

# THE ASSASSINATION OF AN ANDALUSIAN POET

MARTÍN GARCÍA CALLE

He was seen, surrounded by rifles,  
moving down a long street  
and out to the country  
in the chill before dawn, with the stars still out.  
They killed Federico  
at the first glint of daylight.

The band of assassins  
shrank from his glance.  
They all closed their eyes,  
muttering: "See if God helps you now!"  
Federico fell,  
lead in his stomach, blood on his face.  
And Granada was the scene of the crime.  
Think of it—poor Granada—, his Granada . . .

—Antonio Machado, "The Crime was in Granada"<sup>1</sup>

1. Antonio Machado, "El crimen fue en Granada" ["The Crime was in Granada"] in Alan Trubellood, ed. *And trans., Antonio Machado: Selected Poems* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 263–65.

2. Josep Gavaldá, "Federico García Lorca, El Poeta Que Perdió España" ["Federico García Lorca, The Poet Who Lost Spain"] *National Geographic*, June 5, 2020, accessed September 25, 2020, [https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/federico-garcia-lorca-poeta-que-perdio-espana\\_14316](https://historia.nationalgeographic.com.es/a/federico-garcia-lorca-poeta-que-perdio-espana_14316).

3. Ian Gibson, *Federico García Lorca: A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1989).

NEVER IS THE IMPORTANCE of a literary body of work more vital than in the absence of the living body that produced it. Eighty years have passed since the assassination of Federico García Lorca, though his literary legacy, thankfully, lives on in public memory.<sup>2</sup> His works have been translated into many languages, and Lorca is considered the most universal poet of twentieth-century Spanish literature.<sup>3</sup> His work has enjoyed widespread acclaim in his birth country of Spain, as well as in Latin America. He has been honoured in Mexico, Uruguay, and Argentina.

Lorca would not have been assassinated at thirty-eight years of age if not for the Spanish Civil War. The poet was slain on August 18, 1936, in the first month of the conflict. Granada, the birth city of Lorca and the place in which he found refuge during the upheaval, was taken by the insurgent troops under the instruction of General Francisco Franco. According to some manuals of Spanish history, the poet was shot for having been leftwing, homosexual, anticlerical, and a defender of the abolition of the Spanish monarchy. However, the truth remains unknown. In the following, I will outline various distinct theories that surround Lorca's assassination.

### The Official Version

Essential to the clarification of the assassination has been the French-Hispanic journalist Marcelle Auclair. Auclair decided to write a biography in honour of the life and death of Lorca, who was her friend. Titled *Enfances et mort de García Lorca* [*Childhood and the Death of García Lorca*], the biography was published in 1968 by French publisher Éditions du Seuil and, soon after, in 1972, was translated into Spanish by Aitana Alberti and published by the Mexican publisher Ediciones Era as *Vida y Muerte de García Lorca* [*The Life and Death of García Lorca*].<sup>4</sup> In the course of her research, Auclair solicited a report from the Francoist dictatorship on the crime committed against the man she called “one of the great poets of this planet.”<sup>5</sup> She did not receive a response. Instead, the dictatorship concealed the report. However, years later, in April, 2015, a document came to light. Dated July 9, 1965, the document was written by the Regional Brigade of Social Investigation with the Granada police and addressed to the governor of Granada.<sup>6</sup> The report describes the poet as a “socialist” and a “[free]mason belonging to the Alhambra order,” noting that he had become known for “homosexual

4. Marcell Auclair, *Enfances et Mort de García Lorca* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968); Marcell Auclair, *Vida y Muerte de García Lorca* [*The Life and Death of García Lorca*], trans. Aitana Alberti (Mexico: Ediciones Era, 1972).

5. Tereixa Constenla, “El Último Favor de Auclair” [“Auclair’s last favor”] *El País*, April 23, 2015, [https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/04/23/actualidad/1429803724\\_476059.html](https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/04/23/actualidad/1429803724_476059.html).

6. Javier Torres, “La Versión Franquista del Asesinato de Federico García Lorca” [“Franco’s Version of the Murder of Federico García Lorca”] *Cadena Ser*, April 22, 2015, [https://cadenaser.com/ser/2015/04/22/cultura/1429721554\\_396463.html](https://cadenaser.com/ser/2015/04/22/cultura/1429721554_396463.html).

practices” but that no “specific case” had been recorded.<sup>7</sup> In any event, according to the French writer Jean-Louis Schonberg, the principal cause of Lorca’s assassination was his homosexuality.<sup>8</sup>

In his book *Federico García Lorca: L’homme-L’oeuvre* (1956), Schonberg suggests that Ruiz Alonso, the rightwing politician who led the arrest and subsequent murder of Lorca, was also a homosexual, and that Lorca’s assassination—a crime of passion, and a personal score to settle—was ultimately caused by Alonso. Critics such as Paul Preston have concluded that the French regime favoured this hypothesis since it excused them from any blame.<sup>9</sup> In 1967, some years after the assassination, another scholar of Lorca and his death, Ian Gibson, managed to arrange an interview with the infamously guarded Alonso. The biographer asked him whether it was true that he had denounced Lorca out of spite, or vengeance over a supposed homosexual love, as Schonberg had insinuated. The response of Alonso, who has been called “the executioner of Lorca,” was cutting: “Tell that Schonberg to bring me his wife and daughters, so that he can see what type of man I am.”<sup>10</sup>

### Political Motives

For a descendent of the poet, the crime was a political one. Laura García Lorca, the niece of Lorca, asserts that, “From the historical point of view it is important that a document exists within the French regime recognizing that it was a political crime.”<sup>11</sup> Preston, an historian, advances a similar opinion:

One of the most celebrated victims of the terror of the right, not merely in Granada but in all of Spain, was the poet Federico García Lorca. In previous years the Francoists would claim that Lorca had been killed in a private dispute of apolitical denotation, relating to his homosexuality. Lorca had nothing apolitical about him.<sup>12</sup>

7. Ibid.

8. Paul Preston, *El Holocausto Español: Odio y Exterminio en la Guerra Civil y Después* [*The Spanish Holocaust: Hatred and Extermination in the Civil War and After*] (Madrid: Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial España, 2011), 345–46.

9. Ibid.

10. Jesús Ruiz Mantilla, “El verdugo de Lorca” [“The Executioner of Lorca”] *El País*, August 16, 2007, [https://elpais.com/diario/2007/08/19/eps/1187504151\\_850215.html](https://elpais.com/diario/2007/08/19/eps/1187504151_850215.html).

11. Tereixa Constenla, “García Lorca: Fue un Crimen Político” [“García Lorca: It was a Political Crime”] *El País*, April 23, 2015, [https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/04/23/actualidad/1429812848\\_851451.html](https://elpais.com/cultura/2015/04/23/actualidad/1429812848_851451.html).

12. Preston, *El Holocausto Español*, 345–346.

Preston's remarks clearly suggest that the Francoists had sought to downplay the political orientation of the poet, and to obscure the political nature of his assassination. Likewise, in an interview with *El Pais* magazine, Ian Gibson opines that the report requested by the Francoist ministries about Lorca was damning:

The report that they requested is conclusive. It demonstrates that this was no street murder but that the order to assassinate came from the civil government. They say it themselves.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast to these views, others have argued that the national insurgents bear no responsibility. Journalist Eduardo Molina Fajardo, in a book published after his 1979 death titled *Los Últimos Días de García Lorca* [*The Last Days of Federico García Lorca*] (1983), attempts to downplay the role of the Spanish Falangists, a group of two far-rightwing political parties with an authoritarian political ideology. Fajardo notes that disagreement continues to exist regarding who is responsible for Lorca's death because all of the actors who participated in the operation were in one way or another culpable for the ultimate crime.

In 1938, only two years after the assassination, poet and friend of Lorca, Luis Cernuda, described the event as “a monstrous political crime,” his outrage and powerlessness redolent in his words.<sup>14</sup> It is true that Federico García Lorca had a strong affinity with the Spanish left. He was a close friend of the poet Rafael Alberti, a communist, and he was likewise close to a minister of the Republic, Fernando de los Ríos. A professor of political law and later socialist politician, Ríos had lectured Lorca in human rights at the University of Granada and travelled with Lorca to the United States in 1928. In 1937, in the middle of the Civil War, General Francisco Franco was asked about the assassination of Lorca in an interview with a Mexican magazine. In his response, Franco characterised the death as politically motivated: “In those first moments of the revolution of Granada, that writer was

13. Constenla, “García Lorca: Fue un Crimen Político.”

14. Quoted in Eduardo Castro, *Versos para Federico: Lorca como Tema Poético* [*Verses for Federico: Lorca as a Poetic Subject*] (Murcia: Secretariado de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Murcia, 1986), 39.

killed for being mistaken as part of the insurgency: these are the natural accidents of war.”<sup>15</sup> Whether correct or not, Franco’s remarks unambiguously link Lorca’s death to a political plan.

### Family Quarrels

Miguel Caballero and Pilar Góngora are the principal proponents of the thesis that Lorca was killed over familial disputes. For these researchers, the assassination was carried out as a result of grudges and envies that certain Granadian families held towards Federico García Rodríguez, Lorca’s father. The primary dispute was between the Roldán and Alba families. Together with the García Rodríguez family, these families formed the economic triangle of the richest landowners of Granada. In their 2007 book *Historia de una Familia: la Verdad Sobre el Asesinato de García Lorca* [*History of a Family: The Truth about the Assassination of García Lorca*], Caballero and Góngora develop the theory. The persuasiveness of the family theory is affirmed by the book’s preface, written by Gibson. For Gibson, the book no less than

confirms that Federico García Lorca died not only due to his status as ‘red,’ famous ‘red’ and, to be more exact, ‘fag’—a supporter of the Popular Front and enemy of the Spain of the Catholic Monarchs, but because he was the son of Federico García Rodríguez. Somehow the father was punished through the son.<sup>16</sup>

Caballero and Góngora are convinced of two fundamental motivations for Lorca’s assassination. The first is the resentment the Roldán family held towards the father of Lorca for various reasons, including economic rivalry, political matters, and envy. While the children of García Rodríguez had only attended university, Lorca had, at the time of his arrest, already achieved great success as a prestigious poet and playwright. The second (related) motivation was Lorca’s theatrical work, *La Casa de Bernarda Alba* [*The House of Bernarda Alba*]. Though

15. Francisco Franco, *Palabras del Caudillo* [*Words of the Caudillo*] (Madrid: Ediciones FE, 1938), 183.

16. Miguel Caballero and Pilar Góngora, *Historia de una familia: la verdad sobre el asesinato de García Lorca* [*History of a Family: The Truth about the Assassination of García Lorca*] (Madrid: Ibersaf Editores, 2007), 11.

Lorca completed the play in 1936, only two months before his assassination, it was not performed until 1945. The play is about an authoritarian Andalusian matriarch, the eponymous Bernarda Alba, who wields complete control over her five daughters. As Caballero and Góngora suggest, it is likely that the Roldán family viewed the play as a personal slight, since it features characters modelled on—and with the same names as—members of the Roldán family.

Despite the pleas of Lorca's mother, Vicenta Lorca Romero, and of other family members who wished to avoid conflict with the Roldán family, Lorca refused to change the names. As Caballero and Góngora write, when the Roldán family gained "knowledge of the existence of the [play]," it became "a new motive for the quarrels between the families." As they continue, "One might say that this was the drop that made the glass of grievances overflow."<sup>17</sup>

More than eighty years have passed since Lorca's death and the poet's body has still not been found, despite search attempts of archaeologists, historians, and researchers.<sup>18</sup> In any event, Lorca's family has refused on many occasions to exhume his remains should they be found.<sup>19</sup> According to some, the location of the assassination has still not been identified; for others, Lorca's body was hidden by the Franco regime, which sought to avoid the location of his death becoming a shrine or site of pilgrimage for socialists. There have even been those who speculate that his own family moved his body to a different location.

## Conclusions

I believe that Lorca's assassination was not simply carried out because he was a homosexual, nor because Lorca had close ties with the political left; rather, it was a culmination of several events. In relation to the theories advanced to explain his

17. *Ibid.*, 234.

18. See James Baddock, "Remains of Federico Garcia Lorca 'Hidden at the Bottom of a Well,'" *The Telegraph*, April 13, 2016, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/13/remains-of-federico-garcia-lorca-hidden-at-the-bottom-of-a-well/>.

19. Garcia Lorca, "Investigators Believe they Found Lorca's First Grave-Site, Say it was Exhumed," *Agencia EFE*, February 15, 2017, <https://www.efe.com/efe/english/life/investigators-believe-they-found-lorca-s-first-grave-site-say-it-was-exhumed/d50000263-3180476/>.

death, the most plausible seems to be the hypothesis of Caballero and Góngora—that the principal motive for his murder was the resentment for and envy of Lorca and his family held by the Roldán family. In reference to the search for the body, it appears possible, as Marta Osorio has argued, that Lorca's family (or the Franco regime) removed his body to a separate place.<sup>20</sup> This would explain why various excavations have not found any vestiges of Lorca's remains. Besides this fact, it is telling that the family resoundingly refuses to facilitate the search: this might indicate that the family has an interest in obscuring their involvement.

On the other hand, it is inevitable that the figure of the Andalusian poet remains linked to certain political interests and ideologies. The Spanish Communist Party considers Lorca a martyr of the Republic, and even the former Soviet Union considered the poet as allied with the communist cause. In the same way, several poets who sympathised with the Francoist regime have also honoured Lorca. Despite having close friendships with socialist authors, it is certain that Lorca was not part of any political party. However, it is possible that, for his assassins, the strategy for hiding the true reasons for his death—vengeance and resentment—was to search for a political, religious, or moral justification to perpetrate their crime: hence, highlighting Lorca's status as a socialist, atheist, and homosexual.

Lorca's literary afterlife has taken on the dimensions of his death, with his works being both censored and much debated.<sup>21</sup> But his literary corpus has been subjected to its own exhumation and transportation, having been translated and sold around the world. The connection between Lorca's body and his body of work has been intimated by his own translator, Roy Campbell, who wrote the following poem, titled "On the Martyrdom of F. García Lorca," which consists only of a single quatrain:

20. See Raúl Limón, "New Mysteries Surface over Lorca's Final Resting Place," *El País*, August 20, 2015, [https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2015/08/19/inenglish/1439971024\\_385486.html](https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2015/08/19/inenglish/1439971024_385486.html); Marta Osorio, *Miedo, Olvido y Fatasía: Cronica de la Investigación de Agustín Penon sobre Federico García Lorca, Granada-Madrid (1955-1956)* [*Fear, Forgetfulness, and fantasy: Chronicle of the Investigation of Agustín Penon into Federico García Lorca Granada-Madrid (1955-1956)*] (Granada: Editorial Camares, 2009).

21. The Falangist regime imposed a ban on Lorca's work until 1953, and several publications of his work were censored even after the ban was rescinded: see Mary Vincent, "Breaking the Silence? Memory and Oblivion since the Spanish Civil War," in Éfrat Ben Ze'ev, Ruth Ginio, and Jay Winter, eds., *Shadows of War: A Social History of Silence in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 55.

Not only did he lose his life  
By shots assassinated:  
But with a hammer and a knife  
Was after that—translated.<sup>22</sup>

Campbell's poem, together with Antonio Machado's poem at the head of this essay, demonstrate how the tragic event of Lorca's death inspired a swathe of artists to commemorate Lorca's life. The circumstances of Lorca's death have interwoven with the reception of his work—a reception expressed in both artistic and critical responses. Reciprocally, the theories behind Lorca's assassination have taken on their own literary status, each telling a unique story about Lorca as a political citizen, a son, and poet.

22. Peter Alexander, ed., *The Selected Poems of Roy Campbell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 99.