

REVIEW

BOOK

La secreta de Franco. *La Brigada Político-Social durante la dictadura.*

ALCÁNTARA, Pablo. Planeta, 2022

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Barcelona, August 2022. The information panel in front of the police station at No. 43 on Via Laietana was vandalised again. Nothing is legible. What did it say? Who poured paint on it? And why? In the spring of 2019, Barcelona City Council decided to put up a panel a few metres away from the building telling the frightening story behind its walls. The Barcelona headquarters of Franco's political police, the Brigada Político-Social (BPS, the Political-Social Brigade), its premises were used to torture and systematically violate human rights during the Franco dictatorship. Today, different associations of ex-political prisoners, former deportees or relatives of victims of Franco's regime –such as those gathered under the umbrella of the *Ateneu Memòria Popular* (Popular Memory Atheneum), among others– recall the facts and call for this police station, still in operation, to be turned into a centre of memory.

It's hard to understand the reason why a study on the role played by Franco's political police in Spain had not been carried out until now. While other countries have seen the publication of books, articles, reports by human rights institutions and even the release of films dedicated to the political police and secret services, Spain still lacked such a study. Historian Pablo Alcántara sought to fill this gap with his book *La secreta de Franco. La Brigada Político-Social durante la dictadura* [Franco's Secret Police. The Political-Social Brigade during the Dictatorship], a publication resulting from his PhD thesis.

As a result of the restructuring of the Public Order Forces between 1938 (still at war) and 1942, the BPS emerged as the dictatorship's "true praetorian guard". To this end, it had the invaluable assistance of H. Himmler's Gestapo and from 1953, in the throes of the Cold War, the CIA's cooperation through collaboration in international operations and the training of Spanish agents. Alcántara delves into the working methodology of the BPS and its role in major acts of repression, such as the fight against the anti-Franco guerrillas, the workers' movement, the student movement, clandestine political parties (especially Spain's



1. Book *La secreta de Franco. La Brigada Político-Social durante la dictadura*



2. The police station of Via Laietana in Barcelona, 2021. R. Conesa (EUROM)

Communist Party), cultural sectors, professional associations and the actions executed against the armed struggle and terrorism in the final stages of the dictatorship and the transition.

One of the strong points of the research is undoubtedly Alcántara's work on the personal files of BPS members kept in the Ministry of the Interior's Archives or the Social Investigation Bulletins kept in Spain's National Historical Archive. By consulting them, he has managed to compellingly describe the different profiles of the police force members and to reconstruct the careers of the most feared commissioners and inspectors throughout the dictatorship, namely, Roberto Conesa, Eduardo Quintela, Pedro Urraca, Pedro Polo, Antonio Juan Creix, Melitón Manzanas, Antonio González Pacheco (alias) "Billy el Niño", etc.

The Amnesty Law passed in October 1977 spared the agents who had been reported, and the very agents who had acted as forces of public order during the dictatorship continued to work under democracy (some of them being decorated and promoted). In 1986, the BPS was replaced by the General Commissariat of Information, a body which, since its creation, has had

a staff and budget considered "classified information". Despite the "querrela argentina" (Argentinian complaint), the attempt by the dictatorship's victims to bring several of the police torturers (Antonio González Pacheco, Jesús Muñecas, Celso Galván, etc.) before the Argentine courts, Spanish justice has protected them, reaffirming a model of impunity that not only affects justice, but also historical research. Alcántara has had to overcome the many stumbling blocks posed by Spain's Official Secrets Act of 1968 and the Historical Heritage Act in order to gain access to certain documents. Today, many associations of archivists, historians and memorialist organisations are calling for greater transparency and a much more courageous reform of the Official Secrets Act than the one currently being considered by the Spanish government.

Books such as *La secreta de Franco* shed light on the impunity enjoyed by Spain's forces of public order and help us understand why, in 2022, in front of the police headquarters on Barcelona's Via Laietana, there are still those who vandalise information panels and endeavour to conceal from the public the fact that the BPS practised torture there.