetery in Ciaño was returned to the priest (and the legal case cancelled) because the parish was considered the legitimate owner. In fact the 1933 legislation had limited itself to defining the expropriation process; the regulations were not about determining ownership.<sup>78</sup>

Compared to the cemeteries, the matter of funeral processions was more straightforward. The new authorities in San Martín del Rey Aurelio revoked the ban on Catholic funeral processions in January 1935 and returned to Langreo a month later and Barcelona in December.<sup>79</sup> There was also an immediacy to funerals, an issue which affected more profoundly the expression of collective identities than that of to whom the keys of the cemetery belonged. Yet in a context of severe repression of the left and with newly appointed local council authorities, it would have been entirely plausible for the cemeteries to have been returned to the parish clergy. Rather, it appears that councillors were reluctant to relinquish control of the cemeteries. This was not due to respect for agreements made by councils prior to the revolutionary insurrection, as previous decisions were overturned, but rather a resistance to transferring control away from local state institutions and responded to a logic of the accumulation of state power.

---

<sup>77</sup> Archivo de Oviedo, Actas del Ayuntamiento. 22 de junio de 1934 al 10 de enero de 1936, ff. 200–1.

<sup>78</sup> Archivo de Langreo, Actas del Ayuntamiento. 23 de junio de 1934 al 12 de septiembre de 1935, ff. 112–3.

<sup>79</sup> *Región*, 2 January, 2 February 1935. Vicente Cárcel Ortí, *La persecución religiosa en la España durante la Segunda República* (Madrid 1990), 177.

At national level the government did not revoke the legislation, but did introduce a new decree in December 1935 citing concerns over illegal or prolonged expropriations. The new legislation dictated that incomplete expropriation processes had to be terminated, if they had not followed the established procedures, or completed within three to six months. Given the glacial speed of the judicial system, the legislation was plausibly a backdoor way of returning the cemeteries to the Church.<sup>80</sup> Even so, the decree was issued in a context of increasing governmental and parliamentary crisis. Dated 5 December, it was published on 10 December, the day after Prime Minister Chapaprieta resigned. Scandals and internal divisions had eroded the Radical Party while CEDA's strategy of slowly inching towards power ultimately failed when President Alcalá Zamora refused to offer them the opportunity to form a government. Instead, he charged Portela Valladares with appointing ministers to prepare for fresh elections.<sup>81</sup>

The pace of political events from later 1935 onwards outstripped the resolution of the secularisation of cemeteries. The elections took place in February 1936 before the cemetery in La Rebollada could be returned to the parish priest. The elections returned a narrow victory for the resurgent centre-left Republicans, socialists and communists organised under the banner of the Popular Front. The municipal authorities in power prior to the 1934 revolutionary insurrection returned to take their seats at council meetings and investigated and revoked the agreements made by the previous administration. Yet further

---

<sup>80</sup> *Gaceta de Madrid*, 10 December 1935.

<sup>81</sup> See Nigel Townson, *The Crisis of Democracy in Spain: Centrist Politics under the Second Republic* (Brighton 2000), 330–8.

attempts to secularise funeral processions and cemeteries, including an agreement by the municipal council of Cangas de Onís in eastern Asturias to seize a cemetery, were interrupted by the Civil War. The victory of the Francoist ‘Crusade’ in 1939 reinstated the Church’s role as a powerful force in Spanish society, even if the Church’s relationship to the new state was far from secure.<sup>82</sup> The Francoist regime revoked Republican legislation and parish cemeteries were returned to the Church. Even then, civil cemeteries would remain under civil jurisdiction.<sup>83</sup>

### **A grassroots Kulturkampf**

Religion was one of the major cleavages that divided Spanish society in the first third of the twentieth century and played a key role in structuring the two sides of the bloody three-year Civil War.<sup>84</sup> The military coup of July 1936 disarticulated Republican state authority, precipitating a wave of anticlerical violence that claimed the lives of nearly 7,000 members of the clergy, seminarians and (overwhelmingly male) religious. The majority of the Church blessed the Francoist side as waging a ‘crusade’ in defence of ‘Christian civilisation’.<sup>85</sup> The Church partook in the spoils of the Francoist victory through its elevation as the custodian of Spain’s national, Catholic identity within the wider Francoist political project.

---

<sup>82</sup> See Callahan, *Catholic Church*, 372.

<sup>83</sup> *Boletín Oficial del Estado*, 20 December 1938.

<sup>84</sup> Key studies of the religious aspect include Hilari Raguer, *Gunpowder and Incense: The Catholic Church and the Spanish Civil War* (London 2007), trans. Gerald Howson; José María Sánchez, *The Spanish Civil War as a Religious Tragedy* (Indiana 1987); and the landmark Antonio Montero Moreno, *Historia de la persecución religiosa en España, 1936–1939* (Madrid 1961).

<sup>85</sup> The figures in David Martín Rubio, ‘La persecución religiosa en España. Una aportación sobre las cifras’, *Hispania Sacra*, 53 (2001), 63–89.

The centrality of religion to the Spanish Civil War would seem to set Spain apart from wider Europe during this period. Yet recent comparative approaches have made pertinent parallels with Soviet Russia—which saw even greater violence—and Mexico.<sup>86</sup> Indeed the importance of religion in wider Europe during the ‘European Civil War’ has perhaps been underplayed or at least separated too often from the socio-political conflicts that divided Europe.<sup>87</sup> McMillan has argued for a re-evaluation of the importance of the ‘intensification of existing links between religion and nationalism’ during the First World War, including the construction of ‘the idea of a holy war or “crusade”—a war for righteousness in a religious rather than a secular sense, meaning that one did God’s work and took up arms against a diabolical enemy’.<sup>88</sup> It is not difficult to see how such frameworks contributed to the degrading, destructive violence that lay at the heart of the ‘European Civil War’. This intensifying clash of radical right and left ideologies during the 1920s-1930s, in which the Catholic Church played an important role, has been labelled a ‘culture war’.<sup>89</sup>

In European history, ‘culture wars’ most frequently refer to the struggles over the place of religion in the modern nation-state in nineteenth-century Europe. Weir has

---

<sup>86</sup> Julio de la Cueva, ‘Violent Culture Wars: Religion and Revolution in Mexico, Russia and Spain in the Interwar Period’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, pre-published 10 May 2017, doi.org/10.1177/0022009417690594 [last accessed 10 April 2018].

<sup>87</sup> It is neglected, for example, in Enzo Traverso, *Fire and Blood: The European Civil War, 1914-1945* (London 2016).

<sup>88</sup> James McMillan, ‘War’, in Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth (eds), *Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge 2011), 54.

<sup>89</sup> Mary Vincent, ‘Political Violence and Mass Society: A European Civil War?’, in Nicholas Doumanis (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Europe 1914-1945* (Oxford 2016), 388–406.

recently appealed for the term to be extended into the twentieth century. For Weir, the twentieth-century Kulturkampf was qualitatively different in that the very survival of Christian faith itself was perceived to be at stake.<sup>90</sup> Moreover, ‘the culture wars of the interwar period were also fought as real—physically or symbolically violent—wars’, whereas previously violent rhetoric had not been not matched by physical action.<sup>91</sup> The Spanish Civil War, both as a ‘crusade’ and for its anticlerical bloodshed, is a central part of this story and it is easy to see how the label of a ‘culture war’ maps onto societal polarisation and conflict in 1930s Spain with relative ease.

The disputes over the secularisation of cemeteries and funerals during the Spanish Second Republic can be productively drawn into debating a twentieth-century Kulturkampf, revealing both the continuity in attempts at state-led secularisation in Spain and the changed styles of politics. In the nineteenth century culture war, secularists sought to ‘privatise’ religious practice. This drive is also evident in the desire to expropriate cemeteries and restrict funerals in the 1930s. The emergence of new ideologies and styles of politics were also fixated on occupying and defending space, yet injected greater urgency and militancy into these struggles. Funerals were now an opportunity for mobilisation through which to confront political opponents and a litmus test for wider support for particular worldviews.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>90</sup> Clark and Kaiser, *Culture Wars*; Todd Weir, ‘The Christian Front Against Godlessness: Anti-Secularism and the Demise of the Weimar Republic, 1928-1933’, *Past & Present*, 229 (2015), 201–2.

<sup>91</sup> Cueva, ‘Violent Culture Wars’, 20.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas sees this as a leftist reaction to Catholic politicisation of funerals. Thomas, *Faith and the Fury*, 58–9.



The language of the ‘culture wars’ over cemeteries and funerals in Spain during the 1930s is revealing of this shift, particularly in terms of defence of property rights. Justification of property claims to the parish cemetery was frequently framed in terms of representing the ‘people’—a key organising concept in interwar politics.<sup>93</sup> In the left-wing strongholds of the Asturian coalfields, the local community (as the ‘people’) was often interpreted through a prism of class, yet the origins and development of cemeteries were more complicated than such ideological frameworks allowed. For example, according to the right-wing daily *Región*, the cemetery of La Rebollada had been built on land donated by a local lady, funded by popular subscription, and maintained by the parish priest. For *Región*, it was clearly a parish cemetery.<sup>94</sup> For others, however, the contribution made by the local population justified a different interpretation. *El Noroeste* recounted how local citizens had organised the construction of the cemetery in Tudela Veguín via monetary contributions. Once completed, the cemetery had been transferred to the diocese and the promised civil cemetery did not materialise, which undermined the local community as the ‘sole proprietor’ of the cemetery.<sup>95</sup>

In these cases, the local community was conceived in different ways. On the one hand, there was the community as parish, in which the local priest played a leading role and which local citizens were expected to contribute and support, including through monetary donations. This extended to cemeteries. Catholic criticism of the secularisation of funeral

---

<sup>93</sup> E.g. Jessica Wardhaugh, *In Pursuit of the People: Political Culture in France, 1934-9* (Basingstoke 2009). For Spain, Rafael Cruz, *En el nombre del pueblo: República, rebelión y guerra en la España de 1936* (Madrid 2009).

<sup>94</sup> *Región*, 1 July 1932.

<sup>95</sup> *El Noroeste*, 20 May 1932.

processions and cemeteries was couched in terms of the wilful victimisation of a (silent) Catholic majority by a sectarian mayor. *Región* declared that there were not enough civil burials to warrant the seizure of cemeteries in Oviedo and called for respect for the (alleged) Catholic majority.<sup>96</sup> On the other hand, there was the secular local community of free, equal citizens with the right to determine how they would be buried. The priest had no right to interfere in the affairs of this community, who demanded that their local political representatives look after their needs. These claims on the parish cemetery were based on understandings of labour and effort, underpinned by class-based interpretations of the local community. While funding may have come from local notables, local inhabitants had sweated to construct the cemetery with their labour. Their claim was based on physical investment. The construction of the cemetery was no longer a labour of devotion by the local parish, but a product of labour. Elements of a class-based justification thus combined with those of local citizens' rights shaped by the overarching idea of Republican citizenship in interpreting the cemetery as belonging to a local community, which rejected an identification of community with parish.

Struggles and accommodation between religious and civil authority developed differently, in nature and in speed, in different European nation-states, due in part to the confessional mix—or not—of particular societies. In Spain, not only did the 1930s see the culmination of long-running conflict between secular and Catholic cultures, but these combined with the modes of politics, including a propensity for militant, direct action, and

---

<sup>96</sup> *Región*, 22 April 1932.

a policing of public space, characteristic of the interwar period.<sup>97</sup> Mayors and councils tried to manage the competing demands of building a secular state and pressures exerted by local Catholic and secular constituencies. The experience of cemeteries and funerals illuminates how the ‘culture war’ in 1930s’ Spain was peculiarly Spanish, yet also reflected the wider European tone and mode of politics.

### **Conclusion**

At a meeting of the Langreo municipal council in mid-May 1932, councillor Cabezas remarked that wresting possession of the parish cemetery in Ciaño from the Church would take much longer than simply building a new municipal burial ground.<sup>98</sup> His comments were prescient. The municipal authorities gained the cemetery keys but not the deeds and the issue was not resolved during the Republic. Yet Cabezas, wilfully or otherwise, missed the point. For the Republican secularising project, controlling a *parish* cemetery was critical. Similarly, the Church objected to the transfer of Church property to the state. In fact, municipal authorities of different political colours built municipal cemeteries during the Republic without disputes over politics and control detailed in this article.

This study has shed light on the hitherto neglected subject of struggles over cemeteries and practices of death during the Second Republic. It has underlined the differences and similarities between cemeteries and funeral processions and focused on the

---

<sup>97</sup> On the concept of ‘policing’ as used here, see Eve Rosenhaft, *Beating the Fascists? The German Communists and Political Violence, 1929–1933* (New York, 1983).

<sup>98</sup> See Archivo de Langreo, Actas del ayuntamiento. 28 de abril de 1932 al 17 de diciembre de 1932, ff. 32–3.

important role played by local authorities, particularly the mayor, in state building and mediating between different groups in an unclear legal context. While legal boundaries were pushed in 1931 and 1932, respect for private property and private Catholic belief were clearly evident, although to different degrees. This nuances recent work that overemphasises the intransigent sectarianism of local politicians and demonstrates a need for a careful rethinking of the dynamics of politics in the Second Republic. It also suggests a need to distinguish between the rhetorical—and at times physical—battles in the streets and the possibility for negotiation and ‘accommodation’ behind closed doors, as in council meetings.<sup>99</sup> The specific dynamics of the ‘culture war’ thus need to be located in particular spaces and care is required in order to demarcate the limits of the ‘culture war’ as an interpretative framework.

The secularisation of cemeteries and funeral processions was a central facet of the culture war at local level during the Second Republic—a culture war that was both the extension and development of the nineteenth century secular-religious struggle, and between broader competing visions of Spain in the 1930s. It is important to recognise that the examination of municipal politics in the wake of the 1934 insurrection suggests that there is a logic of the accumulation of state power that can be obscured by an overemphasis on the cleavage over religion and between left and right. Even so, the culture war over religion formed a regular part in the lives of Spaniards and the texture of political

---

<sup>99</sup> Oliver Zimmer, ‘Beneath the “Culture War”’: Corpus Christi Processions and Mutual Accommodation in the Second German Empire’, *Journal of Modern History*, 82,2 (2010), 288–334.

conflict during the Second Republic. While removing the wall did little to mitigate the economic problems facing the working class and peasantry, it was a symbolic act that did eliminate a physical barrier that represented perceived historical injustice and victimisation by the Church as represented by the priest and his ability to (permanently) separate friends and family in death. As part of a wider European culture war in the twentieth century, the conflicts over cemeteries and death practices fused aspects of the nineteenth century culture wars with interwar politics. Anticlericals and secularists attempted to restrict the public expression of Catholic belief and asserted a more muscular role for the state, which combined with the greater militancy, the higher stakes of political struggles, the disputes over occupying public space, and the mobilisation of antagonistic understandings of the 'people' in interwar politics. Tracing conflicts such as those over cemeteries and funerals can serve to root broad conceptual categories such as 'culture wars' in the everyday experience of Spaniards during the 'European Civil War'.