Franco’s dictatorship 1939-1975

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FRANCO’S DICTATORSHIP (1939-1975)

1. THE LONG AND HARSH POSTWAR PERIOD

After the Civil War, Spain suffered for a long period under a dictatorship in which all of the power was concentrated in the hands of Franco, the Caudillo. This one-party regime, ruled by the political party called the Falange, possessed an important militant and Catholic character, along with other clearly fascist traits. The nationalist regime built its power on the firm foundation of the army and the church.

Franco’s regime harshly repressed any ideology that strayed from the ideals of the dictatorship. Liberals, democrats, socialists, communists, and many others faced persecution, incarceration, and, in many cases, the executioner’s bullet.
The Francoist regime’s social foundation was formed by the land-owning, financial, and industrial high bourgeoisie and the middle classes most affected by the Catholic Church.

Until the beginning of the 1950s, Spain suffered a period of scarcity and food rationing. The government was run as an autocracy, with a closed economy and scarce economic exchanges with the rest of the world. These autocratic policies were an extension of the international isolation from the early years of the dictatorship. In these conditions, the “estaperlo,” an illegal black market for all types of products, was established and extended out to all branches of the economy. The corruption of many of the “regime’s leaders” was a consequence of the estaperlo black market.
IDEOLOGICAL FUNDAMENTALS OF FRANCOISM

Franco’s regime, installed in 1939, had very clear ideological fundamentals since its beginning:

- **Concentration of political power in the hands of Franco.** The “unbreakable adhesion” around the Caudillo was the key element of the political structure of Franquismo.

- **Anti-communism.** This was an important factor from the beginning of the Civil War. During the Cold War between the US and USSR after 1945, the Francoist regime tried to reinforce these characteristic to gain acceptance in the Western world.

- **Anti-parlamentarism y anti-liberalism.** Franquismo always positioned itself to be against political freedoms.

- **National-Catholicism.** The Catholic Church was the great ‘legitimizer’ of the Francoist dictatorship. In exchange, the Church was allowed to dominate Spanish social life and education. A strict Catholic moral code was imposed on all aspects of public and private life in the country.

- **Defense of the “Unity of the Nation.”** The regime denied any type of regional political autonomy and established Castilian Spanish as the sole official language of Spain. The prohibition of other Iberian languages was strictly enforced at the beginning of the dictatorship, but a certain degree of tolerance eventually developed.

- **Traditionalism.** The regime based their concept of Spain on historical roots, which they often distorted (The Reconquest, the Spanish Empire, the Defense of Catholicism).
• **Militarism.** Predominance of the military social class (parades, uniforms, hymns, and flags)

• **Fascist traits.** Symbols and uniforms, exaltation of the Caudillo, political violence. The most compromising symbols (such as the fascist salute) were toned down after the defeat of Hitler and Mussolini in 1945.

2. FROM EXTERNAL ISOLATION TO THE RETURN TO INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

Despite declaring neutrality during the Second World War, Franco’s regime did not hide its sympathies for the Axis Powers, Hitler’s Germany and Mussolini’s Italy. Even though Spain, quite weakened after the Civil War, did not end up entering the Second World War, Franco did send a unit of volunteers, the División Azul or Blue Division, to fight with Hitler against the Soviet Union.

At the end of the conflict, Spain, considered to be an ally of the Fascist Powers, was internationally isolated. In 1946, the General Assembly of the United Nations voted against
Spain’s incorporation into the newly-established international body. Thus, Spain was condemned to years of economic and political isolation. Spain did not receive any aid under the Marshall Plan and was not admitted into NATO.

The Cold War, the global confrontation between the US and the Communist USSR, “saved” Franco’s regime. In the eyes of the US, Spain changed from a fascist regime to a firmly anti-communist country and a potential ally in the struggle against the USSR.

In 1953, the Bilateral Agreements with the United States were signed, allowing the establishment of American military bases in Spain. In exchange, Spain received American economic aid. In 1955, Spain finally joined the UN.

3. THE LIBERALIZATION OF THE ECONOMY AND THE YEARS OF DEVELOPMENT

Taking advantage of the new international situation, the Francoist regime began to reform its political economy. This meant liberalizing the economy and opening it to the international marketplace at a time when Western Europe was undergoing a real economic boom.

The measures contained in the Stabilization Plan of 1959 were immediately successful. The period between 1961 and 1973 was a testament to the rapid growth of the industrial and services sectors. The country’s economic take-off was facilitated by foreign investment,
which was attracted by low salaries, and **European tourism**, bringing visitors in search of sun and low prices.

**Industrial development** set off an intense migration of farmhands towards the cities and other parts of Europe. Spanish society changed radically. The **middle classes** became the predominant social class in an incipient “**society of consumption.**” Household goods, the television, and above all, the car became symbols of the new country.

Despite the **inefficiencies of the Spanish growth model** (weakness of public services – education and health –, inadequate infrastructures, and disastrous urban planning) a **new, wealthier, more open and more tolerant society** was born in the 1960s, which allowed for a peaceful transition to democracy after the death of Franco in 1975.

**4. THE DICTATORSHIP’S POLITICAL IMMOBILITY**

The drastic economic and social changes contrasted with the absence of any political reforms. The regime continued to maintain the dictatorial traits which had characterized it since the Civil War.

Nevertheless, a few elements emerged that later would be of great importance:

- The Second Vatican Council **caused the Catholic Church and the Francoist regime to drift apart**. The tensions were growing between the two former allies.
• Nationalist tensions resurfaced and ETA appeared. The Basque terrorist organization was born in 1959 and quickly turned to terrorist violence.

• Growth of labor conflicts began in the 1970s. Little by little, strikes began to take on labor motivations (salaries, work schedule) and to make political demands (union and political rights).

The final years of the dictatorship witnessed an increase in social tensions. The growing opposition from various social groups was met with even more repression. In this context, terrorist groups (ETA, FRAP) moved forward with their campaigns of violence, foreshadowing one of the greatest problems of the Spanish democracy.

Ultimately, Franco died on November 20, 1975. In the wake of his death, the country discussed its hopes for the future and fears of a return to the horrors of the past.