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Franco's Shadow. Notes on Fascist Violence During Late Francoism and the Transition in Asturias

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Abstract

The regime of Francisco Franco developed during its 40 years a policy of terror to control and punish the popular classes. Its objective was to generate a climate of impunity and repress anti-Francoism in an exemplary way. After the death of the dictator in 1975, the far right continued with that dynamic, harassing and selectively attacking the representatives of the left forces. This research paper addresses the violent dynamics of Spanish fascism and far right in the last years of Francisco Franco's life and the first years after his death. This paper is focused on the case of Asturias in northern Spain.

Keywords list (en): Late Francoism, Spanish transition, political violence, terrorism, falangism, far-right

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Introduction

Undoubtedly¹, July 18, 1936 meant one of the most creepy dates in the recent history of Spain². This event would sadly go to posterity as the day on which most of the Spanish army revolted in the peninsular territory. They were not the only ones, next to them were also paramilitary bands whose origin was in the fascist and reactionary organizations of the Spanish right. Its objective was clear: to end the democratic experience of the Second Republic. This event gave rise to what Paul Preston called the “Spanish Holocaust”³, a period of Spanish history marked by the omnipresence of political violence. On the other hand, it is necessary to highlight how the political culture of Spanish fascism was imbued with a totalitarian thought in which communism was seen as its main enemy. Enemy against which they would not hesitate to use all the tools at their disposal to achieve its extermination. However, over the years, the Franco regime struggled to build a fallacious narrative in which the defense of “peace” became its main legitimizing argument. This did not prevent very high level of repression against any dissident movement⁴. At the same time, the Falangist forces, although more discreetly than before, continued to form shock groups aimed at control and repression. That is why they actively collaborated with the government in those darker tasks. The death of Franco was a revulsion for these groups that were opposed to the changes and tried to defend the regime of July 18 with all the weapons they had, including violence and terrorism.

² In recent decades, historiography has faced interesting debates in characterizing the origin of this violence and, above all, its objectives. The main element of historiographic discussion has originated around the validity or not of the thesis of the “strategy of tension” for the period of the Spanish Transition. That is, if the violence of these ultra-rightist groups was consciously aimed at creating situations of maximum tension that would create a sense of power vacuum in order to force the military to intervene by giving a coup d'etat or, on the contrary, it dealt with spontaneous facts and lacking a defined strategy. The historian José Luis Rodríguez defended in the 90s the existence of a “strategy of tension” during the Transition based on two issues. First, in which these fascist groups openly defended the thesis of the need for the army to take power and also participated in different conspiracies. And, secondly, in the multiple evidences existing in this period of connections between some sectors of the State apparatus and these fascist groups⁵. For his part, political violence expert Eduardo González Calleja argues that during the 1970s neofascism would have become a marginal and minority movement, marked by the use of violence. Its militants were not seen as a political vanguard but as catalysts of events that could lead to the reimplantation of a totalitarian government through a “strategy of tension⁶”. But not all the research community felt the same, the specialist Xavier Casals has rejected this hypothesis throughout his various works. On the contrary, Casals argues that there would have been no “tension strategy”. For Xavier Casals, this narrative of the past would be fully sensational, the result of journalism of the time. For this historian, this thesis would not be correct due to three main reasons. In the first place, because the extreme right blocked with its own violence the impact of the armed struggle of the leftist groups that could have generated a favorable climate for the coup d'etat. Secondly, because fascist terrorism would not have had, in his opinion, a clear strategy, nor well-defined objectives. And a good example of this would have been the lack of stable connections with the army or the existence of an autonomous electoral strategy that would have been the main one harmed by the criminalization of the fascist groups after these actions. Finally, Casals completely challenges the concept itself, which it considers wrong in its initial approaches since, rather than destabilizing,

these dynamics would generate the stabilization of the system⁷.

3 The truth is that, regardless of whether there was a “strategy of tension” or not, the fascist groups were related to a multitude of violent actions in the last years of the dictatorship and, above all, in the period of the Transition to Democracy (1975—1982)⁸. In addition, it is necessary to address this issue from different angles due to its great complexity. On the one hand, it seems that there are enough indications to maintain that it is possible to speak of a certain instrumentalization of these actions by some sectors of the State that, acting autonomously or in coordination, were interested in harassing the most rupturist sectors without seeing each other exposed to perform themselves actions that could impact them. On the other hand, the collusion of these groups with sectors belonging to the repressive bodies seems proven in many cases, without this necessarily having to support a plot theory⁹. In any case, the lack of access to the state archives of that period makes it difficult to reach more advanced conclusions. In addition, it is necessary to highlight that, although the serious crimes committed by these groups had a high degree of impunity, at the same time they also deeply stigmatized political formations such as the Fuerza Nueva (New Force) that could never recover from the bad press and ended up dissolving.

4 In this context, the study of these dynamics in Asturias can help clarify some relevant issues to reach a global conclusion. The Asturian field in which this research is registered responds to the intention of doing a study that is as closely linked to the field and that can provide some information unknown so far. That is why we have tried to carry out a contextualization in response to the new sources consulted, the vast majority of them of local origin. This has allowed a more exhaustive use of them. In the studies carried out so far Asturias had not stood out especially on the map of fascist violence. This was due to a great ignorance of the events that occurred in this part of the Spanish State. The objective of Asturian fascism focused on controlling and attacking the anti-Franco movement in its different facets (political, cultural, neighborhood and trade union) to try to curtail its activity, being difficult in some stages to discern where the police work ended and where their dynamics began violent autonomous, if these existed clearly at some time.

5 The terrorist actions committed by the extreme right in Asturias responded to the attempts of various sectors from the Franco regime to resist political change, mainly due to the fear of a hypothetical rise of communism in Spain after Franco's death. The period studied here covers from the 60s until the arrival of the Spanish Socialist Worker's Party (PSOE) to the government in 1982. A long period where Asturias underwent profound transformations, but where fascist violence was always present. The different forms of political violence developed by this current had different levels of aggressiveness. From threatening beatings and graffiti, to the placement of explosive devices in pharmacies or bookstores, through kidnappings and attempted assassinations of anti-Franco militants. Despite the seriousness of all these crimes, in most cases these groups enjoyed great police impunity, ignoring the complaints of the victims and protecting their criminal activities with their passivity¹⁰. In spite of the complexity of this object of study and the volume of sources consulted, the space limitations require a synthetic task, which prevents a more detailed study of the details of each stage.

6

The thugs of the regime (1960—1975)

The latest advances in historiography have highlighted how political violence constituted a structural pillar for the survival of the Franco dictatorship throughout its existence. The regime was born in the middle of a bloody civil war and disappeared after a trail of shootings and murders. Over four decades, it carried out a strategy to apply a “fear policy” with the aim of controlling and punishing the population¹¹. In the specific case study was in October 1937 when the rebel troops

invaded the entire Asturian territory. From this date, the violent actions of fascist terrorism began with total impunity. The groups responsible for such activities were multiple, although always with the same intention. These were fascist elements armed by the authorities who collaborated as volunteers in surveillance and repression, an example was the Francoist use of the Somaten, which operated as a parallel police in rural societies. The Falange itself (FET-JONS) also had some especially violent sections, such as the Franco Guard, created in 1944 as a replacement for the party's former militias¹². Its violence was intended to create an environment of widespread fear while harshly repressing any activity against the regime. In that context, Asturias was seen by the Francoist elite as a stronghold of the labor movement, so they made special efforts to try to monitor and suppress any hint of communist resistance. Contrary to what would happen during the transition, during the first decades of the dictatorship the members of the fascist gangs were well-known people who enjoyed open support from Franco's power¹³. Numerous changes occurred in Asturias over the years. The resurgence of the labor movement at the end of the 50s was a great challenge for Franco's power. The strategy carried out by the Communist Party of Spain (PCE) used the new Francoist legality to create cultural associations in which to have spaces more free of anti-Franco socialization¹⁴. During this first stage the repression became more selective but, at the same time, it is striking that increase in fascist violence that, far from appearing as simple autonomous and improvised actions, could have some connections with the official authorities and whose objective would be to dissociate the State from certain actions that sought to spread fear among sectors of anti-Francoism¹⁵.

7 A good example of this has to do with the role assigned to the brotherhoods of ex-Franco fighters in underground work before the famous mining strikes of 1962¹⁶. Far from being an isolated case, these groups of violent falangists also acted against the student movement. A relevant case is found in the attack perpetrated by several armed fascists on the *Fenestra universitaria* radio program in 1963. During this aggression they not only threatened the students who directed it, but also intervened live and put the falangist anthem on the air¹⁷. However, it would be after the arrival of the new civil governor Mateu de Ros, falangist and former member of the Blue Division, in 1964 when there was a qualitative leap in the levels of falangist violence. In that year there were several attacks claimed by a fascist group that called itself the Nalón worker's front (Frente Obrero del Nalón), responsible, among other things, for the attack on the "Infierno" bar in Ciaño¹⁸. That same year several very serious attacks took place, even without clarifying all the parts. The actions included threats and attacks on militants of the labor movement, which included a mock execution, up to two murders¹⁹. Unfortunately, another example of this type of attacks with fatalities occurred on May 1, 1967. That day José Luis Espina was killed because of the shooting committed by Antonio Llana Iglesias in Sueros (Mieres), who was a falangist and a member of Somatén²⁰. This type of fascist violence did not constitute only a few isolated cases, but remained with varying degrees of intensity throughout the period of Francoism. Some examples of falangist violence's survival can be seen in the graffiti threatening the student movement at the University of Oviedo in early 1972 or the attacks of the extreme right to the entourage of the president of the association of parents of students of the University of Oviedo in 1974²¹.

8

Among the shadows (1975—1977)

The last months of 1975 witnessed an increase in social mobilizations in Asturias, which resulted in a greater public presence of the anti-Franco sectors. To this we must add the uncertain future of the regime to the illness of the dictator. In this context, the nervousness of Asturian fascism is understandable, very concerned about its own survival. Although it is not possible to know

exactly to what extent they planned their activities or if, in fact, they came to have a plan, at least there are enough indications to state that not all of their activities were due to mere spontaneous actions. Thus, for example, a great New Force rally took place in May, with the presence of its leader Blas Piñar. Among fascist exaltations Piñar arrived with his rhetoric to incite “to take action” to those gathered there, stating that violence was necessary when it was a just cause²². Coincidentally, a few days later several threats and aggressions signed by the Cristo Rey Guerrillas (Guerrilleros de Cristo Rey-GCR) would appear in Asturias against the most varied of Asturian anti-Francoism (cultural associations, progressive magazines, trade unionists and critical intellectuals)²³. The GCRs were a dark paramilitary organization that responded to a collective name under which very violent groups of anti-communist and anti-liberal militants from different ultra-right organizations acted²⁴. In the same way, these groups also signed their violent activities with other names such as the National Action Movement (Movimiento de Acción Nacional — MAN) or the Asturian Anti-Communist Alliance (AAA or Triple A), which contributed to a greater opacity sensation. However, among all of them it was that of the GCRs that reached the greatest depth, reaching almost the level of myth in ultra violence. Cultural associations and assaulted citizens tried unsuccessfully to get the police to investigate these crimes²⁵. Another favorite objective of the fascists was the progressive bookstores, the case of the Musidora bookstore in Gijón is a good example of how far the ultras could become obsessed with an objective²⁶.

9 1976 was a year when the intensity of violence of fascist origin in Asturias increased markedly. Already in the month of January several explosive devices set fire to the pharmacy of a prominent anti-Francoist who had previously been threatened with death. As if this were not enough, in the following months there were death threats, the breaking of crystals and even the early morning shots against the premises of different associations where people from the left met. To this we must add the threats to well-known people, who also became the target of the ultras, such as the famous singer Victor Manuel²⁷. Continuing with their criminal actions these groups went on to attack throughout the asturian geography with outstanding actions such as the blasting of the car of Professor of Philosophy Gustavo Bueno or the book store of José Troteaga, a member of the PCE²⁸. Another very serious episode took place on the eve of May 1 in Gijón when members of the Franco Guard did surveillance work and surprised members of the Communist Party PCE (VIII—IX Congresses) pasting posters. Before the attempt to stop the communists there was a shooting by both parties that luckily had no fatalities, although the communists were arrested by the police²⁹. As if that were not enough, the attacks continued during the following months as a response to the mobilizations. Thus, for example, the home of Alfredo Liñero, leader of the Popular Socialist Party, was shot the same night in a bar where Gijón's left-wing people gathered. As if that were not enough, there was also the kidnapping of José Manuel Bolado, leader of the strike that the Non-Numerary Teachers (PNN) were carrying out³⁰. All the actions described above bear the stamp of the extreme right. However, in all these actions, the influence of the police apparatus also flies in some way. The suitability of the objectives and the times chosen are clearly due to coordination with other forms of regulated repression. At least one of the authors seems to be related to the Franco Guard, a legal organization and member of the State apparatus. In addition, several of its members participated as infiltrators and confidants in the service of the National Police Information Brigade³¹.

Resistance to change (1977—1982)

1977 was an important year for the Transition to Democracy, that year the francoist official party was dissolved and the PCE was legalized, shortly after convening general elections after more

than forty years. Although Spain was still far from being a full liberal democracy, the fascists saw every little change as the end of their world. That is precisely why they were increasingly active and more autonomous. The acts of the PCE, especially those that had the presence of their general secretary Santiago Carrillo, became their favorite objective³². During the election campaign, there were frequent exits of fascist gangs in search of anti-fascists to attack, which forced the democrats to take many precautions and even self-defense measures³³.

11 Another predominant location for his attacks was the University of Oviedo. An example of this was the attack by more than 50 armed fascists at the Faculty of Law following a Carrillo rally. This assault resulted in several injuries and the most alarming thing was that the police stationed outside the campus refused to intervene. As if that were not enough, the assembly itself convened to denounce these events suffered a similar attack. In response to these attacks, the students and professors declared the strike and tried to demonstrate even though they were severely repressed by the police, which dissolved the march with great brutality. Finally, on February 22, 1978, the demonstration could be carried out normally³⁴. This political violence not only took place in the large urban centers. Outside the big cities, there were also fascist attacks, although it is more difficult to track them. A rather serious example is found in the assault with a firearm in mid-1978 in Cangas del Narcea by a Somatén. In addition, a few days before his son, who was a member of the ultra-right-wing party Fuerza Nueva, had hit a member of the local socialist party with a chain. All these events provoked a manifestation of democratic rejection in this town³⁵.

12 However, it was in the cities where most of the aggressions collected were concentrated. The members of fascist parties FE-JONS and the Fuerza Nueva were especially violent against leftist organizations. There were numerous assaults on propaganda posts or even business of people with a known left-wing militancy³⁶. Another objective with which they were especially primed were the premises of political parties and unions. It was an easy objective to execute and that at the same time directly affected the life of these organizations. During this period there were numerous assaults and fires of premises, for example, the headquarters of the UGT socialist union in Oviedo was attacked twice the same month causing numerous damage. Of course, goods continued to be another objective, especially cars³⁷. Although the degree of impunity of these groups was not the same as at the time of the dictator, their crimes continued to go unnoticed by the authorities that they did not consider to be a real problem. However, these violent dynamics remained and not only in the urban area, as shown by the attempted assassination of a progressive parish priest in the rural zone of Luarca who went unpunished³⁸.

13 In 1980 the left of the third city of Asturias, Avilés, denounced the increase of the aggressions of extreme right before the passivity of the civil governor³⁹. Several fascists with firearms were also arrested in the same area with the intention of breaking a strike⁴⁰. There were also suspicious movements around the coup d'etat of February 23 of 1981 without clarifying. However, the failure of the coup and the dissolution of Fuerza Nueva marked the end of this stage of fascist violence in Asturias. In addition, in 1983 there was a large police operation that produced several arrests related to a shooting range where the Asturian fascists met⁴¹.

14

Conclusions

The political culture of fascism was deeply marked by a militant use of violence. Its use became a privileged tool of its militant praxis. During the first years of the Franco regime the most violent sectors of the regime were perfectly integrated at all levels and enjoyed a broad social projection. However, with the stabilization of the dictatorship and the rise of the technocrats they

were progressively cornered from the public sphere. However, they continued to be very useful for Franco. The most ultras sectors were a shock force whose utility lay in being able to act in ways that the system itself had renounced to use. Those who fought against the dictatorship were not only with police harassment, but also with the threats of apparently unknown groups, which had no limits and from which no one was going to protect them. The years of the Transition supposed a moment of maximum activity for these groups, who saw helpless as the workers' parties took to the streets, while diminishing their privileges. The collusion with the police forces seems clear and its diffuse autonomy for the years 1975—1976. Whether for the initial collaboration or for subsequent passivity, the truth is that the police did not pose a problem for these groups, which in many cases went unpunished from their violent acts. In any case, it can be concluded that Asturias was no exception and the far right was much more important than it had been granted. As desired, it is also necessary to highlight that the capacity of Asturian fascism to develop great actions was limited. No less, if it maintained a low intensity violence throughout all these years, whose objective was to create an environment of fear that would paralyze the actions of the anti-fascist sectors. In addition, it is necessary to emphasize that it was not an improvised violence, but that its objectives were clear and its strategies perfectly match those developed at the state level during the same years.

Remarks:

1. This article is a development of some of the ideas included in a small informative paper written in asturian language: Abad García E. (Un) Controlled. Ultra-right violence in the transition to democracy // *Atlántica XXII*. 2017. № 50. Letras Atlánticas, Oviedo. P. 59—61.
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7. Casals X. ¿Existió una estrategia de la tensión en España? // *Historia del presente*. 2009. № 14. (II 2ª época). P. 25—38.
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10. In all the interviews conducted for this investigation, in the archives and the press consulted, it has become clear that the police ignored, when it did not cover up, this type of ultras activities. Only, starting from 1978, some minor sentences for aggressions began to appear, which did not prevent their most serious actions from continuing unpunished.
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Franco's Shadow. Notes on Fascist Violence During Late Francoism and the Transition in Asturias

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Аннотация

В течение 40 лет режим Франсиско Франко разработал и успешно проводил политику репрессий для наказания и контроля широких слоев населения. Его цель состояла в том, чтобы создать атмосферу безнаказанности и показательно подавлять антифранкистские выступления. После смерти диктатора в 1975 г. крайне правые группы продолжили эту политику, преследуя и избирательно нападая на наиболее видных представителей левых сил. В этой исследовательской работе рассматривается динамика насилия испанского фашизма в последние годы жизни Франко и в первые годы после его смерти. Основное внимание уделено событиям, происходившим на севере Испании в Астурии.

Ключевые слова: Поздний франкизм, испанский переход, политическое насилие, терроризм, фалангизм, крайние правые

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