

The Valley of the Fallen in Spain. Between National Catholicism and the Commodification of Memory

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Thanatourism is a portmanteau derived from the word “tourism” and the Greek term *tanatos*. The latter means death, although when capitalized, it indicates the god of death in Greek mythology. The concept refers to the act of visiting – individually or as a group – locations that have witnessed natural disasters, battles with staggering casualties, or acts of genocide (such as concentration camps, sites of mass shootings, or memorials devoted to these acts). Moreover, thanatourism takes a form of group excursions organized under the theme of death, and comes with all the usual services – transportation, accommodations, licensed tour guides, souvenir sales, and so forth.

Polish scholarship adopted the term¹ following its English equivalent *thanatourism*,² which literally translates to “death tourism.”³ An adjacent concept is “dark tourism”⁴ (in Polish, *mroczna turystyka*),⁵ which expands the object of interest from death to all phenomena falling under the banner of “dark” or “morbid.” Other related terms appear as well, such as “grief tourism,” which serve to modify the scope or character of such activity.

It seems relevant to emphasize that these notions may be incorporated into critical methodologies in the social sciences, due to their demystifying nature. I am referring specifically to taking advantage of the value of sites bound up with death, suffering, human tragedy and the like, which play a crucial role in the collective memory of a nation, ethnic or religious group, or any other kind of imagined community – to use Benedict Anderson’s term⁶ – and putting a price on them for touristic purposes. It involves cultivating feelings of excitement or morbid

¹ See: S. Tanaś, *Tanatoturystyka – kontrowersyjne oblicze turystyki kulturowej*, “Peregrinus Cracoviensis” 17/2006, pp. 85–100.

² See: A.V. Seaton, *War and Thanatourism: Waterloo 1815-1914*, “Annals of Tourism Research” 1(26)/1999, pp. 130–158; R. Tzanelli, *Heritage in the Digital Era: Cinematic Tourism and the Activist Cause*, Abingdon, New York 2013, pp. 4–5; S. Kaczmarek, *Urban tourism – the Blessing or the Curse*, [in:] R.C.L. González (ed.), *Urban Changes in Different Scales: Systems and Structures*, Santiago de Compostela 2006, p. 366; N. Bárbara, *The Business of Creative Tourism and Creativity in the Tourism Business*, [in:] A.D. Barker (ed.), *Identity and Intercultural Exchange in Travel and Tourism*, Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto 2015, p. 14.

³ See: A. Ziębińska-Witek, *Turystyka śmierci jako zjawisko kulturowe*, “Teksty Drugie” 3/2012, pp. 174–186.

⁴ J. Lennon, M. Foley, *Dark Tourism. The attraction of death and disaster*, New York, London 2000.

⁵ See: A. Komsta, *Problem dark tourism i jego możliwości w Polsce*, “Turystyka Kulturowa” 2/2013, pp. 46–65.

⁶ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, New York 2006.

curiosity about death and its circumstances that attract visitors to such places. In economic terms, it encourages attempts to maximize the profitability and lucrative potential of these activities, which results in commodification of death and human suffering. It has been made possible on a sweeping scale with the rise of mass tourism.

The Valley of the Fallen as a Testimony to the Triumph of Francoism

A popular destination for thanatourism can be found in Valle do los Caídos, or the Valley of the Fallen in Spain. It lies within the municipality of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, in the valley of Cuelgamuros in the Guadarrama mountains. It is home to the massive Monumento Nacional de Santa Cruz del Valle de los Caídos (The National Monument of the Holly Cross of the Valley of the Fallen) – this cross is considered to be the tallest of its kind in the world and has become the site's signature mark.

The monument is in a fine setting to tower over its surroundings due to its location on the hilltop of Risco de Nava, facing the Benedictine monastery. The main feature of the complex is an underground basilica carved into the rock in a form of a colossal and long crypt lavishly decorated with Francoist symbols. The crypt opens out onto a vast square consistent with the majestic aesthetics of the complex as a whole. The basilica houses the graves of Francisco Franco and José Antonio Primo de Rivera, as well as the remains of 33,847 civil war casualties, according to the data available on the official website of Patri-

monio Nacional.⁷ Urns of soldiers who fought for Franco and were buried as heroes sit side by side with those who fought in behalf of the republic.⁸

The entire complex was built by decree of the general Francisco Franco in 1940, and its construction, which relied largely on the labor of political prisoners,⁹ was not completed until 1959. The purpose of the complex was to commemorate victims of the Spanish Civil War – which had been regarded by Francoists as a crusade.¹⁰ Yet, more importantly, the site was to stand as testimony to the triumph of their ideology. It claimed the glory of Spain as *una, grande y libre*, or “united, great, and free.” This slogan was used in the time of the Franco regime with the aim to consolidate the society ideologically around the ideas of the nation, Catholicism. A pragmatic instrument of this endeavour was to rule the country with an iron fist.

⁷ In English, “National Heritage;” the website offers information on the premises which used to belong to the Crown of Spain, including palaces and monasteries, which now belong to the State under Ley 23/1982, de 16 de junio, reguladora del Patrimonio Nacional, or Law 23/1982 of June 16 on the National Heritage, <http://www.patrimoniomnacional.es/real-sitio/abadia-benedictina-de-la-santa-cruz-del-valle-de-los-caidos> (August 22 2017).

⁸ See, for example: Q. Solé i Barjau, *Inhumados en el Valle de los Caídos. Los primeros traslados desde la provincia de Madrid*, “Hispania Nova. Revista de Historia Contemporánea” 9/2009, <http://hispanianova.rediris.es/9/articulos/9a009.pdf> (August 24 2017).

⁹ There are diverging accounts of the number of political prisoners involved and their treatment within the then penitentiary system. See, for example: R. Sierra, *Los esclavos del Valle de los Caídos: la historia negra del mausoleo de Franco*, “Clío: Revista de historia” 25/2003, pp. 38–45; A. Bárcena, *Redención de penas en el Valle de los Caídos: las fuentes rebaten el mito*, “Aportes. Revista de Historia Contemporánea” 27(79)/2012, pp. 5–29. For instance, Bárcena claims on the basis of his research that not only were the statistics on political prisoners inflated, but the prisoners received far better treatment than is currently believed.

¹⁰ See also: A. Alted Vigil, *El Valle de Los Caídos ¿Espíritu de cruzada o símbolo de reconciliación?*, “Ayer. Revista de Historia Contemporánea” 98/2015, pp. 263–275.

On the Selfie and Fresh Flowers for Franco, or: Cultural Practices at the Valley of the Fallen

The Valley of the Fallen provides a laboratory to observe passive and active consumption of cultural goods as well as various modes of expressing worldviews. The site draws in Spanish and foreign groups alike. While for some of them it is the final destination, for others it is just one of many attractions in their itinerary. The tomb of Franco is particularly ethralling. Aside from taking photos (nowadays, usually selfies) against the entire panorama, ideally including the cross, and purchasing inscribed souvenirs to document their visit in the valley, many of them are drawn by the desire to see and, whenever possible, touch the simple crypt made of light gray granite that contains the dictator's remains. The recent news that the grave may soon be removed only intensifies its allure, and travel agencies and guides are quick to capitalize on this threat. For the removal of Franco's tomb is one of many operations advocated by the left, it provides support to frame excursions to the Valley as the "last chance" for a "confrontation" with the general.

Moreover, mass services are held in the basilica.¹¹ Interestingly enough, there are claims expressed in the communities associated with the Valley that worship opportunities are restricted "under various pretexts"¹² and, as such, are subject to shutdowns or limited access. In fact, they are due

¹¹ The current calendar of mass services: El Valle de Los Caídos. Abadía de La Santa Cruz, Eventos y Horarios, dates updated regularly, <http://www.valledeloscaidos.es/eventos-y-horarios> (August 30 2017).

¹² See: *Informaciones prácticas para la visita al Valle de los Caídos*, January 1 2011, <http://www.vki2.net/informacion.htm> (August 30 2017).

to ongoing renovations and exhumations conducted by archaeological crews. This work forces the institution to temporarily suspend or downscale its activities. The complex is also a destination for pilgrimages and religious tourism. It also serves as a venue for gatherings held to honor general Franco, imbued with nostalgia for the old regime. They take place twice a year: on November the 20th, to mark the death anniversary of both Franco and José Antonio Primo de Rivera, and July 18, to commemorate Alzamiento Nacional, literally translated as the National Uprising. It was the previous regime's term used with reference to the 1936 coup d'état against the Second Republic,¹³ which triggered the outbreak of the Civil War and is remembered today as the starting point of the Movimiento Nacional (Nationalist Movement) and the Francoist era.

Although Francoism is recalled today as a period rife with dark moments and historical accounts often present its leader as more of a dictator than a national hero, fresh flowers are still laid regularly on Franco's grave. Nowadays, this is not an everyday social practice and it may rather be referred to as a curiosity. The question of who is in charge of laying flowers is posed by Natalia Junquera on the pages of "El País,"¹⁴ and she provides

¹³ Nowadays, this name is discarded by historians for the benefit of the notion "coup d'etat." Even more so, the expression Glorioso Alzamiento Nacional, which literally means Glorious National Uprising, is falling into oblivion. It conjures narratives and iconography once promoted by the state and taught in schools and universities to depict the event as an act of valor performed by proponents of the "real Spain" and directed against the "anti-Spain," which translated to a composite of the "tyranny" of the Second Republic, international communism on "Moscow's orders," etc..

¹⁴ N. Junquera, *¿Quién pone flores frescas en la tumba de Franco? Secretos, verdades y mentiras del Valle de los Caídos*, El País, 20.11.2015, https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2015/10/28/actualidad/1446061476_183076.html (August 30 2017).

her own answer, arguing that it is those who remember Franco's regime as the "defense of freedom" and the general himself as the "past, present and future solution to all problems that plague the moments in history when democracy is extorted." She links such declarations and the ritual of laying flowers to the activities of the Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco,¹⁵ a foundation based in Madrid that has been operating since the year 1976 and is committed to upholding the memory of general Franco and his attainments. There is a declaration on the webpage of the foundation that it works to defend the truth about this historical figure and his legacy. The foundation is not the only entity that undertakes such efforts. There are also individuals who are fascinated with Franco, bring flowers to his grave, and advocate his regime as the golden age of Spanish history.

There appeared a controversy in the media around the flowers in July 2017. It was not just the sheer presence of the flowers, for they form no exception to the site's overall cultural ambience. The confusion was over an episode involving an archeologist Alfredo González-Ruibal. This professor at the prestigious Complutense University of Madrid, who at the time was directing archeological works at Civil War barricades, was asked by a staff member to leave. This followed the professor's attempt to remove a bouquet from Franco's grave. Thereupon, he was informed that he had breached the rules of showing respect in a place of worship. In his argumentation,

¹⁵ The website of Fundación Nacional Francisco Franco, <http://www.fnff.es/> (August 30 2017).

González-Ruibal resorted to the illegal character of exaltation of Francoism¹⁶ and declared that he had acted in defence of the rule of law. On his own initiative, he later published an explanation on his blog. He commented that the man who had placed the flowers on the grave subsequently made a salute to the dictator. Reportedly, a female staff member who asked the professor to leave, inquired how he would have behaved if the grave belonged to his relative. She added that there was no need for the professor to attend the place if he did not like it. Then, the employee called the security to show the professor out. The incident instantly went viral in the Spanish press at the national level. Several major newspapers reported on the event, including: “El País,”¹⁷ “El Mundo,”¹⁸ “ABC,”¹⁹ and “El Español.”²⁰ In this way, the research visit transformed into a conflagration between opposing worldviews. This episode demonstrates that cultural practices at the Valley

¹⁶ This is under Ley de la Memoria Histórica (Ley 52/2007, de 26 de diciembre), the Law of Historical Memory (Law 52/2007 from December 26). For more on the legal basis and conflicts over memorial sites of the Civil War and Francoist era in the contemporary public sphere with a special focus on Catalonia, see: M. Biernacka, *Wojna na pomniki w Katalonii, czyli co zrobić z upamiętnieniem bitwy pod Ebro*, “Przegląd Humanistyczny” 2/2017, pp. 11–22.

¹⁷ *Expulsado un hombre del Valle de los Caídos por retirar flores de la tumba de Franco*, El País, July 24 2017, https://elpais.com/ccaa/2017/07/24/madrid/1500907417_346041.html (August 30 2017).

¹⁸ *Un arqueólogo denuncia que le expulsan del Valle de los Caídos por retirar un ramo de flores de la tumba de Franco*, El Mundo, July 24 2017, <http://www.elmundo.es/madrid/2017/07/24/5975c10be2704e780f8b4589.html> (August 30 2017).

¹⁹ *Expulsan a un profesor de la Complutense del Valle de los Caídos por retirar las flores de la tumba de Franco*, ABC, 24.07.2017, http://www.abc.es/espana/madrid/abci-expulsan-profesor-complutense-valle-caidos-retirar-flores-tumba-franco-201707241311_noticia.html (August 30 2017).

²⁰ H. Riaño, *Expulsado del Valle de los Caídos por retirar flores de la tumba de Franco*, El Español, 24.07.2017, http://www.elespanol.com/cultura/patrimonio/20170724/233726919_0.html (August 30 2017).

of the Fallen are governed by forces that extend go beyond the law pertaining to public space in Spain.

Between the Idea of the Nation and the Laminated Photograph, or: How to Make Money at the Valley of the Fallen

While controversies over the site's future are still playing out in leftist circles²¹ and plans have been drawn up to re-purpose the premises and remove general Franco's grave if not the complex as a whole, the site enjoys uninterrupted support from the conservative right-wing People's Party (Partido Popular)²² as a symbol of reconciliation between Spaniards. It fits into the historical policy that this party advocates as the epitome of the idea of the strong Spain. Buttressed with the narratives which are built around it, it functions as a tool for the formation and consolidation of an imagined community in a form of one nation.²³ The building's monumental scale paired with the dark history of the Civil War and the repressions of the Franco's regime continue to spawn controversies as new evidence is unearthed during exhumations conducted – all make for

²¹ For example, see: *División en la izquierda ante la iniciativa de exhumar los restos de Franco del Valle de los Caídos*, El Mundo, September 5 2017, <http://www.elmundo.es/espana/2017/05/09/5911f76be2704eea608b45e5.html> (30.08.2017); *División en la izquierda por la iniciativa de exhumar los restos de Franco del Valle de los Caídos*, Herald, 9.05.2017, <http://www.heraldo.es/noticias/nacional/2017/05/09/division-izquierda-por-iniciativa-exhumar-los-restos-franco-del-valle-los-caidos-1174519-305.html> (August 30 2017).

²² For example, see: F. Garea, *Solo el PP se opone en el Congreso a sacar a Franco del Valle de los Caídos*, El País, September 5 2017, https://politica.elpais.com/politica/2017/05/09/actualidad/1494314666_574295.html (August 30 2017).

²³ Due to the volume restrictions, I leave aside the details about the political conflict around the Valley of the Fallen and its social basis.

a tourist attraction of tremendous appeal for Spanish and international visitors.

The premises serve the needs of the Franco devotees and pilgrims, due to its symbolic valences and proximity to the monastery. The site has proven to command the appeal of mass tourism, and its facilities are used accordingly. It is conveniently located in the Madrid province, roughly sixty kilometers northeast of the capital²⁴ and a mere fourteen from the Escorial palace and monastery complex²⁵ which serves as a multipurpose site comprising a monastery and a library surrounded by gardens. The proximity and the symbolic value of the two sites for the purpose of reinforcing nationalist ideology and the glory of Spain, travel agencies offer excursion packages to the Valley of the Fallen and Escorial, and more extended tours include sightseeing in Madrid or Toledo.

There is a group of entities that have a vested interest in expanding the complex and the services and products sold there. These groups include the Association for the Defense of the Valley of the Fallen, travel bureaus organizing trips there, souvenir manufacturers and suppliers. Adult admission to the complex currently costs nine euros, while discounted admission costs four, and further concessions are available for large tourist groups and

²⁴ For directions, see: <http://www.calcularruta.com/de-madrid-a-el-valle-de-los-caidos.html> (August 28 2017). The exact distance in kilometers and travel time may slightly vary depending on the route.

²⁵ For tips on getting there, see: <http://www.calcularruta.com/de-el-valle-de-los-caidos-a-real-monasterio-de-san-lorenzo-de-el-escorial.html> (August 28 2017).

school excursions.²⁶ In the year 2015, prices were raised by about 80%, much to the objection of the Association for the Defense of the Valley of the Fallen.²⁷

Aside from ideological activity, the association is involved in the production and sale of souvenirs from the Valley of the Fallen. It is therefore in its best interests to maximize the volume of visitors. Souvenirs available for purchase include laminated panoramic photographs of the complex and its signature features, such as the crucified Jesus figure located in the basilica. The association operates an online store ADVC Ediciones, where the photographs can be purchased for five euros each (according to the price list that was valid at the time of writing).²⁸ The product range includes books on political oppression for fifteen euros, books on the concept, design and construction of the complex (70 euros), books on prisoners (18 euros), an album containing photographs of the complex and the surrounding valley (24 euros), packages of three books on sale for 39 euros, a DVD promoting the vision of reconciliation for 15 euros, and packages of three DVDs on sale for 39 euros. One can also purchase a ceramic mug inscribed with “Valle de los Caídos” and the emblem of the black cross for nine euros. There is also a cotton tee-shirt with the same design available at the same price in five sizes.

²⁶ The current price list is available under this link: <https://entradas.patrimonionacional.es/es-ES/informacion-recinto/15/valle-de-los-caidos> (August 28 2017).

²⁷ See: *Las entradas al Valle de los Caídos suben un 80 por ciento y pasan de 5 a 9 euros*, El Faro de Guadarrama, October 22 2014, <http://www.elfarodelguadarrama.com/noticia/35098/san-lorenzo/las-entradas-al-valle-de-los-caidos-suben-un-80-por-ciento-y-pasan-de-5-a-9-euros.html> (August 24 2017).

²⁸ The online store ADVC Ediciones: <http://www.elvalledeloscaidos.es/tienda/> (August 27 2017).

The website also features links, empty so far, that promise calendars, almanacs, and lottery tickets.

The question of whether the memory of those buried at the Valley of the Fallen will face commodification hardly seems up for debate. This process goes on with the lapse of time and generational transitions, but it is also a reflection of market processes. This site still plays a role in the identity formation for proponents of the idea of the strong and unified Spanish nation. It serves the same purposes for communities affiliated with the church on a national and international scale who advocate the idea of the Christian Europe. The Valley is also an object of political conflicts and ideological schisms in the Spanish society.

Author's translation