

Spain to hand back Civil War archive to Catalonia

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Spain has said it would return documents seized by General Francisco Franco's forces in the 1936-39 Civil War to Catalonia, angering conservatives who object to the region claiming further rights from Madrid.

Catalonia, a wealthy region with a strong cultural identity and its own language, has a degree of autonomy from the central government but relations with Madrid are often fraught as it seeks to extend its powers.

Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero's Socialist government said the gesture would repair a historic wrong.

"This will put an end to an illegitimate state of affairs," Deputy Prime Minister Maria Teresa Fernandez de la Vega told reporters after the cabinet backed a bill to return the papers.

But the conservative opposition Popular Party (PP) said it was too much of a concession to the Generalitat, the regional government of Catalonia.

"We will do everything we can to prevent this blackmailing of the government and the Socialist Party," said PP spokesman Eduardo Zaplana. "A self-respecting country should defend the unity of its identity, its archives and its museums." The issue of the documents seized from Catalonia is emotive in the region because it recalls an old trauma: the loss of hard-won rights when Franco won the Civil War.

Catalans had gained a degree of autonomy under Spain's Second Republic, but when he took power Franco disbanded the Generalitat and quashed regional aspirations.

He ruled a highly centralised Spain as an autocrat until his death in 1975 and it was only with Spain's return to democracy that Catalans regained some autonomy.

Until now, the Catalan papers have been kept in the central city of Salamanca in a wider archive of documents from the Civil War era. They include reports that Catalan mayors sent to the Barcelona-based Generalitat on the progress of the war.

When the bill becomes law, members of the public will be allowed to request documents related to their family history.

For example, a letter in which a man stated his Communist convictions to his girlfriend, and that Franco's

forces used as a reason to execute him, could be handed over to his relatives, the government said.

"(The return of the documents) restores the dignity of the Generalitat," Catalonia's Culture Minister Caterina Mieras was quoted as saying by the Europa Press news agency.

But some critics say the planned handover of papers rakes up painful memories of the Civil War that are better laid to rest.

Spain pulled a veil over the war and Franco's dictatorship to help ensure a peaceful transition to democracy in the late 1970s and Spaniards remain divided over whether a process of national reconciliation is needed.

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