JAVIER TUSELL

SPAIN: FROM DICTATORSHIP TO DEMOCRACY 1939 TO THE PRESENT

TRANSLATED BY ROSEMARY CLARK
A HISTORY OF SPAIN

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Note on the Author

Javier Tusell (1945–2005) was Professor of Contemporary History in the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (Spain’s Open University) and a leading figure among the intellectuals of post-Franco Spain. The author of many books on the history of modern Spain, he was held in high esteem for his scholarship and judgment and recognized as supreme in his access to contemporary sources. By the time he came to write the present work he had reached his prime, but was then cruelly cut down by terminal illness which afflicted him for the last years of his life. He completed the research and writing, and bequeathed the results in this masterly account of a people in transition from dictatorship to democracy, a book which is evidence too of his personal triumph over adversity.

John Lynch, Series Editor
On May 19, 1939, a hundred and twenty thousand soldiers paraded before Franco in Madrid. The press hailed the ceremony as the victory following a second reconquest of Spain’s enemies. During the march-past, the general was awarded Spain’s highest military honor, the Grand Cross Laureate of San Fernando. Although the public was not informed, Alfonso XIII himself had written to Franco pledging his support. The king was unaware that the general was no longer a monarchist and indeed was now playing absolute monarch himself.

The celebrations continued with a religious ceremony the following day. Franco entered the Church of Santa Barbara beneath a palium – a treatment reserved for the Blessed Sacrament and for ruling monarchs. Waiting him in the church was a selection of artifacts that evoked Spain’s past struggle against the Infidel. Every detail in the appearance of those present alluded to past tradition, not only the military uniforms and ecclesiastical robes but also the “Spanish mantillas worn with pride on tall combs” by the not very numerous women present. The climax of the religious ceremony was the moment at which Franco laid down his sword of victory before the Christ of Lepanto, brought all the way from Barcelona for the occasion. Everything combined to glorify the great leading figure of the entire ceremony. The Primate of Spain, Cardinal Gomá, prayed that God “in His mercy and in praise might look kindly upon you, forever protect you and protect the nation whose governance He has entrusted to your care.”

The entire ceremonial, which more properly belonged to a medieval warrior society in which military, political, and religious life were bound together, largely explains what happened after 1939. If ever there has been a crucial break in continuity in Spanish history it was at that moment, at the end of the Civil War. If the war had never happened, if it had not...
Introduction

lasted so long, or if there had been less bloodshed, continuity between the 1930s and 1940s would have been conceivable. Yet although there was a clear intention to make such a break, it was altogether less clear exactly what form it should take. The repression already exercised during the war years was a foretaste of the treatment that would be meted out to the vanquished, while friendship with Germany and Italy defined Spain’s foreign policy; yet decisions still needed to be taken to determine whether Spain’s dictatorship would be personal or fascist, how long it would last, and, above all, how it would function.

So far, circumstances and expediency rather than a political program had decided matters. If anything characterizes the victors of the Civil War it is that while the conflict lasted, instead of attempting experiments in new kinds of social structures as their enemies had done, they left that for later. If we consider Francoism in total, from the perspective of its earliest days, its end, and its duration, it is evident that a fundamental change did occur in Spanish society, but not in the way that those who exercised power had in mind. An observer able to compare the Spain of 1939 with the Spain of 1968 would have judged them to be two entirely different worlds. Yet, although there were evident changes, there were also undeniable examples of continuity, especially obvious in anything relating to the exercise of political power. There is, therefore, no better way of approaching the history of Francoism than by taking these factors as a starting-point.

Franco: Biography and Political Practice

The traits of Franco’s character, particularly his apparent impenetrability, may tempt historians to try to play amateur psychologist with a person who in actual fact was more straightforward than he appeared. When this happens, discussion remains superficial; yet a dictatorship which was by nature personal demands careful consideration of the one who held the monopoly of power.

Born in 1892 in El Ferrol into a family with a history of two centuries of service in the Spanish Navy, Franco’s childhood was not a happy one, though this factor alone does not explain his life as a whole. His father lived apart from his mother and was not officially acknowledged until his death. This explains the boy’s strong emotional attachment to his mother, which contributed to forging a cautious, withdrawn character but one that was, at the same time, susceptible to the wildest flights of ambition. An
even stronger influence in the molding of his character must surely have been his early entry to the Military Academy at Toledo as the youngest cadet in his year. The sinking of the fleet denied him the possibility of joining the Navy: that is why he summed up 1898 in the three words “injustice, betrayal, desertion by Europe.” At the Military Academy, his progress was not brilliant. In contrast, after a quick transfer to the Army in Africa, he gained a series of brilliant promotions and was mentioned in dispatches, always at the head of crack troops, first in the Regular Forces and then the Foreign Legion. On five occasions, he was rewarded for conduct on the battlefield. Although Franco’s family had suffered no economic difficulties, it is possible that his marriage to Carmen Polo in 1923 was a step forward for him personally. In the 1920s he led an intense social life that, in his own words, allowed him to “make contact with men who were prepared.” The general himself at 33 now felt “ready for great responsibilities.”

He no doubt meant political responsibilities and it is important to remember in that respect that early on his opinion swung against what he considered dominant “myths.” His *Diary of a Footsoldier* reveals the mistrust he felt towards liberal politics, in his view unable to achieve anything other than “years of stumbling steps and tentative truces.” But it was the divergence in opinion on military policy in Morocco that brought about confrontation with Primo de Rivera, though it did not last for long. In the draft of his memoirs Franco acknowledges that he welcomed the Republic “enthusiastically.” Disappointment followed swiftly, however, and he blamed all the ills of that regime on “ambitious failed politicians” and on Freemasonry. He soon adopted an attitude of “cold detachment” towards the regime, though not too obviously. From the end of the 1920s onwards he received anti-communist propaganda, and the revolution of October 1934, which he took an active part in putting down, was a turning-point in his life. His tardy commitment to the conspiracy against the Republic can be explained to an extent by his mixture of prudence and opportunism, but also by the fact that he had never been a “ politicized” soldier to the same extent as many of his comrades-in-arms.

Over the course of the Civil War Franco finally became the figure of history that he would always remain. He based that figure on “a profoundly Catholic social conscience and on [a desire] to rid Spain forever of the causes of our decadence, our warring political parties, Freemasonry, and communism.” He sincerely believed that he had “God’s scandalous help” and that on his shoulders would rest in due course “total responsibility:
military, political and economic.” He soon began to astound foreign ambassadors and close collaborators with his distinctly unorthodox opinions on all kinds of matters. With the war, too, there awoke in him secret desires brought together in Race, a text – later made into a film – that he wrote in 1940. The villain of the piece is a lawyer who has gone astray thanks to his membership of the Atheneum but is finally brought back onto the straight and narrow by his love for a young woman Falangist. In contrast, his brother – the hero – is a young officer; a third member of the family – a priest – is murdered during the Civil War. The story concludes with the victory parade in May 1939.

In light of what has been said so far, it is obvious that any study of the character of the dictator must go back in time to his professional life in the Army. Indeed, the first consideration to take into account is that Franco was first and foremost a soldier: “Without Africa,” he declared, referring to his own personal experience there, “I can scarcely understand myself” From his personality, this was the only trait that really stood out, to such an extent that it is not possible to attribute to him, for example, the intellectual qualities shown by other officers. His intellectual horizons were for many years limited to attaining the post of high commissioner in Morocco. In certain senses that is what he did become, but in Spain.

It was from his experience in Morocco that he derived his strength of character, his impassivity, his hardness, and his sense of discipline. He did not hesitate in describing himself as a “sheep-like” officer – that is to say, scrupulous in obeying orders – even in front of young cadets. His austerity was closely linked to his experience in the Moroccan campaigns. “I do not object to luxury but I can do without it,” he once told one of his closest associates. It would be over-generous to describe his residence at El Pardo as a palace when it could more properly be termed a barracks. His writings from Morocco bear witness not so much to cruelty as to a hardness which made him view death as commonplace. If it was in Soviet Russia that for the first time in the modern world a system was generated in which the state apparatus used modern methods of violence against any who opposed it, it was in Franco’s Spain that such a system was first seen in western Europe.

His military career was the only reason why he became an influential national figure but he was by no means outstanding in his profession. His actual capabilities were those of an able tactician in guerrilla warfare against the indigenous peoples of Morocco, and they were also evident in his prudence, orderliness, and logistical skill in the management of his
troops. These same strengths were the ones that he displayed during the Civil War, in which his allies always criticized his excessive slowness and prudence. It is often forgotten that Franco wrote a book entitled *The ABC of Defensive Warfare*; doubtless, in politics too he was a past master of defensive strategies. If life in the Army made him the figure he was, it also convinced him of the superiority of those who received an Army training. Franco always considered military training valuable in itself: he judged Eisenhower and De Gaulle favorably simply because they were generals. His concept of political power was close to his concept of military power and when talking about it he used terms such as “command and captaincy” and, beyond all doubt, tried to organize life in Spain as though it were a barracks. While exercising his political functions as Chief of State, Franco often gave important positions to soldiers. In the mid-1950s, half of the presidents of companies in the National Institute for Industry (*Instituto Nacional de Industria* or INI) were soldiers.

His determination to revive in Spain the glories of the past translated in practice into far more prosaic attitudes as he confined himself to the “order, unity, and endurance” recommended by Luis Carrero Blanco. In the 1930s he reinforced this stance by adding to it another tragic yet firmly held conviction. He became convinced of the communist threat, to which, in his own mind, he added the dangers of a Masonic conspiracy dating back to the eighteenth century. From that time until his death Franco held the view that Freemasonry led inevitably to liberalism and that liberalism opened the way to the threat of communism. The unrelenting stubbornness with which a man who came to govern one of the world’s leading industrial powers defended this nonsense appears excessive. His writings on the matter, signed with a pseudonym, show obsessive attention to detail, and his determination to pursue offenders was such that he managed to accumulate in the Salamanca Archives 80,000 files on supposed Freemasons in a country where there had never been more than 50,000.

Franco’s experience of life in the 1930s also influenced him in another way. He had always been a Catholic but now his religious beliefs led him to view himself as a providential figure. The sincerity and spontaneity with which this conviction grew are astounding. He assured Don Juan de Borbón that he had won victory in the Civil War thanks to “divine favor repeatedly conferred.” Catholicism and the Fatherland were in his mind one and the same thing to such an extent that, being responsible for the latter, he had no difficulty in pontificating on the former. The Spain of his day – at least up until the 1960s – was a country where bishops spoke out
as though they were politicians, while the Chief of State at times seemed to perform the functions of a cardinal. His Catholicism was deeply sincere but it was not informed. He was not in any sense able to understand the changes brought about in the Catholic Church by the Second Vatican Council. It was only then that he felt disoriented.

Victory brought about a fundamental transformation in Franco’s life. The terms he used when discussing taking on the duty of governing the Spanish nation precluded any suggestion that his attitude might in any way have been false or cynical. His own family were aware of the profound change that had taken place. If in the past he had been communicative and affectionate, now his position as caudillo made him “cold and distant” in his treatment of others. Franco’s own convictions concerning his leadership would have been unimaginable were it not for the exalted role that others attributed to him. The consolidation of his position was largely managed by Ramón Serrano Súñer. In one book written in the 1940s Serrano Súñer suggested that the conditions of leadership which allowed the caudillo not to have to account for his actions to any official body set him on a par with the pope.

By that time Franco already had the unshakable conviction that no limits should be set on the scope or extent of his powers of command. Consequently, those on the right who wanted to limit his freedom of choice by institutional means, in accordance with the principles of their original plans of action in which he was seen as a temporary solution, he considered traitors. Those, on the other hand, who were flexible enough to explore other possibilities were found a post in the new regime. Nonetheless, their function within that regime depended entirely on what Franco wanted. During the Civil War he explained to anyone willing to listen the role he had planned for Falange and the traditionalists: the latter were to ensure that solid principles prevailed in the organization of postwar Spain, while the former was to become a vehicle for attracting the ordinary masses.

The role allocated to these two political forces reveals Franco’s doctrinal limitations. It has been said that in 1939 his power was more absolute than that of any other dictator at the time, not only in terms of specific legislation but also because, as a politician, he did not consider himself bound by any ideology. His decisions were based on national militarism, national Catholicism, and national patriotism, and they drew strength from his obsessive hostility to Freemasonry. However, this was not so much a matter of doctrine as of deep-seated feelings. One minister, Mariano
Navarro Rubio, wrote that he was “short on doctrine but unshakable: his ideas were few, basic, clear, and productive.” The first two adjectives no doubt correspond more closely to reality than the second two. At the height of the Civil War, an intelligent conservative such as Cambó did not know whether to be more astounded by how basic the ideas were – “like café conversations” – or by the “admiring tone” in which Franco described his periodic discoveries around the Mediterranea.

It is worth mentioning some of his ideas on different topics because they reveal his limitations. During the Franco years Spain experienced the radical transformation of her economy but not as a result of his economic ideas. What Franco naturally tended towards was a kind of “barracks autarchy.” José Larraz, one of his Finance Ministers, used to say that never having managed to make the dictator pronounce the word “inflation” correctly – he always said “inflation” – he had no hope of ever making him understand what the word actually meant. When the Plan for Economic Stabilization came into being in 1959 the man who had proposed it revealed in his memoirs Franco’s “mistrust” of it, compounded by the fact that it was backed by international organizations. In actual fact, Francoism can be blamed for delaying a national economic development that could have occurred earlier. As Dionisio Ridruejo wrote, when the regime claimed credit for Spain’s economic development, it was as if a harbor pilot sailing out to sea after a northwesterly gale had blown itself out were to claim that he himself had caused it to die down.

In the area of politics, too, Franco’s notions were elementary, though he could concentrate his efforts jealously on holding on to power. During World War II he suggested to Don Juan de Borbón that he should follow the example of “revolutionary totalitarian monarchies” such as the Catholic monarchs had been, in his view. Years later, he sketched out for the same correspondent a curious theory of leadership by “prescribed acquisition.” Nor did his theory of “organic democracy” in a previous era make any significant contribution to political science. These were mere words that he used to justify his position as caudillo.

It was not by chance that Franco’s ideas on important matters were never anything but basic. His world was drably prosaic: his hobbies were fishing, hunting, and, towards the end of his life, watching films and television. He lacked any cultural interests, criticized intellectuals for their intolerable “pride,” made spelling mistakes, and in meetings of the Council of Ministers – infuriating the Foreign Minister – he always referred to Eisenhower as “Aisenover.” The best description sums him up
in the word “mediocrity.” The Duke of Alba wrote that “he possessed all the small virtues and none of the great ones,” and General Kindelán said of him that he suffered from “mountain sickness” – that euphoria that swamps climbers when they reach heights beyond their physical capabilities. This also explains why loyalty was for him such a fundamental value. In the early days he very often used people from his close family circle, such as his brother or his brother-in-law, or those he had known during his childhood and youth in El Ferrol (Juan Antonio Suances or Camilo Alonso Vega, for example).

This notion of mediocrity may seem contradictory given the fact that Franco remained in power for a considerable length of time. One must remember, however, that his dictatorship was the product of a civil war whose cruel memory lasted a very long time. In contrast to this past, he himself presented an image of a shepherd who could bring all the diverse factions of the Spanish right together to graze in the same meadow and could avoid the divisive pluralism that had characterized the Republican years. Never was a phrase so accurate as when Francesc Cambó stated that “the one who stays in power is utterly determined to stay in power.” José María de Areilza foresaw in 1945 that Franco would “always limit the scope of his politics to a short radius around his survival in the job.” Such was the truth of this statement that the man who made it ended up working closely with the dictator, and he was not the only one.

This does not, however, explain how it was that Franco stayed in power for so long. Not being a professional politician himself and detesting those who were (“Do as I do; do not go into politics,” he told one visitor), he nonetheless had the range of abilities without which he could not have played his part. A cynical Basque politician, José Félix Lequerica, gave up comparing him to great figures of the past and instead preferred to liken him to Gabino Bugallal, one of the best-known Galician caciques. José Antonio Girón de Velasco, a leading Falangist, summed up Franco’s virtues as “an ox-like tread, eagle-eyes, wolf’s teeth, and playing the fool.” Thanks to the last of these, Franco gave the impression of being harmless and manageable during the Civil War. “Wolf’s teeth” refers to the hardness he displayed on more than one occasion and the “ox-like tread” to a sense of timing that his collaborators often found intensely irritating. Carrero Blanco, for whom this was particularly so, said to Laureano López Rodó: “We shall have to see just how hard he finds giving birth,” alluding to his hesitancy over decisions on the question of the monarchy. And when Fraga suggested cosmetic changes such as no longer playing the
National Anthem at the end of radio broadcasting, Franco suggested that they did it in two stages.

His ox-like sense of timing would have been of little use to him had he not had “eagle-eyes.” His perspicacity combined a clear perception of reality, a moderation that contrasted strongly with some of his supporters, and above all, a certain cool. “Even more than when he was on the attack,” Navarro Rubio affirms, “the times when you saw him most sure of himself were when he had to ride out storms.” Cautious cunning and discretion completed the panorama of his personality. “Anyone here who is not a fool is a crook,” Franco told Areilza in a phrase devastating in its pessimism. It should come as no surprise that José María Pemán came to the conclusion that there was only one way to find out what his opinions were: to wait until they escaped from his grasp. Girón made no further zoomorphic comparisons but had he done so he would have had to mention the chameleon and its adaptability. The judgments that Franco pronounced on institutions within his regime seem so cynical that had they been expressed in public they would have been damned as subversive. He told López Rodó that he had never managed to understand what was meant by a “vertical trade union,” unless the term was meant to depict an institution in which some people were higher up and others lower down. He told Antonio Garrigues quite shamelessly that the National Movement or Movimiento was a useful “claque” for stirring up the masses on public occasions.

These aspects of Franco’s political character were translated into his daily activity in government; to describe that activity will help towards a definition of his dictatorship. He kept absolutely all political responsibility in his own hands and from the Civil War until his death he retained a degree of constitutive power that would, for example, have made his replacement by an heir quite feasible. So it is possible to say that in Spain what came into being was not a totalitarian system but a dictatorship in which power was vested in one single individual. At least from the legal point of view, Mussolini was constrained by fascist ideology and its institutions. Franco had significantly more political power.

However, this is not to say that he personally took charge of all the various ministries. The most important decisions and those relating to aspects of what he considered fenced-off areas of policy had to be submitted for his approval, but in practice he left a wide area of maneuver for ministers’ initiative, just as he would have done as a commander-in-chief with his subordinate officers. His ministers’ freedom of movement
and “judicious” exercising of virtual omnipotence also drew strength from
Franco’s conception of his own function as one of arbitration. He had
won a civil war thanks to the fact that he presided over a coalition of the
Spanish right, and his dictatorship aimed to ensure that this situation con-
tinued. Having an arbiter in a regime that was not totalitarian meant that
each sector could have a slice of power but no one could ever claim that
any one sector of the right was entirely in opposition or entirely in the
position of favorite. Franco’s exercising of power as arbiter had climactic
moments: replacing ministers. Once he had learned how to do it, he tried
to make ministers last in office for 5 years. Changes were brought about
through an intermediary and they allowed Franco to show his ability,
almost like a homeopath, to combine together all the best ingredients.

According to Fraga, until 1962 “he never discussed politics in the Council
of Ministers,” which is true, though he talked even less about politics in
the Cortes. Franco kept all big political decisions to himself but from time
to time the Council of Ministers became a kind of pocket parliament
where fundamental issues or those that might in some way be seen as such
were bitterly debated. True political enmity during the Franco years was to
be found in the Council of Ministers where Franco’s form of arbitration
also meant turning a deaf ear to confrontation or doing away with anyone
who caused conflict. In his opinion, forums of debate were dangerous
institutions which might limit his power or slip into the bad habits of
parliamentarianism. For that reason he always considered both organzied
pluralism and freedom of expression harmful, which explains why he
took so long – from 1938 to 1966 – to draw up legislation governing the
press, only then to modify its liberalizing content; or why his last political
decision was to close the doors firmly on any possibility of providing an
institutional framework for political pluralism.

It would be incorrect to state that Franco had “favorites” because that
would suggest that he accepted the possibility of his own responsibilities
being handed over to someone else, or that he saw no problem in sharing
power. Serrano Suñer played a very significant role but never one that
interfered with that of Franco who, on another front, needed him as a link
to Falange as he had not yet completed his apprenticeship as dictator.
Carrero Blanco’s functions were more in the nature of support, as indeed
became evident when his influence grew as Franco’s health waned. Beyond
this intimate circle were the most important members of the Army and
emblematic figures in each and every sector of the Spanish right. The
influence that these figures exerted could at times be great but it was never either decisive or constant.

The distance between Franco as dictator and those who collaborated with him was a product of a character that was neither particularly expressive nor effusive, and it explains the curious situation that occurred in the final phase of the regime. In the past this distance had served to enhance his role as arbiter but as his physical condition weakened he seemed barely able to play that role any more. Parkinson’s disease brought out a trait that was the antithesis of his past behavior: weakness of character. His “eagle-eye” and “wolf’s teeth” were apparently dulled unless one views his final repressive measures as their death throes; all that remained was the “ox-like tread.” Franco had always been “a sphinx without a secret,” but now, still indispensable and yet silent and inert, he was nothing more than a sphinx.

His ministers were perfectly aware of his physical decline. According to López Rodó, until 1965 meetings of the Council of Ministers began with a lengthy exposition by Franco and lasted all day, but after 1968 they only lasted the morning. It was also seen as quite an event, as Fraga recounts in his Memoirs, when in September the dictator interrupted a meeting to relieve himself. It was not by chance that from the following year on it became almost commonplace for confrontations between different factions to erupt at the nerve-center of the regime without intervention from the one whose mission it was to arbitrate and prevent this unforeseen conflict.

The last years of Franco’s life were also characterized by his isolation. It was only to be expected that a person who had exercised power entirely alone should be condemned to end that way. Earlier on, his secretary had realized that the dictator was not so much talking to him as pronouncing “lengthy monologues.” He seemed like a distant patriarch who had not entirely lost all his automatic responses and was still able to offer correction but now lacked information. Even so, he did retain a pale glimmer of what had been abilities in the past. In contrast, what turned the final years of his dictatorship into a burlesque farce were those close to him and his family. On the retina and in the memory of many Spaniards images persist from those years, and yet it would have been impossible for him to remain in power right up until his final days had he not played a very different role in the years up to that time.

It is not easy to compare Franco with other historical figures who have exercised power on their own. He has little in common with a professor of
company law such as Salazar, or a former left-wing agitator like Mussolini. In one sense, on the other hand, he can be compared to Tito who, like him, rose to power after a civil war. Like him, too, the Yugoslav president, in the final stage of his rule, left his country with images of a distant patriarch with characteristics that were not entirely negative.

Francoism: A Form of Dictatorship

The 1939 regime may often be referred to as a Francoist dictatorship but it did not owe its character solely to the man who personified it. It has clear similarities to other types of dictatorship in Europe and Latin America. What set it apart, however, was that while Franco was alive it stopped being one kind of dictatorship and became another, while keeping the same person at its head. All those characteristics that are attributed to Francoism as a form of dictatorship are present in other regimes at other times and in other places.

In Spain, rapid politicization under the Second Republic did not result in a strong Fascist Party; instead, what emerged as dominant on the right was Catholicism which, though essentially reactionary, nonetheless acted within the scope of the possible. Manuel Azaña was not wrong when he affirmed in the middle of the war that there might be fascists in Spain but there was no fascism, and were the opposition to win the war it would favor Congregations of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and military parades rather than imitating secular regimes with modernizing tendencies. Even if there was a Fascist Party, religious fervor and a proliferation of outmoded baroque ideals seemed to signal a return to Counter Reformation values.

In the midst of World War II, the point of comparison for the Franco dictatorship was never Germany; instead, the closest model was Italy and even more so the semi-, pseudo-, or para-fascist regimes that proliferated at the time. Franco’s dictatorship was, without doubt, more like Vichy France or certain Eastern European countries than the Hitler regime. In Spain, for example, there was a struggle for power between the Army and the Fascist Party identical to that in Antonescu’s Romania. As with Vichy France or Hungary, the Franco dictatorship, without ever going so far as to become totally fascist, went a long way down that path: indeed, far more so than those two countries, neither of which had only one single party. It made use of a populist façade and certain fascist political institutions but it cannot really be termed fascism as such.
Fascism provided a clear political framework of reference during World War II but after the war it ceased to feature as a viable alternative. After the 1940s the desire for totalitarianism in right-wing regimes, but not the regimes themselves, waned, though the regimes gained new strength during the 1960s and 1970s, albeit with different styles. Non-totalitarian regimes tolerated a certain degree of pluralism in their ranks. Rather than having a precisely formulated ideology, they were the product of a certain mentality and they too lacked a single party chanting a fascist liturgy. Into this category of dictatorship one could well put Francoism which, from a certain moment on, also used Spain’s economic development as its main argument for remaining in power. Non-totalitarian dictatorships were a common phenomenon in Latin America, though with different variations: popular nationalism in Perón’s Argentina, an anti-revolutionary military dictatorship in Pinochet’s Chile, or regimes where the Army acted corporately (the praetorian model). Francoism had something in common with all these styles of regime. To sum it up, one might say that when studied as a whole it can be seen as far more than a mere conservative dictatorship such as that of Primo de Rivera, but also as far less than a fascist dictatorship. Certainly, it is not enough to point to possible similarities, which will be discussed again later; instead we must also emphasize those characteristics that remained constant throughout the regime’s history.

One primary defining element has to do with the role of political ideology. An essentially authoritarian vision, national Catholicism, and a certain populist social agenda would together constitute keynotes of the regime, which remained hostile to the disruptive pluralism and freedom of opinion associated with a liberal society. Yet more than being just the result of a certain set of ideas, its character can more realistically be attributed to a particular mentality: that of those who won the Civil War. Francoism drew inspiration from a number of ideological sources (in the sense that they came from across the spectrum of the Spanish right), which were different in its infancy; however, it also allowed for modification of these ideas in response to changing circumstances.

The regime was, looked at another way and in contrast to certain Latin American or fascist dictatorships, personal not collective: hence its name “Francoism,” for even if the man who personified it was a soldier, it was not dictatorship by the Army. Its personal nature did not preclude a desire for permanence which was never questioned, and this made it different from military regimes in Latin America and that of Primo de Rivera.
Nor did Franco try to do away entirely with powers other than those pertaining to the state. The regime did not even address seriously the task of establishing itself as an institution. Its founding legislation was a response to strategic reasoning and even looked ahead to projects in a distant future but it was never applied with even a minimum of sincerity.

One of the reasons why the regime was never institutionalized was that, having arisen out of a conservative coalition, its different component parts had different visions for the future. The Falangists were pro-Republican and the Carlists always rejected the notion of a single party, to cite just two examples. Therefore, potential conflict was a constant threat that Franco avoided periodically by direct intervention. This worked by splitting each of the groups within the conservative coalition into two sides: those who would collaborate and those who would not. The former reaped the benefits of a slice of power and so enhanced the legitimacy of the regime, while the latter remained on the margins of power.

Franco’s style of government by arbitration was always informal in approach, for he never allowed strong political forces as such to be represented in the Council of Ministers. It was he who elected its members, though always with an eye to what would work best. He even assigned portfolios to each of the different groups, which might well be called “families”: the Justice Ministry to the Carlists because it involved relations with the Vatican; portfolios relating to economic issues to the Alfonsine Monarchists because of their technical knowledge and contacts in economic circles; Labor and Agriculture to Falangists because of the social content, and Education and Foreign Affairs to the Catholics because for them the former was a burning issue and the latter might allow a more acceptable image to be projected to the outer world. The informal nature of the coalition meant that these groups never became institutionalized. The “families” of the dictatorship were above all a phenomenon in the early part of its history; with the passage of time, they were replaced by individuals.

It is typical of dictatorial regimes that they either mobilize ordinary citizens to support them or demobilize them as though passivity were a necessary response for survival. Fascist regimes always mobilize and the Franco regime did so right from the start; throughout all its life, when it thought it was in danger, its response was to mobilize support. Usually this took the form of a kind of “docile anarchy” which worked by cultivating an inarticulate, passive society. One person in the 1960s described the regime Spaniards were experiencing as neither Francoist nor anti-Francoist but
just not interested in politics. The power of the regime was based not on a silent majority but quite simply on an absent one. Those years, as was the case with Italian fascism, could well be called “years of consensus,” not in the sense that the regime was enthusiastically accepted but apathy meant that it was tolerated after earlier repression had utterly crushed the opposition.

Non-totalitarian dictatorships do not have this one single party. In the case of Francoism, there was one party initially intended to be the only actor on the political stage and the inspiration for the regime. However, this intention was frustrated. In due course, the party became bureaucratized and just another part of the state. The party had not conquered the state; what happened was quite the reverse. Yet the party always remained an important element at the heart of the Franco regime. Although its budget only ever reached at most 2 percent of the state budget, Falange did well out of this unification, and if it was not allowed a monopoly of power, it did receive a significant slice.

In general, in non-totalitarian dictatorial regimes there remain autonomous pockets outside the political sphere; the most influential are usually the Catholic Church and the Army. Obviously Catholicism played a hugely important role during the Franco years, so much so that it has been possible to look on it as the intellectual force behind the regime; however, this statement is only valid for the period up to 1962. The Church always had a sphere of autonomy that included control over a large part of education, a section of the press, and religious association. Yet Catholicism was, at the same time, just another family within the regime which took an important lead at certain key moments. It wanted to change the regime in 1945 but found itself forced to accept a portion of power without being able to introduce any changes.

Franco’s dictatorship can much better be described as military than as Falangist. It is important to bear in mind that it was the Army that won the Civil War and that it had changed over the course of the conflict. Of the most high-ranking officers serving in 1936 only a quarter joined the uprising, but another factor was that during the conflict its ranks were swelled by provisional officers who would play a decisive role later on. The purge carried out at the heart of the military family was as harsh or harsher and even more arbitrary than in any other sector of the Administration in order to create a weapon capable of keeping in power those who had won it. At the end of the decade of the 1960s more than a third of all officers had been provisional lieutenants.
The regime that existed in Spain between 1939 and 1975 was that of a dictator – Franco – who happened to be a general. That brought opposition from sections of the Army, principally from those who considered him a kind of primus inter pares. From the 1950s onwards, changes in the Army made it unthinkable that opposition could arise within its ranks, but that did not mean that the regime could be termed military. Military officers played important roles at the heart of the governing class, especially in specific areas; public order was always under their jurisdiction. All vice-presidents and 40 of the 114 government ministers were from the Armed Services; eight of them held power for more than 10 years. They even held portfolios relating to economic affairs. Yet the regime was not praetorian because, for example, it did not endow officers with functions equivalent to those of university vice-chancellors, as happened in Pinochet’s Chile. Military budgets gradually decreased and in 1975 Spain was one of the countries in Europe where the Army was least well subsidized.

Other aspects of the Francoist dictatorship are worth pointing out. The Cortes – which was supposedly equivalent to a legislative assembly – served merely as a sounding-board to give added weight to more important decisions taken by Franco himself; it also provided a forum in which the regime’s political class could sound out different opinions. However, as López Rodó said, the unwritten rules of the constitutional game were that nobody argued with Franco and that it was the government that ran the country. The highest level that could be reached in Francoist politics was therefore that of minister. The qualities required to attain such a post were first and foremost loyalty to the person of Franco himself, also technical training, and finally membership of one of the regime families. Ministers always had considerable power because of an extensive “area of indifference” in which the dictator left those who collaborated with him a wide margin for freedom of movement.

In describing the dictatorship it is also necessary to take into account other factors such as, for example, the degree of political repression that existed. The sheer magnitude of the repression can only be understood if one views it in the light of the origin of Franco’s dictatorship, which was during a civil war. It would be wrong, however, to focus analysis of the Franco regime solely on this initial repressive phase without considering the changes that occurred subsequently. Around 1965, for example, the numbers of those in prison came down to below 11,000 and the number of members of the security forces per thousand inhabitants was relatively
low in comparison to the rest of Europe. Often repression took the form of detention for short periods with delayed court hearings, or it ended with light sentences already served before the trial took place. Although the level of repression rose in the final phase of the Franco years, it was never as severe as it had been in the 1940s or in the 1950s. Society had won new levels of tolerance.

In the economic sphere, freedom of initiative was only interfered with (and that was never done more than indirectly even if it was quite severely) during the first phase of the regime, because the state wanted to show favor to those who had been on the winning side. There was never freedom for trade unions, but from the 1950s onwards there were organizations that represented workers’ interests within companies, and they were capable of reaching agreements with the owners on increases in productivity, so that in 1965 there was a relaxing of sanctions relating to strikes. Persecution of clandestine trade union organizations decreased in the 1960s but toughened up again in the final phase of the regime. Any other form of association was subject to strict controls, but there were marginal zones in which a certain degree of autonomy was allowed for chambers of commerce and – more especially – religious associations.

Legislation relating to the press, inspired by Mussolini’s Italy, was in many respects harsher and more pedantic in the way it was applied. The preamble to the press law written during the Civil War (1938) railed against “freedom in the democratic style.” As prescribed in the text of the law, newspaper editors were always government appointments. The purge among professional journalists was extremely severe: of 4,000 dossiers presented soliciting permission to work in the profession only 1,800 were accepted. Only in the 1950s did it become possible for newspapers to appoint editors of their own choice, and it was as late as 1966 that censorship prior to publication was abolished. Even so, the press always managed to maintain a certain pluralism, though it could only express opinions obliquely. The Catholic media controlled the same number of daily newspapers as there were official publications, and there were also a number in private ownership. The situation was similar for radio, but it was allowed only one single news and information program.

There are two contrary and equally inaccurate tendencies when attempts are made to define the role of the opposition in Franco’s Spain. While it never entirely ceased to exist, probably after the war in Europe its chances of ever winning were slim right up until the moment of Franco’s death. In its early years the regime used violent repressive measures
against it, but it is also true that for much of the time it seemed willing to attract and even collaborate with its opponents. The opposition survived, however, because those who took over from those who were defeated in the Civil War were joined in the 1960s by a new opposition born as a consequence of Spain’s newly developed society. As late as 1953 an important socialist leader died of maltreatment in prison, and in 1963 a communist leader purported to have committed crimes during the Civil War was executed. By the 1970s socialist leaders were known to the police who might occasionally arrest them, but they were not tortured, and when tried they were not sent to prison for long. There was always an opposition that was tolerated and not persecuted as long as it was not too active, and another that was illegal and the butt of extremely severe repression. In addition, the pluralism of the regime itself fostered the existence of a certain pseudo-opposition or opposition from within, of whom it could be said that the boundaries between it and the more moderate form of outside opposition became blurred during the final phase of Francoism.

This description allows us to gain a general impression of what the Franco dictatorship itself was always like; we can, therefore, try to compare it with other types of regime. The best comparison, because it allows us to consider similarities and differences, is with Italian fascism and with Salazar’s Portugal. Relations between the three regimes were close but Franco—who on occasion could see Mussolini not only as someone worthy of admiration but also someone to be imitated—did not view Salazar as anything but a means of making contact indirectly with the democratic world. The origins of the three regimes were different. Only the Spanish regime had begun in civil war and had tried to rebuild a political system out of nothing; furthermore, it alone applied severe repression and always used a dialectic of victors and vanquished. Salazar was never totalitarian; his regime was conservative and based on Catholic corporativist ideas which used authoritarianism to reinforce republican institutions. Mussolini invented the word “totalitarian” but he himself never put it into practice (his totalitarianism was “imperfect” or “defective,” at least in comparison with that of Hitler). Having risen to power by legal means he did not resort to violent repression, and when he institutionalized the regime, he left the way open to absolute totalitarianism, keeping it as a possible option.

A comparison of these two dictatorships with the Franco regime can be extended to examine many other areas too. The single-party model did not apply in Portugal, where Salazar sometimes allowed political
opposition groups to exist legally during elections. He also allowed a certain degree of internal pluralism which brought monarchists face to face with those who were not, and confronted those with progressive views on the colonial problem with reactionaries. Italian fascism allowed for pluralism from different sources, but once in power the only diversity permitted was that of tone. In Portugal the Army, though guarantor of the system, did not play such a crucial role as to warrant the Salazar regime being called a military dictatorship. The Portuguese dictatorship, though personified by a man who had been a member of Catholic movements, was never clericalist, unlike what happened in Spain. In Italy, the more strongly totalitarian character of the dictatorship led to serious conflict between Mussolini and the Church, while the Army, though still maintaining a sphere of autonomy, was decapitated with the removal of those in command. In Portugal, there was the same selective repression as in Spain in the 1950s but it had little in common with the random ferocity of the Saló Republic at the end of the Mussolini era, which was comparable to the earliest Francoist repression. To sum up, in Italy autarchy was favored in the economic sphere, there was an actual cultural policy and even a form of Fascist art, and Italy also had imperialistic tendencies as part of its foreign policy. In Portugal, in contrast, economic policy was in the hands of the careful accountant that Salazar never ceased to be, and his imperialism remained purely defensive. In all these traits it is, of course, possible to see points of comparison with Francoism. If we were to attempt to consider together similarities and differences, we would have to say that the Franco dictatorship was a political regime which, on a hypothetical scale measuring the extent of fascist input, would have been placed in the 1940s between a higher score for Italy and a lower score for Portugal.

Francoism does not, therefore, have any distinguishing traits that make it a peculiar phenomenon. What does make it different is that it came into being as a result of a civil war and this meant that it had more chances of survival. Furthermore, its relative lack of any clear ideological basis allowed it to shift from one form of dictatorship to another, bordering on fascism in the 1940s and resembling more modernizing dictatorships in the 1960s. What is not at all common when a dictatorship disappears is for a peaceful transition to democracy to occur, though this did not depend on the regime itself but rather on changes within Spanish society and on the particular abilities of those in positions of leadership, both within the regime and in opposition.
Any assessment of the disasters caused by the Spanish Civil War must begin with the number of those who died. To cite the figure of a million dead has become a cliché which could only be taken as correct if the number of those “not born” were taken into account. More realistically, the number who died as a direct consequence of the fighting would be just over 1 percent of the total population, which is similar to the percentage of deaths recorded in the civil war in Finland in 1918. In Spain’s case demographic losses would not have exceeded the number of deaths caused by flu that year. The destruction was not materially comparable to that suffered in Europe during World War II. One need only compare the tens of thousands of deaths caused during the bombing of German cities with the 5,000 deaths suffered by Catalonia in the entire war. In this, as in so many other aspects, the Spanish Civil War was more like World War I than World War II. Figures show, however, that agricultural output went down by 20 percent and industrial production by 30 percent. More serious still than all this material destruction was the social fragmentation that was a direct result of repression.

In this respect it is true to say that the war of 1936 exceeded by a large margin what happened in other comparable situations: never before had any civil conflict in Spain ended with such persecution of the vanquished. The Carlist Wars of the nineteenth century, for example, had ended with “Embraces at Vergara” – symbols of reconciliation – but in this case that did not happen. Not only were the defeated put on trial, but in order to make such trials possible an entirely new form of judicial structure and new laws to address these exceptional circumstances were thought up. In addition to all that, economic sanctions were imposed and there was a general purge of the Administration.

The harshness of this repression becomes even more evident when the figures for executions in Spain are compared with those in postwar Europe in countries which experienced similar circumstances. In France and Italy, after 1945, repression was mild and did not last long because the democracy that triumphed was generous. In France only 800 collaborators were executed after being tried; in both countries the administrative purge was superficial and few remained in prison on these counts by the start of the 1950s. Julián Marías has written that in Spain the victors could have