

Helen Graham

FRANCO: A PERSONAL AND POLITICAL BIOGRAPHY

By Stanley G. Payne and Jesús Palacios

University of Wisconsin Press, 632 pp., \$34.95, November, 978 0 299 30210 8

In one of the best documentaries about present-day Spain's intractable history wars,¹ two Swedish filmmakers travel to the Valley of the Fallen, Franco's Madrid mausoleum built to commemorate his victory in the civil war of 1936-39. Accompanying them is eighty-six-year-old Andrés Iniesta, made a political prisoner in 1939 at seventeen, and one of the c.20,000 forced labourers who constructed it as part of his nearly twenty years in Francoist penal servitude. The filmmakers' idea is to have him go with them to meet the presiding Abbot, one of those designated by Franco in 1958 and still in place in 2007 when they come calling. But once there, they have to reconsider because Iniesta gets beside himself with anger when staff at the entry kiosk demand he pay to get in to what has long been a heritage destination whose upkeep is partly dependent on public funds. 'You can't charge me! I built it! This is my place! How dare you try to charge me!' But in the end he has to pay – and one of his companions obliges on his behalf. Later in the documentary, when the filmmakers question the Abbot on camera about the cost of Francoism, he categorically denies the mass killing and terror imposed on large swathes of Spain's civilian population by the 'post-war' dictatorship, and once again reduces to a Manichean parable the complicated wars of social and economic change in which the civil war was embedded – fought over what a post-imperial Spain could be, how it would pay its way, and who would have a voice in domestic politics. The spectacle of the Abbot's 'omnipotent' time-locked tirade brings echoing down the centuries Larra's despairing cry that, for Spain, 'days' – as in decades or even centuries – 'do not pass'. These twenty-first-century clerical utterances belong to mythology, not history: but the fact that they still inhabit not only Church but also State in Spain, and find a positive response in considerable sectors of its society, is a reminder not of myth but of history – of the pivotal transformation wrought by Francoism in its first decade, and ideologically reinforced by the dictatorship throughout its remaining forty years, producing effects which have never really dissipated in the forty years since.

¹ *Mari-Carmen España: the end of silence*, dir. Martin Jönssen & Pontus Hjorthen (Sweden: 2008)

The course was set in July 1936 when Franco and other officers of Spain's colonial army ought to end the young Republic's efforts to achieve a measure of social levelling. But they miscalculated how much resistance their coup against change would face in an already democratising society. Its looming failure was rescued only by Hitler and Mussolini, whose intervention was driven by their own similarly hierarchising imperial adventures across the continent. Through the arsenals of the Axis a technologically sophisticated total war was born in Spain, one of military fronts, battlefields, and the massive aerial bombardment of Republican-held cities which has ever since shaped the abiding Western image and memory of that war. But there was another war already occurring across Spain – a subterranean, civilian-on-civilian war of atrocity, its extreme violence unleashed by the coup. In military-held areas vigilantes killed those they saw as embodying the threat of social change – socially progressive professionals, Republican schoolteachers and 'new' women, as well as unionised workers or landless labourers benefitting from Republican land reform. In areas slowly being reconstituted as Republican, the killings perpetrated by militia and local town and village committees targeted those perceived to represent forces hostile to change – priests, army officers, landowners or estate bailiffs, or others known to be conservative: often the motives were very local and individual, even if still frequently underscored by politics, for pre-civil war Spain was already a highly mobilised society. This war between neighbours was itself cumulatively radicalised by foreign military intervention and the consequent escalation to total war – but the killings occurred much more thoroughly and efficiently in the military-held zone, precisely because there the 'cleansing' violence had from the start been supported, impelled and coordinated by a centralised army command. This off-battlefield war became the forcing house of Francoism as something modern and mass-mobilising, in which it evolved beyond recognition from the old-regime coalition of the pre-war. The footsoldiers of the new Francoism were the mobilised Catholic conservative constituencies (notably, though not exclusively, from the north-central rural and provincial interior) who, through the crucible of war, came to believe not in religion *per se*, but in a sacred nation-state as a cause worth dying – and killing – for. Once Axis firepower gifted Franco military victory early in 1939, it was this mass base which the dictatorship mobilised to eliminate the 'enemy within'.

The story of that enemy, the dictatorship's victims, is one which is now increasingly well-known abroad: the country-wide repression of the defeated Republicans who were cast as community aliens, the Anti-Spain. Many thousands more were executed after 1939, including Andrés Iniesta's father, who had been socialist mayor of a small town; like Andrés, a million

other men, women, and children passed through gaols and work camps or suffered other forms of preventive detention and punishment in Franco's prison universe. But still far less known outside Spain is the other side of that story: how Franco achieved this mass repression by turning his new social base into mass perpetrators, exhorting them to denounce their Republican neighbours to state military tribunals. Tens of thousands responded – out of a combination of political conviction, personal grief and wartime loss, social prejudice, opportunism and fear. Key in the making of this social complicity was the Francoist state's appropriation of one special category of extrajudicial dead, those civilians killed behind the lines in 'barbarous' Republican territory. These it cast in its ultranationalist script as the sacred dead, those martyred for the nation and in whose name the dictatorship spoke and acted. Their bodies were exhumed in the 1940s, given ceremonial reburial and perpetually celebrated as the 'eternal value' – that reburial almost literally cementing them at Francoism's foundations, its legitimating lodestone. These dead, the Abbot's own father among them, were projected for nearly forty years by a dictatorship determined to protect itself through the permanent ideological mobilisation of its supporters. Even today, and in spite of the immense contribution of a civic memory movement to dignify and integrate Republican victims into Spain's public memory, it is still these other 'martyred' dead who remain at issue – 'victors' still in thrall to Franco's malevolent state, a political problem precisely because they have never left myth, have never entered into history.

The problem of the difficult past in Spain has, then, never really been the actual civil war of 1936-39 – not even the dirty war away from the battlefields. Rather, it lies in what Franco made of the war afterwards – a mythology of permanent mobilisation and an instrument of rule. The brutal novelty of this was for a long time screened by the Cold War which (conveniently) 'saw' Franco as an old-fashioned autocrat, as did the overlapping and probably more long-lasting and quasi-racist reading of his regime as an opera-bouffe dictatorship. These continuing quirks in the optic of Western representations have allowed Francoism to hide in plain sight – as a modern dictatorship, based on permanent ultranationalist mobilisation across its four-decade existence, demanding of its willing followers the endless reiteration of a past fracture, so that it remained the ever-present, with devastating consequences for the future.

It may seem far-fetched to argue that so much lasting damage could have been done by the core legitimating strategy of a dictatorship which ended so long ago. But it isn't if we bear in

mind two factors that have held open crucial transmission channels ever since. First, that while Francoism's exceptional longevity encompassed huge economic and social change, this occurred without any corresponding modification of the political fundamentalism within its political class (the so-called 'families' and often literally so), or among its many supporters. Second, that when Spain's democratic transition came in the late 1970s, triggered by world economic recession and 'overseen' by the Francoist army, the deal negotiated by regime politicians and the democratic opposition left in place the bulk of Franco's state personnel (civil servants, judiciary and security forces) – just as that same economic crisis rapidly fragmented and eroded the opposition's own base in anti-Franco social movements, whether neighbourhood associations or the newly legalised trade union movement. The result of all this has been that at no time since the transition – either in economic boom or recession – has anything in Spain challenged either the inherited political culture of Francoism or the unspoken assumptions of its enduring sociological base. So too the old politics of fear have continued to operate – not least in the way Francoist-trained or inspired judges have gagged (by fines and imprisonment) those seeking to air the difficult past – with its toxic blend of repression, corruption and clientelism. The currently ruling Popular Party, as the constitutional beneficiary of Francoism, obviously has no interest in opening things up, especially not since corruption and clientelism constitute the stuff of its daily politics. But nor has the centre-left PSOE ever seen much mileage in confronting the past, notwithstanding its 2007 memory law. To some extent (but only to some) its reasoning may be different, but there has always been in both parties a strong distrust of civil society which is itself an enduring Franco effect. Spanish society today contains many different memory constituencies (leaving aside, on this matter, very recent generations of inward migrants): those who suffered Franco repression in their own families and who want it acknowledged for a measure of private closure and public justice; those who are still fearful (whether or not their families suffered direct repression); those who are indifferent (again, whether or not their families suffered direct repression); those who are genuinely ignorant of, or who have repressed the knowledge of their families' pasts as victims or perpetrators. Then there are the urban and (in their majority) provincial middling classes – more or less affluent constituencies for whom, irrespective of the past, any encounter with what Francoism really was, and at whose cost, would clash with their now comfortable communing with it as a refurbished nationalist myth. They are the direct inheritors of sociological Francoism in the twenty-first century, including the many Catholic Parents Associations and other lay groups who have in recent years bussed en masse to Madrid to demonstrate. Their 'articles of faith' rest on the notion of Franco as a

(mythic) guarantor of stability and economic growth and on the idea of the ‘sacred dead’, a satisfyingly simple appeal, and one which conservative nationalism has latterly transposed to the relatively new and suddenly homogeneous category of ‘ETA’s victims’. The historical question of regional nationalism complicates the picture somewhat here. Nevertheless, the parallel between the current (mis)use of the victims of ETA and those earlier ‘sacred dead’, the martyrs of Franco’s new Spain, is striking – uplit perhaps by *Mourning and melancholia*. What Spain’s sociological right wants today is ‘social peace’: an assurance that society can be a mirror of themselves, and confirmation that they have always been correct in their assumptions, that they don’t need to take notice when faced (once again) today with a discomfiting world of change both inside Spain and beyond.

It is for such a readership – and its equivalents outside Spain – that Payne and Palacios appear to be writing in their biography of Franco. For the authors, the killing and repression of the ten years from 1936 were a mere operational outcrop of Franco’s ‘conventional’ war, and soon over: their ability to ignore the elephant in the room is particularly stunning in the brief chapter ‘Franco and the Nationalist Repression’, which largely omits the recent contemporary historiography (game lost) to suggest, disingenuously, that there was really not much of a pattern to Franco’s repression at all. Likewise, the dalliance with Hitler was solely a matter of old-fashioned territorial temptation, and state violence directed inside Spain after 1939 just a little local difficulty – a repression against the marginal and maladapted (‘communists’), and rapidly over. Here the authors eschew any analysis of broader historical change which might upset or complicate their clipped vignettes of Franco as the bringer of order (whose order?). All discussion of social and political conflict in 1930s Spain is subsumed thus, while Payne and Palacios fast forward to talk up a later developmentalist decade – the 1960s – which conveniently allows them to reproduce a worn eulogy to ‘apolitical’ economic growth reminiscent of Franco’s own technocrat ministers, who combined extreme social and political conservatism (they were members of Opus Dei) with naive faith in trickle-down consumerism as the midwife of a post-political future. The terror and torture in which the Franco state still dealt is airbrushed out of this biography, just as it is now generally from recent popularised conservative work on Franco appearing in English. So the camera fades on the great repression of the 1940s, but when it refocuses on the 1960s we get no new economic material or arguments, just a deferential sense impression of Franco’s stewardship, the captain at the helm – which isn’t so far from the undergraduate perennial about Franco being a ‘good thing’ because he brought the benefits of mass tourism to Spain

(as if he had personally determined the sunny climate, or the European economic boom – or as if any non-dictatorial government in power in post-1945 Spain wouldn't have been similarly capable). But for all this, Payne and Palacios astutely avoid hagiography, which would have undercut their declared intention of providing 'objective and balanced' coverage. (Franco, of all the brutal state- and nation-makers of Europe's dark twentieth century, appears unique in 'requiring' this. Can one imagine such a claim in a mainstream Anglo-American biography of Hitler or Stalin?) But Payne's and Palacios's are new objectivities for populist times, and in this biography aimed at a mass market, the authors focus on the 1960s boom, but even there they occlude criticisms of Franco's grasp of economics – even those made by his own ministers.

In some ways Spain's current history wars are reminiscent of the German *Historikerstreit* of the 1980s, where conservative historians sought to extract a usable past from Nazism. Equally un-novel in their empirical data, Spain's equivalents – old and new – also declare that the blame for bad things done by Franco lay squarely elsewhere. But here international Bolshevism/Stalin, while not entirely relinquished, no longer occupy centre stage, and Payne and Palacio recycle (along with much else) the Franco regime's own apology – that the Spanish Republic was not a democracy anyway. These wars today in Spain are no longer only memory wars, but increasingly history wars – since they encompass both state and historical profession, with *de facto* archival censorship (through both closure of public archives and selective admittance), and with revisionist historians on the publishing offensive, including in contributions to the Royal Academy's official dictionary of biography whose now-notorious entries on Franco and Francoism omit even the fact of dictatorship. The political volatility across Europe of course favours this. And even if there are still potential international spanners in the works of a rising rehabilitated Francoism, notably the demand from an Argentinian judge for the extradition of high ranking perpetrators of the late dictatorship (including one minister), inside Spain the Popular Party still resolutely ignores all international calls to deal with the unfinished business of the repression (whether issues of legal and economic redress or state recognition – commissioning a census of all the disappeared). Media censorship is also present, although no longer enshrined in a tangible dictatorial legal code: prize-winning documentaries dealing with the difficult past – whether made inside or outside Spain, and including the one mentioned at the start of this article – have failed signally and repeatedly to find any mainstream Spanish TV channel prepared to broadcast them.

The difficult past remains lodged in the present, not so much as ‘the past that will not pass away’ but as one which has been incubating, under the impact of new populist nationalisms sweeping Europe since 1989, and is now emerging as the past with a bleak-bright future. Francoism as a formal dictatorship is long gone, dispatched by the very economic and political interests it had once served. But what lives on, aside from those same interests in evolved form, is a particular sociological configuration of power in Spain which has never been truly challenged, above all not in its overweening sense of a quasi-hereditary privilege to rule and be ‘right’. This is visible today in its most unadulterated form in the Popular Party’s Madrid stronghold, where politics has retreated into a time warp of a kind which also recalls Larra’s lament, and reflects the establishment’s preference for an arc of politics reaching from the old ‘families’ of yesteryear to their historic if now vestigial social base. This situation, born of the particularities of Spain’s transition, is now prolonged by the current international moment. It remains to be seen whether Podemos can beat the political system in Spain, and in making a breakthrough for participatory democracy, also change the rules in civil society’s memory wars so it is no longer a zero-sum game. But for the moment, the situation permits the political bypassing inside Spain of many of the social constituencies produced by the past half century of migration and urban change. Given the impoverishment of participatory democracy the Popular Party has overseen in recent years, it’s often hard to tell them apart from their actual Francoist predecessors whose object was also to restrict and permanently disable civil society, even if now there’s a new alibi in economic recession. It’s a familiar script.

The obstacles today in unpacking, let alone ‘exorcising’ Spain’s difficult past seem, paradoxically, to become greater not less as the Franco years recede. And while inside Spain the continuing failure to give an honest account to the dictatorship’s victims, let alone to deal with perpetrators, does not necessarily mean that ‘everything is tied down’ as Franco himself once intimated, the ultranationalism he made remains a dangerously mobile and adaptive mythology. The fog surrounding Francoism shows little sign of clearing, and, needless to say, will not be helped by Payne and Palacios’ breathtakingly dishonest biography. But perhaps none of this should surprise us – as Spain in the twenty first century stands once again, as it did in the 1930s, as a touchstone of Europe’s ‘tribal’ memory and anxieties.