

Connections

In the Valley of the Fallen

One travels from Madrid in an air-conditioned bus, in the company of West German tourists with the latest photographic equipment and the protein-rich picnic provisions carried in gaily colored plastic bags. With its reasonably efficient and (still) relatively inexpensive tourist accommodations Spain attracts millions of tourists per year.

The landscape of New Castille appears to be what it has always been. A monotheistic landscape. Wide, barren, grey. A landscape for men of single will. El Cid riding against the infidels and Don Quixote against the windmills. For those with a penchant for ancient history (the guidebooks for German tourists make no mention of this) there are roadsigns that evoke the great battles of the Civil War. The Guadarrama Valley. Irún. The Alcázar of Toledo. When the Republicans besieged the fortress of Alcázar, held for months by a small contingent of Nationalist cadets, they let the captured son of the commander of the fortress speak to his father on the telephone. The son would be shot unless the fortress surrendered. "Die bravely, my child," replied the commander. We don't know whether he died bravely; we do know that he was shot.

There is disagreement as to the precise number of people killed in the defense of Madrid. The best source for all this is probably Hugh Thomas, who tells the story with even-handed objectivity and British understatement. How did that slogan go? "They shall not pass!"

They did pass. They marched into Madrid in triumph. The monument of their triumph can be reached by a good road, though not too many tourists are interested. It is just a few kilometers from the Escorial, the Valle de los Caídos—Valley of the Fallen. Most of it was built in the 1950's, one is told, by the labor of political prisoners.

A mountain, topped by a gigantic cross. Around the cross, heroic statuary. The approach is across a vast platform, built to hold many thousands gathered for patriotic rituals. A cathedral was hewn into the mountain. One enters through a grim double gate, walking for what seems a very long time across the platform and then ever deeper into the mountain. Far inside is the altar, directly beneath the cross above. In front of the altar, flat in the pavement, is the tomb of José Antonio, founder of the Falange, executed by the Republicans. Back of the altar, one surmises, a place is reserved for Franco. Two wooden gates flanking the altar, bearing the inscription MUERTOS PARA DIOS Y ESPAÑA and the dates of the Civil War. Behind those gates, going even more deeply into the mountainside, are the tombs of thousands who fell in that war. Originally all the dead were Nationalist. Recently, in a gesture of reconciliation, some Republican dead were added.

One leaves the necropolis, back to Madrid through rush-hour traffic, back to an air-conditioned hotel. It is estimated that one million people died in the Spanish Civil War. *And the Spain that is now emerging has nothing to do with what either side fought and died for.*

To be sure, there is much uncertainty about what happens after Franco. A new Spain is emerging. But insofar as one can be certain of anything in history, it will *not* be the Spain of fraternal liberty which, in images of magnetic power, drew the imagination and (to a lesser degree) the self-sacrifice of the Left from the corners of Europe. Nor will it be the Spain of restored grandeur, of faith, honor and manhood, for which the other side marched into the holocaust. Most likely it will be a Spain gradually integrated into the bustling world of the Common Market, run not by visionaries but by technocrats, its eyes fixed not on glory but on the economic indicators (all of which, by the way, continue to go up). Not the worst fate, one might say. But what would *they* say now, all those entombed so splendidly behind the Escorial? Could it be that they did not pass after all? Who won?

Most "lessons of history" are fraudulent. There are some "lessons," though, that have considerable empirical foundations: Most victories are ephemeral ("Falange in the Opposition!" proclaims a slogan frequently seen now on walls in Madrid). Few visions survive a single generation. Most important of all: *History is the arena of unintended consequences.*

This insight need not be paralyzing. Reality confronts us with demands that cannot be avoided, even if we know that the consequences of our actions are beyond our control. Political morality does not demand visions, only that we act as best we can. The best political morality is informed by the heavy knowledge of the past. Its fruits are humility and compassion.

This year America is again full of visions of the future, loudly and arrogantly proclaimed. Moral self-righteousness is evenly distributed throughout the political spectrum. They all tell us so confidently where it's at today and where, if they only have their way, it will be tomorrow. The little grey bureaucrats, with the flag on their lapels, issuing computer-hatched progress reports. The loud-mouthed professors, with beefy sideburns and the wide ties, issuing prophecies of doom and salvation. It is necessary to cultivate the quiet art of disbelief.

History is a stream of blood, behind us, carrying us. Our age scoops up the blood in plastic bags and stores it, out of sight, for electronic retrieval. There is an obligation to remember, not in the memory cells of computers but in the heaviness of the heart. Over the memories of pain looms the solitary figure of the Virgin of Consolations, ever wiping the brow of the world's Quixotes.

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