



Written by [Bonnie Gillis](#) on July 19, 1999

## Franco: Spanish Savior

*Whatever his faults, Francisco Franco stood bravely against totalitarianism, saving Spain and hastening Axis defeat.*

Few figures of the 20th Century have been as relentlessly maligned as Francisco Franco y Bahamonde, who ruled as Spain's *Caudillo* (supreme leader) from 1939 until his death in 1975. Franco's death was celebrated with vulgar, vindictive glee in the obituary columns of Establishment publications that had treated the passing of Communist mass murderers with respectful solemnity.



*Newsweek's* obituary denounced what it called Franco's "relentless cruelty" and insisted that his regime was "a throwback to the age of Hitler and Mussolini and, as such, [is] a painful embarrassment to the rest of Europe." Upon the Generalissimo's death, concluded the magazine, "Liberals throughout Western Europe breathed a sigh of relief that the world's most durable fascist dictator has been removed from their midst."

Franco's obituary in the *New York Times* accused Franco of turning Spain "into a totalitarian dictatorship of the right as ingrown and intolerant as the most rigid Communist dictatorships of the left." (It is only in the context of such strained attempts to create moral symmetry, of course, that the *Times* would ever criticize, albeit obliquely, "Communist dictatorships of the left.")

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When Red Chinese Premier Chou En-lai, one of the century's most accomplished Communist mass murderers, died a few months after Franco, the same Establishment media organs waxed lyrical in hymning his memory. "An intellectual who was also a man of action, Chou possessed grace, charm, tact and grit," cooed *Newsweek*. "Once dashing handsome with smoldering black eyes, slim expressive hands and aristocratic mien, he remained physically impressive into his later years and radiated an unmistakable attraction." The *New York Times* extolled Chou as a "great Chinese leader" and designated him "one of the more far-sighted statesmen of the 20th century." Commentator Max Lerner, all but weeping into his typewriter, lamented in his syndicated column that "Chou En-lai's death removes a giant figure from the world scene, and impoverishes every people, because while he was a Marxist revolutionary he was also basically a moderate and a realist...."

Obviously, the custodians of "respectable" opinion did not object to dictatorship in principle; what they found objectionable in Franco was not his authoritarianism, but rather the fact that he was an *anti-Communist* ruler. According to the Establishment-approved caricature, Franco was a fascist tyrant who seized power from Spain's democratic government with the help of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. After mercilessly purging his political opponents, Franco imposed an oppressive, puritanical regime upon Spain, reversing decades of social progress — or so runs the common indictment.

In fact, under Franco's rule, Spain experienced its first prolonged period of domestic peace and stability in centuries. As a result, Spain — a nation that had been in an apparently irreversible decline since the



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17th century, and was teetering on the brink of totalitarianism in 1936 — enjoyed dramatic economic progress: Between 1960 and 1975, per-capita income in Spain rose nearly 900 percent. Just as importantly, despite drastic measures imposed by Franco to deal with a Soviet-organized revolutionary movement, individual freedom enjoyed by Spanish citizens consistently expanded during Franco's rule.

"Franco was never a fascist or had the smallest belief in any kind of Utopia or system," comments British historian Paul Johnson. A resolute believer in the crown, the Church, and the *Patria*, Franco was prompted to participate in the July 1936 coup by his desire to turn back "the invasion by post-Christian totalitarian culture," which was embodied in the Soviet-sponsored "Popular Front" that was on the verge of taking power.

The so-called "Spanish Civil War," which is more properly considered a Soviet-directed war of subversion, claimed the lives of more than 200,000 Spaniards and left more than one million crippled (the battlefield carnage of the war produced innovative techniques for surgery and blood transfusions). Malnutrition and disease plagued Spain for years after the war's end. Revolutionary figures such as Lenin and Hitler exploited the tragedy of war-ravaged nations to begin the process of creating the total state. Franco, however, was not an ideologue, and he used his power to restore Spain's traditional institutions.

Upon achieving victory in 1939, Paul Johnson observes, "Franco determined to end the destructive process of corruption by amputating the agonized limb of Spanish collectivism." Once the Communist-led forces were defeated, Franco de-Communized Spain's institutions, much as the Allies de-Nazified Germany after World War II. Franco's methods were admittedly harsh; he was dealing, as we will shortly see, with utterly depraved and vicious criminals who had committed unspeakable crimes. But as Johnson notes, Franco's campaign to de-Communize Spain "was not a Lenin-style massacre by classes: the Law of Political Responsibilities of 9 February 1939 dealt with responsibility for crimes on an individual basis.... Strictly speaking, there was no death penalty for political offenses as such."

Franco declared in a December 1939 speech that his intention was "to liquidate the hatred and passions left us by our past war." Those who had been imprisoned for crimes against Christian Spain were urged to seek redemption "through work accompanied by repentance and penitence." While some might object to the medieval overtones of this statement, it is reasonable to believe that Franco's neo-medievalism was preferable to the plague of totalitarianism and total war that was raging through most of the world.

Just as important as Franco's victory over the Communists was his insistence on keeping Spain neutral during World War II. Franco's Nationalists received assistance from Germany and Italy in their war against the Soviet-supported Popular Front, and without the help of German and Italian planes and pilots it is almost certain that the Nationalists would have lost. But Hitler and Mussolini had their own designs for the Iberian peninsula and Northern Africa, and they expected Franco to express his gratitude by eagerly enlisting in the Axis cause. Franco would confound this expectation.

Franco defined his approach to foreign policy as one of *habil prudencia* — "skillful prudence." As British historian Brian Crozier observes, at the end of the civil war in 1939, Franco told his erstwhile Italian allies, "We need a period of peace of at least five years." Although Franco recognized the role of Germany and Italy in his victory, "he was unwilling to allow Spain to become a satellite of Germany or Italy," Crozier writes. In 1938, with victory in the civil war far from certain, the Nationalists had refused to sign a secret treaty of friendship with Nazi Germany, which, notes Crozier, "would have tied Spanish foreign policy to that of the Nazis after victory."



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Crozier points out that “Hitler was less interested in helping Franco win than in prolonging the Civil War for Germany’s advantage” — something that the Spanish leader was sufficiently perceptive to understand. Franco’s own inclination, on the other hand, was to turn “to the democracies for economic succor, and [move] away from Germany,” but this desire was impeded, in large measure, by “the indignantly anti-Franco sentiments that dominated public opinion in Britain, France, and the United States.” Franco’s chief foreign policy objective was “to preserve Spain’s independence and territorial integrity and keep out of the impending European war.”

Many of those who condemn Franco for taking assistance from Germany and Italy have not considered how European history might have developed had a Soviet-dominated regime been in place in 1939 when Hitler and Stalin entered into their non-aggression pact. “It would have been a tragedy for America and the rest of the world if Franco had lost the war with the Communists,” Monaco-based historian/adventurer Hilaire du Berrier — the sole surviving pilot of the Spanish Civil War — remarked to THE NEW AMERICAN. “It would have been a catastrophe for the West if Franco had joined the war on the side of the Axis after Hitler conquered France and joined his pact with the Soviet Union. Franco looked out for Spain’s interests first, but by doing so he was actually one of our best allies — not only by actively opposing the Communists, but also by refusing to help the Axis seize Gibraltar and seal off the Mediterranean.”

When Franco met Hitler in the border town of Hendaya in October 1940, the result was “the most infuriating hours of Hitler’s life,” according to Crozier. “Hitler met Franco with two objectives in mind: to bring Spain into the Triple Alliance, and to gain the *Caudillo’s* assent to German plans for an assault on Gibraltar. The *Caudillo*, for his part, came to the meeting with a single negative, but onerous, objective of avoiding all precise commitments of any kind. It is clear that Franco left Hendaya satisfied and relieved; and Hitler, angry and frustrated.”

The Fuhrer later famously remarked that he would rather have his teeth pulled than endure another confrontation such as he had with Franco. The episode was perhaps even more taxing to the Spanish *Caudillo*, who after all was not negotiating with Hitler from a position of military or material strength. “Franco said to many of his advisers that the hardest battle he ever fought was when he faced Hitler, and the Fuhrer tried to get Franco to enter the war on the side of the Axis,” Hilaire du Berrier recalled to THE NEW AMERICAN. Hitler’s capacity for personal intimidation was legendary, and in a rage the National Socialist despot was almost impossible to refuse. Nonetheless, recalled du Berrier, “Franco was the only man who faced Hitler in one of his notorious rages who resisted him. European history would have turned out much differently had a few other statesmen displayed such courage in the face of Hitler’s demands.”

Franco’s determination to keep Spain disentangled from the European war eventually led Hitler to regret his decision to support the Nationalists in the civil war. Author and historian Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, who covered the Spanish Civil War as a young journalist, observes that “for military, but above all for ideological reasons, Hitler greatly regretted having given aid to Franco, whom he sincerely detested. Too late he discovered, when he met them in France, his deep affinity for Red Spaniards, whom he ironically planned to use as allies at some future date.”

Just as frustrating to Hitler, no doubt, was Franco’s determination to protect Jews from the Third Reich. When the Civil War erupted in Spain, observes Kuehnelt-Leddihn, “the Spanish Jews, most notably those living in northern Morocco ... sided with the Right.” This was a wise choice: Under Franco, Spain’s “consulates and embassies throughout Europe began to issue passports to Jews of Spanish



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descent.... An estimated forty to sixty thousand passports were granted, which accords to 'Franco Spain,' after the Vatican, title as the greatest protector of Jews" during World War II.

Little in Franco's family background suggested that he would one day become a world historical figure. He was a product of what today would be called a "dysfunctional" home. His father, Nicolas Franco Salgado-Araujo, was a minor naval official stationed in El Ferrol, a small town in Spain's northwestern Galicia region. Franco's father, notes Paul Preston's relentlessly critical biography *Franco*, was "a bad-tempered authoritarian who easily lost control of himself when contradicted." Nor was that authoritarian temper wedded to sound moral values: "Marriage had only briefly diminished the number and length of [Nicolas'] card games and drinking sessions at the officers' club." After the birth of Francisco's sister Paz in 1903, Nicolas "returned to his bachelor habits," conducting numerous extramarital affairs and eventually contracting a sham marriage to another woman.

In addition to his morally dissolute personal life, notes Preston, Franco's father was politically "a liberal, sympathetic to freemasonry and critical of the Catholic Church." Franco's brothers emulated his father's politics; this was particularly true of his younger brother Ramón, who would earn notoriety as an aviator — he was the first flier to cross the south Atlantic — and political radical. (While Ramón Franco initially applauded Communist and anarchist atrocities against the Catholic Church, he eventually joined Franco's Nationalists; he died while flying a bombing mission in October 1938.) Although the young Franco would occasionally retreat into a "deep sulk" as a reaction to his father's abusive behavior, he was a loyal and obedient son. After his military exploits in Spanish North Africa earned him celebrity status, Franco tactfully refused to publicize his family's problems. When, as Spain's *Caudillo*, he was confronted by an intrusive question about his father's infidelity, he tersely conceded the reality of his father's weaknesses and transgressions, but insisted that "they never diminished his paternal authority."

Franco obviously took seriously the biblical commandment to honor his father, even when his father's behavior was substantially less than honorable. However, Franco consciously strove to avoid both his father's vices and his politics. Notes Preston, "Franco's own lifelong avoidance of drink, gambling, and women bore testimony to a determination to create an existence which was the antithesis of his father's life."

It was much easier for Franco to honor his mother, Pilar Bahamonde, who is described by Preston as "politically conservative and a deeply pious Catholic." "Francisco was much more deeply attached to his mother than were either of his brothers," continues Preston. "He regularly accompanied her to communion and was a pious child. He cried when he made his first communion. When on leave in El Ferrol, the adult Francisco would never fail to fulfill any religious duty for fear of upsetting his mother."

After her husband abandoned her, Doña Pilar constantly wore black. The desertion left a lasting impression upon young Franco as well. The adult Franco would be the most uxorious of husbands to his wife, Carmen, and a devoted father to his daughter, who was also named Carmen (and given the nickname *Muñeca*, or "doll.")

As a young man, Franco eschewed the vices that had entranced his wayward father. Even after Franco became "a leader with almost unlimited power," wrote commentator Holmes Alexander in 1970, "he never bothered to accumulate the fortunes and mistresses and dissipated habits so often associated with the terrible name of dictator."

The Franco family had a centuries-long tradition of service in the Spanish Navy, and young Francisco



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had aspired to continue the tradition. However, in the aftermath of Spain's defeat in the 1898 Spanish-American war — in which the badly outclassed Spanish Navy had acquitted itself very well — the Spanish government entered a period of retrenchment, and new admissions to the Naval Academy were suspended at just the time Francisco sought to enroll. In August 1907, the 14-year-old Franco, determined to pursue a military career, packed his worldly possessions in a single slender suitcase and traveled to Toledo to enroll in the Alcazar Infantry College.

The future Generalissimo cut an unimpressive figure: He was short, so thin that his childhood friends handed him the nickname *Cerillito* ("Little Match-stick"), and possessed a reedy, high-pitched voice. During his three years in military school, Franco would undergo a constant barrage of taunts, pranks, and petty humiliations on account of his size and background, and also because he had no taste for the gamier diversions — such as drinking and womanizing — that many of his classmates preferred.

The Toledo academy emphasized "discipline, military history, and moral virtue," rather than modern military theory, writes Preston; cadets were prepared to display "bravery in the face of the enemy, unquestioning faith in military regulations, [and] absolute obedience and loyalty to superior officers."

Franco graduated with honors in 1910. "The year was significant," comments biographer Alan Lloyd. "In Morocco, the last theater of Spanish colonial operations, Spain's oldest enemies were honing their daggers and charging their long guns." The Moorish tribesmen who inhabited "the Rif" were emboldened by Spain's defeat in 1898. Franco requested a posting to Morocco in Northern Africa, where Spain was embroiled in a protracted — and dubious — colonial conflict that in some ways approximated America's experience in Vietnam. For many in Spain's military command, observes Paul Preston, "the hypocritical politicians were playing a double game" with Spanish troops assigned to Morocco, "demanding of the soldiers cheap victories while remaining determined not to be seen sinking resources into a colonial war."

When Franco arrived in Morocco as a Second Lieutenant in 1912, he was greeted by a Spanish force that was crippled by inefficiency, ravaged by disease, badly equipped, and burdened with poor morale. He was assigned command over a group of Moroccan conscripts whose loyalty was suspect; Franco spent "more than one sleepless night on guard rather than chance having his throat cut by his own troops," recalls Lloyd. For three years, Franco led his troops on a series of grinding, unglamorous campaigns, using what spare time he had to study topography, military theory, and combat psychology. At the age of 20, he was promoted to captain.

As Franco increased in rank, his reputation grew — in large measure because of his uncanny composure in combat. Preston — who, it must be remembered, is a determined critic of Franco — refers to Franco's "apparent imperturbability under fire" and his unflinching "optimism and determination" as a military leader, and recounts how in the heat of battle Franco was "cold and serene in his risk-taking rather than recklessly brave."

Although his obvious ambition alienated some of his superiors, Franco was immensely popular with his soldiers "because of his methodical thoroughness and his insistence on always leading assaults himself."

Franco's determination to lead from the front nearly cost him his life during a June 1916 engagement with Moroccan guerillas in El Biutz. The guerillas, who commanded the high ground, planned to send a group of tribesmen down the back of the hill to sweep behind the embattled Spanish forces and catch them in a deadly cross-fire. Franco was part of a frontal assault up the slope. When the company





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commander was badly wounded, Franco took command. “With men dropping all around him,” Preston records, “[Franco] broke through the enemy encirclement and played a significant role in the fall of El Biutz.” However, he was shot in the stomach — an almost invariably lethal wound in the African theater. Miraculously, the bullet missed all of Franco’s vital organs — by a fraction of an inch in any direction. It is little wonder that Franco’s Moroccan troops came to believe that he possessed *Baraka*, a mystical quality of divine protection.

Following his heroism at El Biutz, Franco became, at age 24, the youngest Major in the Spanish Army. Accounts of Franco’s exploits in Morocco were published in Spanish newspapers, and the young Major’s modest celebrity was useful in courting Carmen — the popular daughter of prominent parents who looked dimly upon Franco because of his unremarkable family background. Francisco and Carmen became engaged in 1920, but duty intervened to delay the marriage: Franco was chosen to return to Morocco to be second-in-command of the newly formed Spanish Foreign Legion.

As had been the case when he first arrived in Morocco, Franco’s new command was as dangerous to him as it was to the enemy. The Legion was largely composed of thieves, murderers, and other criminals for whom military service was an alternative to imprisonment — or execution. In such company, Preston wrote, “Franco was to show a merciless readiness to impose his power over men physically bigger and harder than himself, compensating for his size with an unnerving coldness.” Once again Franco served with distinction, becoming, at 33, Europe’s youngest general — the youngest since Napoleon.

Franco’s service in Africa would play a decisive role in his decision to participate in the 1936 coup. The *Africanistas* — Spaniards who had served in the thankless Moroccan campaigns — were a distinctive group in the Spanish military, in terms of personal attitudes and alliances forged under fire. As a group, the *Africanistas* believed that Spain’s institutions were being subverted from within, and that separatist forces threatened not only to deprive their nation of its few remaining colonial possessions, but also to rend asunder the *Patria* herself.

As bloody revolutions erupted in Mexico, Russia, Germany, and elsewhere, many in the Spanish military became convinced that decisive action may eventually become necessary in order to save their country from ruin. Franco was a diligent student of Communism, and he displayed an educated suspicion toward political figures whose “republican” proposals were thinly disguised Marxism. However, he strove to remain aloof from political quarrels, repeatedly emphasizing that “a soldier serves Spain and not a particular regime,” and that Spain needed soldiers who were committed to the nation, rather than to a political movement. It was only when he became convinced that Spain confronted a mortal danger that Franco decided to mount a coup.

After King Alfonso XIII was deposed in 1931 and the “Second Republic” was declared, Spanish politics became terminally polarized. In May 1931, the militant Left celebrated its ascendancy by putting churches to the torch in Madrid, Malaga, Seville, Cadiz, and Alicante. By 1934, Spanish socialist leader Francisco Largo Caballero — known as “the Spanish Lenin” — was touring the country “prescribing the dictatorship of the proletariat as a cure for Spain’s ailments,” Alan Lloyd recalls, while terrorists of both the radical left and the fascist-supported “right” prepared for war. When a republican government of the right came to power, “Spain’s Socialists no longer contented themselves with parliamentary opposition, but veered toward open revolt.” Largo Caballero told Mallory Browne of the *Christian Science Monitor* that “evolutionary progress” was no longer possible, and that (in Lloyd’s words) “Socialist leaders were almost unanimous in favoring a rebellion.”



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As Spain lurched toward elections in 1936, street violence between political factions escalated into assassination. In anticipation of the nation's descent into anarchy, the Soviet-supported Popular Front began to organize for a reign of terror. With the guidance and support of Comintern agents, Spanish revolutionaries established "repressive commissions with unlimited authority for the realization of arrests, requisitions and assassinations"; these organs were referred to as *Checas* — a Spanish transliteration of "Cheka," the name given to the original Soviet secret police by Vladimir Lenin and Feliks Dzerzhinsky. Scores of *Checas* honeycombed every major Spanish city, and "Revolutionary Committees" tasked with exporting terror to the countryside were organized in country districts.

On July 18, 1936, convinced that his beloved *Patria* was descending into anarchy and eventually into Soviet-style tyranny, Franco flew from the Canary Islands to Spanish Morocco, where he took charge of a long-simmering coup against the Republic. Thus began a conflict that would be, for the international Left, "the Crusade of Crusades, a far more sacred cause than either World War I or World War II," observes Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Franco's Nationalists were fighting to restore Spain's traditional Christian order; the Soviet-inspired and Comintern-directed "Loyalists" of the Popular Front — including the notorious "Abraham Lincoln Brigade" organized by Communists in the U.S. — were propelled by an utterly depraved hatred of Christian society, as their depredations clearly illustrated.

As part of the "Loyalist" war effort, writes Alan Lloyd, "gangs of revolutionaries roamed the country burning churches, torturing and murdering clerics, [and] wantonly terrorizing the bourgeoisie and the upper classes. In a little over a month, an estimated 75,000 people would [meet] a senseless death at the hands of promiscuous and ignorant killers..." Kuehnelt-Leddihn reports that Spanish Communists butchered at least 6,000 priests, friars, and nuns. Some of the nuns, he recalls, were "publicly undressed, raped, slaughtered, and exhibited on a butcher's hook."

Nor did Communist cruelty spare the mortal remains of those who had already perished. Kuehnelt-Leddihn recalls a visit he made to the city of Huesca, which endured a two-year siege conducted by Marxist "Loyalist" forces. Since the "forces of progress, democracy, and enlightenment could not take Huesca, they vented their spleen on the dead. The vulgarities, the obscenities — the corpses torn out of their graves and assembled in obscene postures — left an unforgettable impression; they were appalling witness to the noble spirit so enthusiastically supported by the American and British left."

The "Loyalist" campaign was "an orgy of rape, sadism, and unspeakable obscenities, all perpetrated by our friend the Common Man," summarizes Kuehnelt-Leddihn. Recalling the orgy of anti-Christian violence that took place during the French Revolution's reign of terror — particularly the savage onslaught against the Christians of Le Vendee — Kuehnelt-Leddihn concludes that the "Loyalists ... showed themselves faithful disciples of de Sade and the Bluecoats in the Vendee." He also asserts that the "horrors that took place in the Congo were anticipated in this war." This refers to the UN's suppression of Katanga, a former province of the Congo that declared its independence from the Soviet-installed Communist regime of Patrice Lumumba and created a peaceful, multi-ethnic society under the leadership of Moise Tshombe, a pro-Western, Christian anti-Communist. The UN punished Katanga by deploying (with U.S. assistance) blue-helmeted "peacekeepers" who emulated the bestial behavior of the Soviet-sponsored "Loyalist" forces in Spain.

For all of his faults, Francisco Franco understood the nature of Communism and resisted its advance with skill and courage. His leadership helped save Spain from the fate that has befallen so many tragic countries in this bloody century; his resistance to Hitler's demands played a key role in the eventual defeat of the Third Reich. By offering sanctuary to Spain's Jews, he saved thousands who otherwise



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would have perished in the Holocaust. Clearly, Franco deserves a prominent place among this century's outstanding champions of human liberty.

"Franco had his share of faults, of course, and he made plenty of important mistakes," concedes Hilaire du Berrier. "He was sometimes extreme in his methods, and he could be cruel, but then it should be remembered that he was from a military tradition in which war was seen as applied cruelty. He tended to overestimate his own indispensability, but unlike genuine despots he provided for orderly succession by restoring the monarchy and appointing Juan Carlos to succeed him in 1969. His devotion to Catholicism was admirable, but it sometimes lapsed into religious bigotry. But whatever his faults, down at the fundamental level, he was perhaps our greatest ally. If he had not stood firm against both the Communists and the Nazis, the world quite literally may have been doomed."

*Photo of Francisco Franco: AP Images*





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