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Honors Project

Franco: Ruler of Spain

In the first half of the 20th century, the world saw many strong, dictatorial, and even charismatic leaders rise to power. Some, like Hitler and Stalin, spring immediately to mind for those in the Western world. For those of the Far East, they may think of Mao Tse-tung or Pol Pot. However, few think of Franco, Generalissimo of Spain for several decades. A peer of Hitler and Stalin, his hold on Spain continued long after his contemporaries were in their graves.

Francisco Franco was born on December 4, 1892. He was born in El Ferrol, a Spanish Navy base in Galicia in northwestern Spain. His family was a part of the military aristocracy in Spain. Franco entered a military academy at the age of 15. His first wish had been to join the Navy; however, when rejected, he entered the Infantry Academy in Toledo instead.

Spain, at this point in history, was crumbling. The gulf between the affluent and the poor was widening. The cultural differences between the Spanish people threatened the national unity. In Spain, there was no such thing as a well-integrated national structure such as exists in America. Instead, people saw themselves as being Anadulucian, Basque, Catalan, and so on. People were further divided into classes. The Catholic Church, the basic thread that had held Spain together for so many years, now no longer provided national stability as the ideas and philosophies of Marx and related thinkers made inroads into Spanish culture. To many Spaniards, the church was only a ritual to be observed at births and deaths and weddings. All of

this cultural instability provided a setting ripe for revolution and unrest and a strong centralized government. Such was the culture that Franco lived in.

During this time, Franco served in the Spanish army. He graduated from Toledo in 1910 at the age of seventeen, then received his first appointment to his old hometown of El Ferrol. In 1912, he was dispatched overseas in order to defend Spanish interests in Morocco. Here he distinguished himself with his bravery and rose to the rank of major within six years of graduating. These years in Morocco were formative and he established relationships with men with whom he would work later in life. In 1915, he was promoted to major for his bravery on the field. In 1923, after a three year courtship, Franco finally won permission from the King of Spain to marry his sweetheart, Carmen Polo. In that same year, a military prime minister took control of the government, General Primo de Rivera. He was only one in several such who assumed control between 1920 and 1936. This span of time became increasingly unstable in Spain and culminated in the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

In order to gain a better understanding of the causes for the Spanish Civil War, one must dig back farther into Spanish history to the early 19th century. Spain had been traditionally ruled by a monarchy until the early 1800s when Napoleon disrupted tradition with his invasion of Spain. His actions weakened the respect that the people had for their king or queen. After this time, the country was no longer held together by a strong monarch but was mainly divided into two sections, the Church and the Army. The first was conservative and the second was historically liberal, but by the 20th had switched sides to be aligned with the Church against a common foe, Marxists. These two factions struggled together for many years, culminating in the ousting of the then-queen and the establishment of the first temporal Spanish Republic. This republic failed, however, and the government reinstated the monarchy with the queen's son a few

years later. This whole saga of the 1800s is very similar to that of the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39.

In the Spanish Civil War, there were once again two main forces. This time, the Army and the Church were on the same side, against the radical anti-Church, anti-capitalism Marxists of the Popular Front or Loyalists. When the Popular Front assumed power through elections in 1931, they wrote and passed a new constitution that smacked of Communist dogma. The constitution attacked church traditions and severely hampered them, removing their paychecks and requiring official approval for public celebrations of religion. This was too much for the people, who still strongly identified with Catholicism. Also, the new government removed all titles of nobility, and thereby offended some their supporters. They also approved of home rule for Catalonia and the Basques and tried to reduce the size of the military. Through all of these moves, the new government lost a considerable amount of support very quickly. They lost the support of the landowners who had been deprived of their lands and that of the people who never wanted Spain to be divided. Most importantly, however, they lost the support of the Church and the Army. The support of the Army was especially important. Over the decades, it had played the role of “king maker” many times through its power and its rights of *pronunciamento*, the ability of the Army to overthrow the current government if they felt it had fallen out of favor. In addition to this fact, the Spanish army, at least among the officers, was anti-Marxist which also immediately put them at odds with their new government. This military restructuring was not a good move on the part of the Popular Front, and it alienated them from the support that they so desperately needed.

Thus the Spanish Civil War was a product of decades of strife and division. It was precipitated by the election of the Popular Front to a majority of the seats in the Cortes, or

governing body of Spain. Franco, by now a general, tried to convince the current prime minister of the government to prevent a Popular Front takeover of the government, but he failed. Still, Franco's sudden action cast him into the party of the Rebels, something that had never happened before. Hitherto, he had always ridden the fence on government affairs. When he had put down the Marxist Asturian strike of 1934, he had brought in Spanish troops from Africa to quell the revolt under a Rebel government, but that was only because he was part of the government establishment, not because of any avowed party allegiance. Still, when the Popular Front government assumed control, they banished Franco to the Canary Islands. Other Popular Front enemies were closely watched as well, but despite the surveillance, plans were hatched for revolt.

Hostilities broke out during the heat of the summer of 1936 with the shooting of prominent and well-loved leaders on both sides of the government. Both sides solicited outside aid, rapidly turning the internal Spanish conflict into an international affair. France and Russia came to aid of the Popular Front on account of its Marxist ideology, while Italy and Germany sent supplies and men to fight on the Rebel side. Thus some have said that the Spanish Civil War was a dress rehearsal for WWII.

The war dragged on for three years until April 1, 1939, when Franco declared the war to be over. He was now *generalissimo*, or head of state, in Spain. He had earned his title during the war after his victory at Toledo. As leader of Spain, Franco recognized the three pillars of power stability in Spain: the Church, the Army, and his political party. His was a totalitarian government, yet he managed to not overstep his power in those areas and to keep a firm hold on the reins of power. He also eliminated all opposition to his rule. As soon as he was leader of Spain, he established a political witch hunt, or inquisition, ruthlessly dealing with anyone who

had ever opposed him. All opposition was stamped out. All Marxists, socialists, anarchists, and even those who had never had any involvement in the Popular Front but were thought to have left-wings inclinations were put to death or dealt with harshly. At the end of the Spanish Civil War, there were at least 300,000 in prison, not counting the many thousands more in other forms of punishing facilities such as forced labor. Conditions in the prisons were horrific as many of the prisons were over-crowded and ill-equipped to handle such a large number of people. In one women's prison, there were more than six hundred women who only had access to four toilets.¹

World War II erupted just the last bullets were fired in the Spanish Civil War. On account of Franco's fascist beliefs and the aid given him by both Italy and Germany, the Axis Powers hoped Franco would join them. After all, Spain held the Straits of Gibraltar, the key to shipping war materiel between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It was a strategic area of land, one that the British desperately needed. At first, Franco's position in WWII was that of neutrality. However, by June 1940, he was merely non-belligerent, meaning that while his heart might be with Hitler and Mussolini, his guns and men were not. Despite this friendly feeling toward the Axis Powers, Franco did not accede to Hitler's demands for the Strait of Gibraltar and Hitler was forced to back down. By 1943, he was back to a position of neutrality. He recognized that neither side, the Axis or the Allies, had Spain's best interests in mind. Spain had a long history of animosity between them and England. Moreover, on the other hand, he also recognized that Germany and Italy were both more than capable of overrunning Spain at will. Therefore, he wished to offend neither. Nor did he wish to be on the losing side whichever that might be. Thus he played the war cautiously, neither attacking the Allies as they passed their war materiel through the Strait nor joining the Axis against them. He was on neither side officially. Covertly, though, he aided the Axis Powers. He provided them with raw materials such as

¹ Bravo

tungsten, allowed them to refuel their U-boats at Spanish ports, and provided some Nazis with political asylum after the war. In addition to these he also sent men to fight with the Germans against the Russians. He did this not because he wanted to join the Germans but because of his intense hatred of Communists and especially Stalin, who had assisted Franco's enemies during the Spanish Civil War.

All of this was common knowledge in the Allied community during WWII, yet Franco evaded punishment. The Cold War was settling on the world, and the Allies did not wish to weaken Spain. They wanted to stall the advance of Communism in Europe, and they did not to see another country capitulate into the hands of Stalin.

At the end of WWII, Spain continued to experience some political unrest as well as some economic difficulties. Franco managed to retain his hold on power, though, despite attempts by the exiled king's son, the Spanish prince, to reinstate the monarchy. In 1948, the prince agreed to send his son, Prince Juan Carlos, to Spain to be brought up in Spain and to possibly succeed Franco. This was to be in exchange for Franco's agreement to put an end to antimonarchist propaganda.

Another source of constant friction for Franco was the various separatist movements afoot in Spain at the time. He had always fought to preserve a united Spain, ever since the days of the Asturian uprising of 1934. One of his chief areas of opposition came from the Basque population of Spain. This ethnic group had struggled for their independence for years and had a long history of animosity with Franco. The Basques are not Spaniards, and they have their own unique culture. Their language is also unique, and Franco forbade them to speak it, making it a crime to speak Basque and forcing them to speak Castellano, the official form of Spanish, instead. He also assumed this attitude towards the Catalans. Their language, also known as

Catalan, was the sole thing that made them different from the rest of Spain. Their language was the single factor that gave them a national identity.

Despite these troubles and rebellious factions, Franco maintained his grip on the reins of power for thirty-six years. His dictatorship came to an end with his death on November 20, 1975. He had finally succumbed to the scourge of several diseases after experiencing multiple heart attacks. As he had promised, the monarchy was reinstated, and Prince Juan Carlos was crowned King of Spain shortly after the death of the generalissimo. Well-educated and thoughtful-minded, Juan Carlos I slowly won the approval of his battle weary people, reversing Francoist policies and setting the course for a freer Spain. Despite the years of careful Francoist indoctrination, Juan Carlos did not carry on Franco's dreams and style of government. He won the hearts of his people, as is evidenced by the overwhelming support shown him during the unsuccessful coup of 1981. Today, King Juan Carlos I continues to win the support of his people willingly, a sharp contrast to the legacy of his predecessor.

Franco left behind a legacy of peace at the cost of many lives and much bloodshed. He stayed in power through the ruthless crushing of all opposition and the suppression of the Spanish people. Particularly amongst the Basques, he dealt harshly with them, crushing their freedom movements and only succeeding temporarily in his efforts to quell their nationalist spirit. While he may have put down his opponents' outward revolts, his decisive actions only served to stiffen their resolve for freedom and increased the number of those associated with the freedom movement. The same bore true for the Spanish Communist Party. It, too, had greater numbers at his death than ever before. Thus, it can be said that Franco accomplished little of lasting value during his life, and that he left Spain to deal with his dark and sordid legacy.

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