Vision and Visuality in Franco's *Valley of the Fallen*

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The Spanish Civil War ended in 1939. The Republicans had fought to maintain the democratically elected government but lost to the Nationalists, conservatives who rebelled against what they saw as an anti-Catholic and dangerously liberal regime. At the end of three years of bitter conflict, Generalísimo Francisco Franco, leader of the Nationalists, took power as dictator. The war had served to expose the myth of Spain as a unified nation and had made visible the country's fragmented population by revealing a state divided along severely opposed political lines. During the 35 years of his reign, Franco took on the task of constructing a truly unified state, one that fit his own personal definition of Spain. Today, the *Holy Cross of the Valley of the Fallen* exists as a reminder of that vision (Figure 1). Since its conception in 1939, Franco declared it to be a monument intended to help heal the wounds left by the Civil War, and the inscription inside the basilica dedicates it to the "Fallen, for God and for Spain."[1] Today, Spain is a modern democracy, yet the monument remains as an unassailable relic of the dictatorship.

The *Valley of the Fallen* is a monumental architectural complex consisting of a basilica and a Benedictine monastery. Situated fifty kilometers outside Spain's capital, the colossal construction took twenty years to complete. The basilica was quarried to transverse the mountain peak and is rooted in the Guadarrama Sierra. The landscape remains the focal point; the basilica seems to grow from the terrain as a 492-foot tall cross crowns the complex and marks the way for visitors who journey to the Sierra (Figure 2). The Christian symbol of the cross brands the location with undeniable religious significance: Catholicism is made to literally stand upon Spanish soil as true and unequivocally part of the Spanish land. The awe-inspiring cross can be seen from a distance, creating a panoptical impression that speaks of the power of the Catholic Church under the Franco regime. As visitors arrive at the basilica's expansive entrance, they are embraced by an enormous semicircular colonnade. Comparable to the practice of other Fascist regimes, the use of monumentality in architecture was an attempt to create spectacle, although in the *Valley* it retains a uniquely Spanish flavor.[2] The use of Catholicism in Fascist aesthetics is distinctive to the first phase of *Franquismo*, which diverged from other Fascist regimes in maintaining a clear connection with the Catholic Church, giving it a prominent role in the official government.[3]

The Monument is protected under the umbrella of National Patrimony, a title that grants it public funding. Protected status has meant that keen attention has been directed to its history throughout the years. Scholars and the general public have made a point of bringing to light the problematic details of its construction. For example, political prisoners from the war were used as workers in the construction. At least fourteen of these died in the task, but some contend that the number was much higher. Additionally, the crypt within the basilica holds over 30,000 bodies of Republican and Nationalist soldiers, victims of the armed conflict. These bodies were taken from mass graves, usually without permission, to fill the crypt. Today, many whose relatives are buried here wish to exhume the bodies and give them what they believe to be a more proper burial. At the crux of the controversy is the fact that José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the *Falange*, the Fascist Party in Spain, is buried in the apse. His body lies in a place of honor, next to the altar under a golden mosaic dome, adding to the political volatility of the construction. In 1975, the year Franco died, he, too, was buried in the basilica. Thus, it has been said that the construction acts as a grandiose mausoleum for Franco, on the understanding that the religious space is also a political statement.[4]

With the amount of attention that the Monument re-

I would like to thank my professors Dr. Gerald Silk and Dr. Susanna Gold for their help in editing this paper, and my Temple colleagues and the Florida State University Art History Department for their valuable feedback.

1 This dedication was prevalent during the Franco era. Many churches around Spain had added a small plaque commemorating people who had died during the war. After the transition to democracy, many of these were removed and only a few are left today.

2 Although different authoritarian regimes in the 1930s preferred different aesthetics, one clear connection amongst them is the monumental scale of their architecture. See Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, *Art Under a Dictatorship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 117.

3 José Calleja, *El Valle de los Caídos* (Madrid: Espasa, 2009), 92-93.

4 It must be noted that not all the workers were prisoners. This is an aspect that is often brought up during discussions of the Monument. The issue of the number of bodies buried in the crypt is problematic since it is not at all certain how many bodies are there and only a small percentage is actually identified. The skepticism that only fourteen people died is based on information from a worker at the *Valley* whom Calleja interviewed. Ibid., 111-116, 189, 190-191.

ceives in the news and historical studies, it is surprising that very little attention has been given to it from an art historical perspective. Perhaps this is because an art historical focus has the inherent danger of finding artistic worth and value in a remnant of the Fascist period. Recent historical scholarship has helped the Spanish people understand the polemics of the construction. Since the dictatorship had censored the press, these critical studies of the strategies Franco took to assure his power could not have been published under the Franco regime.[5]

The *Valley*'s contentious status makes it difficult to separate the Monument from Spain's ongoing debate of Civil War history versus memory. In 2007 the passing of the *Law of Historical Memory* tried to deal with the unresolved issues from Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy. When the law passed, it resolved many of the longstanding points of contention: one of them directly addressed the very existence of an official narrative of history.[6] Under Franco there was an intended suppression of the Republicans' version of history, a reality that is still being discussed today. Aware of these different coexisting narratives, the Spanish people are still torn as to how deal with the *Valley* as a concrete artifact created in the aftermath of a war which some saw as necessary and others saw as an attack upon democracy. Public and private implications of memory and social history exist as a current polemic that must be dealt with to produce an objective study of the *Valley of the Fallen*. By studying the visual properties of the Monument, its Fascist didacticism is clearly revealed, as is the danger that exists when historical studies do not take symbolism and visuality into account.

The *Valley of the Fallen* employs national history to support Franco's ideal vision of the state, a state he saw poised to reignite the Golden Age of Spain.[7] Its location, style, and even the rhetoric used by Franco and his supporters indicate that it is not merely a basilica constructed under the regime, but a concerted attempt at rewriting and establishing a historical narrative. *Franquismo*, the particular brand of Fascism that developed under Franco, did not have a systematic or defined aesthetic, so this particular monument was of Franco's own creation. In constant contact with the architects and artists responsible for the *Valley*, he proposed models to be emulated, so that the project came to reflect his deliberate and personal input. It is the only such example of this magnitude that Franco ever took on, remaining a focus of his attention throughout the long period of its construction.[8] Acting as the project director, Franco appears as the true heir to Spanish power inherited from the royal family, fulfilling the ideals of a unified nation-state. In 1959, he stated that while the *Escorial Palace* was a monument to Spain's grand past, the *Valley* was to be a point of departure for the future of Spain.[9] The modern visitor inevitably participates in this vision, as the Spanish media, the government, and the general population have yet to coalesce in regards to their view of the importance of the *Valley* monument. However, an analysis of Franco's choices of location, style, iconography, and his sources offers insight as to how the architecture's narrative unfolds as an experience for visitors.

Physically, the complex is a visual display of the version of national history—at many times inaccurate—that Franco pursued and tried to establish as the singular narrative. The colossus rivals in size St. Peter's basilica in Vatican City and recreates Baroque theatricality for visitors who are engulfed by the monumental order utilized.[10]

Despite the dramatic impact of the Monument, scale is its most overwhelming feature. There is nothing truly innovative about the Monument's design: a sober structure built in granite, the only exterior decoration immediately visible is the set of reliefs depicting the coat of arms flanking the entrance (Figure 3). This coat of arms is particularly emblematic to the Franco era. It appeared in the national flag, and today the menacing eagle behind the coat of arms is understood as a Fascist allusion. In reality, the coat of arms together with the eagle has historical significance because it was the Catholic Queen Isabel's personal emblem. Displayed here, it underscores the connection of a sovereign Catholic government in Spain.[11]

As the visitor looks up, colossal sculptures are visible: a Pietá above the entrance, the Four Evangelists on the base of the enormous cross, and the Four Virtues above the Four Evangelists. Strong and sharply-cut features are used to portray strength in these symbolic pillars of the Catholic faith (Figure 2). These traditional Christian figures would have been familiar to those visitors with a basic Catholic upbringing, one that Franco made sure was part of the state education. Since the *Valley* monument was intended primarily for Spaniards, the exterior decorative reliefs placed on equal footing the Fascist government and the longstanding national Catholic tradition represented in the form of the sculptures.

5 José María Calleja, Tário Rubio, and Julián Casanovas are scholars currently investigating the history of the construction of the *Valley of the Fallen*.

6 The preamble states that it is not the legislator's responsibility to "implement a collective memory," but the law tried to make right some of the wrongs that were never dealt with during the transition to democracy. Among the many issues, the *Valley of the Fallen* comes up as a special case. Finally in 2007, political manifestations were prohibited on the site. Spain, House of Representatives, *Ley de Memoria Histórica, 52/2007, Boletín Oficial del Estado, 2007.*

7 Spain's Golden Age is comprised of the 16th and 17th centuries. During this period Spain was an imperial and world power and great cultural developments occurred. This is the era of the Inquisition, but also of classical Spanish art, literature, philosophy, and architecture.

8 Alexandre Cirici, *La Estética Del Franquismo*, Colección Punto y línea (Barcelona: Editorial G. Gili, 1977), 12, 112–113.

9 Ibid., 113, 115.

10 Saint Peter's Basilica in Vatican City measures 624 feet in length; the Valley measures 860 feet in length.

11 I would like to thank Dr. Jack Freiberg of Florida State University for bringing this fact to my attention.

Inside the dimly lit basilica, the drama intensifies (Figure 4). The smooth dark floor acts as a reflective pool creating a somber atmosphere. A grille separates the vestibule, marking a stage in the visitor's entry. The visitor walks through successive spaces, each with a different floor elevation, noting the few decorative elements in the large and coherent space. The journey terminates at the altar, the only area that is well lit. Pews are absent from the entire nave except for the last section in front of the altar. The absence of pews denotes that the Monument is to be walked through and experienced and is thus significantly different from orthodox church appointments. Franco chose to not adhere to any traditional style, but instead created what he called a new imperial style.[12] Meant to complement the "new Spain" of his regime, this style emphasizes size over ornamentation and uses classic semi-circular arches and heavy undecorated stone.

The so-called imperial style shows the Dictator wrestling with a twentieth-century aesthetic predicament: that churches constructed in modern architectural styles were generally criticized for not inspiring devotion. The streamlined simplicity of modern architecture has been said to diminish the worship experience, and new materials are often regarded as not rich or noble enough for a religious context. Yet, it would have been anachronistic to revive the Gothic style traditionally associated with Catholic churches. An imperial style retains the dignified and Spartan sense of a memorial, and simplified forms distance it from an overwrought Gothic style.[13]

Within the sober interior, the few decorative elements include sculptures and lighting fixtures, yet these are clearly bellicose in tone. Angels with swords, said to represent the angels that guard the gates to paradise, appear in niches (Figure 5). Made of bronze from cannons used during the war, they are said to symbolize the war's end.[14] The swords the angels carry and the lighting fixtures composed of symmetrical helmeted angels seem out of place in a monument where the objective is to "heal a wounded nation."[15] To understand the significance of these decorative elements, it is important to point out that the Civil War was initiated by a military revolt led by Franco, who unlike other Fascist rulers, was a general, not the leader of a political party. This iconography of militarized religiosity is made even clearer in the six chapels adjoined to the nave. Each chapel is dedicated to a patron Virgin, something common in Spain, a country known for its Marian devotion. Three are protectors of different military sectors. These are: Our Lady of Loreto, the Immaculate Conception, and Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the patronesses of the air forces, ground forces, and marine forces, respectively (Figure 6); Our Lady of Africa, Our Lady of Mercy, and Our Lady of the Pillar are patronesses or symbols of Spanish imperial expansion in the Mediterranean, the Orient, and the Atlantic.[16] These holy defenders of the Spanish armed forces and the nation's imperial enterprise encourage visitors to view the divine grace of God protecting Spain's military.

A military uprising was responsible for the initiation of the war. Because the basilica is dedicated to those who died in the war, the implied connection is that the task taken on by the rebellious military represented God's will. The revolt, which was initially purely political, was called a crusade from early on as the Nationalists and their supporters aggrandized the magnitude of their task. Strong support came from members of the Catholic clergy who expounded the ideas of the Civil War as a holy war in many of their writings.[17] Nationalism, the cause and name-giver to Franco's faction, was different in Spain than in other countries, since it united Catholic sentiment with the concept of the Spanish nation.[18] Thus, the Nationalists' revolt was by consequence a Catholic revolt. Franco's own chosen title, "*Caudillo* by the grace of God," demonstrates the inherent character of being "chosen" to lead the country. A *caudillo* is the head of troops in a war, consonant with the fact that as war leader, Franco became the legitimate power once the war ended, albeit retaining militancy in his ruling title.[19] In the phrase "by the grace of God," we see Franco's role as the chosen leader for an appointed task in which God takes an active interest in ultimate victory. The sculptures of the warrior angels, however, indicate that the war has yet to end. Standing armed and impassive, they leave the visitor questioning the sense of closure the *Valley* supposedly offers. As a monument dedicated to the end of the struggle, the *Valley of the Fallen* does not present a satisfactory conclusion, but rather one of steady alertness and awareness of conflicts yet to come.

Spain and Catholicism in this context are revealed to be fully engaged in the battle against outside forces, such as Communism and Bolshevism. Franco interred left-wing

12 Daniel Sueiro, *La verdadera historia* (Madrid: Sedmay Ediciones, 1977), 21.

13 Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 161.

14 El Valle de los Caídos, "Basílica del Valle de los caídos: Abadía de la Santa Cruz - El monumento paso a paso," accessed 10 December 2011, http://www.valledeloscaidos.es/monumento/paso.

15 Sueiro, *La verdadera historia*, 188.

16 Our Lady of Africa may also be related to the fact that the coup that started the war first occurred in Spain's Northern African holdings. This is another interpretation but still related to colonialism and fits perfectly well with the overall idea of the chapel's symbolic meanings. The summary of what the Virgins symbolize is from Cirici, *La Estetica del Franquismo*, 113-115.

17 Sueiro, *La verdadera historia*, 10–11.

18 Juan Beneyto Pérez, *La Identidad Del Franquismo: Del Alzamiento a La Constitución*, Colección E.E. 22 (Madrid: Gráficas Espejo, 1979), 26, 34, 38–39.

19 The term *caudillo* has different significance in Latin American history. Beneyto explains the particularities of the term in ibid., 67-80.

Republicans and right-wing Nationalists in the crypt with a clear intent on integrating both sides towards a representation of forced unity. Both camps are perceived to receive the same treatment in order that Franco be able to state that it is a monument intended as atonement for the war. However, the subjugation of the Republican combatants is crystallized: their bodies are located in a monument that prescribes Franco's standards and they operate in a contrived performance of peace that the *Valley* presents for the divided population. The most essential task Franco had at hand during this early period of his regime, at the same moment that the *Valley* was being constructed, was to eliminate the ideological divides that fragmented the Spanish people. With authoritarian suppression, he was successful in eliminating public, if not private and personal, dissent. The "new Spain" disregards past differences to make way for a unified and powerful ideal of nationhood.

This apparent contradiction of giving equal treatment to Republicans and Nationalists is not as paradoxical as it first appears. The Civil War was the path for Franco's vision of Spain to become a reality. The crypt can contain anyone who fought in the War; the Civil War, as Crusade, was destined to occur so that the differing forces could battle for what Spain was to be.[20] Nationalists won, and Franco's ideals were set as the standard under which the country must unite and practice peace. Franco managed to recreate in the *Valley*'s crypt the most literal sense of integration possible.

The chosen geographic location achieves symbolic importance as well, since the *Valley* is placed close to royal sites, such as the *Pedraza Castle*, *La Granja*, or the renowned *Escorial Palace*. Situated in the Guadarrama Mountains, near the geographic center of Spain, in the region of Castile, Franco's selection of the site indicates his desire to equate the royal constructions with his own. Even today, visitors are encouraged to see the *Escorial* and the *Valley* on package tour combinations, blurring the differences of timeline and intent between the Renaissance palace and the modern monument.

Franco's personal ideals are also exposed by virtue of his placement which speaks of the regime's imposition of a standard nationalism. The Guadarrama Mountains in Castile are close to the capital, Madrid. Strategically chosen, the capital's location helped monarchs exert power more easily throughout the country. The Castilian region is also significant because it provided the standard for the culture that was exported throughout the Spanish empire from the 1500s onward. Unity in the Golden Age of Spain existed because the language exported to the Americas and the legal institutions were all Castilian.[21] Basque, Catalonian, and Galician regions that exhibited multiple nationalisms were customarily not supported in or outside of Spain. In fact, during the twentieth century under Franco, a strong repression of these traditions and their dialects occurred in favor of Castilian culture and language.[22] Indeed, the Spanish language is equivalent to the Castilian dialect. In order to truly unify and strengthen the dictatorship and guide the country once more towards imperial greatness, Franco forcefully attempted to eliminate the differences that existed among the inhabitants of the Iberian Peninsula.

Franco clearly understood the importance that the royal palaces had in the artistic and historical tradition of Spain. When decorating the nave, he opted to place tapestries from *La Granja*, a royal estate, to add color to the otherwise austere structure. This decoration is the most direct example of Franco borrowing from Spanish royalty; but he pushed for other unlikely correspondences with royal settings, and the *Escorial Palace* offered Franco the best model to emulate.[23] Famous for its sobriety and subdued splendor, the kingly estate is a key monument in Spanish history. It is often considered a proclamation to the fanatical Catholicism of King Philip II (reigned 1556-1598) because it houses his collection of over 7,000 holy relics. The Hieronymite monastery attached to it, along with its center of studies focused on matters of the faith during the time of the Counter-Reformation, assured that King Philip II would be remembered as a defender of Catholicism.[24] The *Valley* appears once more as a reissue of monarchical ideas, revived and reformed. The complex performs many of the same activities as the *Escorial*, and the rhetoric traditionally used to describe it works to compensate the absolute differences between the two monuments.

Franco constructed a Benedictine abbey next to the basilica. The abbey currently uses the basilica, and the monks help care for it. The abbey also held a center intended to promote scholarship on social and religious studies meant to help guide the nation in the post-war process. The reasoning behind the study center in the *Escorial* was to protect the Catholic religion, which in Phillip II's period was under attack by the ongoing Protestant Reformation in Northern Europe. Although Spain retained its Catholic status in the twentieth century, the attacks on the Catholic faith were seen as coming from Communism. When the Republican government tried to sever ties with the Catholic Church in Rome to create a secular state, the Nationalists opposed the reforms. During the Civil War, the Nationalists were backed by the Catholic

20 Michael Richards, "From War Culture to Civil Society: Francoism, Social Change and Memories of the Spanish Civil War," *History and Memory* 14 (2002): 94-99.

21 For information on how the Spanish Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries was organized and ruled, see Tamar Herzog, *Defining Nations: Immigrants and Citizens in Early Modern Spain and Spanish America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 64–65, 199–200.

22 Stanley Payne, "Catalan and Basque Nationalism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, no. 1 (January 1971): 48–50.

23 Sueiro, *La verdadera historia*, 11, 126.

24 For more information about these long-standing views on the *Escorial*, its religious and educational goals, and fresh interpretations, see Henry Kamen, *The Escorial: Art and Power in the Renaissance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 200–202, 205–207.

Church in both Spain and Rome because they promised to maintain the Church's influential position in Spain. Under Franco, the government re-established the Catholic Church as the official church of the state. The Counter-Reformation provided guidelines by which the monarch could preserve Catholicism. Franco's role was not to uphold the Church's dogmas; instead, as the protector of traditional Catholicism, he used religion to bolster his own power.

The basilica, unlike the *Escorial*, never housed holy relics, but rhetoric was employed to support ideas of religious significance in the battle and its resulting victims. The War was called a crusade and those who died for the Nationalist cause were called martyrs. In Catholic religion a person who is killed for upholding his religious beliefs is a martyr. Although the War clearly had political roots, the issue is semantically simplified so as to be viewed primarily as a religious conflict.[25] Thus, the resulting deaths are seen as the products of a holy war. Franco explained that he wanted for people to frequent the *Valley* and turn it into a pilgrimage site.[26] Once more, the rhetoric indicates how he manipulated history to convert the location into a significant and sacred place. A pilgrimage entails a journey with a specific destination to participate in the experience of relics. In the case of the *Valley*, it is the so-called martyrs' bodies in the crypt and the two graves that are considered relics. Pilgrimage would imply a desired participation or experience of these graves, and the idea of the relic is promoted within the specially created space, particularly in the area of the altar where the bodies of Franco and Primo de Rivera are found. In this space there is a recreation of an ambulatory path for the visitor, a well-known architectural type in pilgrimage sites.

The pilgrimage to this site is eased and modernized by the inclusion of wide roads leading up to the *Valley*, thus making it a tourist site along with the *Escorial Palace*. There is also a cable car that goes up the base of the 492-foot tall cross. These modern additions are far from the tourist experience of medieval cathedrals and demonstrate that Franco was very much interested in public participation. This participation, in turn, would result in public acceptance of the *Valley* as another of the numerous tourist locations like those frequented in Spain since it combines religiosity and historicity in the same way as the most famous pilgrimage site of the country, which is the medieval *Santiago of Compostela* cathedral in the north.

"One motherland, one state, one *caudillo*" was a popular slogan of the Franco period that encapsulated the goal of the dictatorship of achieving a strong country, a product of a homogenous population. Another slogan of the period connects the contemporaneous visitor to his idealized history: "to the Empire, by God." Franco envisioned himself as leading Spain to its rightful destiny. The *Valley*, as the product of the Spanish Civil War, embodies the pinnacle of the Dictator's vision of a new Golden Age in a state unified under Catholicism.[27]

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[25] The Catholic Church has beatified and canonized victims from the Spanish Civil War *en masse* because it considers them martyrs. In 2007, 498 victims were beatified. This makes them official martyrs; the rhetoric, however, has spread to all Nationalist victims of the war. For more information on the rhetoric used, see Víctor Pérez Díaz, *The Return of Civil Society: The Emergence of Democratic Spain* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 131.

[26] Sueiro, *La verdadera historia*, 15.

[27] I've recently found that Noel Valis has taken into account many of the issues and made similar connections as those that I've brought up in my paper. See Noel Valis, "Civil War Ghosts Entombed: Lessons of the Valley of the Fallen" in *Teaching Representations of the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Noel Valis (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2007), 425–235.

Also, at the moment that I am writing, the question of what to do with Franco's body is unresolved. The Spanish government put the question to a committee that decided that since Franco did not die during the Civil War he does not need to be buried there because it doesn't fit with the Monument's prescriptions. The body would be returned to Franco's family if this decision is ratified, but it is at the moment being left up to the Catholic Church to decide, since this is a Catholic basilica.

Recently, I requested permission to use photographs of the *Valley of the Fallen* from the Monument's official website. The request could not be granted unless I signed a written document which affirmed that the article would not portray the Catholic Church of Spain or the Monument in a negative light.

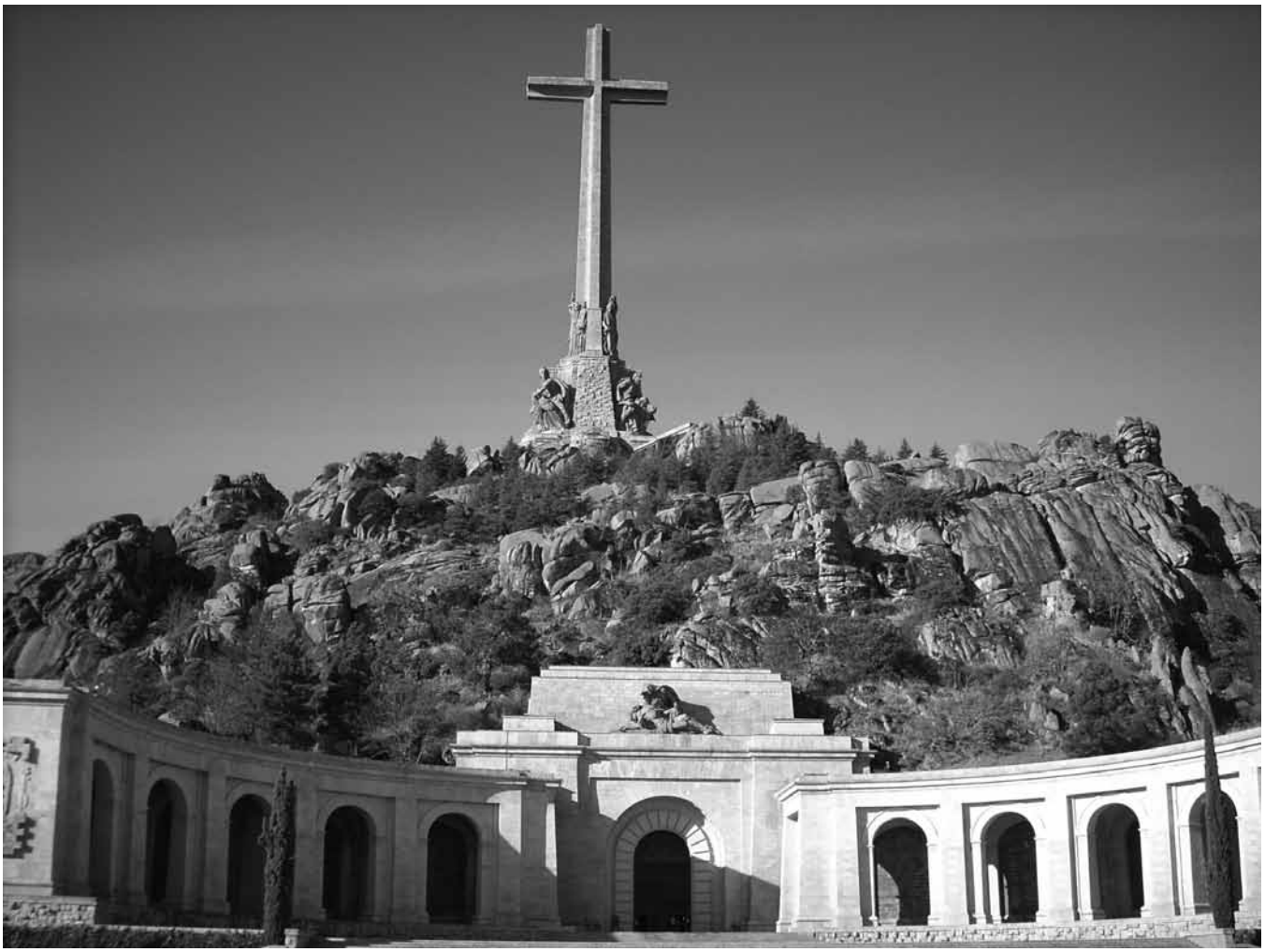

Figure 1. Pedro Muguruza and Diego Méndez, *Valley of the Fallen*, 1940-1959, Sierra of Guadarrama, Spain. Photo credit: Pablo Forcén Soler.

[*far left*] Figure 2. Cross by Diego Méndez and sculptures by Juan de Ávalos, *Valley of the Fallen*, 1940-1959, Sierra of Guadarrama, Spain. Photo credit: Maite Barragán.

[*right*] Figure 3. This relief flanks each side of the colonnade. ??? depicts the coat of arms that is today recognized as the one used during the dictatorship. Pedro Muguruza and Diego Méndez, *Valley of the Fallen*, 1940-1959, Sierra of Guadarrama, Spain. Photo credit: Maite Barragán.

Figure 4. Basilica interior, Pedro Muguruza and Diego Méndez, *Valley of the Fallen*, 1940-1959, Sierra of Guadarrama, Spain. Photo credit: Håkan Svensson © GNU Documentation License.

[*right*] Figure 5. Carlos Ferreira, *Angel with Sword*, bronze, *Valley of the Fallen*, Spain. Photo credit: Lilian Durero for *Clamor Republicano*.

[*far right*] Figure 6. Ramón Mateu, *Our Lady of Loreto Chapel*, alabaster, *Valley of the Fallen*. Photo credit: Håkan Svensson © GNU Documentation License.