

# Francisco Franco Is Back: The Contested Reemergence of a Fascist Moral Exemplar

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## BUILDING THE LEGEND

Francisco Franco declared the end of the Spanish Civil War on 1 April 1939. A few weeks later, on 19 May, he presided over a spectacular victory parade that included 120,000 soldiers marching along Madrid’s main avenue, commemorating this historical event and the birth of the “New Spain.” Just before the ceremony, Franco was invested with the Laureate Cross of Saint Ferdinand, Spain’s highest military decoration, for “having saved the Homeland and Civilization” (Box 2010: 96–100; Di Febo 1999: 464). Historian Paul Preston argues that the early *mises-en-scène* of Franco’s emerging dictatorial regime were intended to establish his status as a “worthy coeval of the Duce and the Führer, as well as a fitting heir of the great warrior kings of Spain’s glorious past” (2004: 362). In the early years of his rule, Franco saw fascism as the fastest route to a glorious, reborn Spain, in a local version of what some authors define as a sort of political religion (Saz 2004; Box and Saz 2011), or even clerical fascism (e.g., Trevor-Roper 1981)—which he connected to the medieval birth of the Christian nation and the subsequent splendor of imperial times. To this end, as his press office stated at the time, the massive entry of his troops into Madrid followed the pattern first established by King Alfonso VI in 1085 when he seized the city of Toledo from the Muslims, accompanied by legendary knight Cid Campeador (Preston 2004: 365–67).

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This display of military power and political legitimacy was followed the next day by an equally noteworthy ceremony in the Church of Santa Bárbara in Madrid. There, Franco symbolically crystallized weighty genealogical elements of the Crusade that he believed he had led against Bolshevism and the “Anti-Spain,” and reaffirmed his alliance with the Roman Catholic Church. The official discourse of the time, prolonging the legitimizing arguments elaborated before and during the war, was based on the construction of a grand narrative portraying a Second Reconquest of the true soul of the nation, replicating the defeat and expulsion of the Muslims in 1492 (Ríos Soloma 2016) with the political left portrayed as the new Muslims. In the process of building his own legend, a task to which Franco devoted much time and propaganda effort, he and his ideologists appealed to a growing constellation of moral exemplars and heroic events and locations that made sense of his sacrifice for the nation and remained glued to his deeds during his regime and beyond. In a sort of expanded exemplarity by proxy, Franco successfully absorbed key historical characters and glorious military victories into his own biography to such an extent that some of them became all but synonymous with the figure of the *Caudillo* in the Spanish imaginary.

According to some of the main experts on Franco’s biography and scholars of the nuances of his strong alliance with the Church, this inaugural ceremony incorporated elements of a Christian royal coronation (Di Febo 1999). Franco chose a mostly medieval military, political, and religious choreography to establish a clear continuity between the war he and his generals had waged against the Second Republic (1931–1939) and earlier crucial moments in Spanish history that became iconic for Francoism. To this effect, he brought objects to Madrid that were highly charged symbolically: the Sacred Arch with the relics of Don Pelayo (Pelagius of Asturias), a shadowy nobleman credited in Francoist historiography with lighting the first spark of the Reconquest of Spain against the Muslims in Covadonga in 722; the chains of Navarra rescued in the Battle of Navas de Tolosa in 1212, another crucial victory of Christians against the Moors; and a lantern from the admiral-ship in the Battle of Lepanto, where the Holy League, a Catholic alliance led by Spanish royal Juan de Austria, defeated the Ottoman Empire in 1571. To obligatory military salvos, dressed as a Captain-General, marching under a pallium and flanked by top military, religious, and political authorities, Franco surrendered his victory sword to the Sacred Christ of Lepanto in the presence of Cardinal Primate Gomá—truly upscale paraphernalia usually reserved for monarchs (Di Febo 1999: 466–71; Rager 2001; Preston 2004; 2008; Box 2010; Casanova 2011). For decades, Divine Providence, crusades, Reconquest, empire, eternal homeland and the Roman Catholic Church became the crucial moral and religious moorings of Franco’s messianic role as Spain’s savior. These transcendental values, exemplarily embodied by Franco in numerous victory parades, but particularly during his quasi-royal assumption of power in Madrid, were also replicated in a myriad of monuments, nomenclatures, and commemorations throughout the country (Aguilar 2008). During the early stages of his dictatorship, a lively propaganda machine

elaborated on these themes, establishing a dense rhetoric of divine providence, grandeur, and heroism as a mode of ideological legitimation for the rebellion against the Second Republic. Importantly, in exalted versions of varying degrees, the interpretation of the war as a grandiose sacred crusade against the Red Terror was progressively consolidated (Arrarás 1938–1944), eventually becoming “the central plot of Spain’s peculiar road to fascism, to the construction of a strong national community, that of Victory” (Rodrigo 2013: 20). Historical or legendary characters such as Don Pelayo, El Cid Campeador, the Catholic Monarchs, Phillip II, and Juan de Austria were given privileged spots in the nation’s pantheon of martyrs. Beyond that, Franco was compared by his most enthusiastic hagiographers to Napoleon, Charlemagne, Alexander the Great, and even Saint Michael the Archangel (Preston 2008: 11).

In the framework of these transcendental historical plots and glorious lineages preceding and justifying a necessary sacred war, the Francoist propaganda apparatus also elaborated on the charismatic leader’s exemplary personal traits, in what Preston calls “Franco’s everyday lies” (ibid.: 14). The *Caudillo*, touched by divine providence, was promoted as a brilliant strategist, as visionary, fearless, gallant, fortunate, generous, profoundly religious, a loving husband and father, and ultimately, indisputably noble at heart. An example of the rhetoric of Franco propagandists of the time is the writer José María Pemán, who in 1940 asserted that the *Caudillo* was the “magnificent surgeon who, with a steady hand, and concerned with both efficacy and anesthesia, conquered the *red zone* as if he were caressing it, saving lives and limiting bombings” (quoted in Vázquez Montalbán 1992: 398–99).

Preston remarks that Franco especially cherished and elaborated a number of highly significant roles as the years passed: Before the Civil War, he was the Hero of the Rif, in a reference to his prominent participation in the Moroccan colonial wars. During the war and in the postwar period, he became the Savior of Spain, interweaving his biography with that of medieval characters such as the legendary Cid Campeador and the imperial King Philip II. Later, after Germany’s defeat in World War II, he took a turn at being Commander of Numancia, a Celtiberian settlement where the residents fought fiercely against Romans and preferred suicide to defeat. Finally, after the 1953 agreement with the United States that ended Spain’s diplomatic isolation, he drifted toward the status of Father of the Nation (ibid.: 14–20).

This ambitious and multifaceted totalitarian ideological operation had a strong necropolitical emphasis, as the cult to the dead became paramount (Mbembe 2019). The blood of the Civil War’s Martyrs for God and for Spain—the *caídos* or fallen—merged with that of preceding glorious fights for the insoluble unity and authentic soul of the motherland. Particularly important for the legitimation of the new regime was the spectacular “Reconquest” (Foxá in Box 2010: 171) in November 1939 of the body of the founder of the Spanish fascist party, the Falange, José Antonio Primo de Rivera. José Antonio had been executed by the Republican government on 20 November 1936 in a prison in

Alicante. After the war he was exhumed and transported to the Monastery of El Escorial, the most representative monument of Imperial Spain, built by Philip II, which contains the royal pantheon. In November 1939, three years after his execution, Primo's fascist supporters carried his coffin on their shoulders in a ten-day parade. The spectacular mortuary ritual inaugurated his glorification and mythification in early Francoism and displayed all the local fascist features developed in the years prior to the war: "There was silence and solemnity; slogans and patterned shouts; and, at night, torches . . . illuminating the funerary parade of the deceased" (Box 2009: 271; see also 2010: 160–78). As the procession moved along, bell ringing and cannon fire could be heard in the localities it crossed and onlookers greeted the body with Roman salutes. Primo de Rivera was posthumously appointed Captain-General of the army and received the appropriate honors in his reburial in El Escorial, attended by representatives of both Hitler and Mussolini, who offered funerary wreaths.

Primo de Rivera's memory as a prophet and a visionary patriot was to become a crucial symbolic and political locus in early Francoism; he was even assimilated to Jesus Christ (Box 2010: 163–71). In the wake of his early transfer to a more than honorable reburial place, thousands of mass graves of *caídos* were opened all over Spain in a pattern of fascistization of the cult to the fallen (Box 2009; Ferrándiz 2014: 148–54; Saqqa 2017; 2020). Authorities built reputable pantheons in many local cemeteries to rebury the bodies of the exhumed Francoist supporters. Lists of local *caídos* were placed on the walls of every church in the country, always presided over by the name of fascist leader José Antonio, the Absent, the Martyr of Martyrs. As he was already doing with other historical and legendary characters, Franco sought to associate his charismatic leadership to José Antonio's exemplary political trajectory, courage, and ultimate sacrifice.

These foundational events in Franco's dictatorial rule illuminate the deliberate framing of the new leader as a moral exemplar deeply ingrained in Spain's most glorious past, and highlight the sacrifices endured in a "sacred" war. As Franco's case makes clear, an analytical focus on the ethical qualities attached to historical or mythical figures permits a nuanced appraisal of the makeup of charismatic leadership. It also gives us insights into the historical construction of moral and political legitimacy, the potential of emerging exemplars to magnetize, recycle, and cluster moral values that were formerly dispersed or lacked a concrete biography where they could adhere in a systematic way, and the political engineering of collective patterns of conduct mirroring such desirable attributes (Humphrey 1997; Laidlaw 2017).

So far, I have focused on the historical production of a legendary narrative of sacred crusade to legitimize the 1936 military coup, some of its exemplary, monumental, and funerary expressions, and Franco's leading role in this whole ideological scheme. Yet, a processual focus on exemplarity is also crucial, since it shows the precariousness and dynamism of the moral universes that each instance invokes and conveys, and the ways in which exemplarity can be

modulated, deactivated, or turned upside down in the framework of complex historical and socio-political cycles. Moral exemplars and their publics (and potentially, counterpublics) are always on the move.

Understandings of the Civil War and Franco's historical role have undergone successive metamorphoses over the last eighty years. In what follows, I will discuss four crucial modulations of Franco's moral leverage: First, progressive blurring and increasing irrelevance, connected with a transformation in the understanding of the war in late Francoism and the Transition to Democracy (*la Transición*). Second, negative exemplarity, associated with a new political culture linked to global human rights that emerged in 2000 in connection with the exhumation of mass graves of Republican civilians executed by Franco's army and paramilitary. Third, neo-exemplarity, or the way in which some of the Franco Regime's main moral themes have been reemerging in public debate in recent years, though both historical revisionism and emergent forms of neofascist political participation. And finally, necro-exemplarity, where contemporary debates about Franco's exhumation on 24 October 2019 from his most representative monument, the Valley of the Fallen, exemplify a clash between the second and the third transfigurations—the fate and treatment of his corpse became the cornerstone of a tense political and memorial struggle about his regime and his moral and historical legacy.

#### FROM CRUSADE TO PEACE AND RECONCILIATION TO NEGATIVE EXEMPLARITY

After the defeat of fascism in 1945, and particularly from the late 1950s and 1960s, the worn-out crusade narrative slowly, and not without resistance, started to give way to an alternative account of the Civil War. This process started to unsettle the political and moral cleavages of Franco's public perception as constructed in the postwar years. A new version of the conflict as a tragic and fratricidal war was initially put forward by both internal opponents of the regime and Republicans in exile, with a change of paradigm within the Communist Party (Juliá 2004: 437–62; Aguilar 2008: 175–87; Rodrigo 2013: 70–98). As the internal and external opposition began to imagine new narratives for the war, international conditions shifted, and a generational shift took place in the intellectual and political elites, Franco's regime was forced to refresh its narratives and re-elaborate the theme of the crusade away from a focus on victory and sacrifice toward a new one on peace, with Franco's incipient portrayal as a peacemaker. This complex and fragmentary process continued until his death but was best expressed in 1964 at the official celebration of twenty-five years of peace, which was the first anniversary that did not commemorate victory. It marked a major shift in mainstream Francoist understanding of the war (Rodrigo 2013: 77).

After Franco's death in 1975, during the period known as the Transition to Democracy (1975–1982), the political storyline of national reconciliation that

started in late Francoism was further developed and firmly established. A main theme was the need to “throw into oblivion” past grievances and look toward the future and consolidate the democratic regime (Juliá 2003; Aguilar 2008). After 1975, Franco’s hard-fought legendary status was progressively diluted in Spanish public consciousness, and depictions of the war as an unavoidable sacred crusade against communism became increasingly peripheral, cherished only by shrinking groups nostalgic for the dictatorial regime. His status as a moral exemplar dwindled. This was but the prelude to his emergence as a negative exemplar in the twenty-first century.

For more than three decades after Franco’s death, reconciliation and its indispensable corollary of overcoming past grievances was the hegemonic political narrative in Spain when referring to the Civil War (Aguilar 2008). Yet, as before with the Francoist politico-religious historical crusade paradigm, so too the hegemonic ideological framework characteristic of the Transition eventually started to age. With the turn of the century, increasing numbers of activists belonging to the generation of the grandchildren of those defeated in the war emerged with force in the public sphere and began to question the received account of the past and the very Transition as a political project (Sánchez-León and Izquierdo 2017; Baby 2018). They challenged the long-term success of the politics of reconciliation that were set in motion after the dictator’s death, shaking them dramatically out of their comfort zone. Indeed, the new century has witnessed the emergence of a radically new paradigm in assessing Franco’s role in the history of Spain. Rather than proclaiming his sacrifice, heroism, and providential advent, it portrays him as a bloody war perpetrator, and thus squarely falls into the category of negative exemplarity (Humphrey 1997: 39). Through the prism of recent Spanish historiography on the wartime repression of civilians and my own ethnographic fieldwork, let us consider the thinking behind this new approach to the criminality attributed to Franco’s character and legacy, and its connection with global human rights discourses and practices.

During the war, both sides executed great numbers of civilians: contemporary historiography places the numbers at around fifty-five thousand killed in the Republican-controlled zone and as many as 150,000 in the rebel Nationalist zone (Juliá 1999; Rodrigo 2008). To this figure, Preston adds a further twenty thousand executions of Republican supporters after the war, and many more died from hunger and disease while trapped in a dense network of jails and concentration camps (2012: 17). Beyond these numbers, these repression sprees were neither equal nor symmetrical. Influential historians such as Santos Juliá claim that, while the killings of civilians and members of the clergy on the Republican side responded to the collapse of the state, the fragmentation of power, and the loss of control over popular militias, the murders and executions carried out by the rebel army responded to “cold-blooded decisions taken by the military command or their civilian allies” (1999: 26; see also Casanova 1999: 159–77).

Some contemporary historians and anthropologists have described the widespread repression on Republican civilians carried out under Franco's command in terms of "terror investment," "blood pedagogy," or even the building up of a "topography of fear" to paralyze the potential political enemy (Rodrigo 2008; Ferrándiz 2014). As a testimony to the scale of the killing, Preston entitled his monumental book on the war *The Spanish Holocaust* (2012). What remains clear is that these widespread executions, and the process of seeding the country with irregular mass graves, helped consolidate Franco's dictatorial rule and extend its sovereignty (Robben 2015; Rojas-Pérez 2017). This historiographical turn is part of a fundamental reversal of the former memory politics of the dictatorship that were based on portrayals of the war as a crusade.

The funerary treatment of the Civil War dead is key to understanding the deep impact Francoism has had, and continues to have, on Spain's social and political fabric. Since the end of the war, four very different and independent necropolitical stages involving unburials have emerged (Mbembe 2019): the postwar years (starting in 1939), the Valley of the Fallen (starting in 1959), the Transition to Democracy (starting in 1975), and contemporary unburials (starting in 2000). Each refers to specific clusters of victims, deploys its own body-recovery procedures, and stages its own political and ideological framework.

First, after the war Franco issued important legislation and devoted substantial resources to exhuming his "Fallen for God and Spain," while abandoning to their fate and even increasing the number of Republican mass graves (Ferrándiz 2014: 148–55). These events created what amounts to a funerary apartheid that graphically reflects the differential fate of the "Two Spains," the winners and the defeated, during the dictatorship: glory and welfare for the former, no pity and humiliation for the latter (Ferrándiz 2013; 2019).

Then, in 1940, Franco ordered the construction of a gigantic pantheon to host his *caídos* in the Valley of the Fallen. After almost twenty years of work, some of it carried out by Republican prisoners, it was inaugurated by Franco on 1 April 1959, the twentieth anniversary of the military victory. I will discuss this monument presently. A second high-profile reburial process took place around this memorial. From 1959 to 1983, particularly during the first few years, over thirty-three thousand Civil War bodies were brought to its crypts, including, prominently, the transfer of fascist leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera from the Monastery of El Escorial to be reburied in the most prominent spot, in front of the main altar of the Valley's basilica. Republican bodies were also transferred from mass graves, without the knowledge or permission of their relatives. When Franco died in 1975, he was buried on the other side of the altar, instituting a politically charged exemplary tandem with Primo de Rivera, not only because it refreshed in funerary fashion Franco's alliance with fascism, which had dwindled in the latter part of his dictatorship, but also because both men died on the same day, 20 November, albeit thirty-six years apart.

Exhumations of Republican mass graves on a large scale had to wait. A third necropolitical reburial moment picked up momentum after Franco's death in 1975, although its inception preceded it. Forty years after the war, relatives of Republican victims started to disinter mass graves in earnest, with no relevant institutional or technical support (Ferrándiz 2014: 158–69; Aguilar and Ferrándiz 2015; Aguilar 2017; De Kerangat 2017).

Finally, the new century marked the beginning of a new and high-profile necropolitical phase that also involved the rescue of Republican bodies, although on a different scale and in a radically different technical and political environment.

Since 2002, I have been carrying out multisite ethnographic research on the exhumation of mass graves of civilians executed by Franco's military and paramilitary troops in the rearguard, mostly during the Spanish Civil War but also after. This process of unearthing Franco's repression of civilians, which started in October 2000 with the exhumation of the bodies of thirteen executed people in Priaranza del Bierzo (León), has been crucial in consolidating a new paradigm for reassessing the figure of Franco in contemporary Spain. From 2000 to 2021, around nine hundred such mass graves were opened, holding some ten thousand bodies.

To understand this intricate necropolitical process, I have conducted ethnographic research on the most representative sites where the unburied bodies have been acquiring presence and visibility, starting with the mass graves that are the crucial ground zero for the recovery of the bodies of those defeated in the war. I have based my research on attending and documenting a large number of exhumations in different regions of the country, cooperating in interdisciplinary teams led by archaeologists and forensic pathologists. However, I have also followed the unfolding afterlives of the corpses (Verdery 1999) in forensic laboratories, and have engaged in the media, both as a witness and as a participant in news-making. I have taken part in “dignifying” political rituals, ceremonies returning corpses to their communities, reburials, DNA sample-taking rituals, demonstrations and teach-ins, book presentations, academic conferences and debates, political acts, less formal talks in neighborhoods and retirement homes, documentary making, social networking, and artistic exhibitions. I was also a member of a 2011 governmental “expert commission” appointed to consider the fate of Franco's body and the controversial mausoleum hosting it (Ferrándiz 2013; 2014; 2019).

The twenty-first-century mass grave exhumations have been mostly promoted by relatives of executed Republicans and leftist activists, and they constitute a complex, heterogeneous, and at times contradictory “historical memory movement.” In my research, I have encountered among grandchildren of those defeated in the war a growing interest in learning family secrets, largely unspoken during not only Francoism but also the early decades of democracy, when a tacit pact of oblivion about past grievances prevailed within a dominant moral



framework of national reconciliation. Storytelling within the families and also in public settings such as exhumations, reburial ceremonies, or tributes became a crucial vehicle to foster personal and public knowledge of Franco's repression of civilians, and created a powerful connection—and a stream of solidarity and mutual empathy—between generations that could finally overcome a wall of shame and fear. Although the modalities and extent of transmission of this suffering varied from family to family, many were bewildered to learn the reasons behind the unmentioned absence of a grandfather, the permanent mourning dress of a widowed grandmother, the absences in family photo albums, or the latent tensions in their villages.

In these scenarios, I was able to video-record numerous narratives of arrests, tortures, executions, and humiliations, violence inflicted on women, trials in kangaroo military courts, jail terms, concentration camps, slave labor, purges, property thefts, stifling control of dissidence, re-education programs, and so forth, as these began to circulate widely in a full-scale memory boom, which had a serious media impact. As exhumations proliferated, relatives of victims of Francoism, with differing degrees of political interest, increasingly mobilized across the country, shocked to see the idealized landscapes of their childhood revealed as killing fields.

The scale of the memory process and the topographies of terror it unveiled took many people in Spain by surprise, including myself. In my grandfather's village, where my siblings and I spent long summer holidays during our childhood and adolescence, one of my best friends from that time, Santos, became a memory activist and spent five years interviewing elders about local killings and disappearances. I followed his research on local Francoist repression, accompanied him to interviews, tracked execution sites, searched for documentation, and discussed with him the logics and long-term consequences of the killings. One afternoon he revealed to me the existence of two mass graves in a nearby spot in a pine forest where we had for years played casually with siblings and friends, ignorant of past events. As for many of my generation, my childhood memories were suddenly soaked in blood. A poet and a writer, Santos was unable to author a historical account of the tragic events and has instead self-published a chilling novel in poetic prose, *Covalverde*, which he has sold locally, from a street stand on a bridge leading to the main square, three times as many copies as there are inhabitants left in the village (Jiménez 2015).

Over time, the new memorial culture associated with these unburials became more connected with transnational human rights discourses and practices and began absorbing new rights and demands not previously on the agenda (Baer and Sznajder 2015). What started out as a civil initiative to bring the bodies of the executed back to their relatives for a dignified reburial became a high-profile political movement denouncing the impunity of Francoist crimes. The impetus of this civil movement, driven by “antifascist” ethical standards, and its remarkable media impact, compelled different state institutions to respond. In

2007, a controversial Memory Law providing new rights for the victims of Francoism was passed in Parliament by the Socialist government. The preface to the law was based on a 2002 Parliamentary resolution condemning the use of violence to promote political beliefs and the establishment of totalitarian regimes, and a 2006 declaration of the Council of Europe condemning the human rights violations committed during Franco's dictatorship. Although the Memory Law offered legal coverage to subsidize exhumations and many other memorial activities, as well as symbolic support to previously orphaned victims, it was heavily criticized both by the political right, which considered it divisive and unnecessary, and by memorial associations disappointed by its lack of political ambition. In turn, some Autonomous Regions governed by the political left began to develop their own memory policies, creating legal frameworks and committing funding and other resources.

A breakthrough occurred when Baltasar Garzón—the judge renowned for the international arrest warrant he issued for Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1998—on 16 October 2008 sought the judicial indictment of Franco and leading figures of the military coup and his dictatorial government, accusing them of crimes against humanity. Specifically, Garzón employed the legal concept of “forced disappearance” to portray the backbone of Franco's repressive policies. He acted under pressure from several of the memory associations with whom I was working. For months, I accompanied them as they gathered information for the judge, held assemblies, attended to the media, and demonstrated in front of the Spain's National High Court (*Audiencia Nacional*), the judicial body where Garzón was tenured. Yet, the attempted indictment was deactivated within a few weeks by the Spanish judicial system, and Garzón himself had to face trial in the Supreme Court for perversion of justice. He was acquitted in 2012. But despite the legal wreckage, his highly criticized initiative left an influential social and political legacy, conceptualized in anthropology as the “social life of human rights” (Wilson 2006), which has provided the memorial movement with a powerful new moral agenda: Franco, as well as his top generals and supporters, could and should be judged under international law for their crimes during both the war and the dictatorship.

Although the international legal entanglement of Franco's legacy has many chapters, it is important to note that in the wake of Garzón's endeavor two UN missions—one by the Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and one by the Special Rapporteur for the Promotion of Truth, Justice, Reparations and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence—traveled to Spain and corroborated on connecting Francoism with massive human right violations. Both missions issued 2014 reports highly critical of successive Spanish governments for having taken insufficient steps to promote truth and justice for Franco's victims (Ferrándiz and Silva 2016: 90–97).

Franco came to be seen by the historical memory movement as a reactionary, uncharismatic, and ruthless dictator and world-class war criminal, and even

as guilty of genocide, in line with the dominant “do-good” global moral human rights paradigm (Laidlaw 2017; Míguez Macho 2016). In the same vein, the movement has linked Spain’s ongoing problems in coming to terms with the war to the sustained impunity of the crimes committed by him, his generals, his army, his judicial system, and his overall repressive regime. This new perception of Franco as a cruel perpetrator who died in his bed beyond accountability finds academic grounding in the historiography of his repressive profile, which has grown considerably in recent decades (Preston 2012; Rodrigo 2013; Gómez Bravo 2017).

The application of universal justice to the Spanish case came to be viewed as indispensable to improving the quality of Spain’s democracy. There was a notable transformation in the political symbolism used by memorial associations in exhumations and commemorations of all sorts, as they absorbed global concepts and iconographies denouncing human right violations (Ferrándiz and Baer 2008). In this new memory paradigm, an alternative collective moral exemplarity is expressed through the sacrifices of mostly anonymous executed Republicans exhumed from the mass graves, in which the heroic and invincible Franco becomes a fascist coward and murderer. His providential, semi-sacred role becomes an opportunistic betrayal of a legitimate government that represented the progressive Spain. His cherished political charisma is challenged by a new image of a clownish and mediocre man who was able to win the war and cling to power only through pervasive, iron-fisted repression.

This perception of Franco as a negative moral exemplar has gained high public visibility in the last twenty years. It has been heavily contested by the right-wing, where public representatives and sympathetic journalists and talk-show guests frequently dismiss it as a fraudulent ideological operation by the political left to win a war they lost, or at least the narrative of that war. Yet Franco’s new persona as a war criminal has had a tangible impact on the ground, as the memory movement’s agenda, facilitated by the proliferation of memory laws, has expanded from mass grave exhumations to the erasure of perpetrators’ names from streets and other places, the dismantling, or at least questioning, of Francoist symbols and monuments, including the removal of Franco’s equestrian statues from public spaces, and increasing pressure surrounding honorific burials of former military coup leaders.

Against the backdrop of this highly controversial memorial context, the rest of this paper will unpack some crucial elements of Francisco Franco’s reemergence as a twenty-first century fascist moral exemplar (Veiga et al. 2019). This resurgence is obviously intertwined with contemporary political and moral debates and the growth of neofascist movements in Europe and beyond. Anybody who has been living in Spain over recent years is well aware that the figure of Franco has been ever more in the public eye and debates, either as an admired leader who saved the country from catastrophe and led the way to a unified, conservative, visionary nation, or as a ruthless perpetrator whose legacy

continues to poison the peaceful coexistence of different political sensibilities. We have seen that Franco is crucially different from other European fascist exemplars like Hitler, Mussolini, or Mosley in that he won a bloody war, ruled as a dictator for thirty-eight years (using propaganda to creating a false legend for himself) and, before his death in 1975, set down the basic rules for an emerging monarchic regime. Unlike Hitler's practical deactivation as moral exemplar in contemporary Germany, Franco has in some right-wing political sectors managed to retain a lingering exemplarity (expressed with differing degrees of ambiguity) over Spain's first four decades of democracy. More recently, this viewpoint has taken a sharp turn toward becoming "free of shame" (*sin complejos*).

To analyze the growing popularity of neofascism in Spain, I will focus on two interconnected instances where debates around Franco's moral legacy have been noteworthy. The first is the very recent rise of the political party Vox, which claims undisguised admiration for Franco's legacy and links its political destiny to a continuation of his historical role, his long dictatorial rule, and his charisma (which I call "neo-exemplarity"). Vox can be considered a splinter group from the right-wing Partido Popular (PP), which questions the party's lack of courage in defending Franco's legacy, reclaims him as a visionary leader, and expresses no regrets for his actions. The second is the controversial dismantling of his honorable burial, as his body was exhumed by the Socialist government from the Valley of the Fallen on 24 October 2019 (which I call "necro-exemplarity"). The debate around this exhumation has placed the whereabouts of his corpse and the treatment it deserves in the thick of a tense debate about his historical legacy. In analyzing both cases, I will be attentive to the positions taken by the Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco (FNFF, Francisco Franco National Foundation, 1976–), an institution devoted to promoting the dictator's legacy.

#### NEO-EXEMPLARITY: THE AFTERLIFE OF THE FNFF AND THE EMERGENCE OF VOX

When Franco died, a good part of his lingering constituency, as well as much of his political elite, found a new home in Alianza Popular (AP), a conservative political party founded in 1976. It had as its main leader one of Franco's last top officials, former Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Manuel Fraga Iribarne. In 1989, AP was re-founded as Partido Popular (PP). For almost forty years, it alternated in power with the Spanish Socialist party (PSOE), until the arrival of new political parties in national politics after 2014 fragmented the vote, making it increasingly difficult to gain comfortable majorities in parliament. For the purposes of this paper, let it suffice to say that, over several decades, AP and PP have incorporated political sensibilities ranging from center-right to extreme-right. Such political breadth required the development of an ambiguous internal voice which kept genealogical connections to Francoism alive while, at the same time,

building distance from it, embracing a discourse of progress and modernization. With a few exceptions, PP has always been uncomfortable with the work carried out by the historical memory movement and the development of public policies favoring the victims of Francoism.

This claim could easily lead into a longer discussion than I can provide here, but let me make a few brief points. When confronted with the claims of Franco's victims, the official party line has been to assert that a satisfactory reconciliation of the "Two Spains" was achieved during the Transition to Democracy and that therefore collective efforts should look to the future instead of stirring up a dark and painful past. Such strong defense of the Spanish Transition is understood by many on the political left as clear evidence that this period ultimately benefited Franco's political elites and their descendants, who continued to pull strings in the democratic political, economic, and even judicial realms. The party's mainstream obstructionist attitude regarding the refashioning of the memory of the Civil War and Francoism can be summarized in a public declaration by its last ruling prime minister, Mariano Rajoy (2011–2018). When challenged to annul the 2007 Memory Law in a 2015 television interview, he boasted that it was not worth the effort since he had effectively deactivated it by allocating it a total budget of €0, a policy he maintained throughout his tenure.

With the consolidation of the new paradigm of Franco as moral villain and its increased public visibility, there has been an important pseudo-historical revisionism of the Civil War in the conservative political arena, where the Francoist version of the origins and moral grounds of the war are replayed and refreshed, while Franco's historical providential role in rescuing Spain from chaos has been revamped (Moa 2003; Payne and Palacios 2014; see also the analysis in Rodrigo 2013: 128–41). Some authors reframe this nostalgic, interpretive drive in reaction to the new hegemony of the neo-Republican memorial movement as a sort of negation of Francoist crimes akin to arguments circulating in other European countries (see the debate between Pío Moa and Francisco Espinosa [2005] in Sánchez-León and Izquierdo 2017: 129–42). Some of the main moral themes of this revisionism liberally reuse well-established Francoist motifs: insistence upon the inevitability of the war needed to eradicate the red (communist) terror, minimizing rebel violence, to the point of challenging the very existence of mass graves, and assertions of Franco's role as a moral leader and visionary pacifier, who was the only guarantor of the indissoluble unity of the nation in a time of chaos.

This revisionism is readily available on bookshelves and newsstands at leading supermarkets and airport shops, and on the myriad right-wing television and radio talk shows that have recently sprouted up. Beyond this, the most extreme Francoist "nostalgics" have always been able to find ideological shelter in various fringe neo-Francoist political parties with minimal electoral weight. They have also relied on the proselytism of a relatively marginal

private institution that is devoted to spreading and praising the dictator's memory: the Francisco Franco National Foundation. Founded in 1976, the FNFF is an important part of the picture because its propaganda activities focus exclusively on the promotion of Franco's moral exemplarity and historical agency and the preservation of his glorious legacy. In the last two decades, FNFF has devoted much of its activity to countering the emerging narrative of Franco as a war criminal, derived from the exhumation process discussed earlier and crystallized in the 2007 Law of Historical Memory and Garzón's failed indictment of 2008. The relentless ideological groundwork maintained in these pockets of Francoist nostalgia has had success in the long run: it has rescued, sustained, and promoted the exemplary myth of the moral superiority of Francoism and its historical moorings in the Reconquest and the empire, and now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, this ideology has become a serious political option.

Until this recent reshuffle in the political arena, Spain, like Portugal, had been able to claim a certain exceptionality in Europe for having successfully held back any surge of neofascist or right-wing populist movements. All of this changed in 2018 with the astounding electoral irruption of Vox, a party that claimed representation for the most extreme-right positions within PP. Vox emerged in Spain within the national context I have described, although its rise is also connected to the increasing force of right-wing populist parties across Europe (more to Orban and Legutko than to Salvini or Le Pen), and even to Trump's presidency in the United States or Bolsonaro's in Brazil. It was no surprise that one of its first anti-immigration electoral promises was to build a wall in the colonial towns of Ceuta and Melilla in northern Morocco to stop migratory flows ... to be paid for by Morocco!

Vox capitalizes on a wave of social dissatisfaction similar to that which has propelled other extreme-right movements across Europe and beyond since the end of the Cold War, conceptualized as neofascist or populist, depending on the case (Veiga et al. 2019: 19). They are in tune with like-minded parties in terms of their xenophobia and neofascist anti-migratory positions, their extreme brand of proud nationalism, strong antifeminist stand, emphatic anti-abortion and pro-life position, wholesale Euroscepticism, and rejection of what they call the "dictatorship of progressivism" (*dictadura progre*) (Gallego 2007). To this transnational conservatism, Vox, in search of "permanent moral and material progress," adds a strong centralist drive and a fierce defense of the unity of the nation. This is in reaction to the pro-independence movements in Catalonia and Basque nationalism, and an outright rejection of historical memory initiatives that question the virtues of Francoism. They nurture a belief in the eternal Spain as the lighthouse of the Western world and tireless guardian of the true traditional values of Christianity. As stated in its Foundational Manifesto, for Vox moral grounds come first. "An economic approach to our difficulties is insufficient and drives us to failure. If the

ideas that lead us are wrong, if the moral conceptions inspiring us are weak, we will never go back to the path of material growth.... It is effort, perseverance, altruism, cohesion, search for excellence, acknowledgement of merit, honesty and patriotism that create jobs and bring about prosperity.... The indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation and the attribution of national sovereignty to the Spanish people are inalienable pillars of our cohabitation in freedom.”<sup>1</sup>

The party was registered on 12 December 2013 and, after a few insignificant showings, cut its teeth in the regional elections in Andalusia on 2 December 2018, where it received almost four hundred thousand votes (nearly 11 percent) and became part of a right (PP) and center-right (Ciudadanos) alliance to displace the Socialist government from power. Later, in the general elections of 28 April 2019, Vox won 2,688,092 votes (10.26 percent) and gained twenty-four seats in the Spanish national parliament. This was no doubt a major achievement, but it was far below the expectations raised by its unexpected result in Andalusia. The failure of the Socialist candidate to form a government took the country back to the polls and gave Vox a fresh opportunity to show its political muscle. In the elections of 10 November 2019, the party was backed by 3,656,979 voters (15.09 percent) and won fifty-two seats, making it the third largest national party after the Socialists and PP conservatives. They were the moral victors of that electoral evening.

The FNFF did not specifically call on people to vote for Vox in the national elections. Its political alliance is broader, and its support also lies with fringe neofascist groups like Primo de Rivera’s Falange party. The FNFF sometimes sees even the radical Vox as too soft, because its claims to continuity with the charismatic leader have been insufficiently explicit. In a public letter issued before the first 2019 national election, titled “¡Viva Franco!” (Hail Franco!), FNFF’s President, ex-general Juan Chicharro, accused PP of “escaping like a desperate cat from direct identification with their ideological ancestors,” and Vox of “wearing lead shoes with confusing and at times contradictory declarations in order to dodge the label of Francoists.”<sup>2</sup> But such disagreements between Vox and the FNFF are but nuances in a political fight to control a rather narrow ideological space. Some of their members share affiliations with both platforms and are related (the FNFF’s President is a cousin of the Vox Secretary General Ortega-Smith) or belong to identifiable Francoist families. At a later stage, the Foundation did hail the entry into parliament of the “real Spain.” Yet while the FNFF necessarily focuses on producing and distributing propaganda, and their

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.voxespana.es/espana/manifiesto-fundacional-vox> (accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

<sup>2</sup> See the public letter “¡Viva Franco!” released by FNFF’s president Juan Chicharro on 19 February 2019, before the first 2019 national elections: [https://fnff.es/actualidad/442402271/Ante-las-eleccionesViva-Franco-Juan-Chicharro-Ortega.-General-de-Division-de-Infanteria-de-Marina-\(R-\).html](https://fnff.es/actualidad/442402271/Ante-las-eleccionesViva-Franco-Juan-Chicharro-Ortega.-General-de-Division-de-Infanteria-de-Marina-(R-).html) (accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

public reach is limited, Vox has gained considerable political power and outstanding public visibility, which has transformed the party into the leading player in what can be considered the nostalgic transformation of Spain into a neo-Francoist regime reclaiming the superiority of its morally ordered universe.

As Humphrey suggests when referring to the passing impact of communist rule on Mongolian moral schemes, while exemplarity may be a structural feature of morality in many human societies, its representatives and its contents are always in process, adjusting to evolving political and moral milieus (1997: 41). Strategically, Vox has been careful to avoid a one-on-one association with the figure of Franco. Yet most of Vox leadership's statements and symbolic actions clearly resonate with Francoism and its exemplars, rituals, symbols, and moral ideals. It is important to remember that, as I highlighted in the first section of this paper, Franco's moral exemplarity was composed of a blend of the legend he constructed for himself and a constellation of exemplars representing what he understood to be the splendid deeds of the medieval and imperial ages. Vox's leader Santiago Abascal, a PP member from 1994 to 2013, does not hide his sympathies for Franco and some members of his family (his friendship with Franco's great-grandson Luis Alfonso de Borbón is public knowledge), although he falls short of the unyielding allegiance that the FNFF would like to see. But his party is building a moral universe and political iconography that clearly connects with Franco's legendary profile and with the broad historical mission of building and defending the indissoluble unity of the homeland, where the *Caudillo* is understood as a crucial junction. Two examples show how this embrace of the quintessential patriotic leadership has been built, often through what I call "proxy exemplarity." Even when the explicit connection is not always clearly formulated, the moral and ideological flavor is unequivocal, and perfectly recognizable by the Spanish public. This neo-exemplarity is conveyed in the conventional media but, replicating the precedents of Trump, Salvini, and Bolsonaro, it is being circulated more effectively through the new social media, particularly Instagram, where Vox is Spain's most-followed political party.

The first case is connected to the re-elaboration of Franco's highly manipulated historical vision, expressed in his obsession with the Crusades, the Reconquest, and the subsequent "expulsion of the Moors" from Spain in 1492 by the Catholic Monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand. Within this essentialist and simplified moral universe, this eight-century fight against Islam—a historical process that many historians say is merely ideological and never existed as such—is understood as a prelude to the imperial age and a crucial moment in the establishment of Spain, not just as a staunch Catholic country, but as the spiritual reservoir of the Western world (Moreno 2016). An electoral video circulated in the media during Andalusia's 2018 regional elections, and was widely commented upon, which portrayed Abascal and some of his candidates riding horses under the slogan, "The Reconquest will start on Andalusian land." Beyond its electoral messages, the video conveys a perfectly recognizable Francoist *habitus*



(Humphrey 1997: 27; Bourdieu 1989: 72–95). A troop of about twenty horsemen dressed as landowners proudly advance face-forward on a vast plain. The video is jokingly referred to in certain left-leaning media as a lousy remake of the “Lord of the Rings,” and indeed that film saga’s soundtrack is used in the video. Nonetheless, it was instrumental in reviving the notion that the nation had been taken over by enemies—in this case a socialist government—and that a historical mission to defeat the “Anti-Spain” was once again in motion. Since this original video, the Reconquest has become a recurrent theme in Vox’s political repertoire. After their strong electoral showing in Andalusia, where they were instrumental in overthrowing the Socialist party after its forty-one years in power and had facilitated the rise of the first right-wing government in the region since Franco’s death, they vowed to extend this “duty” to the rest of the nation.

Prolonging this initial theme, Vox’s 2019 national electoral campaign began a few months later in the Sanctuary of Covadonga (Asturias), beneath the statue of the eighth-century king Don Pelayo. This is where the Spanish right-wing traditionally places the origins of the Reconquest, in the highly symbolic and legendary battle won by Pelayo, which many historians now describe as a mere skirmish in a volatile social and political environment (Ríos Soloma 2016). Earlier I discussed how Franco had mobilized the Sacred Arch with the relics of Don Pelayo in the 20 May 1939 ceremony to inaugurate his regime in the Church of Santa Bárbara in Madrid. Returning to Covadonga as the original location of Spain’s heroic historical mission, now to be taken over and continued by Vox, is a clear salute to Franco’s moral universe. Under the hashtag *#espirtitudeCovadonga* (*#Covadongaspirit*), Vox leaders and sympathizers recreate the traditionalist values that, as expressed in a conversation between Abascal and Vox’s Madrid leader, Rocío Monasterio,

have made us bigger and better. We are here thanks to the effort of many generations that have conquered crucial things for us. If we do not persist as they did, we run the risk of creating a whole lost generation of young Spaniards that for the first time are worse off than their parents. . . . We continue to be descendants of these people. They have left us more than a legacy; they left us a way of being, a spirit of rebelliousness, and we cannot allow our way of life to be once again confined to these mountains [as occurred during the Muslim era in Spain].<sup>3</sup>

In a less elaborate fashion, but within the same moral rationale, Vox has similarly mobilized other Reconquest exemplars such as the Catholic Monarchs (who defeated Boabdil in Granada in 1492, removing Muslim dynasties from the

<sup>3</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y4eNLVQwf5w&feature=youtu.be> (accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

territory), or the victorious Juan de Austria who defeated Islam in Lepanto. As Vox General Secretary Javier Ortega Smith claimed before the European Parliament on 5 March 2019, “Without [the Battle of] Navas de Tolosa, the Battle of Lepanto or Charles V, all the people in this room would be wearing *burqas*.”

Abascal and other Vox leaders claim that they are in public life to reclaim Spain’s “traditional values” and reopen forbidden debates, banned by the “progressive totalitarian dictatorship” (*dictadura progre*) and shamefully abandoned by the “cowardly right” (*derechita cobarde*) that aims at the center-right and moderate-right Ciudadanos and PP. They evoke the concepts of nation, empire, civilization, glory, honor, Catholic faith, and the true Spanish soul. Retrieving the unified and indivisible national essence of Covadonga and Don Pelayo implies a strong racial pride and a moral stand, showing “no regrets” about the *reconquista*, the colonial empire, the Civil War, or Francoism, and treating these as illustrious milestones in Spain’s history. In its more conventional and less heroic political discourse, Vox’s contemporary *reconquista* aims to combat what they consider a coalition of the enemies of true Spain: socialists and communists, peripheral nationalists, pro-independence movements like those thriving in Catalonia or the Basque Country, feminist and LGTBI activism, and in tune with other neofascist movements in Europe, immigrants, and particularly Muslims.

The other crucial instance of neo-exemplarity where Vox directly connects with Franco’s ideological and moral legacy is related to the revisionist reading of the Civil War and the attempt to discredit all activities connected with the exhumations of Republican civilians that question the legitimacy of the 1936 military uprising, portray Franco as having committed genocide, or typify his rule as a criminal dictatorship. In Vox’s political rhetoric, people searching for the bodies of their relatives are despised as subsidized and divisive “bone searchers” trying to “open old wounds.” This narrative is similarly embraced by some in the more moderate political right, although Vox raises it to a new level of repudiation. According to their moral narrative, if Franco is guilty of anything, it is of having been up to the historical task that fell to him. He had, in their view, no choice but to take drastic action to stop the criminal drift towards communism and chaos in the mid-1930s, a drift responsible for the monstrous but inevitable war of regeneration for Spain. A controversial [and partially decontextualized] statement by Javier Ortega Smith—“Yes, there were people executed in the war, but [all of this was done] not out of hate, but love”—has been interpreted by the political left as the most explicit instance of this revisionist attempt to reframe the memory of the Civil War and absolve Franco of any historical responsibility for the tens of thousands of Republican civilians who were killed.

In this respect, their political proposals include reversing any public memory initiative related to the losers in the Civil War, which they consider a desperate attempt to impose a fraudulent and vengeful official truth. They include the rebuttal of all memory laws and the dismantling or deactivation of existing memory institutions. In the words of some of its leaders, “You cannot

just throw forty years into the garbage can.”<sup>4</sup> As stated in a parliamentary press release, the Law of Historical Memory, which they often dub “hysterical memory,” “is an attack on political, personal, and academic freedom aimed at reopening confrontation among Spaniards, manipulating the History of Spain, and questioning the legitimacy of Spain’s Monarchy.”<sup>5</sup> But as we have seen, the memory politics they promote cover a longer time span that can be traced back to many of the same national milestones to which Francoism anchored itself: the Reconquest; the discovery, civilization, and Christianization of America; the conquest of Granada by the Catholic Monarchs; the splendor of colonial Spain; the resistance of the last colonial soldiers in the Philippines; or even the Civil War itself, which, according to this political and moral rationale, is another crucial marker demonstrating Spain’s ability to (painfully) overcome its divisive ghosts and regain its unity of destiny.

#### NECRO-EXEMPLARITY: CONTROVERSIES AROUND THE FATE OF FRANCO’S BODY

The progressive consolidation of the moral narrative of Franco as a war criminal, linked to the “recovery of the historical memory” process that began in 2000, provides another vantage point from which to assess the man’s lingering reach over Spain today. I want to shift my focus to the embodiment of moral values and examine the necro-exemplarity involved in a raging controversy that took center stage in 2011, over Franco’s burial and what treatment his bodily remains deserved in modern-day democratic Spain. For a few years, particularly in 2018 and 2019, Franco’s remains became the topic of a passionate public and political debate over his moral exemplarity. In this high-stakes controversy, Vox remained in a supporting role, with the defense of Franco’s exemplary status largely falling to the FNFF and the dictator’s family, especially his grandchildren and some of his great grandchildren.

Franco died in La Paz hospital in Madrid on 20 November 1975 after a long agony, exactly thirty-nine years after fascist leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera was executed by the Republican Government in Alicante. This coincidence in the day of their deaths turned 20 November into the key commemorative date for nostalgic Franco followers. On 23 November, the dictator was buried with the highest honors in the Valley of the Fallen, directly across the main altar from José Antonio’s tombstone, creating a powerful moral and memorial funerary axis that

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.publico.es/politica/memoria-historica-vox-franquismo-no-coger-40-anos-tirarlos-basura.html> and <https://www.larazon.es/espana/vox-pide-la-derogacion-de-la-ley-de-memoria-historica-por-cuestionar-al-rey-y-abrir-viejas-heridas-JK24956870/> (both accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

<sup>5</sup> See [https://www.voxespana.es/grupo\\_parlamentario/notas-de-prensa-grupo-parlamentario/vox-exige-derogacion-ley-memoria-historica-socava-monarquia-parlamentaria-20190916](https://www.voxespana.es/grupo_parlamentario/notas-de-prensa-grupo-parlamentario/vox-exige-derogacion-ley-memoria-historica-socava-monarquia-parlamentaria-20190916) (accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

seemed impossible to dismantle. Yet, on 24 October 2019 Franco was removed from his grave and transferred to the cemetery of Mingorrubio, on the outskirts of Madrid, where his wife Carmen Polo was already buried.

To fully explicate the stakes that have been raised in Spain regarding the burial arrangement of the *Caudillo*, and to a lesser extent that of Primo de Rivera, I will first outline the history and nature of this extravagant monument and provide a few glimpses of Franco's 1975 state funeral. I will then give a more detailed analysis of the decision by Socialist Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez to exhume Franco from the Valley in July 2018, and the extraordinary controversy that this provoked, shaking the country's nervous system to its foundations (Taussig 1992).

The Valley of the Fallen is Spain's most conspicuous militarist-religious compound, a petrification of the national-Catholic ideology of Franco's regime and the most obvious expression of its moral order (Ferrándiz 2019). During the war, Franco visualized the monument as a resting place for the bodies of the victors, creating a permanent religious cult to commemorate their martyrdom and sacrifice. Parts of the monument imitate the imperial style created by architect Juan de Herrera, canonized in the nearby Monastery of El Escorial that was built by Philip II in the sixteenth century and houses the Royal Pantheon. Barely 13 kilometers apart, these two architectural power structures are joined by an umbilical cord connecting different imperial utopias. Christianity's tallest cross soars 150 meters above the Valley site, hewn into a granite hill. The subterranean Basilica is packed with a blend of Catholic and militaristic symbols, sealing a decades-long alliance (Casanova 2011). The impressive, tiled dome reviews Spain's history as a Catholic country and features representations of the nation's martyrs. One section alludes directly to the Civil War and its share of martyrs, where Francoist fighters, including *falangistas*, are on full display, their flags billowing in the wind.

Just before its formal inauguration on 1 April 1959, on the twentieth anniversary of Franco's military victory, one of the first bodies to be transferred to the monument was that of fascist leader José Antonio Primo de Rivera, re-exhumed from the Monastery of El Escorial's Basilica and placed before the Basilica's main altar. As in 1939, his fascist followers carried him on their shoulders to the new burial place in an emotive procession. Over the next few years, a large-scale funerary parade of Civil War dead brought over thirty-three thousand bodies to the monument from different parts of Spain, ranging from senior military officers to rank-and-file soldiers and civilians killed in the war.

The Valley's affiliation with Franco's moral universe was dramatically sharpened in late 1975. Although it is unclear how it was decided to bury the *Generalissimo* in the monument, or even if he had agreed to it, on 23 November he was brought to the pantheon in a state funeral presided over by the recently appointed king of Spain, Juan Carlos I, after a multitudinous two-day vigil in the Royal Palace in central Madrid. In a burial ceremony with full military honors,

worthy of a glorious head of state, Franco's coffin was covered with the Spanish flag and his attributes of power and placed in an army vehicle to make the 60-kilometer journey to the Valley, surrounded by his Guard of Honor. The mortuary parade, named Operation Bright Star, was greeted by tens of thousands of people as it departed Madrid. A large Spanish flag commemorating his 1939 military victory was hung from the Triumphal Arch. International authorities such as King Hussein of Jordan, U.S. Vice-President Nelson Rockefeller, and Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet were also present.

The military parade was received in the Valley by a large crowd of ex-combatants and members of the main political factions that had supported Franco during the dictatorship. A little after 1:00 p.m., elite troops fired the regal salutes in recognition of the highest military honors. All the senior State authorities—monarchy, civil, military, and religious—were in solemn attendance at a dramatic state funeral and burial in the Valley, paying their last tributes to the *Caudillo*, the savior of Spain. Buried in full dress uniform right behind the main altar, he was set in a heroic funerary axis with Primo de Rivera's tomb. Despite the tensions between Franco and the fascist factions of his regime during his dictatorship, especially after fascism's defeat in Europe in World War II and the international discredit of its distinctive political cultures (Saz 2004: 158–69; Gallego 2014: 22), both leaders were united for eternity under the Valley's gigantic cross. As Franco's grave was closed, Spain was pervaded by a generalized sense that this was a change of epoch. And yet, while many cried in dismay, regarding the future with uncertainty and anguish—despite Franco's promise in his 1969 end-of-the-year speech that he would leave “everything all tied up”—many in the political opposition were toasting with champagne.

For decades, on every 20th of November the Valley became the main site of nostalgia for bygone times. Although their numbers faded over the years, groups of Francoist supporters and Falange members staged celebratory rituals, including paramilitary parades between Madrid and the Valley, Roman salutes, and the singing of fascist anthems by the tombstones. In their outdated homilies, the Benedictines still say daily prayers for the “unity of Spain” and the blood shed by Civil War martyrs. Although they claim to pray for all who died in the war, from both sides, there is little doubt that the masses they celebrate honor Franco and his historical and moral legacy, as expressed in this massive monument and its funerary hierarchy. While José Antonio's tomb was losing prominence over time, Franco's grave, and more specifically his remains, became the ultimate bastion of his regime's protracted but decaying sovereignty (Yurchak 2015).

When the Socialist Government of José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero passed the Law of Historical Memory in 2007, under pressure from the memorialist social movement reclaiming rights for the tens of thousands of executed Republican civilians, an article with direct reference to the Valley of the Fallen was included. It contained two provisions: the Valley was to operate under the general legislation on religious worship and public burial sites, and political displays at

the monument were now prohibited. This was the beginning of the end of the openly pro-Franco ceremonies at the site. In additional provisions, the law recommended that the Valley honor the memory of all those who died in the war and the subsequent political repression and represent “constitutional [post-Franco] values.”<sup>6</sup> In order to perform this new role, the status quo of the monument had to be drastically transformed.

In 2011, the government decided that effective action had to be taken in relation to the Valley, and appointed a Commission of Experts, in which I participated, mandated to provide recommendations for transforming and democratizing the monument and divesting it of its anachronistic Francoist aura. For six months, the twelve members met in the Presidential Palace in Moncloa. I was by far the youngest, and my appointment was directly connected to my fluid relationship with the memorial movement in general and more specifically my connections with the Association Pro-Exhumation of the Republicans in the Valley. I had long worked with Fausto Canales, one of the two representatives of this association, alongside Silvia Navarro. Fausto had become a central figure in the historical memory movement when, in 2003, he promoted the exhumation of a mass grave of seven people, including his father, executed in 1936 near their village. To the surprise of the technical team, they found only a few remains. Fausto’s private research then proved that the mass grave in question had been transferred to the Valley of the Fallen without the knowledge or permission of the relatives. I worked with him for years as his media profile rose and he denounced the bizarre situation of these Republicans buried alongside their executioner. He had to resort to the judicial system to recover the bodies from the Valley’s crypts (Ferrándiz 2019). I was expected by the Presidency of the Commission to coordinate my position in the plenary sessions with that of the Association, and to this end we worked together in many strategic planning sessions and post-meeting briefings.

The key recommendation to come out of the Commission was that the Valley’s funerary hierarchy had to be dismantled, and more specifically that both Franco and José Antonio needed to be removed from their righteous burial sites on either side of the Basilica’s main altar. The rationale followed by the majority in the Commission, including myself, was as follows: even on Franco’s own terms, expressed in laws and political discourses over the years, the Valley was conceived to host the Civil War dead. Since Franco was not one of those dead, he should not be buried at the monument. In the case of Primo de Rivera, who was a Civil War victim, it was recommended that he be moved from his preeminent site to one of the side crypts, to be with the more than thirty-three thousand other bodies in the monument. After heated internal debates, the Commission’s three most conservative members signed a private vote against Franco’s exhumation,

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2007/12/27/pdfs/A53410-53416.pdf> (accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

arguing that the unburial would cause social alarm and that, in the unlikely event that it ever happened, Franco would have to be reburied with full state honors. Nobody objected to the removal of Primo de Rivera.

The proposal to exhume Franco, and implicitly, to degrade his burial location, ignited a controversy in Spain. It was the first time that an official document had so bluntly intervened in what was already a public debate on the fate of the monument and its principle funerary arrangement (*ibid.*). It was a direct hit to Franco's cherished exemplarity since it implied, on one hand, that the moral universe he ossified in the Valley was a falsification that failed the test of history, and on the other, that Franco was unworthy of such a virtuous burial and needed to be relocated to a lesser, and private, location.

The political fuss surrounding the Valley after the 2011 report was made public led to more visitors there, many of them nostalgic for Francoism. As a former member of the Commission, I have often been asked to guide groups around the monument, ranging from politicians to national and foreign students and international scholars. My only condition has been that, in order to truly understand the monument, participants had to attend the 11 a.m. mass, which is so conservative that it is almost like being transported back to the heyday of national Catholicism. As a guide, I have focused on the Valley's political history. On many occasions, we have had to navigate potentially tense situations, such as when approached by skinheads or *falangistas* during our discussions, which led us to switch to a less critical mode, or even small talk. On April 2017, I unexpectedly met Pablo Linares, the President of the right-wing Asociación para la Defensa del Valle de los Caídos (Association for the Defence of the Valley of the Fallen). Gilles Tremlett, a freelance reporter working for the BBC, had, unbeknownst to us, convened both of us for the purposes of an audio report on the monument (without intending us to interact).<sup>7</sup> We were both regularly present in the media and recognized each other immediately. As the BBC reporters went about recording different sounds, we were left together, giving us a rare opportunity to engage in a long conversation about our different views on the Valley. To his complaints about the vindictive harassment of a monument generously representing Christian reconciliation, I opposed my view that a drastic transformation of its status was required. Although he was unerringly polite, I knew that he did not welcome my presence there. Since then, I have met him several more times when guiding groups of visitors. I have now lost the convenient anonymity I once enjoyed in the Valley.

The landslide electoral win by the right-wing PP immediately after the release of the document meant that, in practice, the Commission's report was ignored throughout its eight years of tenure, and the debate subsided. PP's involvement in a series of corruption scandals led to Prime Minister Rajoy being

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/p0512v5k> (accessed 11 Jan. 2021).

overthrown in 2018, and Socialist Pedro Sánchez was voted in as his replacement. In June, just two weeks after he was sworn in, Sánchez tried to highlight his allegiance to the victims of Francoism and the historical memory social movement by pledging to follow the Commission's recommendations and exhume Franco from the Valley, setting this as a top priority for his government. It was then when the fate of Franco's remains reopened discussions about whether his moral character was exemplary or criminal (Faber 2021).

For the Socialist government and the political left, the exhumation was seen as an act of justice for the victims and a necessary step to dismantle the main stronghold and monumental expression of Francoism. For the political right, the Valley's status and the inviolability of Franco's tomb became a red line. But it was the extreme right that took up the fight, spearheaded by Franco's family, the FNFF, and, with less public visibility, the Association for the Defence of the Valley led by Pablo Linares. In short, they denounced the Spanish government for seeking not only to desecrate the corpse of a head of state who had altruistically saved Spain from communism and atheism, returning the nation to the imperial path, but also to humiliate Franco's charismatic legacy and disavow his glorious vision of an eternal and unified Spain. In this way, Franco's corpse and what sort of funerary treatment it deserves have dominated ongoing debates about the nature of his exemplarity in twenty-first-century Spain.

The FNFF and Franco's family, particularly his grandson Francis and, to a lesser extent, his great-grandson Luis Alfonso de Borbón (with his royal lineage and claims to the throne of France), had been relatively marginal in Spanish political culture over recent decades, but they gained enormous public visibility in connection with the dictator's exhumation. They were systematically included as "the other party" in the avalanche of newspaper, television, or radio reports on the issue. While the family's narrative mostly focuses on the legitimacy and historical mission of Franco's rule, the honest origin of the family's fortune, and their memories of a sweet and loving grandfather, the FNFF is a fundamental propaganda hub in contemporary Spain, comparable to a formal academy of Franco's exemplarity. That there is still a foundation devoted to sustaining Franco's providential role in Spain's history may seem shocking in countries like Germany, Italy, or the UK, but its existence is protected by the Foundations Act and no government has been able (or willing) to outlaw it, despite continuous demands by the political left that it be banned for its constant "fascist apologia."

The issue of the fate of Franco's body ignited a nasty, take-no-prisoners battle between the Socialist government and the neofascist cluster represented by Franco's family and the FNFF. During this process, growing numbers of Franco followers flocked to the Valley carrying unconstitutional flags and singing fascist anthems, while worn-out images of the cult to the charismatic leader resurfaced with great vitality and captured front pages of newspapers, not just in Spain but worldwide. My group visits to the Valley became more awkward. To cut a long story short, on 13 September 2018, the Royal Decree to exhume Franco was



adopted by Parliament. A few days later, Franco's family rejected the exhumation but pointed, if worse came to worst, to Madrid's cathedral (right beside the Royal Palace) as the final resting place for his body, and they requested military honors and a state funeral for the reburial. The government maintained its refusal to provide any such honors but was caught off-guard by the plan to relocate Franco's body in the cathedral, and turned to the Vatican for help in preventing that (Franco was buried in sacred land in the Valley's Basilica). A report commissioned by the government declared the Cathedral an unsuitable place for the burial due to public security concerns. Meanwhile, in coordination with Franco's family, the Prior of the Benedictines order in the Valley—a well-known neofascist monk closely connected with Primo de Rivera's Falange party—refused to acknowledge the state's authority and repeatedly vowed to keep Franco's body in the Valley at all costs. To keep the administrative and judicial wheels moving, the government set 10 June 2019 as the date for the unburial. Franco's relatives appealed to the Supreme Court, which initially declared a precautionary suspension of any action in the Valley until a final decision was reached.

Finally, amid rising tension and confusion, the Supreme Court ruled in the government's favor on 24 September 2019, with reference both to the unburial and the final destination of the body: a crypt in the Mingorrubio cemetery, where Franco's wife, Carmen Polo, as well as other top Francoist leaders and even Dominican dictator Trujillo are also buried. The process of exhuming and transferring the body was set in motion, and it finally took place on 24 October, sixteen months after Sanchez's announcement that set off an emotional, political, and judicial rollercoaster ride in the country. The exhumation conveyed a strong political statement: Spain is no longer a comfort zone for dictators, even their mortal remains. The choreographed exhumation, another political thriller designed by top officials down to the last detail, was imposed on the family by the government, which took full control over both the protocol and the information flow. No images of the exhumation in the Valley's Basilica were allowed (Franco's relatives had to hand over their mobile phones at the entrance), and the state provided a single audio-visual signal broadcast on Spain's national television that was rebroadcast live nationally and internationally. It made for great expectations and entertainment, as the country ground to a halt to watch the historical moment. The images of Franco's relatives leaving the Basilica with the coffin on their shoulders, fully alone in the same huge plaza that had been packed with devastated followers during his high-profile state funeral in 1975, exemplified the staunch defeat of all resistance to the body's removal, and a triumph, albeit no doubt partial, of the political sensibility behind the rise of Franco's negative exemplarity in Spain.

I had been called on to comment live on the exhumation on one of Spain's leading radio stations, Cadena SER, and had to leave the studio several times to attend other media. As a member of the Commission that recommended Franco's

transfer and a researcher specialized in the memory process, I was very much in the spotlight. The months leading up to the unburial had been a never-ending media tour. Yet, barely an hour after the re-inhumation in Mingorrubio, public attention began to dissolve as the media turned back to the political conflict in Catalonia. The television spectacle left the Spanish public with conflicting senses of relief, indifference, or outrage, depending on people's political leanings and whether they considered Franco a villain, a relic from the past, or a moral hero whose tomb had been shamefully desecrated.

#### MORAL EXEMPLARITY AS A POLYMORPHIC PROCESS

An analysis of the historical evolution of Franco's exemplarity demonstrates several issues regarding the comparative study of morality. First, as Humphrey demonstrated in her pioneering article of 1997, looking at the itinerary of exemplars in context allows for a critical assessment of the resilience or precariousness of the moral universes they convey, in the framework of complex historical and socio-political processes. Second, exemplars themselves are historical processes in continuous transformation and subject to multiple and even contradictory interpretations. In the case of Franco, in broad terms we can trace a winding evolution: the original fascist exemplarity constructed after his military victory was modulated by the moral matrix that appeared during his later years in power. From the increasing irrelevance of his moral profile after his death emerged his negative exemplarity as a war criminal in the framework of contemporary memory struggles. This was followed by his recent revamping as a neo-exemplar, linked to the activation of a new space on the political right that is itself part of a broader European and global radical wave. Third, unlike other non-totalitarian modes of exemplarity (Humphrey 1997: 35–36), the leader-centered nature of fascist exemplarity requires heavily ideological foundational rituals, memorial landmarks, and propaganda apparatuses to get it off the ground and sustain it over time. Fourth, it may be useful to further explore the intersections between exemplars and rules, as in the blunt, formal disapproval of Franco's original exemplarity expressed in the 2006 resolution of the Council of Europe, the 2007 Spanish Law of Historical Memory, and the two 2014 UN reports on human rights violations during the war and subsequent dictatorship. Fifth, exemplars can be understood as moral gravitational zones with the potential to attract selected constellations of former exemplars in their own exemplarity. As happened in the case of Vox, this allows for the activation of what I have called proxy exemplarity, a route to a moral universe that need not commit directly to the central exemplar in the constellation. Finally, each exemplar demands different analytical approaches to unpack its origins, nature, and contradictions. In Franco's case, the recent controversies over his burial arrangement in the Valley of the Fallen and what type of treatment that his body deserves in a democratic society show how important it can be to approach such historical or legendary characters

in terms of their necro-exemplarity, when the disputes surrounding the exemplar's body become the crucial battleground on which its moral status is fought out.

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**Abstract:** Based on long-term ethnographic research on contemporary exhumations of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), as well as analysis of the exhumation of Francisco Franco from the Valley of the Fallen, this paper looks at the ways in which the dictator’s moral exemplarity has evolved over time since his military victory in 1939. During the early years of his dictatorship, Franco’s propaganda machine built the legend of a historical character touched by divine providence who sacrificed himself to save Spain from communism. His moral charisma was enriched by associating his historical mission with a constellation of moral exemplars drawn from medieval and imperial Spain. After his death, his moral exemplarity dwindled as democratic Spain embraced a political discourse of national reconciliation. Yet, since 2000, a new negative exemplarity of Franco as a war criminal has come into sharp focus, in connection with the exhumation of the mass graves of tens of thousands of Republican civilians executed by his army and paramilitary. In recent years, Franco has reemerged as a fascist exemplar alongside a rise of the extreme right. To understand the revival of his fascist exemplarity, I focus on two processes: the rise of the political party Vox, which claims undisguised admiration for Franco’s legacy (a process I call “neo-exemplarity”), and the dismantling in October 2019 of Franco’s honorable burial and the debate over the treatment that his mortal remains deserve (a process I call “necro-exemplarity”).

**Key words:** fascist exemplarity, moral values, necropolitics, Francisco Franco, neofascism, Spanish Civil War, social anthropology