

Introduction



Throughout the Franco regime, José Antonio Primo de Rivera was portrayed as the principal martyr of the “red barbarity” that Spain had experienced during the Civil War. The biographies written about their National Leader at the time by members of the Falange Española (Spanish Falanx—hereinafter Falange) were so gushing in their praise and so lacking in critical content that they are of absolutely no use to historians for anything other than specific facts (and even some of these have been made up or are simply not mentioned). More than biographies, they are hagiographies: they depict their subject as some kind of saint. They are just one product of the hero worship felt for José Antonio by the Traditionalist Spanish Falanx of the Councils of the National Syndicalist Offensive (FET y de las JONS)—Francoist Spain’s sole legal party behind the National Movement (Movimiento Nacional)—and by the regime in general ever since he was executed by firing squad on 20 November 1936, an event that was only officially and publicly announced two years after it had taken place.

The hero worship to which he was subject was phenomenal, quite unmatched by anything before or since, and far in excess of the feelings expressed for other martyrs of the crusade, such as José Calvo Sotelo or the generals José Sanjurjo, Emilio Mola, and Manuel Goded. (The one exception to this, of course, is the eternal glorification of Caudillo Franco.) In fact, the posthumous adoration for José Antonio was merely an amplification of the esteem in which the Falange had held him while he had been its leader. The party was typically Fascist in that it was structured, in the military or paramilitary manner, around a strong, charismatic leader. But, however difficult it may be to believe now, things got so out of hand during the Franco dictatorship that José Antonio’s having gone to the firing squad at the same age as Jesus Christ died on the cross led to the two of them being spoken of in the same breath. And the generations of young people who were educated during the regime were taught about his exemplary life.

Against this background of hero worship, it is hardly surprising that many authors who wrote about José Antonio during the Franco regime, and even some who wrote about him later, had been so seduced and/or fascinated that the vision they gave was distorted, mythified, and acritical. He is often portrayed as a great thinker, the author of an extremely important political and philosophical body of work, and even the creator of a school of thought all his own. (Of course, all this work was unfinished because of his sudden death.) All this was greatly exaggerated: José Antonio was no more than a normal, educated person with intellectual concerns that included an interest in literature. For some time both before and after he decided to dedicate himself to politics, he produced a corpus of articles, the vast majority of which were self-published in the press of the party of which he was the undisputed leader. José Antonio was clearly able to study, think, and express himself orally and in writing, although his use of language was often criticized for being a mixture of literature and politics that was not altogether clear or comprehensible, quite unlike what was expected of a Fascist leader.

His reading provided him with the rudiments of a personal political doctrine, although he owed much to the theories of others, which he adapted to his specific needs. Much of this doctrine he drew up as he went along, at the same time as he was founding a Fascist-style party and becoming its undisputed leader. So, while he was playing the role of a Fascist, he gradually became a Fascist, and then increasingly more so. His written work was a response to—and a rejection of—his father's: Miguel Primo de Rivera had had several notorious confrontations with some of the most prestigious intellectuals of the age and had produced various texts in his irrepressibly verbose style that were duly published in the press—the famous *notas oficiosas*—during his time as dictator (1923–1930). It is not difficult to see in his firstborn son's continuous display of erudition and careful expression, and a touch of literary frustration, a desire to distance himself from his father.

José Antonio had professional aspirations—he earned his living by practicing as a lawyer and working in the legal world in general—but also literary ones. He was interested in reading, the theater (he had even been an amateur actor), and writing novels, plays, and poetry. But nothing could compare to his passion for politics. In the field of law, he wrote numerous reports, some of which he had to submit to the Supreme Court of Spain. In the field of literature, he did not publish anything, although he did outline several novels. Nevertheless, paradoxically, he managed to gather around him a considerable group of professional and prolific men of letters. Like him, they too were pas-

sionate about politics,¹ and they found in José Antonio not only a political leader but one to whom they were devoted.

He was certainly not lacking in capacity of seduction or charisma, largely because he was his father's son—being the heir of Spain's dictator held a certain sway—and his personality was what it was. As I shall explain throughout this book, he combined seriousness, thoroughness, shyness, friendliness, and outbursts of violent biblical rage, all wrapped up in an impeccable physical appearance. But what was to define his life as much as how it ended in a corner of the courtyard of Alicante prison was his desire to emulate and better his father's political career. This desire meant that political action became the driving force of his life, and he worked tirelessly to draw up a doctrine that would support his political project and to create and lead a party that would bring it to a successful conclusion.

His aim was to solve all of Spain's problems and save the country from the internal and external dangers that were allegedly threatening it, just as his father had tried to do. José Antonio, however, believed his mission was even more crucial because he was convinced a Communist revolution was imminent and would do away with Spain as he knew it. The country, then, was in urgent need of being saved, even at the cost of his life and the lives of other *falangistas*. Unavoidably, the project was enshrouded in a persistent but fluctuating sense of tragedy. There were moments of euphoria when he was convinced he would ultimately be successful and take power, and others of realistic pessimism when he became aware of his party's lack of real influence, of the little chance he had of succeeding to power, and of the political shortcomings of at least some of his comrades in leadership positions.

In contrast to what has been said ad nauseam, José Antonio did not go into politics because the death of his father just a few weeks after he had been "unjustly" and "ungratefully" (according to family and supporters) ousted from power awoke in him a sense of filial duty—a conviction that he should defend, at considerable personal sacrifice, the memory of his humiliated and defenseless father. Far from it. He went into politics in response to a deep desire to emulate and exceed his father, a desire that marked him and impelled him to act messianically. He threw himself into politics as soon as he knew he had found the formula he needed, a formula he never stopped developing and improving. He entered politics just as many before him had, not just his father, so there was something quite familiar about what he did. He started out as a Fascist because he felt he was fulfilling his obligation as an aristocrat, as a gentleman—although not as a gentleman of leisure, a figure he was extremely critical of. In this way, he played

the historical and heroic role of guide, defender, and savior that was inherent in the nobility. The fact that he was a parvenu was simply irrelevant, since he believed he came from noble stock.

Nevertheless, although his political career was the tangible result of what he had always wanted, not something he resigned himself to, he sometimes considered giving it all up or complained about the price he was having to pay. According to a friend and fellow *falangista*:

José Antonio used to say: "What I would really like to do is study civil law and in the evening go to a café or Puerta de Hierro to have a chat with friends." All his life—which was heroic, self-sacrificing, full of fantasy and vigor—he was impregnated with a bourgeois-cum-literary nostalgia, some sort of combination of methodical toil and personal chats. He did realize, however, that he was destined for other things, that it was no longer possible for him to go back, that he had to sacrifice everything. Because you must choose between your life's work and your happiness. And José Antonio chose the former. We would all like to conquer Peru but on the condition that we could tell our friends all about it that very night.²

José Antonio occasionally thought he could give up the heavy burden of saving Spain because others (e.g., Manuel Azaña, Indalecio Prieto, a Republican government) could relieve him of the task and do it in his stead. This suggests there were two José Antonios, one of whom was even open to Democratic-Reformist solutions. This second José Antonio, however, was clearly subordinate to the other, more dominant supporter of Fascism.

All Fascist political projects have some features in common and others that are peculiar to the national reality on which they were based, but José Antonio's was quite specific. Some aspects of his doctrine concerning fundamental questions were difficult to glean from his writings. For example, what role should his party, the Falange, play once it succeeded to power? Should it act as a single party like the Nazis and the Fascists in the only two Fascist regimes existing at the time? What should his role be as the new leader of the country? He made no mention of these issues, but, of course, this does not mean he had not given them any thought. However, he did write about the type of state he was going to create, which he sometimes described as totalitarian. He said it was going to be Syndicalist in nature and based on vertical syndicates and the three natural entities: family, municipality, and the syndicate itself. The type of state, then, was to be quite new, neither a capitalist regime nor a Communist proletarian dictatorship. However, he did not specify exactly how it was to be structured. Perhaps he did

not do so because he thought, as he generally tended to think, he could make decisions on these issues as the need arose and as part of an important minority in possession of the one and only true doctrine that would reveal to him the solutions that were most appropriate to Spain's problems. Of this he was convinced. He could not have been more messianic.

In the pages that follow, I give my interpretation of José Antonio Primo de Rivera and what I believe were the driving forces behind his life and politics. I discuss his political career, his thinking, the myth, and the fact that his party worshipped him not only during but also after his years as its leader, which would be of particular significance. His myth was fueled by the aura of heroism that surrounded him—at once messianic and tragic—but also exploited by the Franco regime to which he probably would not have been sympathetic, or at least not totally.

This book is the result partly of the persistence of this myth and partly of the continued interest shown in José Antonio by professional historians and the public. But interest is even greater among nonprofessionals and publicists who are constantly publishing books on him. With little attempt at critical analysis, these publications often reproduce the myth or make wild speculations based on spurious evidence in an attempt to attract readers. My intention was not to write an exhaustive biography of José Antonio but to provide an interpretation based on his defining political actions and on those features of his personality that spurred him on and fundamentally marked him. While I was engaged in this task, I felt neither empathy nor hostility for the object of study. I merely give the reader my interpretation of a Fascist leader who aimed to implement a political regime in Spain, of which he was to be the leader, and died in the attempt. While he was alive as a leader, he had limited personal and political influence, but after the state took over his party, he was subject to a cult of commemoration.

On a strictly formal level, and to avoid excessive repetitions of his name, I tend to use the surname Primo as a synonym for José Antonio. I have reserved the use of his full surname, Primo de Rivera, to refer to his father the dictator (whom I also refer to as the General). In the case of Franco, and to avoid repetition, I have used *Generalissimo* or *Caudillo*, although this does not mean, of course, I identify with the use that the regime gave to these forms of address.

This book would never have been written if not for the brilliant work done by historians and intellectuals on the figure of José Antonio and the Falange. Stanley G. Payne was the first professional historian to study this subject, and his expertise is such that I have had much

to thank him for during my own career in Spain and in the United States. Others who followed him are Javier Pradera, Ian Gibson, Julio Gil Pecharromán, Ismael Saz, José-Carlos Mainer, Paul Preston, Herbert R. Southworth, and Salvador de Brocà. My debt to all of them is considerable, although, of course, the interpretation given here is exclusively my own.

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Notes

1. Mónica Carbajosa and Pablo Carbajosa, *La corte literaria de José Antonio: La primera generación cultural de la Falange* (Barcelona, 2003), 79.
2. Agustín de Foxá, "José Antonio: El amigo," in *Dolor y memoria de España en el segundo aniversario de la muerte de José Antonio* (Barcelona, 1939), 217.