



A NEW HISTORICAL-POLITICAL DEBATE: GREATNESS AND MISERIES OF THE SPANISH EMPIRE

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In recent years we have witnessed a very unusual publishing phenomenon. [María Elvira Roca Barea](#), a high school teacher from Malaga, published in 2016 a historical essay, entitled, [Imperiofobia y leyenda negra. Roma, Rusia, Estados Unidos y el Imperio español](#) (*Imperphobia and the Black Legend. Rome, Russia, the United States and the Spanish Empire*). Despite its title, the book met with great success, ending up selling more than 100,000 copies.

The fact that a book whose subject matter revolves around the [Black Legend](#) reached such a number means that people without specific training in the field of history are interested in this topic, and that is precisely where the interest in imperiophobia ("the fear of empire") lies, not only from a historiographical point of view, but also from a sociological, political or ideological point of view.

History is not a static science, but something that often acts as a pendulum swing that oscillates amidst the topics that generate interest and about which it is written. The fact that historiography does not cease to be a reflection of the concerns and interests of society is a recurring theme in historiographical treatises.

As Gonzalo Pasamar has [pointed out](#) as an example of the first steps of Contemporary History, these are inseparable from the political and social changes of the 19th century. In the same way, we see the death and birth of new historiographical trends, in step with the times, as when, from the second half of the 1960s, among the background factors that led to the decline of historicism we can cite the disappearance of the main historians of the generation that developed their careers during the Weimar Republic and Nazism, the student mobilization, or the end of the political hegemony of conservative governments.

In the same way, Charles-Olivier Carbonell [surmised](#) that in the 1930s an economic history, oriented more towards exchanges, prices or currency, and not towards the modes or processes of production, as well as a social history that was not limited exclusively to the question of classes, but to that of groups and their form of interaction, such as rural and urban communities, minorities or the marginalized, was constituted.

The [Annales school](#) itself is the child of a very specific political and historiographical conjuncture without which neither its genesis nor its consolidation can be understood. It was a period between two world wars, when the process of progressive decline and the end of the historiographical hegemony

that had been typical of the Germanic world since about 1870, and which would enter into crisis with the First World War and then with the political rise of the Nazi party, took place.

It is pertinent to frame the publication of Roca Barea's work within a very specific context, which is related to the image of Spain, both within Spain's own borders, especially in Catalonia, and at the European level. It is a portrait that has become, if possible, less favorable since the massive [Diada of September 11, 2012](#), the beginning, as [Enric Ucelay-Da Cal](#) has [pointed out](#), of the so-called "pro-independence process" that became more radical as the "*molt honorabilitat*" ["great honor"] of former President [Jordi Pujol](#) was called into question, for his undeclared fortune abroad, in what can be understood as an attempt to distract attention, and which has ended with some Catalan politicians convicted by the Supreme Court for the crime of sedition.

In reality, the origin of this situation, at least in the Catalan context, should not be sought from the time [Carles Puigdemont](#) was elected president of the [Generalitat](#), nor since the ruling of the [Constitutional Court on the Statute of 2010](#), but from the time Jordi Pujol became president of the Generalitat in 1980, with a mandate that, as is well known, would last until 2003, when he was relieved by the socialist leader, [Pasqual Maragall](#).

The feeling of belonging to a wider community, the Spanish one, seems to have been diluted in Catalonia, a society that shows a great polarization between a countryside with a pro-independence majority and a more cosmopolitan and integrated urban centers. At the same time, the decades-long indifference of the hegemonic Spanish parties, the [PP](#) and [PSOE](#), captive to the need for votes that the party dominated by Pujol could provide them, led to a tacit agreement – that some would receive support in Madrid, in exchange for "Pujolism" being imposed in Catalonia without too many obstacles.

As a result, the concept of "Spain" was erased from politically correct language, as if it were a cursed word with Francoist reminiscences, and was replaced by the term the "Spanish State," which seemed innocuous and neutral. All this was due, to a large extent, to the influence of the media as well as to essential elements in the process of building any nationalism, such as education, language or history, always manipulated from a prism aimed at satisfying nationalist anxieties. It is in these circumstances that *Imperiofobia* appeared as a kind of counterattack that seeks to vindicate the Spanish past, sometimes considered as a taboo, or perhaps as a counterweight that tries to balance the image of Spain.

Of course, the manipulation of history by nationalism is by no means a new element. [J.T. Delos](#) drew attention [several decades ago](#) to the national sentiment influenced by Germanic thought, whose peak was experienced in the 20th century and according to which, through the invocation of historical rights, blood and soil, there was belief in the *"collective soul, in the dark and instinctive forces that prevail in the life of peoples and in the development of their institutions over the decisions of individual freedom,"* thus being closer to nature and the physical conditions of life, and less to rationality, and ultimately oriented towards racism, since the principle of their unity was concentrated around race. Delos felt that, in Germany, the language community provided great arguments for national claims, and the poets seized on this argument from the beginning of the 19th century, while politics turned it into a weapon of war.

During the second half of the 20th century, interest in studying the concepts of nation and nationalism increased notably, which led to the publication of numerous works that made this subject one of the historiographical favorites and on which it is very difficult, given the abundant bibliography that continues to be published today, to undertake a detailed study. Ernest Renan, with his work entitled, [What is A Nation?](#) gave the initial indication signal for the defense of linguistic and consensualist theories about the nation.

Contrary to what was advocated by the essentialist theses, which served as theoretical support for the Galicia of [Manuel Murguía](#), the Spain of [Modesto Lafuente](#) or the France of [Jules Michelet](#), the nation is not in this case something immutable and eternal, but a reality dependent on external instruments, which make up the nation-state, and internal instruments, mainly language and national education, as [analyzed](#) by [José Carlos Bermejo](#). This group of theorists also included [Anthony Smith](#), [Ernest Gellner](#), [Eric Hobsbawm](#) and [Benedict Anderson](#), who in 1983 coined the famous term "[imagined communities](#)," in one of his books which marked a turning point in the debate that had been taking place on nationalism in recent decades.

In Spanish history we find several examples that show the need for nations to connect themselves with prestigious ancestors. The authors of the great narrative constructions, [Juan de Mariana](#) at the end of the 16th century, or the aforementioned Lafuente in the mid-19th century, emphasized the need to remember, for example, the main heroic deeds of Antiquity, which although they did not end in victory, as in the case of the sieges of [Saguntum](#) and [Numantia](#), or in the biographies of [Viriatius](#) and [Sertorius](#), were nevertheless heroic episodes. Both their memory and the bravery and courage shown in those resistances against the invader were to be internalized by the students who filled the classrooms in order to create citizens committed to the nation and the patriotic values it defended.

This yearning led in most cases to elaborate racist doctrines whose objective was to define "us" very well, since "we" were pure and uncontaminated by the rest of the races, which in most occasions were considered inferior. The case of the Basque Country is very curious, because during the 16th and 17th centuries the [Cantabrians](#) stood out as the first representatives of the Basques, a situation that remained more or less stable until the first decades of the 19th century, when this reference was still hegemonic among its cultural and political elites, when referring to the most remote past of [Biscay](#), [Gipuzkoa](#) and [Álava](#).

However, from the 1870s, we witness the emergence of the Iberians as the ancestral referent of the Basques, and by the end of the century, [Sabino Arana](#) formulated the first Basque national identity, completely separate and exclusive of the Spanish identity, based, as is well known, on race as the nuclear principle of his doctrine. And all this, as is natural, with the aim that the nation would sink its roots in the oldest and most glorious soils possible; or, in [Fernando Wulff](#)'s expression, would be the depository of the "patriotic essences."

But, as J.T. Delos observed, the nation is a product of social life and nationalism, that complex mixture of doctrines, political claims and passions. This same author, as Anderson would later do in *Imagined Communities*, stressed that aspects such as national sentiment are nothing more than manifestations of a collective conscience linked to historical conditions and a given environment, in such a way that the community exists insofar as there is a common state of conscience; that is, the awareness of "us" is given by the belief of forming an original entity that is constituted by opposing third parties, who are usually the enemies that all nationalism needs; and, secondly, by the will to perpetuate common life.

On this path, of which all the elements that make up the nation are part, the nation tries to generate a series of differentiating features that make up the identity of that people, since, as David Lowenthal has pointed out in a classic book, the ability to evoke the past and identify with it, both collectively and personally, offers meaning, purpose and value to our existence.

The Imperiophobia-Imperiophilia Debate

The purpose of Roca Barea's book is, as she states in the Introduction, *"to understand why [black legends] arise, what clichés shape them and how they expand until they become public opinion and a substitute for history."* The book, whose subject matter is one of the most controversial in the history of Spain and on which there is an enormous amount of bibliography, is divided into three parts.

The first, entitled "Empires and Black Legends: The Inseparable Couple", begins with a review of the origin and meaning of the expression, "black legend," including authors, such as, [Arthur Lévy](#), [Cayetano Soler](#) and [Emilia Pardo Bazán](#), who, according to Roca Barea, was the first author to use the expression, in April 1899 in the [Salle Charras](#), in Paris, to refer to anti-Spanish propaganda. The analysis continues with [Julián Juderías](#), who used the expression "black legend" as a title to his [well-known book](#), in 1914.

However, according to Roca Barea, in recent decades there has been a tendency to deny the existence of the Black Legend. To justify this, she mentions a travel documentary broadcast on Spanish Television eight years ago where, under the theme of the discoveries carried out by the Portuguese, English, Turks or Spaniards in the 15th and 16th centuries, only unedifying facts were mentioned in the case of the latter.

On the other hand, there were a number of authors concerned with concealing, if not denying, that the Black Legend had existed or, in the best of cases, that it disappeared a long time ago. Among them, Henry Kamen and his book, [Empire](#), where the British author defends the idea of Spain as a poor country, stand out. Roca Barea, with a certain ironic tone that she does not abandon throughout her book, concludes that Spain only *"became an empire by a stroke of a pen; or, in other words, Spain did not build an empire but, let us say, fell upon it by chance."*

Next, and still within this first part of the book, Roca Barea begins to analyze the respective black legends of Rome, Russia and the United States, leaving the Spanish Empire aside, for the moment, since being the most abused, it will need a much larger space than the rest. Roca Barea states that the racist prejudices that affected the United States and Russia were born in France. The first author responsible for this was [Arthur de Gobineau](#), author of the well-known [Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines](#), when he stated that the mixture that was taking place in the United States would end up provoking *"a race without beauty or intelligence,"* which would result in *"the end of the different races,"* and would also put an end to *"the clear supremacy of the white race."* Whereas, in the Russian case, the French Enlightenment would be directly responsible; Russia went from being an example worthy of imitation, before the Treaty of Paris, to becoming a historical reality doomed to failure after the signing of the same.

After reviewing the three cases cited, Roca Barea finds a common thread that binds these three examples, which consist of the *"mixture of admiration and envy."* In this way, she establishes "a fairly solid model of what we have been calling imperiophobia". Roca Barea goes on to say that this would be

"a particular kind of prejudice of racist etiology that can be defined as the indiscriminate aversion towards the people who become the backbone of an empire."

She concludes the first part of the book by completing this definition a little more, in order to maintain that imperiophobia is particularized by two basic features. Firstly, that it does not go from a more powerful people against a weaker one, but the other way around. Secondly, by its intellectual immunity, given that, in Roca Barea's opinion, *"it is a prejudice of good tone, that is, it is not considered a prejudice but a completely justified and reasonable opinion,"* and even finds "its most perfect accommodation among the literate classes, *"which is logical "since it owes to them if not its birth, then certainly its development and spread until it became public opinion."*

The second part of the book, dedicated to the study of imperiophobia against the Spanish Empire, which, in her words, would not differ in essence from the cases previously analyzed, doubles the length of the other chapters because it is the paradigmatic example. Some of the episodes, characters and institutions that have traditionally contributed to forge a certain negative image of Spain that is associated with the Black Legend are touched upon. Thus, she reviews the major highlights, starting with the imperial military expeditions carried out by [Charles V](#) in Italy, and continuing with the conflict in the Netherlands during the reign of [Philip II](#); Germany and Protestantism; Great Britain; as well, decisive and controversial episodes such as the Inquisition or the conquest of America and the work of [Fray Bartolomé Las Casas](#), to cite some of the most relevant examples.

The fact that Roca Barea begins the epigraph dedicated to the Netherlands with the anthem of the Netherlands is noteworthy, since it highlights some clichés that are recurrent in the image projected both of the Spanish and the Spanish, as we will see. the image projected both of the Spanish and of what is Spanish, as we will have occasion to see later on. The lyrics read:

*O that the Spaniards rape thee,
My Netherlands so sweet,
The thought of that does grip me
Causing my heart to bleed.*

This question is interesting because it puts us before the mirror of the foreign vision of Spain and the Spaniards. In this sense, José Varela Ortega has just [published a fundamental book](#). It is about how Spaniards have defined themselves and how they have been seen from the outside in a pendular

movement that has oscillated between contempt and exaltation, between misery and exaltation.

Stereotypes, as Varela Ortega points out, although imprecise and inaccurate, have the virtue of being very effective. Vague or unproven assertions are the ideal breeding ground for these types of ideas to be successful. It is not only the merit of those publicists who, from the end of the 15th century to the present day, the period analyzed in this book, have proposed a distorted vision of our history, but also of Spain itself because many Spaniards were incapable of articulating a discourse that would counteract these stereotypes, a discourse that could mix both self-criticism and self-esteem about the image that was being projected from the outside, along the lines that Roca Barea also defends in *Imperiofobia*.

In fact, Varela Ortega gives an example of the prejudices that would continue to plague Spain, not only from the historical point of view but also from the judicial one, and that would translate into a double yardstick, depending on whether the events took place in Spain or in another country.

According to Varela, it is curious *"that the U.S. press pontificates about the little left hand of Spanish politicians,"* in a country where not two years ago the Supreme Court *"unanimously rejected as unconstitutional a petition for the right to secession, signed by a hundred thousand plus citizens of Texas, who harbored desires and pretensions very similar to those of the Catalan nationalists."* Not to mention the German Constitution, which would expressly prohibit the secession of a federated state, so that the territorial unity of the Republic might remain "inviolable;" or, in other words, a case similar *"to the secessionist process [which] would force any government of the Federal Republic to intervene in any land"*.

The persistence of certain clichés about the history of Spain is a fact that both Roca Barea and Varela Ortega analyze in their respective texts. If we focus on the profile of Philip II and the [Duke of Alba](#), we will see that their reputation in Europe is far from positive, even today.

Roca Barea mentions that a professor at the University of Ghent, named [Lieve Behiels](#), examined, in the 1980s, textbooks used in Belgian education from 1843 to 1986. Behiels concluded that the Duke of Alba was described in most of them *"with negative or very negative adjectives:"* nineteen times he was called "cruel" and only five times a positive appellation, "brave," was applied to him.

In the same vein, José Varela warns that, today, in a recently published and infantile *Histoire de la*

Belgique (History of Belgium), the image presented of Philip II and Alba is that they tried to introduce the Spanish Inquisition in Flanders, an extreme event that is uncertain; and about the duke it is stated that he was "little less than a psychopathic butcher even by [the assessment of] current professional historians, such as Robert Goodwin." A little further on, Varela argues that the Duke of Alba "came to represent the image of violence and cruelty, associated, from then on, with Spaniards in general," making the Duke the "bogeyman" of Dutch children to this day.

It is true that both Philip II and the Duke of Alba are true protagonists in the Black Legend. Not in vain, for it was [William of Orange](#) who wrote his *Apologie* in 1581 as a rebuttal to the [Edict of Proscription](#), under Margaret of Parma, which had been made public in August of the previous year, where he was accused of treason, rebellion and disloyalty, with the aim of developing a story or an alibi to justify the crime of *lèse majesté* that he had carried out against his king, a crime we must not forget was one of the worst that could be committed.

Some of these characters who contributed to the origin and consolidation of the Black Legend have been marked by the taint of treason. Indeed, there were active traitors because they wrote slogans, pamphlets or texts denouncing the alleged abuses perpetrated by Philip II and his administration, such as, William of Orange himself or [Antonio Perez](#) and his *Relaciones*, who perhaps perfectly represents the prototype of the traitor in the history of Spain. However, we also find other traitors who are passive, such as [Don Carlos](#), a young prince who left no testimonies to incriminate his father but was nevertheless used and exploited with the aim of showing the ruthless behavior of his father, [the king](#), and who ended up being associated with the "[Demon of the South](#)."

In the eyes of Spanish historiography, Don Carlos was understood as someone dominated by a lust for power, to the point of wanting to overthrow his father with the help of some Flemish subjects who were very unhappy with the treatment meted out by Philip II; he would end his days without his father's pardon, in a prison cell at the age of barely twenty. Don Carlos went beyond the limits of history, literature and his time; and proof of this is that Friedrich Schiller was inspired by him to compose his drama, *Dom Karlos, Infant von Spanien*, and of course Giuseppe Verdi and his work, *Don Carlo*, which premiered in Paris in March 1867, and which definitively consecrated the image of a despotic and cruel Philip II, even to his own son.

Imperiofobia then turns to two fundamental elements of the Black Legend, the Inquisition and the conquest of America, which are the themes with which Roca Barea closes the second part of the book.

In regards to the Holy Office, Roca Barea devotes herself to demonstrating that from *"Frenchified literature to the theater of Martínez de la Rosa,"* there has been *"what we could call a complete normalization of the myth of the Inquisition in Spain itself within the political-literary world of the 19th century."* Her aim is to demonstrate how that myth was created, and she begins by stating that the identification of the Holy Office *"with the Antichrist is already found in some texts from the 1530s; that is, at a surprisingly early date, and not only in Germany."* *The procedure, in the author's opinion, was always the same: "a small part of truth served to raise up a big lie that justified a prejudice of racist etiology that so far refuses to recognize what it really is."*

She then cites some of the testimonies that came to justify this thesis of the myth of the Inquisition. Among the authors she mentions are [Reginaldo González Montano](#), author of the [Sanctae Inquisitionis Hispaniae Artes](#), whom she suspects was a Spanish apostate; [Francisco de Enzinas](#), another apostate of Burgos origins, who wrote, with the help of his brothers Jaime and Juan, a [Historia de Statu Belgico deque Religione Hispanica](#), under the name of Franciscus Dryander; or [Matthias Flacius Illyricus](#), who wrote a complete history of the Protestant Church and its martyrs, [Catalogus testium veritatis](#) (*Catalogue of Witnesses to the Truth*), dated 1556.

Again, as had happened with the Black Legend, *"the myth of the Inquisition passed unshaken to the Enlightenment, and then to Romanticism and liberalism, and from there to the present day."* And not only that, but, in Roca Barea's opinion, the acceptance of this myth is also influenced by the laziness of Spanish society, incapable of counteracting centuries of insults against the Holy Office.

She cites a report broadcast by La 2 of Televisión Española, entitled "The Inquisition: A Spanish Tragedy," which was aired on May 22, 2013; also the fact that by typing into Google, "tortures of the Inquisition," *"you will find 171,000 results; and these only in Spanish;"* or that in a survey carried out by the Council of Europe in 2009 on the occasion of the fourth centenary of the telescope, among students of the European Union, *"30 percent of students think that Galileo was burned at the stake by the Inquisition, 97 percent are convinced that before that, he was tortured"* and that almost one hundred percent believe that the phrase, *"Eppur si muove"* ("and yet it moves") was in reality said by Galileo.

Authors such as Varela Ortega have called attention to the fact that the Holy Office does not need a special appellation. Therefore, it is revealing that not even in English do they refer to the Inquisition as just the "Inquisition," but rather the allusion is made through the formula "the Spanish Inquisition," even though the Spanish Inquisition was by no means the pioneer, although it was the one that obtained the

most fame or repercussions.

According to [José Martínez Millán](#), the episcopal Inquisition, administered by local bishops, was born with [Lucius III](#). From 1231, with the bull, *Excommunicamus* of Gregory IX, it became known as the Papal Inquisition, already subordinated to pontifical power. Even within the borders of the Iberian Peninsula, as [García Cárcel](#) wrote in a [short article](#), the Castilian Inquisition had antecedents in Aragon. In the words of Varela Ortega, the polemic could be summarized, not without a certain irony, as follows: *"It is already known that it [the Inquisition] is Spanish; that of other countries, does not count (the fact that it came from France and that it acted there until almost the French Revolution hardly anyone knows about or is interested in knowing, outside of the odd expert)."*

Roca Barea's next objective is to list data that demonstrate that the Inquisition was not as savage, bloodthirsty and arbitrary as it has been made out to be, adjectives that, incidentally, respond either to the difficulty that often exists with certain institutions, battles or characters when it comes to distinguishing between reality, myth and prejudice, or directly to ignorance. Perhaps, in the history of Spain, one of the best examples of this sense is offered, as we are seeing, by the Inquisition itself.

Furthermore, she establishes a comparison with the rest of the European countries to prove that their legal system was more severe than that of the Inquisition. As an example, she mentions that studies, such as those of [Henningesen and Contreras](#), bring the number of people condemned to death by the Holy Office, between 1550 and 1700, to a total of 1346, while [Henry Kamen](#)'s estimates amount to 3,000 victims. In contrast, Sir James Stephen calculated that *"the number condemned to death in England in three centuries reached the chilling figure of 264,000 people,"* adding that some convictions *"were for crimes as serious as stealing a sheep."*

This series of clues leads Roca Barea to conclude that, in reality, the Inquisition *"was never a shadow power, nor did it have the capacity to control society,"* since the inquisitors, in general, *"worked under difficult conditions and their work was quite routine and bureaucratic."* Consequently, the Holy Office is for the author *"an icon, and its mental representation belongs more to the world of symbolic realities than to that of historical truth."*

From 1480, the Catholic Monarchs, in possession of the functions they had acquired by virtue of a papal bull signed by [Sixtus IV](#) in 1478, appointed Juan de San Martín and Miguel de Morillo as inquisitors, and the first act of faith took place in February 1481, in which six people were killed. This is the beginning of

a period that Joseph Pérez defines as one of "terror" and about which Modesto Lafuente declares in his *Historia general de España*: *"It was the first step, product of an error of understanding of the enlightened and kind Isabel, whose consequences she did not foresee, and whose results were to be fatal for Spain."*

A chronicler of the time, [Andrés Bernáldez](#), considered that between 1480 and 1488 *"they burned more than seven hundred people, and reconciled more than five thousand and threw them into perpetual prisons, where there were such prisons, where they were kept for four or five years or more."* This is perhaps the harshest period of the Holy Office, although the one chosen by Roca Barea to establish her estimates, on the other hand, begins in 1550, some twenty or thirty years after this brutal stage of the Inquisition took place.

Equally problematic are the figures offered by Sir James Stephen, among other reasons because, first of all, Roca Barea does not indicate in which three centuries these hundreds of thousands of murders were committed. Sir James Stephen, who, let us remember, lived in the 19th century, states in his book, *A History of the Criminal Law of England*, originally published in 1883, that, if the average number of executions in each county was 20 per year, the total would be 800 per year in the 40 English counties, data that Julián Juderías also cites, following Stephen: *"And following the same author with his calculations, he arrives at 264,000 executions in three hundred and thirty years."* Naturally these are unrealistic figures which, moreover, would have us to believe, without evidence, that the intensity was always uniform over more than three centuries. In any case, it is difficult to maintain, as Roca Barea does, that the Inquisition belonged more *"to the world of symbolic realities than to that of historical truth,"* or that it did not have *"the capacity to control society."*

The other extreme that attracts Roca Barea's attention in the construction and maintenance of the Black Legend is the conquest of America, to which she devotes the final pages of the second part of *Imperiofobia*. The hypotheses she maintains with respect to the Conquest are similar to those defended for the Holy Office: *"In the case of America, the deformations reached such a point that it has been impossible to try to make history without adopting a belligerent defensive attitude."*

Under this premise, Roca Barea sets out to bring to light the efforts of the Spanish Empire to provide what was necessary to accommodate life in the Americas. She mentions that between 1500 and 1550 *"some twenty-five large hospitals were built in the Indies, in the style of St. Nicholas of Bari, and a much larger number of small hospitals with fewer beds,"* to the point that in Lima, she tells us, there was one bed for every 101 inhabitants, which we should not expect in each of the cities of the Americas,

although she does think that *"this pyramid has a broad base of support, as evidenced by the fact that few of these institutions failed."*

If in the field of health this is just some of the data she brings to bear, in the case of education she offers much more that ranges from the creation of higher education centers, which she estimates at more than twenty, and the number of graduates that came out of them, which she estimates, until independence, at *"approximately 150,000... of all colors, castes and mixtures."* Likewise, she does not miss the opportunity to establish a favorable comparison, indicating that one must add *"the totality of the universities created by Belgium, England, Germany, France and Italy in the colonial expansion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to approach the number of Spanish-American universities during the imperial era."*

In relation to the conquest of Tenochtitlan-Tlatelolco, José Varela indicates that, as in all American conquests, it was indispensable to collaborate with other indigenous ethnic groups subjugated by the Aztecs *"who forced them to a very demanding regime of tribute and decimated them, imposing on them macabre human sacrifices and systematic and very numerous ritual cannibalism."*

In this sense, Varela Ortega argues that it might even be legitimate to question the term conquest because *"in most places there was no conquest at all,"* to such an extent that the characteristic feature was *"the scarcity of warlike acts and the abundance of negotiations."* In this respect, it cannot be denied that, in the conquest of America, which extended beyond the 16th century, there were new formulas for *convivencia* or coexistence. However, it is quite a different matter to suggest that the military conquest and political, economic or religious subjugation were not the basic pillars of the process, so it does not seem important to argue that these events did not respond, in effect, to a conquest.

However, the main protagonist in the entire chapter dedicated by Roca Barea to the conquest of America has a name of his own: Fray Bartolomé Las Casas and his [*Brevisima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*](#) (*A Brief Account of the Destruction of the Indias*). Roca Barea dismisses this work as an unreliable historical source; she discredits it because simply, *"it produces astonishment and pity,"* so no one *"with a little intellectual serenity or common sense defends a cause, however noble it may be, as the Dominican did."*

To some extent the life of Las Casas, the Spanish religious, was overshadowed by this work, of which there were many negative comments by prominent authors. But what is certain is that Las Casas had a

very broad and systematic bibliographical production, covering several volumes, ranging from the political to the religious, passing through the social and the legal.

In fact, the protective legislation passed in 1542 was inspired by the reflections of the friar. To understand the historical transcendence of Las Casas, it is necessary, on the one hand, to take into account all his work and not only the *Brevisima*, and, on the other hand, to draw attention to the context in which he lived and avoid the great myths that surrounded him and contributed to create a distorted profile of him. In this way, it is possible to reach a broader understanding of his real persona, a task to which [Bernat Hernández](#) devoted himself in his most recent biography.

One of the lasting consequences of Las Casas' book was, in Roca Barea's view, to have facilitated "*the birth of the myth of the indigenous Eden crushed by the evil white man*," arguing that it did not matter "whether the native is anthropophagous or head-shrinking," but that "*his state of nature makes him intrinsically good*." Subsequent translations into English, French or German, along with the famous engravings of [Théodor de Bry](#) in which sadistic, bloodthirsty and brutal scenes, such as that of the natives being devoured by dogs, can be seen, helped to spread and sustain the Black Legend.

Throughout the third and last part that integrates *Imperiofobia*, Roca Barea links, as she did already in the first part, the French Enlightenment with the creation of Hispanophobic prejudices, to the point of affirming that "*Hispanophobia in France does not occupy an eccentric and marginal place, but is part of the central body of ideas of the Enlightenment*." She cites in this sense those authors responsible, among whom she highlights, Pierre Bayle, Montesquieu, Voltaire, [Guillaume-Thomas Raynal](#), the *Encyclopédie* or the articles published therein by [Louis de Jaucourt](#).

The essential summary drawn from the French cultural environment about the Spanish is, as the author summarizes, the following: "*Spain is a country of ignorant and uneducated people; Spain is backward; the Inquisition and, therefore, Catholicism are to blame for the backwardness and uneducatedness of Spain, and in general of any place in contact with it; Spain is not part of civilization*." And again, Roca Barea again draws the comparison with the political, economic and social situation of France at that time, marked by a deficit that it is unable to control, by successive cholera epidemics, by a backward banking system or by the fact that "*there is no running water or sanitation in Paris, and it was the most malodorous capital in Europe*."

But the basic idea with which the book ends and which we have already stressed throughout this

discussion is the assumption about the Black Legend by the Spaniards themselves, who are responsible, in the final analysis, for not creating a narrative to counteract the accusations and falsehoods heaped on the national past. In the first place, Roca Barea blames Spanish liberalism, saying that all the clichés of Hispanophobia *"rejuvenated by the Enlightenment are already assumed with perfect naturalness, as an unappealable and self-evident truth, in El fanatismo"* (Fanaticism by [Meléndez Valdés](#)).

Regarding Valdés' book, an author who, according to her, naturally assumes the clichés of the Black Legend, she mentions that during the reigns of [Charles III](#) and [Charles IV](#) there were four death sentences handed down by the Inquisition, the last one in 1781. A year later, [Anna Göldi](#) became the last witch burned by Calvinism, which leads Roca Barea to argue that *"the bonfires go out in Europe almost at the same time from coast to coast,"* in an attempt to play down the importance of the Spanish case.

According to the scheme proposed by Roca Barea, the relationship of the Spaniards and their elites with the clichés of the Black Legend were structured as follows. During the "golden centuries," the Spaniards, although aware of the Black Legend, did not take much interest in it, and when they did, it was in a tone of "cheerful contempt." In the eighteenth century, part of the elites began to take on certain clichés of the Black Legend. And from the middle of the 19th century onwards it became a natural part of Spanish life because society needed these prejudices to explain its own situation and, at the same time, with reasons admitted by all, to evade its responsibility.

In conclusion, Roca Barea suggests the need, on the one hand, to admit that the Black Legend and its consequences are still alive, and, on the other, to create an alternative discourse that combats the inaccuracies and insults perniciously maintained about the history of Spain. As an example of the former, the author delves in the last pages into the cinematographic sphere to note that, in most of the films analyzed, especially those that deal with the prevailing historical themes, the image of a Spain dominated by fanaticism, backwardness, tyranny and cruelty prevails. With respect to the second point, and in the words of the author, the book was written *"to help clarify not the past, but the future."*

It is pertinent to mention at this time that with *Imperiofobia* Roca Barea completes her views of the Black Legend, and which she leaves off in the Enlightenment. The basic thesis she defended in [Fracasología. España y sus élites: de los afrancesados a nuestros días](#) (Failurology. Spain and its Elites: From the Frenchification to the Present Day), is made clear in the Introduction when she says, *"There is a moment from which a significant part of the Spanish elites assume the discourse of the Black Legend because it is the winning discourse of the eighteenth century."* Under this premise, Roca Barea sets out to

follow the path that takes her from the time the Bourbons acceded to the throne down to the present, with the aim of demonstrating that the prejudices associated with the Black Legend still survive in Spanish society.

Continuing her account near the end of *Imperiofobia*, Roca Barea maintains that it was in the century of the Enlightenment when a series of problems were born that Spain still suffers from today, such as, the rejection and moral condemnation of the Habsburg period, for which the Spanish elites were responsible because of the influence of Frenchification. Of course, and in line with her previous book, the source of the necessary breeding ground for the clichés to survive was France, especially with regard to Spain's responsibility for the Inquisition and the destruction of the Indies. The Spanish inferiority complex would explain not only why these prejudices were present in the 18th century, but also why, by the 19th century, the intellectual and political elites cared little about the dismemberment of the empire and its eventual decomposition.

The Black Legend is, in the end, and in Roca Barea's opinion, *"the hanger from which hangs northern supremacy,"* made possible because *"not only has the Roman Church been completely defeated, but also because the Spaniard, the last of the sons of Rome to rule in the West, has been defeated."* The essential conclusion that this whole series of arguments brings forward for Roca Barea, what she wishes to emphasize, is that *"from the situation of cultural subordination there is no way out without the assistance of the elites."*

She concludes *Fracasología* by arguing that the weakening of Spain can be seen in how the Fifth Centenary of the Discovery of America was celebrated and how the Fifth Centenary of Elcano's and Magellan's Round the World Tour is being celebrated. If Portugal, *"with eight million inhabitants, is in a position to impose its presence on an equal footing in the celebration of a historic event, a milestone in the history of mankind,"* that means that *"our country has reached a state of extreme weakness,"* to the point that *"Portugal is right now capable of imposing its will on Spain, which has five times its inhabitants."*

The truth is that the theses defended by Roca Barea have raised debates, if not very heated controversies, which have gone beyond, in something that is rarely seen, the scope of academic discussion. This can be seen very well when in the newspaper *El Mundo*, in its edition of December 26, 2019, a heterogeneous group formed by journalists, lawyers, writers, academics or university professors signed a manifesto "In defense of Elvira Roca," whose purpose was to reject the information given by the newspaper *El País* on December 20, 2019, according to which *Imperiofobia* gave, in at least about

thirty instances of incorrect or even non-existent references. Among the signatories in support of Roca Barea were personalities, such as, [Carmen Iglesias](#), Director of the Royal Academy of History, the playwright [Albert Boadella](#), and the philosopher [Fernando Savater](#).

The response published by *El Mundo* revealed "an astonishing campaign of public vilification directed at the researcher Elvira Roca Barea," a harassment that had its origin in the pages "of the newspaper *El País*, with no holds barred," but which "was taken up by other media."

The final paragraph of the manifesto closes by linking it with one of the clearest argumentative lines of Roca Barea's book, that is, the assumption of the prejudices about the Legend believed by Spaniards themselves, who also do nothing to remedy it – an idea which yet persists, although this time in journalism, since as one reads, *"the very article in El País, in its efforts to disavow the book, Imperiofobia, does nothing more than confirm one of the theses that its author defends;"* and this is, as we have just pointed out, *"the resistance of a part of present-day Spanish intelligentsia to admit the survival of the Black Legend among us."*

However, perhaps the most forceful response to *Imperiofobia* has been the book by José Luis Villacañas, professor of philosophy at the Complutense University, [Imperiofilia y el populismo nacional-católico](#) (*Imperiophilia and National-Catholic Populism*), which is another history of the Spanish Empire.

There were two motivations, according to Villacañas in the Prologue, which prompted him to write this book. In the first place, because he considers *Imperiofobia* a "harmful and dangerous" book; and in his opinion, it is *"an ideological artifact that has initiated the offensive of a reactionary thinking whose effects we are now clearly observing."* And secondly, because Roca Barea's book attacks "in an insidious and grotesque way" everything that this author defends in his work, to the point of qualifying what Roca Barea does in her book as "reactionary intellectual populism."

Imperiofilia is an amendment to the entirety of Roca Barea's book. For Villacañas, both *Imperiofobia* and the reception it has received are the reflection of something he defines as follows: *"The success of the book reveals the limited cultural demands of certain elites of the country, who, faced with a world they no longer understand nor know how to lead, need a legitimacy that Imperiofobia offers them in a brutal way."*

Thus, in the first part of *Imperiofilia*, he sets out to dismantle the theoretical scheme on which the work

he intends to refute is based, by questioning aspects, such as, the distinction he makes between the "superiors" and the "inferiors," the relationship between intellectuals and the maintenance of imperiophobia or the use he makes of the term "empire."

According to Villacañas, the essential point in Roca Barea's book is when she suggests that in order to analyze such complex phenomena, *"the variable is still the difference between Catholics and Protestants;"* so that *"if you go against a Lutheran empire, then you are neither anti-Semitic nor racist."* On the other hand, *"if you go, for example, against the Spanish Empire, which expelled the Jews in tragic conditions and exterminated them as a very ancient peninsular people, then, by a strange rule of three, you are anti-Semitic."* In his opinion, this type of approach meets not only with the approval, but also with the complicity, of *"famous film directors, influential journalists and far-sighted editors,"* who applaud without hesitation Roca Barea's hypotheses.

In the second part of *Imperiofilia*, Villacañas exposes what he considers to be the two fundamental categories that constitute *Imperiofilia*, following the case studies chosen by Roca Barea: Imperial victims and the victimizers. Within the first group we find Rome, Russia and the United States, while in the second group we find Italy, German Protestants, England and Holland.

Villacañas understands that, in the epigraph dedicated to the imperial victims, Roca Barea's objective is none other than to defend the idea that the use of the power of empires does not produce a bad conscience, which is why she presents a precursor, Rome, in the process of forming Black Legends. From his point of view, she is only interested in proving Rome's innocence: *"At last the eternal city finds its advocate before history. Now its ghost can rise again and put on the white robe of the innocents of history."*

On the contrary, regarding the victimizers, Villacañas thinks that what Roca Barea wants to demonstrate above all is that Protestant Germany is the true enemy of Spain; or, in other words, the precursor and forger of the Black Legend, an opinion that he does not share, since he believes that the beginning should be placed in the wars of the Netherlands. Furthermore, he does not accept Roca Barea's interpretation of Luther's or Calvin's behavior when he says that the latter, in a period of four years, had fifty-four people burned, alleging that Calvin *"may be an unsympathetic character, but to turn him into a pathetic criminal is unfounded."*

Villacañas also says that, in general, Roca Barea's description of Italy, Germany and England is

"superficial and inconsistent," and adds that in the case of Holland it borders on "delirium." And, finally, he recalls that the entirety of *Imperiofobia* is riddled with messages that lead to Catalonia, which is why he wonders if, in reality, there is the possibility that Roca Barea "wants to send the tercios to Brussels, to extradite Puigdemont, or to continue celebrating autos de fe, and force the good people to roar after the inauguration of the inquisitor of the day."

At the part dedicated to Spain, Villacañas simply dismisses Roca Barea's argument regarding the Holy Office and the conquest of America. At the heart of the matter is his own deficient methodological apparatus. In relation to the Inquisition, he maintains that the sources most used by the author of *Imperiofobia* to document her assertions are "comics" or "television documentaries," or what amounts to the same thing, *"the sources of the new populist science."* Again, he insists that it is Roca Barea's intention to compare the Inquisition with the way the French courts used torture, for example, in order to demonstrate in this way, in a view clearly favorable to the Spanish Inquisition, that it was more regimented.

Villacañas summarizes Roca Barea's view of the American issue as an attempt to limit everything to a battle between the Catholic world and the Protestant world, which prevents the observation of reality with the necessary clarity to understand it. All of this is clothed by the tendency to use "populist anachronisms," since anachronism is the method most loved by what he calls "intellectual populists." From Roca Barea's treatment of Las Casas, valuable because it can thus be demonstrated that a Spaniard initiated the Black Legend, perhaps making good the idea of that negative community which evolves directly towards a lack of community, and to other aspects, such as, the fact that in America, in the 18th century, *"the most audacious theories of the Enlightenment were arriving and being studied,"* which he regards simply as exaggerations.

Villacañas devotes the end of the book to two other topics to which Roca Barea does not pay as much attention as to the previous ones: the Enlightenment and liberalism. In both cases Villacañas' opinion is similar. On the one hand, when analyzing the Enlightenment, he says that Roca Barea "is not interested in the movement of ideas nor in understanding them," but only in *"counting the Catholic embassies that were set on fire by the English and pursuing this cosmic battle of which she is the last champion, the last crusade, the Spanish Joan of Arc."* When time comes to say something about liberalism, she does it to point out that "what interests the author of liberalism itself is the will to put into circulation the concept of Latin America as opposed to that of Hispano-America, which affects the Spanish Empire and constitutes the last sign of imperiophobia."

Imperiofilia closes by recalling that Roca Barea's success is based on the need that, in the absence of a Spanish nationalist response to the excesses of Catalan nationalism, there is compensation "in a work that calms many insecurities, generates absolute loyalty and attends to the unhappy conscience of many of those who see themselves endangered as a people." *Imperiofobia*, he concludes, is ultimately "a product of Steve Bannon's factory, mixed with the castizo heart of Gustavo Bueno's imperial melancholy, used by the founding fathers of the Association in Defense of the Spanish Nation in its inaugural proclamation, and current inspirers of the VOX political party."

The historiographical debate between María Elvira Roca Barea and José Luis Villacañas is nothing more than a reflection of the polarization suffered by Spanish society at present, since it has also had its manifestation in the media. It is not a question of reiterating here the fundamental role that historical knowledge plays in any democratic society, but of vindicating the need not to trivialize it in order to obtain political, economic or ideological advantages.

This becomes even more pertinent in a society dominated by immediacy, where slow and original thinking seems to be disappearing and history tends to satisfy old longings for grandeur. Otherwise, we will continue to be prisoners of a historical narrative riddled with inaccuracies, which refuses to debate with researchers and specialists and which finds in anachronism its best ally; or perhaps this is just a symbol of our own curse, and therefore we are condemned to be haunted by it throughout our history.

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The [featured image](#) shows, "The Conquest of Tenochtitlán in 1521," an anonymous work, painted ca. 17th century.

