

Forgetting How to Forget: The Valley of the Fallen

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Writing 101: Monuments and Memory

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Monuments stand to commemorate ideas, people, and events of the past. The version of history they construe, though, is often a narrative crafted by the powerful. Notably, the dictator Francisco Franco exerted his control over Spain's post-civil war collective memory by erecting the Valley of the Fallen monument 40 miles outside of Madrid. The monument's 152-meter-tall cross (the tallest in the world), basilica, and mausoleum containing the remains of both Franco and the founder of the fascist Falange party, José Antonio Primo de Rivera tell a story of their own (Hancox); however, Franco's manipulation of the site's 'official' purpose and narrative prolongs his influence into the present. Franco initially built the memorial to glorify his regime with "the grandeur of monuments of old, which defy time and memory" (Franco qtd. in Phelan), although he changed this story once construction began.

Recently, controversy over how the country should handle such a grandiose monument to such a brutal leader has resurfaced. Despite Franco later describing the Valley of the Fallen as "a national act of atonement" (Franco qtd. in Phelan), the monument's problematic construction history, exploitation of religious architecture and symbols, and treatment in the aftermath of Franco's violent regime suggest otherwise. On one hand, the Valley of the Fallen glorifies Franco and offers a rallying ground for his supporters. However, since the structure survives as one of the last vestiges of this period following the government-enforced amnesia, the monument should not be destroyed, but rather recontextualized to educate visitors about its history.

The failures of the Franco regime and Spanish collective memory in its aftermath invoke both a desire for Spanish citizens to remember and forget this harrowing era. The monument's roots date back to the mid 1930s when Spain became a new democracy. The secular left-wing Republicans won the election, worrying the traditional, Catholic right-wing nationalists, including Spanish army general Francisco Franco. Franco and other like-minded military generals banded together to overthrow the leftist government in the Spanish coup of July 1936, prompting the start of a two-year Spanish Civil War. During the war, the militant



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During my sophomore year of high school, we learned about 20th century European radicalism as a part of our history curriculum. Everything about the leadership of Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin piqued my interest; how could one human treat another with such disdain for their humanity? And how disconnected from reality does one have to be to assume such power over others? To me, the monstrous regimes of the 20th century highlighted – to an extreme, of course – an ever present divide within society: those with power, and those without it. Following this realization, I have since started to see its manifestations everywhere.

Professor Tharler's Writing 101: Monuments and Memory was no exception. In the beginning weeks of the class, we discussed methods of analyzing statues – how to describe them, what to notice, and how to expand these observations into hypotheses of their meaning. One thing in particular stood out to me in this process: we remember what those in power want us to remember. As I developed this point of view throughout the class, it was only natural for me to research Francisco Franco for our final project, a tyrant and dictator in 20th century Spain. Connecting what Professor Tharler taught us in Monuments and Memory with my preconceived interest in political radicalism, I broadened my understanding of the true role monuments play in collective memory, and the consequences of power falling into the wrong hands. Further, the project made me wonder about smaller scale power structures in my own life at Duke, and what physical "monuments" enforce them. I never anticipated a class about ancient statues would have such relevance in my life and such lasting effects on my worldview.

I would like to thank Professor Tharler for allowing each of us to find our own interests within the framework of his class, and for fostering our curiosity and desire to pursue those interests. I would also like to thank the Deliberations board and Dr. Sheryl Welte Emch for helping me articulate my ideas during the editing process. Last, I would like to thank my 10th grade history teacher Scott Cotton for forcing me to think outside the box.

nationalists ravaged through the city capturing, parading, and shooting civilians they suspected of being Republicans (O'Mahoney). Fighting for the values of uniformity, social order, and nationalism, Franco's forces triumphed after claiming nearly half a million lives on both sides, leaving the country in shambles (Bird). Subsequently, Franco's right-wing rule was no less lethal. Prison camps and extrajudicial killings of anyone suspected as Jewish, Muslim, homosexual, and even many women raised the death toll to over 20,000, although the numbers are still contested (Bird). Beginning construction in 1941, Franco commissioned the Valley of the Fallen monument, which contains the bodies of both Republican and nationalist soldiers, exhumed from their original mass graves without their familial consent ("Report").

Following Franco's death in 1975, Spain quickly transitioned into a democratic style government. Rather than investigating and trying members of Franco's regime like Germany, Chile, Argentina, and other countries in their transition from authoritarian to democratic style governments, the new government passed the Amnesty Law of 1977 and implemented the less formal "Pact of Forgetting" (O'Mahoney). These measures granted amnesty to all political prisoners, dissuaded prosecution of Franco government officials, and urged Spanish citizens to not look back. So many people were implicated in Franco's crimes that the new government thought it best to focus its energy on building a new democracy and moving forwards, not harping on past injustices. Another piece of legislation, the Historical Memory Law passed in 2007, officially condemned all laws passed by the Franco regime

as illegitimate. Although this statute appears to retract the Amnesty Law of 1977's acquittal of Franco's allies, the Historical Memory Law also authorized the removal of all public symbols of his dictatorship, such as street names, building names, statues, etc. (Hepworth), erasing any hindrances of the era from national memory.

Interestingly, the Valley of the Fallen, arguably the largest and most memorable of Franco's monuments, was not eliminated on account of its religious affiliation. Conservatives argue that disrupting the basilica, abbey, and monks that still live and practice there does not fall within the act's jurisdiction ("Report"). Recent movements have revitalized



Figure 1. close up of the monument's layout. Cross extends above hilltop with basilica at the base (Phelan)

the push for a deeper investigation into Franco's regime, which liberals worry will open old wounds and right-wing supporters fear will call for the destruction of their sacred Valley of the Fallen. The monument's disputed interpretation falls at the heart of the issue.

The details behind the Valley of the Fallen's construction raise concern over the sincerity of Franco's reconciliatory intentions for the monument. Franco's sympathizers focus their interpretation of the monument on the joint burial of nationalist and Republican soldiers at the site (Hepworth). As the argument follows, Franco sought to unify the country by building a monument with both nationalists and Republicans resting at its base. An alternative theory highlights that all the nationalist soldiers were buried at the site first, and only upon discovery that the

grave was still mostly empty were Republican soldiers exhumed and buried at the site as well (Hepworth).

A third theory follows that the United States, an ally of Spain during the Cold War, heard of Franco's initial plan for the monument and thought it too divisive and authoritarian. Instead, they suggested Franco construct the monument as a tribute to the war itself rather than himself and his fascist ideology (O'Mahoney). Franco updated the monument's 'official' meaning to a reconciliatory one after beginning construction, exerting his control over the narrative of the war and the era despite his contradictory actions.

Due to Franco's decision to alter the monument's message after beginning construction, the design of the monument fails to reference sentiments of reunion and amity. Further, the religious association Franco creates through the monument's artistic choices promotes both his immortality and his divinity. At the base of the cross lies the entrance to the basilica (figure 1). In order to reach the tombs of Franco and Rivera, one must walk down the 260 m long tunnel (figure 2) lined with apocalyptic tapestries depicting Christ and his conquest to vanquish a seven-headed beast (Hancox). The divine scene and its placement represent how Franco wanted to be remembered: as Spain's heavenly savior. Franco and José Antonio's bodies rest below two inlaid rectangular stones located by the main altar, further immortalizing Franco.

Beyond the architecture of the Valley of the Fallen, the way Franco supporters interact with the commemoration maintains Franco's divinity. The "simplicity [of the shrines] is a surprise, that is immediately dwarfed by the shock at seeing each grave strewn with numerous bunches of flowers" (Hancox). Under the Historical Memory Law, it is illegal to demonstrate any public respect for Franco or his regime, banning the gesture of flowers at his grave. Regardless of Franco's intent for the monument, his supporters' relentless will to honor him further supports a less than reconciliatory interpretation. In addition to simple expressions of their veneration, Franco supporters also rally and protest at the monument. In July of 2018, the Spanish government announced Franco's body would be exhumed and buried elsewhere. One observer of a rally that broke out at the monument following the news describes how "they did what they always do here: sieg heiling, waving fascist flags, singing Cara al Sol. This time however, they threw in some other topical bigotries: chanting 'Spaniards yes, refugees no,' and 'Catalonia is Spain, they're not fooling us'" (Hancox).

Not only do Franco supporters use the Valley of the Fallen to pay homage to their dead dictator, but they also use the monument as a gathering place to perpetuate Franco's oppressive ideology into the present. The Valley of the Fallen represented a message of nationalism and totalitarianism upon its inception. After nationalist and Republican bodies reunited at the site and the United States weighed in, this definition morphed into a reconciliatory one. But alas, the monument itself and its use as a rallying ground today demonstrate that this monument has transformed again into a shrine to a tyrant.

Due to Spain's forced amnesia of the Franco era, it is important for the monument to remain with additional contextualization as a reminder to never forsake memory again. As it stood in 2018, the official Valley of the Fallen guidebook made little mention of the unavoidable controversy surrounding the site. Among the 60 pages of explanations of each aspect of the basilica, cross, and

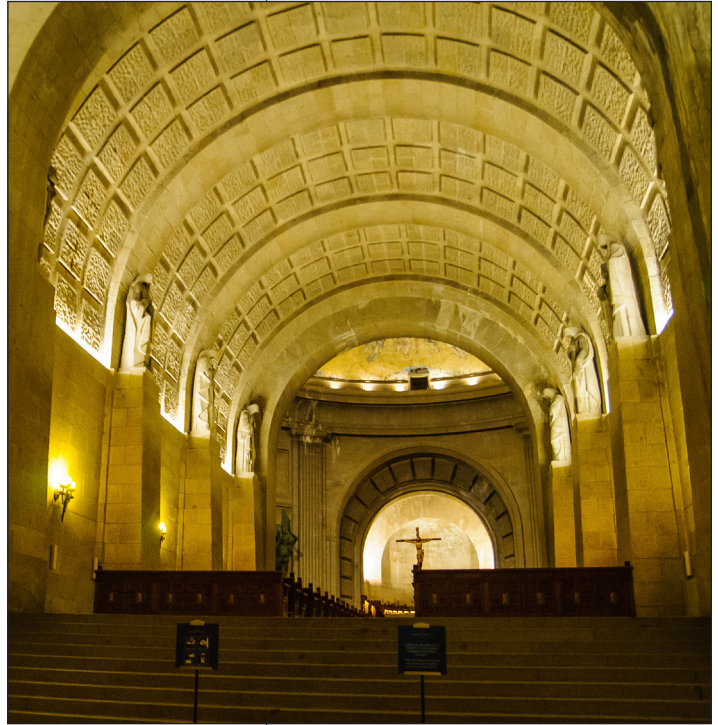


Figure 2

mausoleum, the guidebook mentions Franco's name a mere three times. Further, there is no mention of the Historical Memory Law, the Amnesty Law, the Republican bodies transferred to fill the tombs, or the death and injuries of the forced political prisoners who built the monument (Hancox).



Figure 3. far away shot of the Valley of the Fallen on its secluded hilltop (Phelan)

The overwhelming lack of information about the purpose and history of the monument is contradictory to the definition of a monument. The monument stands, then, as a vestige of the past pushed aside due to inconvenience in facing its complex history. Spain's handling of the Valley of the Fallen directly mirrors its procession forward after Franco's death: amnesty, amnesia, and never looking back. In this regard, the monument takes on another meaning within the context of how it has been managed (or rather not managed). The monument is a blemish on the country's conscience demanding attention,

which it has recently received. After decades of looking past the monument in fear of "stressing and dividing the nation" (Phelan), the newly empowered leftist Spanish government announced and proceeded to remove Franco's remains from the Valley of the Fallen.

Although Spain took a fundamental step in the right direction, proper contextualization of the monument is still necessary to educate the population about their past. Spain's hesitancy to deal with its past translates into an inability to take responsibility for Franco's dictatorship. In many ways, Spain's lack of reparations for Republican soldiers, prosecution of Franco elites, and acknowledgement of the wrongs committed has allowed this tormenting wound to remain unhealed today.

To properly close the controversy surrounding the Valley of the Fallen, the Spanish government must embrace its past through transforming the site yet again to a center of education. Throwing up a plaque unveiling the truth about Franco's dictatorship and involvement in the building of the monument is not enough, however. The monument underwent many changes in meaning: from Franco's original intent of self-adoration to a reconciliatory symbol, to a vestige of a lost era, to a fascist anachronism, and, finally, to a mark of Spain's present polarization. The Valley of the Fallen must memorialize and educate on each of these accounts.

One way to accomplish this goal is to turn the mausoleum hallway into a timeline of the monument's significance. In reminding the community of the tumults of its past, the hall will represent Spain's ultimate promise to both acknowledge and educate about the past, learn in the present, making it possible to begin the future on a more just path. Additionally, the updated monument should honor soldiers who fought on both sides. A plaque with the names of all the Republican soldiers whose bodies were lost, destroyed, or moved above the tombs that used to hold Franco's remains will serve as a place for their families to honor their late relatives. Most importantly, the repurposing of the Valley of the Fallen will effectively overturn the "Pact of Forgetting" once and for all.

The construction, implementation, and legacy of the Valley of the Fallen has implicated political, cultural, and societal issues in Spain for the past half century.

Continuing to divide the country even in the present, the monument represents Spain's harsh past of polarization, Franco's dictatorship, and amnesia. Comparing Spain's 20th century political history with that of other European countries like Germany, which had their own fascist scares, Spain responded poorly to its mistakes. Where Germany spent the following decades apologizing, conducting the Nuremberg trials, and erecting memorials for their own damages, Spain encouraged oblivion.

Despite their delayed response, Spain is now making up for lost time, realizing it is not too late to acknowledge its societal shortcomings. Relocating Franco's remains

was the first indication that Spain was ready to undertake their responsibility to remember. While there is still much change to be made, memories to be restored, and political friendships to be reconciled, the momentum with this recent move is pushing Spain in the right direction. How the country decides to proceed from here will make all the difference in correcting the precedent moving forward. Updating the Valley of the Fallen will not only start the long overdue healing process, but also dictate the standard for how Spain will respond to its modern polarization and future mistakes.

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