



JOSÉ ANTONIO: EXPIATORY VICTIM OF THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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After exhuming the body of Franco on October 25, 2019 (forty-four years after his death), the Spanish extreme Left, which claims to be heirs to the Republic of the Popular Front, is still not fully satisfied. A number of its leaders, activists and sympathizers have repeatedly demonstrated their willingness to carry on with the politico-cultural and religious struggle that surrounds the [Valle de los Caídos](#) (Valley of the Fallen).

The Irish historian, Ian Gibson, an admitted supporter of Socialist governments, declared a few years ago that he was in [favor of putting a bomb](#) in the basilica of the Valley of the Fallen, in order to destroy the monument and its immense cross.

More recently, voices have been raised to quickly remove from its grave the body of José Antonio Primo de Rivera. But why does the young founder of the Spanish [Falange](#), assassinated after a sham trial in November 1936, still evoke such aversion and hatred?

José Antonio Primo de Rivera – Victim of the Spanish Civil War

Last August, the Vice-President of the Socialist government, Carmen Calvo, was still trying to be conciliatory: “José Antonio was a victim,” she said. “And he can remain in this place, but somehow in a discreet way, because he is one among the more than thirty-thousand victims, from both sides, that are over there.” But her half-hearted statement failed to calm the vengeful ardor of the self-proclaimed “progressives” and even less of the radical Marxists.

One example is [Alberto Garzón](#), member of the [PCE](#), the [Izquierda Unida](#), and the coalition, [Unidos Podemos](#). Reacting to Carmen Calvo passing the buck, he wrote in a pure Chekist vein, “The fascist José Antonio Primo de Rivera was executed because he was a putschist, like Mussolini was shot and hung up in Italy. And none of these facts justifies considering them as victims, because that would put them on the same level as the democrats assassinated and repressed by the fascists.”

In reality, for Garzón and his peers, José Antonio's deadly crime is not so much his enthusiasm for the same social approach as Mussolini (or – which we should not forget – his admiration for the British

political model) – but rather for his dogged defense of those particular phobias of cultural Marxism, namely, religion, fatherland, family, and Christian civilization. It is true that during the time of these facts, the politico-cultural precursors of Garzón were in the habit of calling all their adversaries as “fascists.”

During the years 1933–1936, in the Socialist-Marxist, Communist and Anarchist press and in their propaganda, Liberals and Democrats, such as, [José Ortega y Gasset](#), [Gregorio Marañón](#) and [Ramón Pérez de Ayala](#), men considered as Founding Fathers of the Second Republic, to say nothing of the Liberal-Catholic philosopher and friend of [Benedetto Croce](#), the Basque [Miguel de Unamuno](#), were all tarred with the same infamous designation. Not having any illusions about the merit of the Popular Front, these noted intellectuals of the time, significantly chose the side of the Nationals during the Civil War. Thus, giving particularly [damning testimony to the totalitarian excesses](#) of the governing coalition of the Left and the extreme Left.

Contrary to what one frequently hears, Primo de Rivera was not responsible for the uprising of July 1936. Treated in an arbitrary and abusive manner, condemned to death without proof and following an expeditious and unjust trial – he was, instead, the victim of the government of the Popular Front. The facts that demonstrate this are today well established, as follows.

The day after the first round of elections in February 1936, despite the [frauds, falsifications, manipulations and considerable violence of the Popular Front](#), José Antonio naively put his trust in the president of the government, the Jacobin-Liberal, [Manuel Azaña](#). He ordered his men to respect the law and to avoid all criticism and caricature, even humorous, of the government. (In a circular to provincial officials of February 21, 1936, he stated: “The Left now reinstated into power is much more capable of realizing audacious reforms”).

But in response, on February 27, under the pretext of illegal possession of arms (which were widely owned by all the militants of political parties, especially among those of the Bolshevized Socialist Party ever since their attempted putsch of October 1934), the security forces proceeded to shut down all the headquarters of the Falange.

The days that followed were marked by the first assassinations of young Falangists – no less than half-a-dozen. In reaction, on March 12, some Falangists carried out a failed attack on the Socialist Deputy,

[Luis Jiménez de Asua](#), which resulted in the death of a bodyguard.

The government responded immediately, on March 14, by having all the members of the Falange Political Committee arrested, together with hundreds of activists. (In 1933, José Antonio's Falange had 2,000 members; about 5,000 in February 1936; 50,000 in June; and 500,000 in October. Franco's new Traditionalist Phalange would later have nearly 2 million affiliates, including 600,000 women).

Once incarcerated, José Antonio was subjected to an endless series of trials (a good half-dozen), the avowed purpose of which was to keep him in prison. When the Madrid Provincial Court declared the Falange to be legal, the government appealed to the Supreme Court.

But on April 30, the verdict was upheld and the Falange was declared to be in conformity with the Constitution. Censorship then banned the publication of this ruling. Finally, on June 5, the government ordered the transfer of the leader of the Falange from the [Modelo Prison](#) in Madrid to a prison in Alicante, to keep him away from the capital.

Incarcerated four months before the uprising of July 18, 1936, José Antonio was nevertheless condemned to death for conspiracy and armed rebellion and executed on November 20, 1936.

The accusation normally made against him by numerous historians of the 1930s is that he incited hatred and violence and was therefore responsible for the climate of political unrest which finally led to the Civil War. (From February 16 to July 17, there were 270 victims, the majority killed by the police. Falangists were responsible for the deaths of 60 Socialist, Communist and Anarchist militants, and suffered an equal number of deaths in their own ranks).

His rather infamous and oft-cited statements (always presented in a much-altered form) are taken from a speech given at the foundation of the Falange on October 29, 1933: "Dialectic, as a first instrument of communication, is a good. But when justice and the homeland are attacked, is there not any other dialectic but that of fists and revolvers?"

Progressive and crypto-Marxist historians who blame him, of course, forget to recall that in September

1933, the Socialist, [Francisco Largo Caballero](#) (the future, "Spanish Lenin" who a few days earlier was still a minister of the government of the Republic), and to quote him only as an example, made statements that were far more irresponsible, in the magazine, [Renovación](#), a publication of the [Young Socialists](#): "What is the difference between the Socialist Party and the Communist Party? Doctrinally, nothing. We profess Marxism in all its purity." And again, "Achieving Socialism in the framework of bourgeois democracy? It is impossible!... I do not know why some people are completely horrified by the dictatorship of the proletariat, of possible violence by workers. Is not the violence by workers a thousand times more preferable than fascism?... Socialism will have to undertake maximum violence in order to displace capitalism... We are at the beginning of such action that it will lead the proletariat to social revolution."

José Antonio publicly regretted his inflammatory speech of 1933. But such was not the case for the principal leaders of the Socialist-Marxist Left (with the rare exception of [Indalecio Prieto](#) and [Julian Besteiro](#)), as well as the extreme-left [Communists](#) and [Anarchists](#), who only ratcheted-up such inflammatory rhetoric by October 1934.

The testimony

of José Antonio, written shortly before he was shot, gives us a better idea of his personality, which is at the same time mystical, poetic, and political: "May it please God that my blood be the last Spanish blood spilled in civil discord. May it please God that the Spanish people, so rich in qualities worthy of love, may find in peace, a fatherland, bread, and justice... I forgive with all my soul all those who have sought to harm me or offend me, without any exception, and I pray that all those whom I have harmed, either greatly or in little ways, may forgive me."

But the

Christian demand for forgiveness is still being stubbornly refused him by the most intolerant and the most divisive members of the political and media world. Let us, therefore, [recall the salient facts](#), so often misunderstood and garbled, of his political life.

[**José Antonio, The Great Unknown**](#)

On October 1933, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, a young aristocrat, leading light of the Spanish Bar, organized a meeting at the [Teatro de la Comedia](#) in Madrid, which would be the prelude to the creation of the Spanish Falange. Born of a desire to create a "synthesis of tradition and revolution," this movement, rejected and fought against by both the Right and the Left, was short-lived and turbulent. Its history is largely confused with that of its founder, whose tragic destiny was one of deep loneliness.

An unsuccessful

candidate in the elections of February 1936 (after having been elected to the Cortès in 1933), José Antonio was incarcerated four months – let us highlight this once again – before the uprising of July `18, 1936, when the Popular Front came to power. Hauled before a popular tribunal, during the Civil War, the leader of the Spanish Falange was condemned to death and shot, because of pressure from the Communists, on November 20, 1936, at the age of thirty-three.

Paradoxically, so many years after his execution, José Antonio, still elicits hatred or fervor, repulsion or admiration. "An appointed agent of the Italian Embassy," says the Frenchman, [Max Gallo](#). The American Herbert R. Southworth [stated](#) that he had "a personality of a pimp under an elegant polish."

On the other extreme, the philosopher [Miguel de Unamuno](#), [recognized](#) him as a "privileged mind, perhaps the most promising in Europe." And the Ambassador of the United States, [Claude G. Bowers](#), [saw in him](#), "a hero of romance, with cape and sword." And as for the grand master of the [Generation of '98](#), [Azorin](#), he wrote: "Cordiality emanated from José Antonio. He therefore had a good heart."

But what manner

of man is hidden behind the mask of stone that detractors and hagiographers have put on his face?

In the

extensive bibliography about the Spanish Civil War, of its origins and its consequences, José Antonio occupies a central place. However, it becomes quickly apparent that the conventional image of the leader of the Falange is usually delineated by a few tirelessly repeated clichés. Alongside the hate-filled caricature of the Socialist-Marxist historians, the "recouping" of his personage by Francoist historiography likely is the second leading cause of

this singular situation.

The premature disappearance of José Antonio, in the midst of the Civil War, ideologically left the field open for General Franco. In 1937, the Caudillo imposed the merger of the Falange with all parties of the Right (monarchists, traditionalists and conservative-republicans), and this created a new movement, the [Traditionalist Falange](#).

[Manuel Hedilla](#), secondary leader of the original Falange, was condemned to death for refusing to bend. Very quickly, the Francoist authorities understood the benefits to them of a cult of José Antonio. They extolled his example and his sacrifice, but systematically eliminated from his doctrine "revolutionary" or "socially dangerous" themes.

In the years following the dismantling of Francoism and the return of democracy, the wound is still too fresh for scholars and authors to be seized by a desire to study on a historical level the confused relations between Francoism and the original Falange. They prefer instead to draw the veil of forgetfulness, or limit themselves to a general condemnation. But such schematic interpretations are beginning to break down.

Much has been written about the Christian or traditional philosophy of the original Falange and about the conservative elements of its political doctrine. But one essential aspect is its social program.

José Antonio wanted to establish deep social justice, so that on this basis, the people might return to supremacy of the spiritual. He intended to bring about this idealist project by carrying out the nationalization of banks and public services, by giving greater value to the work of the unions, by deep agrarian reforms in agreement with the principal of "the land belongs to him who works it." And, finally, the creation of familial, communal and union property.

We can debate the reformist or revolutionary character of this program, but we will have to affirm that it is not reactionary. Such was Conservative-Right and Liberal opinion that his press did not hesitate to treat José Antonio as a "National-Bolshevik,"

while reproaching him for confusing "Franciscanism" with "fascism."

In the [Cortès](#), when the Rightist majority decided to lift parliamentary immunity from the leader of the Falange in order to get rid of a cumbersome opponent, José Antonio owed his safety to the aid of almost the entire Left and a handful of Rightist deputies.

In February 1936, on the eve of the elections, the Falange was careful to disassociate itself from the "National Block" – an anti-revolutionary coalition that opposed the union of Leftist parties. In the end, the Right on the whole did not have sympathy for José Antonio until after the victory of the Popular Front.

No less surprising is the Left's relationship to the Falange. Numerous Falangist officials were drawn from the Anarchist Confederation ([CNT](#)) or the Communist Party.

[Manuel Mateo](#), José Antonio's right-hand man for unions, was the former secretary of the [PCE](#) in Madrid. In their memoirs, the Anarchist leader, [Diego Abad de Santillán](#) and the Popular Front minister, [Julián Zugazagoitia](#), explain how both men facilitated contacts with several officials of the [CNT](#) (notably, [Ángel Pestaña](#)), and the [Iberian Anarchist Federation](#). As well, negotiations took place with [Juan Negrín](#), one of the principle representatives of the minority, non-Marxist [Socialist Party](#). José Antonio even told [Indalecio Prieto](#) that he would willingly entrust to him the direction of a future Socialist Falange.

After the Civil War, various Republican personalities, including the President of the government of the Republic in exile, [Félix Gordón Ordás](#), acknowledged that "it would have been possible in the beginning to get José Antonio to cooperate with the Leftist Republic."

[Teodomiro Menendez](#), Socialist deputy and director of the [UGT Union](#), stated that José Antonio often told him in Parliament: "Teodomiro, if there were no religious ideas, we would be close to one another in politics." And he added, "He was right!"

Prieto, Zugazagoitia and the other moderate ministers of the Popular Front paid tribute to the leader of the Falange for trying to persuade the belligerents to negotiate early in the Civil War. His execution – demanded by the Communists – was an absurdity. Exchanged or returned to the Nationals, without a doubt, he would have tried the impossible, to achieve peace through compromise. They shot him, and

no one could then stop the carnage.

Among the theses demolished, there is the so-called political agreement between Franco and José Antonio. The unique witness to the only meeting of these two men is [Ramón Serrano Suñer](#), the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and the brother-in-law of the Caudillo, told me in an interview: "José Antonio and Franco had neither sympathy nor respect for each other. They belonged to two very different worlds, in their mentalities, their sensibilities, and their ideologies. There was never any political dialogue nor an agreement between the two of them."

That said, there is a question that automatically comes to mind. Does the discussion, or even consideration of a set of underrated facts, ignored or just pushed aside, about the political life of the founder of the Falange lead to a sort of "revisionism" of fascism (not to speak of Nazism)? I do not think so. Such an argument is propagandistic misinformation.

For the serious historian, the Falange of José Antonio Primo de Rivera cannot be separated from the context of Spanish reality of the 1930s, in which this movement arose and died. Reducing the Falange to the petty common denominator of Italian fascism, to Nazism, or the various "socialist nationalisms" of Europe at the beginning of the twenty-century is to refuse to engage seriously with the originality and fundamental significance of a movement that left its mark on much of Spanish history of the twentieth-century.

The Falange of José Antonio was neither racist nor anti-Semitic; it did not place the State or race at the center of its world-view. On the contrary, "Man, bearer of eternal values, is capable of saving himself or destroying himself."

Of course, history is far richer and more complex than the claims of ideologues. And historical debate is neither judicial nor politico-memorial; nor a debate between yourself and the blind defense of a particular and unique representation of the past which undermines the free competition of opinions and therefore democracy itself.

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This article was translated from French by N. Dass.

The [image](#) shows a portrait of Jose Antonio by the Spanish portrait painter Miguel del Pino (1890-1973). This work, which was commissioned by FET (Falange Tradicionalista de Franco - Franco's Traditionalist Falange) after the Civil War, was painted by Del Pino in Argentina, where he lived from 1938 to 1956.

