

Up or down?

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Stanley Payne and Jesús Palacios
FRANCO
A personal and political biography
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Franco receiving letters of credence from Monsignor Ildebrando Antoniutti, Madrid, December 28, 1953
Photograph: Paul Popper/Popperfoto/Getty Images

but nor was he the worst. He was, perhaps, no better than the enemies who might have defeated him in the Civil War or overthrown him afterwards; they were probably just as bad, or, to judge from their own records of injustice and repression, would have been so had they won power. Franco was, the authors aver, quoting his final, posthumous message to the Spanish people, perhaps “the first example in modern history of a dictator asking pardon from his foes”. In Spain, the book will be a *succès de scandale*. Any vindication of Franco, however measured, will get huge attention, stoke incandescent controversy, and sell copies. Yet most readers, in the rest of the world, will be more interested in whether the authors can trap Franco’s sphinx, and help us understand his maddeningly elusive character.

Dearth of sources makes the task hard. By dictatorial standards, Franco was taciturn and remarkably free of egotism. He had none of the loquacity of Mao, for instance, or the garrulousness of Hitler. He confided little to paper, and what he did write rarely included any reliable insights into his own thoughts or feelings. He had modest imaginative gifts but never betrayed much of himself in his sparse paintings or his single work of fiction. Notoriously, he embodied the national stereotype of the natives of his part of Spain – and mine: when you meet a Galician on the stairs, as an old Spanish saw says, you never know whether he is going up or down. King Juan Carlos often alluded to the same joke, sometimes even to Franco’s face – provoking dictatorial chuckles. “A less straightforward man I never met”, was an American journalist’s verdict in 1943, not because Franco was mendacious, but rather because he was congenitally evasive.

Franco’s life, in any case, encompassed vast self-transformations that are hard to track and that defy any search for consistency. From modestly bourgeois origins he came to sit – literally – on the throne of Spain and to hobnob with monarchs, popes and presidents. The cadet who barely succeeded in military school rose to outrank every army rival. The socially gauche, self-conscious subaltern came to condescend to royalty, to whom he owed nominal allegiance but whom he bossed and reprovved at will. The youth who, in the opinion of his brother officers, was indifferent to women, became a meekly uxorious husband. The “churchless” young commander turned into the routinely pious old man who, when he died in his eighties, was surrounded by priests, prayers and disappointingly untherapeutic bits of saints’ bodies.

He embodied paradox. In some ways he matched the standard dictator’s matrix. He was small. His ambitions were elastic and unrestrained, expanding at every opportunity. He had

“ I will not say I ever saw a better king,” wrote Philippe de Commines of Louis XI of France, “for although he oppressed his subjects himself, he would never allow anyone else to do so.” Faint praise of a similar sort is typical of apologies for Francisco Franco’s long, dreary, oppressive and – sporadically and selectively – cruel dictatorship in Spain. He spared Spaniards, according to most of his admirers, from rule by “Reds”. Or he kept his own fascist fellow-travellers at bay, mistrusting and frustrating the right-wing radicals who aimed to “absorb Red Spain ideologically”. Or he thwarted factions, on Left and Right alike, that would have protracted or perpetuated conflict. Or he saved his country from occupation by foreigners during the Second World War.

In offering a new vindication, Stanley G. Payne and Jesús Palacios are more cautious and more credible. Franco, as he emerges from this book, was not the best of dictators,



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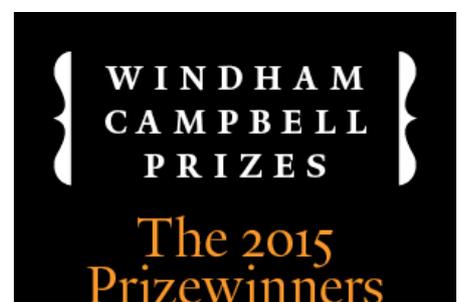
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the luck Napoleon praised as “the ability to master fortune”. He had a Napoleonic knack for sleeping at will and remaining wakeful at need. Pathetically, he tried at times to ape Hitler and Mussolini, with silly salutes and over-egged slogans. He borrowed the language of totalitarianism, while actively avoiding the practice. Somehow, however, the role of great dictator always eluded him. He was rarely vainglorious, except in the abuse of rhetoric. He was usually silent and, when he spoke, he squeaked in a high, thin voice. He hardly ever strutted, except when showing off to Falangist audiences. He was modest in company to the point of self-effacement. He wore frayed uniforms in the interests of economy. He was personally incorruptible. He was given, despite his customary aloofness and emotional indifference, to mawkish displays of sentimentalism when moved by a sob story or a sense of personal betrayal. He fancied himself as an aristocrat – his dedication to rural sports was deeper, I think, than to the Church – but he always seemed to cut a comic figure in waders or shooting coats.

He was incapable of ideological consistency – personally incapable, because he had a professional rather than an intellectual formation, in a military academy from the age of fifteen, and practically incapable because he had to keep a rag-bag coalition of natural enemies together, including fascist revolutionaries, conservative republicans, liberal monarchists, authoritarian militarists, sentimental imperialists, clericalists, pragmatists, technocrats, social Catholics, romantic reactionaries. He appropriated just enough of the rhetoric of each faction to keep them all enthralled and unalienated.

In their attempt to penetrate the paradoxes, and resolve the contradictions, Payne and Palacios have virtually no new data to draw on. They seem to feel obliged to quote repeatedly from interviews, which they published a few years ago, with Franco’s daughter, Carmen. But the effect is only to draw attention to the banality and superficiality of the interviewee’s reflections. She solemnly tells us, for instance, that her father left her upbringing in his wife’s hands because “this was the way it was in that era” but that “when he was not so pressed, he devoted more time to his family”. Her version of Franco’s tense relations with his brothers is jaw-droppingly vacuous. “I think they really got along very well”, she says in reference to Nicolás Franco, whose fun-loving irresponsibility was a frequent source of vexation, “though their personalities were quite different.” The authors’ privileged access to Franco’s own papers yields an occasional fragment, showing, for instance, how well informed Franco was in the 1960s about flirtations with liberalizing and democratizing groups by Prince Juan Carlos, his putative successor as head of state.

Still, the authors face their daunting task with redoubtable advantages: the respect due to their scholarship and erudition; the freedom of judgement Stanley Payne can exercise after forty years of unimpeachably independent-minded work on modern Spanish history; the purity of his non-partisan reputation, such as few historians of controversial modern topics can command; and the renown that attaches to one of the academy’s grandest old men. Payne had the misfortune to work on modern Spain in the shadow of giants, whose stature as writers and thinkers he could not match. But Raymond Carr is now in his nineties and the productive phase of his career is, alas, probably over. Hugh Thomas now works on earlier periods of Spanish history. So Payne is left as the doyen of his field, although he still seems, in one sense, to preside from the margins, because Carr’s students and his students’ students now shape the scholarly agenda, together with new generations of Spanish historians, who, since the dictator’s death, are free to study the era without fear or favour.

In any case, to write fairly about Franco is a largely thankless, albeit perhaps remunerative, task, appealing only to those who have a stomach for a fight or indifference to blows. In 2011, for instance, Spain’s Real Academia de la Historia published an account of the dictator’s life in the prestigious *Diccionario biográfico español*. The author was Luis Suárez Fernández. As a medievalist, the contributor had a solid reputation, but he had become something of a favourite of Franco’s family and came to fulfil the role of court historiographer towards the end of the regime, churning out eight indigestible volumes of narrative and documents of the Franco years. Having eaten his subject’s salt he was perhaps under an obligation to his old patron’s memory. He tried to make the entry in the biographical dictionary sound objective but committed to infelicitous or inept – though not inaccurate – choices of language, referring, for instance, to Franco’s adversaries as “the enemy”, and to Franco’s side in the Civil War as “national”. Suárez’s overall judgements, endorsing Franco as a bulwark against Communism and a guarantor of Spanish independence, led to widespread demands for the pulping or re-writing of the *Diccionario* and to denunciations of the Academy as a “bunker de luxe”.

With audacity similar to Suárez Fernández’s, but with greater subtlety, Payne and Palacios demonstrate freedom of judgement by making points in the dictator’s favour, without hesitation or cavil. They are often right. They accurately portray Franco, for instance, as a latecomer to political life, who remained soldierly in his values and conduct, aloof from military conspiracies against the Republic, until the eve of the Civil War. They point out that he was reluctantly willing to accept the legality of the Republic, to do his duty to the state, and to uphold democracy under the law, until the Popular Front and some of its hot-headed militants traduced democracy, subverted law, and sought to provoke violence. The authors acknowledge fairly that Franco was no typical *étatiste*: he avowed “principles prior to the

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state". They argue persuasively that his deliberately prudent conduct of wartime operations was the result of strictly military and strategic considerations, or perhaps of the limitations of a "battalion commander" promoted beyond his competence, not a pretext for repression behind the lines. Consistent with their policy of faint praise, they point out that Franco's dictatorship did not get more malevolent as time went on, but rather the reverse. They do not conceal the extent of the victimization of the vanquished of the Civil War, but abjure "the hyperbole of denunciation" of his crimes, which, they point out, hardly amount to "holocaust" or "genocide". They do not try to argue – as apologists often and absurdly do – that Franco prepared the way for democracy, but they claim that he deserves some credit for the fact that Spain's transition to democracy was uniquely peaceful. They appeal to the verdict of Spanish opinion surveys in which "somewhere in the range of 40 per cent" judged Franco's rule "as a combination of the good and the bad, not an unreasonable judgment about a complex history".

Their portrait of Franco mixes risky psychological speculations with tentative inferences from behaviour. Their starting point is their belief that their subject from childhood "would ever remain unswervingly loyal to the values and beliefs of his mother". The evidence that leads them to this conclusion is their reading of Franco's only written work of imagination, *Raza* (Race, 1942), a novella of vaguely autobiographical inspiration. The hero's mother unquestionably resembles the mother the author thought he had – a resilient, self-sacrificing matriarch. But the father figure of the novel is equally exemplary, whereas the real Franco *père* was an amoral ne'er-do-well who exchanged enmity freely with his ultimately more famous son.

Unremitting piety is the second hallmark of Payne and Palacios's Franco, whom they repeatedly credit with lifelong Catholic commitment. They dismiss it as "standard for young Spanish officers to give little evidence of religiosity", but, like many Spanish men, Franco seems to have seen the care of the *lares et penates* as women's work. He adopted conventional observance in obedience first to his mother, then to his wife. He did not attend Mass regularly until he married. His Catholicism was always shallow and pharisaical, as Payne and Palacios implicitly show in the amusingly ingenuous story Carmen Franco told of her father's exchanges with priests, whose advice on alms-giving the dictator sought. "One thing that particularly concerned him", she recalled, "was how much a good Christian should give to the poor." A tithe? The same as one should give a child, on priestly advice that "the poor are one child more"? Franco decided in favour of a tithe.

Yet Payne and Palacios make religiosity "the crucial factor" in his politics. If there is a sense in which their judgement is correct, it is only because Franco needed the Church to lend his regime some specious legitimacy. "Francisco Franco", the coinage of his era proclaimed, "Caudillo of Spain by the grace of God" – more, surely, out of convenience than conviction. Prayers for "our head of state, Francisco" joined those for the serving pope and local bishop at Mass. When I was a student I asked my most pious classmate, who was very left-wing and who went to daily Mass, how he could bear to pray for the dictator every day. "I don't pray exactly for him," he replied, "but for his soul. May God receive it, and the sooner the better." The Church was always the most left-wing organization Franco tolerated. With Vatican II, the hierarchy seemed to reveal Christianity's true colours, with an agenda of modernization, confidence in *vox populi*, Christlike candour in speaking truth to power. Franco felt betrayed and in some measure bereft – not, I think, owing to any deep Catholic sentiment, but because he had become dependent on the invocation of God and the endorsement of the hierarchy whenever he felt the lack of any coherent ideology of his own.

A further, even less plausible dimension of the authors' insistence on Franco's religiosity is their claim that he felt, from as early as 1938, a "providential mandate", even a "messianic complex". The only evidence they cite is a line of conversation reported by Franco's physician during the Caudillo's last illness: "Whatever I do has no merit whatsoever, because I simply fulfil a providential mission with the help of God". Even if this was more than deathbed self-exculpation, it can hardly be read as a leitmotif.

Along with Catholicism the authors identify lifelong monarchist allegiance as vital. But if Franco was a visceral monarchist, he had a funny way of showing it: planting himself on the throne, arrogating the title of head of state, sidelining the former King's son, scanting the rules of succession, and postponing the return of the monarchy until after his own death. "Cultural traditionalism", Payne and Palacios say, was another "basic principle". Again, however, the Caudillo's conduct hardly bears the judgement out, as madcap development from the 1960s butchered grand old streets, desecrated the rural economy, felled trees, polluted soils and wrecked landscapes. Franco betrayed all his constituencies, leaving the monarchists without a king, the Catholics without their kingdom, the fascists without an effective state, the traditionalists without romance. His most daring treason, however, was in diluting the old Spanish virtues and beauties he claimed to defend. Among all the faint praise lavished on Franco, Luis Buñuel's stands out. "He wasn't the Devil," the film director pronounced, but "all the wealth and culture on the Falangist side ought to have limited the horror."

Payne and Palacios are right about some of the prominent threads in Franco's politics: they spot the roots of his authoritarian tastes in military discipline, which at every stage of his

ascent in the army he observed punctiliously and imposed ruthlessly; they notice his treatment of his predecessor, Miguel Primo de Rivera, who ran the state from 1923 to 1931, as a model of what to avoid; they implicitly endorse Italian Fascists' sense that Franco's regime was idiosyncratic. They notice his flexibility: he stretched points and flexed policies according to circumstances – wartime autarky, for instance, yielding to pragmatic *laissez-faire* or shameless *enrichissez-vous*, as circumstances ordained. The authors realize, on the other hand, that Franco did have unremitting and barely rational obsessions – with the supposed evils of Freemasonry, for instance, though he was willing to exempt individual masons if he liked them; or with the dream of restoring some, at least, of the past glories of the Spanish empire, although, once in power, he was unwilling to waste Spanish lives on impractical overseas adventures. He was consistent – like almost everyone who has ruled in Madrid for the past four centuries – chiefly in guarding national unity and fearing national dissolution.

Other judgements are less felicitous. Despite their own evidence, Payne and Palacios claim that Franco “refused” to enter the Second World War. Paul Preston demonstrated long ago that the decision was Hitler's, who refused to pay the price Franco sought for his doubtfully useful help. The authors occasionally defer to the myth of Franco's sagacity, attributing to him, for instance, during the Second World War, strategic insights that he seems never to have had. They conclude by crediting Franco with “the country's modernization”, even though they admit elsewhere that it happened in spite of rather than owing to the leader's policies. They repeatedly oversimplify the politics of the Franco regime, referring to “two factions”, respectively ideological and technocratic. Really the tendencies were multiple and overlapping. The authors' unjust classification of Manuel Fraga Iribarne in the ideological camp demonstrates the difficulties: he was *sui generis*, with allies in the Falange and in *Opus Dei*, and was classifiable, if at all, as a secular technocrat, focused on hopes of peaceful democratization after Franco's death. It hardly makes sense to speak of Franco, who was mercurial, opportunistic, and devoid of any save a mythical notion of history, embodying “a millenary tradition”.

Perhaps because the authors strive for an objective tone, excising colour, and restraining all display of style or stimulus, the effect is dull, whether they are plodding through their narrative or pleading their case. Anyone who wants to ponder the evidence in detail will surely stick to Paul Preston's vast and magisterial *Life, Franco: A biography* (1995). Anyone who wants a brief, sensitive summation will probably prefer Juan Pablo Fusi's brilliant biographical sketch of the same title (I should declare my interest: the translation into English is my own work). But Stanley Payne and Jesús Palacios deserve admiration for taking the risk of saying what little there is to be said on their subject's behalf. Theirs is a fearless book. I hope that among liberals, *bien-pensants* and even leftists, it may not be friendless.

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