

# Ángeles Flórez Peón, Spanish Civil War's Last Militia woman, Dies at 105

She was revered as an essential guardian of the country's memory of war and repression long after the Franco dictatorship.



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Ángeles Flórez Peón in 2016. Her political engagement with Spain began after her brother Antonio, a Communist, was taken prisoner by the republic's Civil Guard. Daniel More, via El Comercio



By [Adam Nossiter](#)

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Ángeles Flórez Peón was 17 when she braved mortar and artillery fire to bring food to her fellow Republican volunteers in the trenches of northern Spain during the Spanish Civil War.

At 18, she was a nurse tending to the wounded in the doomed effort to save Spain from a military takeover. Nationalist troops attacked the hospital where she worked, in coastal Asturias, and she was later arrested and sentenced to 15 years in a women's prison — marked forever, she said, by the memory of seeing fellow inmates being taken out at night and shot.

Ms. Flórez Peón died on May 23 in a hospital in Gijón, Asturias. She was 105. The Spanish press, which first reported her death, called her the last remaining militiawoman of the Spanish Civil War.

Pedro Sánchez, Spain's Socialist prime minister, [paid tribute](#) to her on social media, writing, "105 years of dignity, commitment and struggle for equality, liberty and social justice."

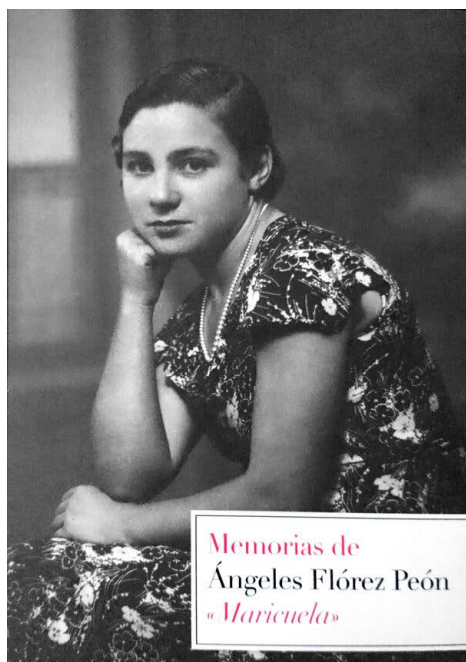
Last year, in regional elections in Asturias, Ms. Flórez Peón, at 104, was the oldest Socialist candidate on the ballot.

After her death, the daily newspaper El País [wrote](#), "Her life straddled an era of intense emotions, of hopes, grand illusions and joys, the irruption of war, repression, enormous suffering, punishment and exile."

Ms. Flórez Peón was known as Maricuela, the name of her character in a play she was in when Gen. Francisco Franco began his military uprising against the Spanish Republic in 1936.

She was celebrated not so much for her relatively modest contribution to the long-ago fight for the Spanish Republic as for representing the living memory of that period, one that still scars and fascinates her country.

Ms. Flórez Peón was a last militant vestige of her country's stillborn modernization under the Second Spanish Republic, an eight-year democratic interlude between monarch and dictatorship that, with its promise of gender equality, was crushed by Franco, leading to his nearly 40-year rule.



The cover of the first of two volumes of memoirs that Ms. Flórez Peón published when she was in her 90s. This one was from 2009. Credit...Fundación José Barreiro

“I count myself one of the lucky ones,” she [said](#) in 2018 at a book festival gathering in Madrid to celebrate a volume of her memoirs. Recalling the prisoners who were shot during her four years in the dreaded Santurrarán women’s prison in Guipúzcoa, she said: “I saw them go to their deaths. That’s why I’m shedding tears. Because I can talk about this, and I’m alive.”



Ms. Flórez Peón and her husband, Graciano Rozada Vallina. They married in 1946. The next year, escaping detention by Franco’s police, he fled to France, and she soon followed him there. Credit...Ángeles Flórez Peón, via El Comerico

Ms. Flórez Peón's political engagement with her country began with the murder of her 29-year-old brother, Antonio, a Communist who took part in an Asturian miners' strike and uprising in October 1934. He became one of the so-called martyrs of Carbayín, 24 young men who met a violent death after being taken prisoner by the shaky republic's Civil Guard. Thousands were killed in subsequent weeks of repression against socialists, communists and anarchists — a bloody prelude to the civil war.

"His death marked my life," she said in an [interview](#) in 2013. "When my brother was murdered, I realized I had to do something."

She joined the Juventudes Socialistas Unificadas, or United Socialist Youth group, and when Franco's military staged its coup in July 1936, she heard loudspeakers in the main square of her town, Pola de Siero, calling for volunteers "to go defend the republic," she recalled.

Ms. Flórez Peón went to work in a restaurant kitchen, helping to cook for the hastily organized Republican volunteers on the front lines. When she brought them food, "shots surrounded us from all sides," she recalled, "but we were young and were not afraid of anything."



Ms. Flórez Peón celebrated her 101st birthday in 2019. "I was lucky to get out alive," she said of her incarceration during the Spanish Civil War. "In prison, they humiliated us and starved us." Credit...Juan Carlos Tuero, via El Comerico

As the front line drew nearer, women were moved further back. Ms. Flórez Peón was recruited to work as a hospital nurse in a converted match factory in Gijón, on the Bay of Biscay.



She and one of her sisters were put in charge of a ward with 30 patients, mostly wounded Basque militiamen. That lasted some two months, until the fall of Asturias in October 1937. Then came her arrest, a 15-minute court-martial and prison.

“I was lucky to get out alive,” she [told](#) El País in 2016. “In prison, they humiliated us and starved us.”

Ángeles Flórez Peón was born on Nov. 17, 1918, in Blimea, Asturias, to José Flórez Llusia, a miner, and Restituta Peón Iglesias, a midwife. Her parents separated when she was 9, and at 12 she was sent out to mop floors to help support her family.

“There was so much misery,” she said in the 2013 interview. “I couldn’t go to school or do any studies.”

She later apprenticed as a dressmaker.

Her boyfriend during the war, Quintin Serrano, a police officer for the republic, was shot and killed while she was in prison. “He left me a ring, a bracelet, and a letter,” she said.

The war ended with the republic’s defeat in April 1939, but she remained in prison under the Franco regime until August 1941. After her release, she found [work](#) in a pharmacy.

In 1946, she married Graciano Rozada Vallina, a miner and Socialist militant who had been seized by Franco’s police while serving with Republican forces but who managed to escape and flee to France the next year. She soon joined him there, in Saint-Éloy-les-Mines, where they lived until his death in 2003. That year, after 56 years in exile, she returned to Gijón to bury his ashes.

She is [survived](#) by her two children, María Ángeles Rozada and José Antonio Rozada, two grandchildren and one great-grandson.

Ms. Flórez Peón, who in her 90s was [described](#) by El País as “petite, smiling, charming, and walking with a firm step,” was delighted to pose for selfies at the Madrid book festival, where she presented her memoirs, “Memorias de Ángeles Flórez Peón: Maricuela” published in 2009, and “Las Sorpresas de Maricuela” (“Surprises of Maricuela”), from 2013.

“She wrote her memoirs in France,” Mr. Rozada, her son, said. “It was during those years after we had grown up. I think she started at the end of the ’70s. We got her a typewriter, and she learned how to use it. She was a woman with a lot of energy, and she had a strong desire to write. She wrote pages and pages. She thought it was

important to write the memoirs of those who had died, so that today's youth could share the memory."

Ms. Flórez Peón remained committed to socialism, gender equality and gay rights. Her son recalled, "She always said: 'Be careful. If we're not united, the extreme right will come back.'" And she remained proud of her role as an essential guardian of Spain's memory after decades of state-imposed forgetting during the Franco years.

"A country without a memory is a country without a soul," [she said](#). "Spain was soulless. We can't forget, and we can't resent. Because if we did, we become like them."

*Rachel Chaundler contributed reporting from Madrid.*

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/21/world/europe/angeles-florez-peon-dead.html>