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Spanish Lessons: Reflections on *el 23-F* and other Spanish Coup Attempts in the Aftermath of the January 6th Insurrection

Scott Boehm

Like many Spaniards and scholars of contemporary Spain, I watched the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol that took place on January 6, 2021 through the filter of *el 23-F*, the February 23, 1981 coup attempt that involved an armed assault on El Congreso de los Diputados.¹ After consuming an exorbitant amount of screen time filled with livestreams, news reports and raw footage of the day's disturbing events, first from my office desk and then from my home in mid-Michigan, I sent a WhatsApp message to a friend in Spain before going to bed as the presidential election results were still being certified long after midnight. It read: "*Aquí estamos viviendo un 23-F estilo americano, una mala noche la tiene cualquiera.*" The reference was to the title of Eduardo Mendicutti's 1982 novel about *el 23-F*, that notoriously bad night that kept Spaniards on edge into the wee hours until King Juan Carlos I finally appeared on national television at 1:15am to condemn it, reassuring Spaniards that the situation was under control and that the recently restored Spanish democracy would live to see another day. The king's two-minute address came more than seven hours after 288 members of the Civil Guard under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero interrupted a parliamentary vote to install Leopoldo Calvo-Sotelo as Spain's new president a month after Adolfo Suárez's sudden resignation. As on January 6th, "*El Tejerazo*" was staged during a transfer of power that was temporarily suspended by a shocking act of organized violence. Shortly after Tejero infamously shouted "*¡Quieto todo el mundo!*," several rounds of submachine gun fire were shot off in the congressional chamber. Not long after that, Captain General Jaime Milans del Bosch of the III Military Region led more than 2,000 troops and fifty tanks into the streets of Valencia, where he promptly declared a state of emergency. The failed coup was over the next morning, but bullet scars are still visible in the ceiling of the Spanish Parliament today.

¹ I would like to thank the people who read various versions of this article at different stages and offered differing views that contributed to its development. Sebastiaan Faber, Joseba Gabilondo, John Washington, Adam Lewis and Alistair Martin helped me work through and process the historical meanings and potential implications of January 6th from the perspectives of Spanish and U.S. history. Additionally, the feedback from the anonymous reviewers proved invaluable and I am grateful to them both. I would also like to commend the Board of the *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies* for having the foresight to create a space for the publication of academic articles that grapple with the many types of crises we will undoubtedly continue to face in the future as both scholars and human beings living on an increasingly precarious planet.

While the legacy of January 6th is contingent on its evolving narration and future events that will retroactively determine its meaning, including the outcomes of the House of Representatives Select Committee to Investigate the January 6th Attack on the U.S. Capitol, *el 23-F* quickly became a foundational moment in “*la Transición*” that followed Francisco Franco’s death in 1975. It also provided a much-needed dose of political legitimacy to Franco’s hand-picked successor as the country’s head of state, since Juan Carlos I had publicly sworn his allegiance to the man who had raised him like a son, as well as to the principles of Franco’s *Movimiento Nacional*. Thus, the failed coup attempt ratified the dubious democratic credentials of the king, instantly producing a generation of “*Juancarlistas*” and cementing his place within what the historian Ferran Gallego and others have called “*el mito de la Transición*” for decades until both the king and that political process came under intense scrutiny during the first two decades of the 21st century.² This was due, in large part, to the emergence of the historical memory movement during the first decade and *el 15-M indignados* movement during the second, as well as the historical revisionism and cultural criticism they have engendered.³ Such shifts, combined with a series of scandals and corruption charges, prompted the celebrated hero of the official narrative of *el 23-F* to abdicate the throne to his son in 2014 and to go into ‘voluntary exile’ in 2020.

In the aftermath of January 6th, memories of *el rey emérito* loomed large as references to *el 23-F* could be found on social media and in the press. One of the most notable examples of this was a column by Giles Tremlett in *The Guardian*, which was republished in Spanish by *elDiario.es*, in which Tremlett rightly echoed the shared experience of “*déjà coup*” in the title of his article, “For Spaniards who remember 1981, the storming of the Capitol looked eerily familiar.”⁴ This rang true because in addition to the fact that both events involved the takeover of congressional buildings during a contentious transfer of power, much of which was broadcast live or replayed on television in the days after in the case of *el 23-F*, there were other eye-catching parallels. For instance:

Spain’s attackers—reactionary followers of the dictator General Francisco Franco, who had died six years earlier—were also led by men in silly hats, although Lieutenant Colonel Antonio Tejero was sporting the patent

² Ferran Gallego, *El mito de la Transición: La crisis del franquismo y los orígenes de la democracia (1973-1997)*, (Barcelona: Crítica, 2008).

³ See, for example, Martínez, Guillem (Ed.), *CT o la Cultura de la Transición: Crítica a 35 años de cultura Española*, (Madrid: DeBolsillo, 2012)

⁴ See Giles Tremlett, “For Spaniards who remember 1981, the storming of the Capitol looked eerily familiar,” *The Guardian*, January 9, 2021.

leather tricorn of Spain's civil guard paramilitary police force rather than a pair of buffalo horns.⁵

The comic aspect of both events is, indeed, one of the most conspicuous ways in which they are likely to remain connected in Spanish cultural memory. However, Tremlett follows this resemblance with the statement that “comparisons mostly end there” before distinguishing what occurred in Spain in 1981 as “a proper coup attempt, not a shambolic human tidal wave containing costumed followers of an egomaniacal conspiracy theorist.”⁶ If Tremlett acknowledges the farce now commonly associated with *el 23-F*, which was due as much to Tejero's distinctive moustache and butchering of the Spanish language (“¡Se sienten, coño!”) as it was to the *tricornio* placed upon on his head, while still taking the threat it represented seriously, he is quick to dismiss the gravity of the U.S. insurrection for appearing excessively carnivalesque and rather disorganized. He concludes by claiming that “an incident like this can be purifying and clarifying,” and that “for Spain it marked the limits of violence and the definitive end of the rotten era of Francoism,” reproducing the official narrative of *el 23-F*, in which “democracy and its institutions proved resilient, just as they have in the United States.”⁷

But such a conclusion is only possible if one ignores the fact that the limited democracy that exists in Spain today is, in part, a consequence of *el 23-F* and how it has been narrativized as the definitive end of the dictatorship through which the consolidation of a (re)new(ed) democratic Spain was achieved, in idyllic fashion. This is a story that has been propagated by a myriad of history books, novels, films and television shows, a slew of which came out in anticipation of the 30th anniversary of the failed coup a decade ago, including Javier Cercas' celebrated *Anatomía de un instante*, which won numerous accolades and awards, including the Premio Nacional de Narrativa in 2010.⁸ In her lucid analysis of what amounts to a veritable *23-F* culture industry, H. Rosi Song argues that “after a long, repressive, and authoritarian dictatorship, the democratic ‘triumph’ of the failed coup came to be used as a defense against criticisms of the imperfect nature of the country's political transformation.”⁹ In contrast, Emilio Silva, president of the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory, offers a very different reading:

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ See also the film *23-F: la película* (Dir. Chema de la Peña 2011) and the tv miniseries *23-F: el día más difícil del Rey* (Dir. Silvia Quer 2009)

⁹ H. Rosi Song, *Lost in Transition: Constructing Memory in Contemporary Spain*, (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2016), 53.

Cuando termina la dictadura, los organizadores del orden establecido tienen tenso y muy desarrollado el músculo de la producción de miedo permanente. Los más de 580 muertos por violencia política, entre 1976 y 1981, permitieron que el miedo a la dictadura se transformara en miedo a la democracia. Se trataba de un triunfo de las élites: gracias a esa forma de autoparálisis social podrían morir impunemente en la cama, arropadas por todos sus privilegios. En ese festival de miedos artificiales hacía falta una traca final, un cerrojazo que permitiera dedicar las energías a otras cosas pero dejara definitivamente cubierto ese flanco. Y el 23F fue el gran susto.¹⁰

In both the official narrative and Silva's alternative account, *el 23-F* is treated as the climax of a historical process, but they differ sharply in terms of the process to which they refer. While the official narrative posits *el 23-F* as the end of a dictatorship whose (farcical) specter was unable to thwart Spain's triumphal transition to democracy thanks to the heroic intervention of a democratic king, Silva's narrative posits it as the final act in a carefully orchestrated transference of fear that characterized the Francoist dictatorship to "democratic" Spain, setting limits to how far democratization could go in a country still haunted by Franco's shadow, and perpetuating the state of impunity established under his vicious rule.

Thus, one of the lessons that *el 23-F* has to offer observers of January 6 and the depths of the political crisis it signals is the power of narration to shape cultural memories of a failed coup attempt. Cultural memory is a battlefield of sorts itself as signified by the common use of 'memory battles' or 'memory wars' to describe disputes over the past and its political import in the present in a variety of national contexts, including, of course, the contemporary Spanish one.¹¹ But this is not the only lesson that can be gleaned from *el 23-F* or a pair of coups that sought to stop democracy in its tracks much earlier in 20th century Spain. Nor, perhaps, is it the most important. In what follows, I seek to sketch how *el 23-F* functions as a screen memory that blocks out cultural recognition of the traumatic memories and historical lessons of those other two coups, both of which took place in the 1930s. To our collective detriment, this function of *el 23-F* effectively thwarts our ability to cognitively map their relevance to January 6th and the moment of danger we occupy due to the return of ethnic/religious nationalism, authoritarianism and fascism on the global stage in the form of Donald Trump and

¹⁰ Emilio Silva, "¡Con miedo todo el mundo!" *Público*, February 25, 2016.

¹¹ See, for example, Sebastiaan Faber, *Memory Battles of the Spanish Civil War: History, Fiction, Photography*, (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2018).

Trumpism in the U.S., Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, and Narendra Modi in India, as well as the emergence of the far-right political party Vox in Spain and similar parties across Europe that have taken power in countries such as Poland and Hungary in recent years.

El 23-F as Screen Memory

In his 1899 essay on the topic, Sigmund Freud proposed that screen memories are produced as a result of displacement in which one memory that is closely associated with another objectionable memory takes the place of the traumatic memory, which is, in turn, repressed due to its emotionally charged, threatening content that is the very source of resistance to its being recalled in the first place. As Freud states, “the result of the conflict is therefore that, instead of the mnemonic image which would have been justified by the original event, another is produced which has been to some degree associatively *displaced* from the former one.”¹² While Freud’s focus was on childhood memories, the concept has been adapted by scholars such as Marita Sturken, who has applied it to cultural memories of the Vietnam War and the AIDS epidemic in the U.S.¹³ In her book *Tangled Memories*, she writes:

Freud’s work has been particularly significant in problematizing the concept of forgetting. He was primarily interested not in why memories were retained but in what they were hiding [...] In Freud’s formulation, forgetting is an *active* process of repression, one that demands vigilance and is designed to protect the subject from anxiety, fear, jealousy, and other difficult emotions. The concept of a screen memory is particularly useful in thinking about how a culture remembers. Cultural memory is produced through representation— in contemporary culture, often through photographic images, cinema, and television. These mnemonic aids are also screens, actively blocking out other memories that are more difficult to represent.¹⁴

¹² Sigmund Freud, “Screen Memories,” (1899), 307, reprinted in Howard B. Levine & Gail S. Reed (Eds), *On Freud’s “Screen Memories,”* (London: Routledge, 2015), 9.

¹³ For example, in the case of the Vietnam War, Sturken claims that, in the United States, narratives of U.S. veterans of that war overshadow the traumatic experiences of Vietnamese civilians and veterans, rendering them virtually invisible and forgotten to cultural memory.

¹⁴ Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*, (Los Angeles: U of California P, 1997), 8.

Sturken's point that Freud— perhaps better than anyone before him— grasped that memories have both the capacity to retain personal (and collective or cultural) experience, *as well as to hide it* is particularly pertinent when positing *el 23-F* as a screen memory. This is especially so when considering the psychoanalyst Eugene J. Mahon's observation about what he considers "a neglected Freudian discovery," that "historical accuracy is not their prime concern."¹⁵ This is because the function of screen memories is to offer protection from rather than high fidelity to the truth. In the case of *el 23-F*, this insight begs the question of what objectionable truths do mass-produced cultural memories of *el 23-F* seek to repress when they are so frequently in the service of the official narrative. While one possible answer to this question involves interrogating the various lacunae related to the unfolding of that day's events, including considerable speculation that the king himself may have been involved in the plot, a truly traumatic prospect— if true— for any remaining *juancarlista* or defender of the myth of the Transition, I am more interested in another possible answer that entails traumatic memories of the 1936 coup that ignited the Spanish Civil War, as well as the 1932 coup that foreshadowed it.¹⁶

But before shifting the focus to the 1930s, I would like to return briefly to January 6th in order to provide another notable example of how it elicited cultural memories of *el 23-F* in Spain as a means to arrive to that "low, dishonest decade" by way of what I will consider as screen memories.¹⁷ In his capacity as Director of El Instituto Cervantes, Luis García Montero, the celebrated poet and former Izquierda Unida candidate for president of La Comunidad de Madrid, began two days of talks in Madrid to commemorate the 40th anniversary of *el 23-F* by referencing the January 6th insurrection that had occurred one month earlier. In his opening comments, García Montero referenced "*la invasión del Capitolio*" as "*un movimiento irracional*" that, by its very citation within this context, would appear to be related somehow to *el 23-F*. However, García Montero conspicuously failed to offer any critique of January 6th by way of *el 23-F*, or vice versa, making his scant words on the subject appear more as a public moment of free association

¹⁵ See Eugene J. Mahon (2016) "Screen Memories: a Neglected Freudian Discovery?," *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, 85:1, 59-88.

¹⁶ There is not sufficient space here to elaborate on the possibility that King Juan Carlos I was involved in the coup plot, a long-standing controversy that falls outside the scope of this article. Various competing theories concerning the origin and intentions of the coup, as well as its possible organizers, including the king, are covered in detail by Emmanuel Rodríguez López in *Por qué fracasó la democracia en España. La Transición y el régimen del '78*, (Madrid: Traficantes de sueños, 2015), 256-264. See also Jesús Palacios, *23-F. El Rey y su secreto*, (Madrid: Libros Libres, 2010), as well as Juan Carlos Monedero, *La Transición contada a nuestros padres. Nocturno de la democracia española*, (Madrid: Catarata, 2013), 152-159.

¹⁷ The line is from W.H. Auden's most well-known poem, "September 1, 1939."

than as a conscious statement on the matter. Such arrested analysis, which is reminiscent of the column by Giles Tremlett discussed above, suggests three things. First, that García Montero believed the connection would be obvious to the socially-distanced audience, which included Spanish President Pedro Sánchez and other socialist members of the coalition government. Second, García Montero's affect and word choice to describe the participants of the January 6th insurrection as "irrational" without providing any scrutiny of their motivations suggests that he may have been overwhelmed by the (screen) images of the political violence of that day, which were still quite fresh at the time, if also incomplete in their representation of the extent of the violence that took place, which was revealed only months later. Third, such an analytical impasse is indicative of the limits of what is permissible to state openly about *el 23-F*, especially in the presence of *el presidente del gobierno*, the master signifier of Spanish symbolic authority. Thus, ideological censorship may explain why García Montero did not make a more profound connection between the two events in his welcoming remarks to open these *jornadas*, which, tellingly, were titled, "Los retos de la democracia. 40 años después del golpe de Estado del 23 de febrero," which were inaugurated by the First Vice-President and Minister of Democratic Memory, Carmen Calvo, who was also in the audience.¹⁸ Ultimately, in this curious speech act, January 6th is deployed in the service of the official narrative of *el 23-F*, whose utterance was overdetermined by ideological forces and its proximity to state power: even an established poet and public figure who has professed his republican ideals elsewhere could not speak otherwise within this context.¹⁹

Now, if we zoom out from García Montero's comments to consider their context from a wider angle, then *el 23-F* comes into focus as a screen memory that, as Freud claims, "owes its value as a memory not to its own content but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed."²⁰ And as I've alluded to already, in the case of *el 23-F*, that other content would belong to the 1936 coup against the II Spanish Republic that was launched between July 17-18th, whose partial failure resulted in the Spanish Civil War, as well as the coup attempt led by General José Sanjurjo that had failed spectacularly four years prior. While cultural memories of the 1936 coup have been recovered over the past two and a half decades primarily through the exhumation of mass graves directly tied to that coup and an explosion of cultural production that contests the official narrative constructed during the Transition

¹⁸ García Montero's comments can be heard at the beginning of the recording of the event. See "Los retos de la democracia. 40 años después del golpe de Estado del 23-F," *Instituto Cervantes*, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiDR-P6vIF0>.

¹⁹ For example, see Luis García Montero, "Un pensamiento republicano," *Público*, April 17, 2011.

²⁰ Freud, 320.

about the Spanish Civil War as a period of “collective insanity” in which blame for its origin is shared equally by the II Spanish Republic and the assortment of generals and fascists who plotted against it, the 1932 coup has largely been relegated to the dustbin of cultural memory.²¹ Of course, there are obvious reasons for this discrepancy, since the historical significance of the former dwarfs that of the latter. However, I insist on the importance of including the 1932 coup attempt here as I believe it contains some valuable lessons for understanding the January 6th insurrection that have been overshadowed by both *el 23-F* and the 1936 coup, something that is itself a consequence of the displacement of traumatic, “objectionable” content of the coup that ignited the Spanish Civil War onto screen memories of *el 23-F*.

For example, let us hover over the commemorative acts organized by the Sánchez government and extensions of the Spanish state such as El Instituto Cervantes in honor of the 40th anniversary of *el 23-F* for a moment longer. Two full days of talks featuring an array of public figures that culminated with an address by King Felipe VI in El Congreso de los Diputados in the absence of his father who had self-exiled to Abu Dhabi six months earlier. Heir to Juan Carlos I’s endangered legacy, Felipe VI stressed his father’s role in defeating the coup by reminding all listening that “el Rey Juan Carlos I asumió como Jefe del Estado su responsabilidad y su compromiso con la Constitución. Su firmeza y autoridad fueron determinantes para la defensa y el triunfo de la democracia.”²² Furthermore, he stated:

Millones de españoles, incluso de mi generación, tienen—temenos— aquella noche grabada en la memoria y sobre todo el recuerdo de cómo, desde la angustia y la preocupación sobre lo que podía suceder, sintieron la tranquilidad de ver cómo la libertad y el orden constitucional prevalecían.²³

What I would like to highlight first is the fact that while it is certainly true that at least a generation of Spaniards have that night recorded into their memory as Felipe VI suggests, it is not entirely clear that the memories they have of it are historically accurate. At the same time, the king’s version of the official narrative works to restore his father’s status as the hero of Spanish democracy in a political thriller with a happy ending suitable for Hollywood. As Sturken notes, “the desire for narrative closure [...] forces upon historical events the limits of narrative form

²¹ See Paloma Aguilar, *Memory and Amnesia: The Role of the Spanish Civil War in the Transition to Democracy*, (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002).

²² “El discurso íntegro del rey Felipe VI en el acto por el 40º aniversario del 23F,” *laSexta.com*.

²³ *Ibid.*

and enables forgetting.”²⁴ But it is not only all the messy details, loose ends and inconvenient truths of *el 23-F* that are forgotten in this sanitized narrative; the origin and assault against Spanish democracy is also left out of the story. While both Franco’s ghost and Juan Carlos I’s absence haunt this particular retelling of it, the affective power of *el 23-F* in Spanish cultural memory functions to overpower memories of the II Spanish Republic that was toppled by Franco and the other *Africanistas* behind the 1936 coup. Spain’s first experiment in democracy is rendered invisible, and its traumatic destruction is displaced upon the much less traumatic coup waged forty-five years later. To quote Marx: “first time tragic, second time farce.”²⁵ But the farce of *el 23-F* has tragically blocked the transmission of Spain’s democratic history to multiple generations of Spaniards by making it appear again and again— anniversary after anniversary— as *the* pertinent battle of Spanish democracy, rather than the bloody war that was waged against it.

To further illustrate how *el 23-F* functions as a screen memory that blocks out traumatic memories of the coup that ignited the Spanish Civil War, let us compare how *el 23-F* and the 1936 coup have been commemorated by the Spanish state. Such a comparison is exceedingly brief as there have been no such official commemorations, at least not since the restoration of Spanish democracy. Nor has there been any official denunciation of the 1936 coup by any Spanish president elected since Franco’s death, something that the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory demanded from Pedro Sánchez in July 2021 to no avail, even as the new Law of Democratic Memory was being touted by the government. Furthermore, while Sánchez did mention the II Spanish Republic on the 90th anniversary of its proclamation on April 14th, 2021 in a brief statement made on the floor of El Congreso de los Diputados, he did so by conjoining that event with the ratification of the 1978 Constitution and Spain’s entrance into the European Economic Community in 1985 to produce a three-pointed genealogy of national progress that completely ignores the fascist assault against the II Spanish Republic, as well as the *longue durée* of the repressive dictatorship that followed its triumph over democracy in Spain.²⁶ Such conspicuous omissions could not contrast more with how *el 23-F* had been remembered by the Spanish state only two months prior. We have here once again, evidence of a desire for narrative closure— and I would add, a happy ending— that Sturken indicates is indicative of official narratives of history that entail “a ‘strategic’ forgetting of painful

²⁴ Sturken, 8.

²⁵ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (New York: International Publishers Company, 1994).

²⁶ See the sixth minute of “Sesión Plenaria (14/04/2021),” *Congreso de los Diputados – Canal Parlamento*, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoDGyGv5edQ>.

events that may be too dangerous to keep in active memory” such as the 1936 coup, the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship, all of which work against the possibility of narrative closure and a happy ending.²⁷ They also disrupt claims made about the “fullness” of Spanish democracy, something that had become a matter of national debate and a source of conflict within the coalition government, the first such government since the II Spanish Republic, in fact. This was due to the polemical remarks made by the then Second Deputy Prime Minister Pablo Iglesias when he stated in an interview that “no hay una situación de plena normalidad política y democrática en España cuando los líderes políticos de los dos partidos que gobiernan Cataluña está uno en la cárcel y otro en Bruselas” in the context of the 2021 Catalunya elections.²⁸

While I do not have space here to contribute to this debate in terms of the exceptional situation in Catalunya that provoked it, I would like to point out that Iglesias’ comments were made only a few weeks before the events organized by the government to commemorate the 40th anniversary of *el 23-F*. These were used to mobilize popular sentiment against them and the “objectionable” cultural memories Iglesias’ words had the potential to elicit, which went well beyond the on-going conflict between the Spanish state and Catalunya to encompass questions about the monarchy and its legitimacy as a legacy of the dictatorship that toppled democracy in Spain and produced over 100,000 *desaparecidos* whose prostrate remains were left to rot in mass graves after its celebrated restoration. This historical fact is clearly a stain on any claim to Spain’s democratic credentials. And it has been recognized as such in one form or another by the United Nations Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances and Amnesty International, as well as the Argentine case investigating Francoist crimes against humanity that created a state of impunity perpetuated by the 1977 Amnesty Law. Such a state has been sustained by every single Spanish government elected since the first democratic elections held in forty years after they were suspended by the dictatorship, in the face of international law and pressure from international bodies and human rights organizations, as well as the family members of the disappeared who cannot in good faith be expected to accept Spain’s status as a full democracy when they continue to be treated as second-class citizens. As reported by *El Mundo*:

Congreso, Gobierno y Casa Real aprovechan este 40º aniversario de la intentona golpista para subrayar que España es una democracia plena, en contra de lo que sostiene el vicepresidente

²⁷ Sturken, 7.

²⁸ See Inés Santaaulalia & José Marcos, “Pablo Iglesias: ‘No hay una situación de plena normalidad política y democrática en España,’” *El País*, February 8, 2021.

Pablo Iglesias y los partidos nacionalistas e independentistas, socios del Gobierno de coalición. El aniversario del 23-F viene a coincidir con un momento álgido en el cuestionamiento de la monarquía por parte de Unidas Podemos desde el propio Gobierno.

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Here we have evidence of an awareness of how *el 23-F* is deployed as a screen memory to block the flow of dangerous traumatic memories alluded to above and to short-circuit the transmission of history that conflicts with the official narrative of democracy in Spain, which, as the tale goes, begins with the “historic” elections of 1977, not those of 1931, which were celebrated nearly a half century earlier.

The Consequences of Displacement

If I am correct in claiming that *el 23-F* functions as a screen memory, then, as I have already argued, it means that displacement has occurred between the 1936 coup that ignited the Spanish Civil War and the failed coup of 1981. But before concluding with a short discussion of some of the consequences of the displacement of the memories of a highly traumatic coup upon another less traumatic one, as I have outlined above, there is an additional aspect of this process that I have yet to describe that bears heavily upon those consequences and constitutes one of the most devastating. This has to do with the mass appeal of the official narrative of *el 23-F*, for it is true that it has been embraced since the early hours of February 24, 1981 by the vast majority of Spaniards, regardless of their political affiliation and despite the deterioration of Juan Carlos I’s reputation. While it is easy to understand why those on the right have accepted and vehemently defended the official narrative since the consequences of doing so benefit the state created largely by the dictatorship and many of its former officials during the Transition that, by and large, protected the privileges of the dominant classes and preferred sectors of Spanish society under Franco, it is somewhat paradoxical that so many of those on the left have also done so for precisely the same reason. I would assert that an aspect of displacement is at play that at least partially explains this phenomenon above and beyond any overwhelming desire for “*la reconciliación*” or “*la convivencia*” at any cost, which would be consistent with dominant ways of understanding the cultural

²⁹ Lucía Méndez, Felipe VI y Pedro Sánchez aprovechan el 23-F para defender la “plena” democracia Española, *El Mundo*, February 23, 2021.

politics of the Transition. Once again, the desire for narrative closure and happy historical endings are crucial to this alternative reading.

Displacement is one way to understand Spain's status as a global leader in the application of universal jurisdiction, most notably in the case of Augusto Pinochet. In 1998, the former Chilean dictator was detained in London and placed under house arrest after Spanish judge Baltazar Garzón issued an international warrant for his arrest on charges of genocide, terrorism and murder, which marked the first time that a former head of state was arrested on the international law principle of universal jurisdiction. His arrest was celebrated by the Spanish left and paved the way for the historical memory movement. Although it may not have been obvious at the time, from the perspective of twenty-three years and all that has occurred in terms of historical memory in Spain since then, the Pinochet case seemed to fulfill a displaced wish that had been impossible to achieve in Franco's case. Since his death in 1975, a frequent lament on the Spanish left was that "*Franco murió en la cama,*" which signified the frustrated desire to have killed him like the Italians had hung Mussolini, or at least to have defeated his regime and put him on trial and behind bars, a fantasy that suddenly appeared to be unfolding in reality in the Pinochet case. That did not come to pass thanks to the intervention of U.K. Home Secretary Jack Straw who overruled the House of Lords decision to send Pinochet to Spain to stand trial (in Franco's place), but the judicial, political and affective displacement that occurred on the Spanish left during the year and a half that the impossible seemed possible, highlighted the degree to which Spain's traumatic past had been repressed by the Transition, only to return in a related form that, like in the construction of screen memories, "is another element closely associated with the objectionable one."³⁰ Furthermore, the Pinochet case offered up the prospect of narrative closure and a "happy" ending, if not in Spain, at least in Chile by way of Spain, in the form of a transnational substitution or dictatorial transference that paid off a symbolic debt to Franco's victims, especially the Spanish disappeared who were not yet recognized as *desaparecidos* but were named as such by Emilio Silvia in the regional newspaper article that led him to recover and identify the remains of his grandfather two years later.³¹

I offer this case as a way to support my hypothesis that a similar aspect of displacement combined with frustrated desire explains why a large portion of the Spanish left has embraced the official narrative of *el 23-F*. When viewed from this perspective, the parallels with the Pinochet case are striking. Just as in that case, the desire for the prosecution of another dictator who was closely associated

³⁰ Freud, 307.

³¹ Emilio Silva Barrera, "Mi abuelo también fue un desaparecido," *La Crónica de León*, October 8, 2000.

with Franco— and it should be noted that Pinochet was an outspoken supporter of Franco’s regime and was one of only three heads of state to attend Franco’s funeral— resulted in celebrations on the Spanish left when Pinochet was arrested, thus rendering the impossible at least partially possible, in the case of *el 23-F* we can perceive the realization of a related impossible desire that has been displaced onto an object that is closely associated with the original that, like Franco, was lost to history. This lost object is precisely the II Spanish Republic. The corresponding impossible desire of the Spanish left— which was very much alive in the 1980s and remains so today in the form of a leftist melancholy that is still perceptible when it comes to the II Spanish Republic— was to have defeated the 1936 coup that utterly decimated it and repressed its memory. Therefore, when *el 23-F* erupted and the specter of Franco and that of 1936 coup suddenly reappeared— *on screen*— in the “irrational” form of Tejero and rapid bursts of submachine gun fire that were followed by tanks being deployed and the declaration of a state of emergency, was it not an ideal opportunity to phantasmatically crush the 1936 coup, whose traumatic memory was instantly displaced upon the events unfolding in El Congreso de los Diputados and in the streets of Valencia? And while Tejero was clearly no Franco, was not his comical caricature reminiscent of Franco’s short stature and incongruous feminine voice that had been displaced onto Tejero’s moustache and way with words? What better way to at least partially satisfy the frustrated desire to save the II Spanish Republic and, by extension, the original version of Spanish democracy of which the version celebrated during the Transition was a poor copy limited by the guardians of the dictatorship? Was there any other way to declare “¡No pasarán!” that didn’t contain an echo of defeat and more than an ounce of deceit in the voice of those who shouted it so long after the fall of what was to be “*la tumba del fascismo*?” How else to achieve some form of narrative closure to the never-ending nightmare that began with the 1936 coup? And if it’s true that as the poet Jaime Gil de Biedma claimed, “*de todas las historias de la Historia, la más triste, sin duda, es la de España,*” then why not take *el 23-F* as an excuse to celebrate a “happy” ending in the form of an imaginary compensation for having to suffer the traumatic real of such an objectionable truth?

This is exactly the precarious path that Javier Cercas follows in his highly acclaimed “*relato real*” of *el 23-F*, which goes some way to explaining why it was such a phenomenal best-seller that won several major literary awards and was named book and non-fiction book of the year by both *El País* and *El Mundo*, respectively. At the end of *Anatomía de un instante*, Cercas makes a rather outrageous claim about the legacy of Francoism, inverting Gil de Biedma’s famous phrase along the way:

En fin, el franquismo fue una mala historia, pero el final de aquella historia no ha sido malo. Pudo haberlo sido: la prueba es que a mediados de los setenta muchos de los más lúcidos analistas extranjeros auguraban una salida catastrófica de la dictadura; quizá la mejor prueba es el 23 de febrero. Pudo haberlo sido, pero no lo fue.³²

This passage sums up how the official narrative of *el 23-F* produces narrative closure and provides a “happy” ending to what was nothing less than a catastrophe for Spanish democracy: Francoism. The very dictatorship that emerged victorious from the organized violence and mass extermination carried out by the Nationalist forces and La Falange with the help of the Catholic Church during and after the 1936 coup— the traumatic memories and legacy of which have been completely erased from this story— is retroactively recovered by the way in which its farcical repetition is narrated and stitched back into the fabric of an elastic cultural memory that fits the psychological needs of all sorts of political persuasions on both the right and the left. Thus, a widely shared libidinal investment in keeping its narrative threads in order far exceeds any attempt at historical accuracy that threatens to undo the knots of meaning and affect that the official narrative of *el 23-F* has kept tied together for so long. This explains the ease and vehemence with which alternative accounts of that *mala noche* are dismissed as conspiracy theories, even as the credibility of the hero that emerges at the climax of the official story has, finally, been called into question.

The consequences of the displacement entailed by *el 23-F* as screen memory go beyond national concerns, however. For those of us concerned about what the January 6th insurrection signifies, fixation on *el 23-F* hinders us from seeing how the 1936 coup offers a variety of lessons that might be applicable to this moment of danger. The fact that there are images and video footage of *el 23-F* readily available on-line that look like historical echoes of January 6th is one way in which historical analysis is arrested by what already functions as a screen memory to block out a coup that lacks images that convey the same sort of mnemonic power. To cite Sturken one last time, “cultural memory is produced through representation— in contemporary culture, often through photographic images, cinema, and television. These mnemonic aids are also screens, actively blocking out other memories that are more difficult to represent.”³³ When the most representative image of the Spanish Civil War is a polemical, grainy black and white photograph of a falling republican soldier that may or may not have

³² Javier Cercas, *Anatomía de un instante*, (Madrid: DeBolsillo, 2010), 434.

³³ Sturken, 8.

been staged, it is difficult to compete with the immediacy of the footage of Tejero and his troops storming the Spanish Parliament, in color. This is not the biggest obstacle to recalling the lessons that the 1936 coup holds for us today, however. That has to do with Spain's marginalization within European and world history, which means that neither the coup nor the Spanish Civil War is taught in any significant detail, at least not in the United States, despite the thousands of U.S. volunteers who joined the Lincoln and Washington Brigades to fight "the good fight" against fascism. But this pedagogical gap is hardly an anomaly, as the war is still barely taught in Spanish schools as well, for reasons that can be traced back to the Transition's stress on "*el consenso*" and "*la concordia*." Such concepts are virtually impossible to apply even to the most equidistant and sterile versions of the war, making it simply too dangerous to teach and ceding more ground to *el 23-F* to function as a largely uncontested screen memory of a coup that blocks out memories of other, more distant ones. This would include the 1932 coup, which has been largely written out of Spanish cultural memory and given short shrift in historical accounts of the events leading up to the Spanish Civil War. And yet, in many ways, that failed coup attempt speaks more directly to our present moment than either *el 23-F* or the coup that it foreshadowed.

"*La Sanjurjada*," was the name given to the August 1932 coup led by General José Sanjurjo, the most famous military figure at the time. Sanjurjo was popularly known as "the Lion of the Riff" for his fighting prowess in the Moroccan War, which was accompanied by an outsized personality that far eclipsed that of another famous general who had made a name for himself by leading ruthless campaigns in North Africa, one Francisco Franco, who did not take part in "the Sanjurjo business." Like the coup that followed it four years later—which Franco joined onto rather late—*La Sanjurjada* mobilized anti-democratic sentiment among sectors of the Spanish military and civil society to take up arms or otherwise support an assault against the II Spanish Republic. In the few detailed historical accounts of it that exist, the coup is depicted as an unorganized fiasco that resulted in a high-profile trial involving 150 people involved in the coup attempt, mostly military officers who were deported to a Spanish colony in North Africa. Sanjurjo managed to escape a death sentence and was granted amnesty by Prime Minister Alejandro Lerroux in 1934, prompting him to go into exile in Portugal. It was from there that he was called upon to take charge of the Nationalist cause in advance of the 1936 coup. But he died in a plane crash shortly after taking off to take command of the rebellion, a fatal accident that has been attributed to Sanjurjo's vanity. Ironically, when the pilot warned him of the danger represented by the weight of his luggage for the small biplane aircraft that he insisted on flying in for the sake of drama, Sanjurjo

reportedly replied that “I need to wear proper clothes as the new caudillo of Spain.”³⁴

Perhaps the most important lesson that can be gleaned from the failed 1932 coup attempt for our present moment is that there is always a better organized and more methodical fascist waiting in the wings to take over from the leader if he crashes and burns, either politically or literally. Indeed, the plane Sanjurjo declined to fly in the day he died was the exact same one that had transported Franco from the Canary Islands to Spanish North Africa from where he took command of the Army of Africa. The rest, as they say, is history. Another lesson from the 1932 coup is that neither its disastrous outcome, nor the trial that followed it did anything to thwart the forces that were so radically opposed to what the II Spanish Republic represented. Instead, the plot’s failure provided an opportunity for the conspirators of the 1936 coup to learn from the mistakes that were made four years earlier, including keeping the details of their plot a better secret from the government. While it easy to write off the significance of the 1932 coup to the January 6th insurrection when considered on its own terms, when considered as the first major step on a long road that leads to the 1936 coup, the Spanish Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship, *La Sanjurjada* begins to reveal itself as an event that might be more commensurate with the messy business of January 6th than the many comparisons made to the burning of the German Reichstag that took place in 1933 while Sanjurjo was biding his time behind bars. This included General Mark Milley, Donald Trump’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who told his aids that they were facing “a Reichstag moment” as Trump was preaching “the gospel of the Führer” in the days leading up to the insurrection.³⁵

Such comparisons to Hitler were commonplace throughout the Trump presidency and they only accelerated in the aftermath of January 6th. This was due largely to the outsized space the Nazis and the Holocaust occupy in U.S and global cultural memories of fascism and genocide, in spite of the fact that fascism began in Italy and the crimes of the Holocaust were prosecuted as war crimes, not as genocide. While these may be considered irrelevant technicalities, they suggest that cultural memories of the Nazis and the Holocaust themselves function as

³⁴ As recounted in Nicholas Whitlam, *Four Weeks One Summer: When It All Went Wrong*, (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2017), 10. For more on *la Sanjurjada* and its relationship to the 1936 coup see Hugh Thomas, *The Spanish Civil War*, (London: Harper Colophon Books, 1961), 53-63; Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 237-267; and Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2012), 3-33.

³⁵ Martin Pengelly, “Top US general warned of ‘Reichstag moment’ in Trump’s turbulent last days, *The Guardian*, 14 July 2021.

screen memories that block out our ability to perceive historical parallels that may have more, different or complimentary historical lessons that bear upon January 6th and what it may forebode. This certainly seems to me to be the case when it comes to the coups of the 1930s in Spain, in addition to Francoism itself. For did not Franco ultimately seek to “Make Spain Great Again?” in ethnic national terms similar to those pronounced by Trump? Was Franco and the other Africanista generals behind those two coups not motivated, like Trump, by a sense of imperial nostalgia forged by “*el desastre*,” otherwise known as the Spanish-American War that ended the Spanish Empire in 1898 and marked the beginning of “the long American Century” that would abruptly end on September 11th, 2001, providing Trump with a rationale to promote “America First” once again? Did not Francoism also mobilize what political scientist Wendy Brown has so lucidly described as “ressentiment [...] born of dethronement, from lost entitlement, rather than weakness,” which she ascribes to the legions of white men who feel they have no future that constitute Trump’s base?³⁶ And didn’t Franco combine Christian nationalism with elements of fascism and the elevation of the military in Spanish society to produce the holy trinity of a repressive regime that more closely resembles the basic elements of Trumpism than do Nazism or Italian Fascism?

While historians such as Timothy Snyder have drawn some compelling historical parallels to these two political movements and to Trumpism, with Snyder’s short book *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century* becoming quite popular after Trump’s election in 2016, 20th century Spain has largely been omitted from such conversations for the reasons I’ve already mentioned.³⁷ The set of questions I end this essay with are intended to spark debate within Iberian Studies about their relevance to January 6th, Trumpism and the global political crisis that we are currently facing, not least of all on the Iberian Peninsula. Indeed, the specter of political crisis has recently extended to Portugal after its own leftist coalition government broke down over the 2022 budget that may lead to a snap election that provides the country’s first right-wing populist party Chega! (Enough!) room to make substantial gains in representation. Meanwhile in Spain, a snap election called last May by the Partido Popular (PP) President of La Comunidad de Madrid resulted in a landslide repeat victory of the “Trumpista” Isabel Díaz Ayuso that was treated as a showdown between her and Pablo Iglesias, who resigned from his post as Deputy Prime Minister to challenge her, and as a referendum on the national government’s handling of the COVID-19

³⁶ See Wendy Brown, *In the Ruins of Neoliberalism: The Rise of Antidemocratic Politics in the West*, (New York: Columbia UP, 2019). 161-188.

³⁷ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2017).

pandemic. The fact that Ayuso crushed Iglesias and turned the Madrid map PP blue in spite of her own administration's gross mishandling of the pandemic does not bode well for the future of Spanish politics. Thus, one of the many urgent tasks of scholars of Iberian Studies who have not been fully captured by neoliberal ideology, held captive by the Culture of the Transition or convinced by the official narrative of *el 23-F* is to follow Walter Benjamin's injunction to "brush [Spanish] history against the grain."³⁸ Among other things, this entails drawing lessons from Spanish history that have been blocked by both national and global screen memories to reveal their potential to "improve our position against the [on-going] struggle against fascism" in any of the new faces it may take now or in the future.³⁹

There is no alternative.

³⁸ See Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, Ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken Books, 1985).

³⁹ The quote is also drawn from Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History." The reference to the "new faces" of fascism comes from Enzo Traverso, *The New Faces of Fascism*, (London: Verso, 2019).