

Evaluation of the bachelor thesis "Valle de los Caídos – a symbol of Franco's legacy which has withstood Spain's transition into democracy? The reception of national identity project through the onsite ethnography in Spain" by Belén McKechnie Charle

The Spanish Civil War was fought in Spain from July 1936 to April 1939 between the democratically elected government of the Second Spanish Republic ("Republicans") and the right-wing putschists under General Francisco Franco ("Nationalists"). With the support and after military intervention of the fascist and Nazi allies from Italy and Germany, respectively, the alliance of conservative military, Catholic forces, the Carlist and the fascist Falange won. This victory was followed by the end of the Republic in Spain and the Francoist dictatorship that lasted until Franco's death in 1975. Historians agree that the Francoist repression, which was directed mainly against Republican soldiers, trade unionists, and members of leftist parties, cost significantly more victims than the Republican repression, which was directed mainly against clergy, members of rightist parties, and Falangists. The Church estimates that nearly 7,000 clergy were killed between 1931 and 1939. However, figures on the number of people murdered vary widely; estimates to date have ranged from 75,000 to 200,000 victims in the nationalist zone and from 35,000 to 65,000 in the republican zone.

The bachelor thesis of Belén McKechnie Charle deals with the question to what extent the nationalist monumental "Valle de los Caídos" (The Valley of the Fallen), represents a symbol of Franco's legacy and has withstood Spain's transition into democracy and what the meanings are ascribed to the visits of the site and the monument itself by those who attend the place. (p.21) The author notes that: "The Valley of the Fallen is currently the site of Spain's largest mass grave. There are an estimated 33,847 bodies of *both sides* [of the war] "buried" (stored) in wooden boxes underneath and within the structure of the Crypt (Basilica) [...] These bodies were transferred from across Spain to the Valley of the Fallen from 1959 to 1983 (Franco died in 1975). These bodies were taken from cemeteries, in the case of nationalist bodies, and from mass graves, in the case of republican bodies." (p. 1)

In general, it can be stated that the work, with 75 pages of text, ideally corresponds to the scope of a bachelor's thesis. The ratio of research literature and internet sources is also exemplary. Maps, illustrations and photos supporting the text are used sensibly and in the right place and contribute to the understanding of the work. (p. 38-59).

The author divides the work into two equal parts: in the first part she elaborates in considerable detail on the methodological approach she used and the theoretical basis (p. 1-26); the second part consists of the empirical study and is followed by a conclusion (p. 1-71).

She first builds on the French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs and his work on collective memory. Here, the focus is primarily on three important aspects that sociologists should concentrate on when studying memory. Individuals are said to have "collective frames of reference," meaning that people within the same group are exposed to the same "tools of remembering." Language plays the most important role here. Second, individual and group memory preserve the past through selection and interpretation; thus, memory is viewed as a reconstruction of past events. Finally, Halbwachs stated that a group's memory "serves a function for a group's identity" both because it "fosters" integration within the group and because it represents elements of the past that are relevant to a group's identity. (p. 4) Building on Halbwachs, the author applies current research literature on memory culture, collective

memory, etc., such as Boyer & Wertsch (Memory in mind and culture) and Rosa Rivero (Memoria colectiva e identidad nacional).

In the empirical part of the bachelor thesis, the author first addresses the description of the ethnographic environment of the site, the geographical details of the Valley of Cuelgamuros, where the Valley of the Fallen is located. She then describes the interior and exterior of the crypt (basilica) where the main research took place, and then elaborates on the religious and political symbolism present in and outside its structure (p. 29-55).

The last section of the empirical chapter consists of the impressions of the people with whom she spoke (p. 55-71).

What must be emphasized is the fact that Belén McKechnie Charle is fluent in Spanish and conducted the empirical work by traveling to the study site herself. She divided her results of the survey of the visitors of the memorial in the empirical part of the work into four categories: "A historical site like anyother" (p. 55), "A site to learn what should not be repeated" (p.56), "A site to be proud of" (p. 58), "A site of pain" (p. 62).

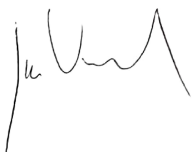
Based on her data, the author concludes that while many people do not openly praise Franco, they also do not openly condemn him, the regime, or the atrocities they committed (p. 72).

Overall, the author concludes, based on both conversations with visitors and her own observations, that the Valley of the Fallen presents itself as Franco wanted us to see it. There is no evidence of the work or presence of political prisoners, and no indication that the monument was commissioned by a dictator or that the only person to receive a dignified burial in a place that should commemorate all the fallen is the founder and leader of the Falange movement in Spain. The experiences of those who feature in the "peripheral" narratives of Spanish history have largely remained underground, as have their bodies. The main significance of this memory site remains untouched and unaddressed, regardless of the current memory discourses and disputes within Spanish society (p. 73).

It would have benefited the academic character of the work if a historical chapter on the Spanish Civil War and the Memorial and, for example, forced labor had preceded the empirical section.

Nevertheless, the author has shown that she understands how to work academically, how to combine methodological approaches in a meaningful way, and how to integrate and evaluate specific literature. Her empirical work at the memorial site shows that she understands how to put into practice what she explained in the first part. I recommend the submitted bachelor thesis for defence and I propose to evaluate it as excellent (1).

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