

Monument Culture

*International Perspectives
on the Future of Monuments in a
Changing World*

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Homage to Charlottesville

A Familiar Essay

ALEX VERNON

We are all drowning in filth. When I talk to anyone or read the writings of anyone who has any axe to grind, I feel that intellectual honesty and balanced judgement have simply disappeared from the face of the earth. Everyone's thought is forensic, everyone is simply putting a "case" with deliberate suppression of his opponent's point of view, and, what is more, with complete insensitiveness to any sufferings except those of himself and his friends. . . . One notices this in the case of people one disagrees with, such as Fascists or pacifists but in fact everyone is the same, at least everyone is utterly heartless towards people who are outside the immediate range of his own interests. What is most striking of all is the way sympathy can be turned on and off like a tap according to political expediency.

—George Orwell's diary, April 27, 1942¹

FRIDAY EVENING, AUGUST 11, 2017, THE FIRST OF THE WEEKEND'S INCOMING news updates from Charlottesville hit my smartphone: WHITE NATIONALISTS MARCH ON UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA. Over a dozen such organizations were descending upon the newly renamed Emancipation Park to protest the potential removal of a statue of the Confederate General Robert E. Lee. They were to be met on Saturday by a diversity of counter-protestors. Luckily, we had canceled our cable subscription, freeing me from that medium's irresistible news hypnosis. I needed to absorb the events and images on my own emotional terms and schedule. From the radio, I learned about the car ramming into the crowd of counter-protestors. I didn't need an assault by video footage to know more; I could read about it, read about the entire depressing mess, online.

Web browser opened, cable news channel website found, and there it was, the first frame of the video. Looking past the car's rear end, its spoiler and GVF 111 license plate, my eyes follow what from the image's perspective is the car's axis of advance to its most prominent visual end point. *What the . . . ?* Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing, waving there in the background, above

and slightly to the left of the car, above what must be the last cluster of anti-racist counter-protestors? A few minutes studying other images online confirm it. It's the red-yellow-purple triband flag of the Second Spanish Republic, 1931–1939.

What the . . . ?

Eighty years earlier and 170 miles from Charlottesville, President Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke at the anniversary of the Battle of Antietam. Seventy-five years earlier, the Union Army had turned back General Lee's first incursion into the north, outside Sharpsburg, Maryland. It remains the bloodiest single day in US military history.

Roosevelt's September 1937 speech acknowledged the painful years of Reconstruction, especially for Southerners. He regretted the "sectionalism" of the postwar years and, for the South, the "economic destruction and the denial to its population of the normal rights of free Americans."² That he meant *white* Southerners, that he spoke to white America, became clear in the pretense that the nation's house had finally been restored to order:

It is too soon to define the history of the present generation; but I venture the belief that it was not until the World War of twenty years ago that we acted once more as a nation of restored unity. I believe also, that the past four years mark the first occasion, certainly since the War between the States, and perhaps during the whole 150 years of our government, that we are not only acting but also thinking in national terms.³

In 1862, five days after the battle's symbolic victory, Abraham Lincoln issued his preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. Roosevelt's anniversary remarks overlooked the very people for whose freedom the war was waged.⁴ The anniversary included concerts, a small reenactment, and a pageant with Miss Antietam. I have not yet discovered photographic evidence of African Americans among the celebrants. If they were there, I can only somewhat imagine their reactions.

And what of the conflict setting Spain aflame that very moment? It was the most pressing international issue of the day; it could not have been far from Roosevelt's mind. Would he have thought to connect the two civil wars that day, the two republics imperiled by rebellions of those clinging to their exploitative agrarian economic legacy? Roosevelt mentioned the 1898 Spanish-American War as an example of what "young people" consider history, as whatever predated themselves into inconsequence. But was he, was anyone, assembled outside Sharpsburg that day thinking of Spain's pain? Of the Americans who traveled illegally to fight for the Spanish Republic, to fight

for their vision of democracy and freedom, having taken as their name the Abraham Lincoln Brigade?⁵

In 1931, an election of democratic Republicans, generally moderate Progressives and Socialists, brought about the end of Spain's monarchy and the birth of the Second Spanish Republic. The next five years saw fierce political fighting among the Republicans, radical Leftists, and various conservative forces for control of the government. The electoral and legislative battles were joined by strikes and suppression, other forms of mob violence, imprisonment, harassment, arson, and murder. A failed military coup in July 1936 by the conservative army and on behalf of conservative Spain devolved into three years of civil war. Those forces—monarchists, landowners, industrialists, the army, fascists, the Catholic Church—fought and won under the banner of Nationalism and the leadership of Francisco Franco, who would rule as fascist dictator until his death in 1975. On the other side, the government collected every center and left-of-center group it could: moderates, socialists, unionists, nonrevolutionary communists, revolutionary communists, syndicalists, anarchists, and regional separatists. To call this coalition *motley* would give it too much cohesion. They shared a common enemy but had competing agendas and worldviews.

Franco's Nationalists openly embraced fascism and received significant financial and military support from Mussolini and Hitler in violation of a nonintervention pact. With the European democracies declining to violate the pact, the Republican government survived as long as it did largely through the interventions of the Communist International, the Soviet Union, and postrevolutionary Mexico. The full extent of Soviet and Communist influence remains a subject of debate. Regardless, many people outside Spain identified oppositionally—in other words, they supported the Republicans as anti-fascist or the Nationalists as anti-communist.⁶

Today, eighty years after the war and more than forty after Franco's death, fresh symbols of the old war repopulate Spain. There—and if you know to look, there is practically everywhere: at University City, the campus on the northwest corner of Madrid where Franco's rebellious Nationalist forces were halted and through which ran the trench lines, stalemated, for the rest of the war, its academic buildings pocky with bullet and shrapnel scores. And there, at old Belchite, a town destroyed during the war whose ruins Franco ordered to remain as a lasting testament to the destruction of the fatherland by his enemy, the legitimate Republican government of Spain. And there, in caves and on medieval forts in the New Castilian countryside south of Madrid. And there and there and there and there, on dumpsters and stanchions and benches and signage—in such places graffiti revives the war's panoply of sym-

bols: yokes and arrows, hammers and sickles, clenched fists, swastikas, circle-A brands, and the acronyms of yesteryears: FAI, CNT, UHP, PCE, POUM.⁷

It's not just graffiti. It's a fascist Falange Española banner in a small town's *plaza mayor*. It's Spaniards whipping out Republican flags to protest pretty much anything, sometimes communist flags too. Those who want to preserve the history and legend of the defenders of the Second Republic hold commemorative marches at major battle sites. Don't imagine a US National Park Service treatment, with shiny canons and welcome centers, a Shiloh or an Antietam—in Spain, a former battlefield is just a piece of land. People carry aloft and wrap themselves in the Republican tricolors and, sometimes, the red drapery of communism. People break out singing “The Internationale.” At my first march, at Jarama, a fellow outfitted himself in full Republican military garb. The walk back to our cars during my second such march, this one at Brunete, took us by an equestrian club. With the presumed aristocratic (Nationalist-leaning) riders as the backdrop, fellow marchers posed for cheerful pics clutching open a Republican flag accessorized with a large Atlético Madrid emblem. The people's football club, in opposition to Real Madrid, the club of the royals.

Less than a month before the “Unite the Right” weekend, at the World Gay Pride week in Madrid, rainbow flags with the anarchist circle-A joined regular rainbow flags and Republican flags (and a squad of trotting men wearing nothing but leather straps and pig masks). It is all in good fun, youthful progressive cheeky esprit. It is all quite serious.

I read almost nothing posted online the Saturday of the rally in Charlottesville. Instead, I examine the images. *19 hours ago. 11 hours ago. 2 hours ago. 22 minutes ago.* The swastikas, Confederate battle flags, Nationalist Front banners, and clownish Ku Klux Klan (KKK) regalia don't interest me. They don't surprise. No one needs a photo to picture that scene. But the flag of the Second Spanish Republic, 1931–1939? The usual protest props of Spain have migrated to the Virginia Piedmont?

Apparently so. Look: red flags with the gold hammer and sickle in the corner. Look again: posters with clenched fists, some emblazoned with the word SOLIDARITY. While these fists potentially signify black pride, to face off with the white bigotry of the rally, their red color plus the presence of Republican and Communist flags confuses the message. *Where am I looking at? When am I looking at?* I see among the counter-protesters and their allies in other cities the black flags and the circle-A brand of anarchists, I see black and red flags, I see images of the serpent of fascism, I see anti-fascist language. It's straight from the propaganda art playbook of the Republic's coalition.

At least one person in Charlottesville that August day in 2017—maybe only one person—had the Spanish Civil War in mind, the woman bearing the tricolors. At least one person near Sharpsburg that September day in 1937 had Europe in mind. A rabbinical student, Pinchos J. Chazin, traveled from New York City to speak at the Synagogue of Congregation B’Nai Abraham in Hagerstown. The speech’s references point directly to Nazi Germany, never Spain. But the young seminarian addressed Antietam’s lessons of liberty and democracy to all dictatorships: “Today, Antietam out of bitter and costly experience steps forth and speaks to dictatorships.” To them Antietam says, among other things, “Mankind must not be impaled in the pillories and stocks of medieval reaction for hundreds of years.”⁸

In its war to restore power to the traditional ruling class, which included monarchists and the Catholic Church with its inquisition legacy, Franco’s Nationalist rhetoric appealed to a fantasy of a true and pure Spain, uncorrupted by the foreign—by Jews, Bolsheviks, and democratic modernity (while aggressively recruiting Moroccan Muslims to fight for Catholic Spain). Roughly a quarter of those who traveled to Spain to fight for the Republic in the International Brigades were Jewish.⁹ To fight fascism was in a sense to fight cultural monolithism. The two battalions of volunteers from the United States were the first totally integrated combat units in American military history, and Oliver Law became the first African American to command white and black Americans. He died in July 1937 from wounds suffered in combat at Brunete.

Indeed, African American volunteers and their supporters felt deeply the connection between European fascism, North American racism and segregation, and the plight of Europe’s colonies. As Canute Frankson wrote home from Spain in July 1937:

Since this is a war between whites who for centuries have held us in slavery, and have heaped every kind of insult and abuse upon us, segregated and jim-crowed us; why I, a Negro, who have fought through these years for the rights of my people, am here in Spain?

Because we are no longer an isolated group fighting hopelessly against an immense giant. . . . Because if we crush Fascism here, we’ll save our people in America, and in other parts of the world, from the vicious persecution, wholesale imprisonment, and slaughter which the Jewish people suffered and are suffering under Hitler’s Fascist heels.

All we have to do is to think of the lynching of our people. We can but look back at the pages of American history stained with the blood of Negroes; stink with the burning bodies of our people hanging from trees; bitter with the groans of our tortured loved ones from whose living bodies, ears, fingers, toes have been cut for souvenirs—living bodies into which red-hot pokers have been thrust. All because of a hate created in the minds of men and women by their masters who

keep us all under their heels while they suck our blood, while they live in their bed of ease by exploiting us. . . .

We will crush them. We will build us a new society—a society of peace and plenty. There will be no color line, no jim-crow trains, no lynching. That is why, my dear, I'm here in Spain.¹⁰

Black American commentators on the war, such as the poet Langston Hughes, saw in Spain's Moorish history and Europe's dismissal of Spain as more African than European a source of blood and spiritual kinship.¹¹ Franco was imagined, in cartoons and prose, as belonging to the KKK.

Yet are those bearing Communist, anarchist, and anti-fascist icons in Charlottesville actually happy bedfellows who share a unity of purpose with one another and most especially with those counter-protestors who simply abhor racism? Can one trust that different, potentially conflicting agendas aren't being pursued? "What's eroding," writes Peter Beinart in *The Atlantic*, "is the quality Max Weber considered essential to a functioning state: a monopoly on legitimate violence. As members of a largely anarchist movement, anti-fascists don't want the government to stop white supremacists from gathering. They want to do so themselves, rendering the government impotent."¹² One should not forget the Spanish Republic's bloody internecine war within Spain's bloody internecine war, the May Days of 1937, with anarchists, rival communists, and the government fighting among themselves in the streets of Barcelona and to which George Orwell bore witness in *Homage to Catalonia*. Walking alongside the hammer and sickle as a sympathetic observer during a commemorative event, sure. But severe disquietude hits when I imagine marching beside the hammer and sickle of Stalin's liquidation regime as an activist, even if simply to protest white supremacy. Is a perfect protest, one without complication, reasonable to expect? Is insisting on a single message, well, undemocratic?

A nuanced historic understanding and unity of purpose, whereby the Charlottesville counter-protestors focused upon the anti-racist overlap in the Venn diagram of their gathered symbolism, feels unlikely. Even more unlikely—ridiculously unlikely—would be the expectation that everyone watching them, ideological foes included, would appreciate the nuance. During the Spanish Civil War, all supporters of the Republic, to its foes, were *rojos*. Reds. Everyone in the International Brigades was a *Russo*, a Russian, regardless of country of origin. It is difficult to process mid-twentieth-century rhetoric and symbols resurrected in patchwork and stumbling through the twenty-first century countryside like Frankenstein's monster. Political ideologies, entities, and identities evolve. When should one recall and apply the historical legacy? When should one let it go? Rhetoric and iconography are appropriated, recycled, repurposed. Visual symbols don't easily disambiguate.

The summer before Charlottesville, a controversial photograph from West Point of African American female cadets from the graduating class of 2016 raising clenched fists became national news. The nation had watched Beyoncé's surprise Superbowl performance of "Formation" and was living through the height of the Black Lives Matter response to the killing of black men by police and the exoneration of the officers, their departments, the state.

Did the young women intend to invoke the Black Panthers? Did they even understand fully what that would have meant? Could they recognize the fist's complicated history, stretching at least back to the 1930s' relationship between black America and communism? Was it more about Beyoncé and their love of pop culture than a revolutionary shout-out to the Panthers and a fuck you to the nation-state whose uniform the cadets wore? Was it simply an expression of collective accomplishment that harmlessly if pertly acknowledged their shared identity as black women? The image most closely resembled an assembly of Republican soldiers in Spain circa 1937. And it *could* have simply expressed their accomplishment. After all, President Donald Trump raised his clenched fist moments after taking the oath of office. Surely it wasn't solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement; given how his 2016 campaign resonated with various white pride groups, could it have been the Aryan Fist, stolen from the Black Panthers? Or a sly salute to Russian President Vladimir Putin, about whom Trump spoke admiringly during the campaign?

The English writer Ralph Bates published a wonderfully strange essay in October 1936 about the burning of Catholic iconography and churches by anarchists in Catalonia, "Compañero Sagasta Burns a Church." Bates writes the scene as witness-participant:

It was a grand bonfire. A little technical commission (to which I was elected) stood at one side of the door, passing judgment on the saints as they were carried out. Compañero Sagasta relies on my judgment.

"This one, compañero?"

"Revolting, burn him."

"Very good, compañero."

Poum! The bearers run to the fire and St. Peter throws up a billow of sparks.

"This one, compañero?"

"Absolutely nauseating, pitch her on the fire." (Why do female saints appear to suffer from permanent disorders of the kind proper to their sex?)

"This one?"

"H'm, looks rather old, the carving's direct; probably deserves a second thought."

"Very good." The saint is dumped on his back among the silver plate candelabra, the books with parchment backs, which may make binding for school-

books, the electric bulbs, the linen, good for bandages, and, in short, anything that possibly has artistic or secular value.

This not-gaudy candelabra, for instance: when it came out I yelled, “Eh, bring that here.”

“It’s only iron.”

“Only iron! Christ Jesus, it’s pure Catalan work of the fifteenth century; look, no rivets, no clips, everything is welded and drawn under the hammer.”

The iconoclasts reverently placed the candelabra to one side, reverently I say, for a *compañero* has said this is art, and feeling out of it, they rush into the church for another trophy.¹³

Bates assures his readers that the anarchists took great care in their work, preserving artifacts and architecture of genuine value and declining to burn a Barcelona church whose position gave the enemy no military advantage. They knocked on doors of homes to issue polite warning when they were about to torch a neighborhood church.

I think of Bates’s “technical commission” when I read about today’s monuments targeted by various groups as needing removal. That 1933 Chicago monument to the creator of Mussolini’s air power that would soon be used against Republican Spain, Italo Balbo? Maybe. Maybe not. I—we—require more research, more reflection. Christopher Columbus? In Barcelona in early July, walking past the sixty-meter-high Columbus monument overlooking the port, I hoped to elicit a smile from my teenage daughter by embracing my role as uber-gooper dad and so thanked Columbus aloud. Probably with a wave or a half-assed salute. I also think of how, a century ago, the white-robed brethren of the white Christian supremacists of Charlottesville’s “Unite the Right” gathering were arguably more anti-Catholic than anti-black, at least in their speeches and publications.¹⁴ That in a previous incarnation they themselves might have cheered on the anti-fascist *Compañero* Sagasta as well as the anti-Catholic revolutionaries in Mexico. Instead, in Wisconsin in September, in the wake of Charlottesville, vandals defaced a monument to the state’s contribution to the International Brigades located across the street from the Gates of Heaven Synagogue. Swastikas, “ANTIFA SUCKS,” and “TRUMP RULES,” spray-painted in red, appeared hours before Rosh Hashanah commenced.¹⁵

There is a vast difference, of course, between a self-appointed committee’s willy-nilly destruction of icons and the proper, democratic decision-making processes carried out by elected officials over potential statue removal, such as the legislation by three Maryland congressmen to remove the Lee statue at Antietam, introduced two days before the 155th anniversary. When for over twenty years the state of Arkansas celebrated Robert E. Lee Day over the national Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, many Americans can hardly imagine any public testament to Lee as anything but a racial affront. Yet for many

defenders of controversial statues, the removal movement can be characterized by a mobocracy overtaken by self-righteous political correctness mixed up with absurd notions of anti-fascism and anarchist iconoclasm. Will West Point rename Lee Barracks rather than have cadets live in a building named after a fellow graduate, a former academy superintendent, and a leader whose battlefield genius contributes to the school's boast that "the history we teach was made by those we taught"?

I think of the old monument to Spain's colonial army, destroyed during the civil war. It was eventually replaced by a monument to Simón Bolívar, erected by the former colonies to the embodiment of their liberation, a stone's throw from Franco's triumphant arch leading into Madrid. Scores upon scores of commuters pass them every day.

George Orwell's experiences in a Marxist pro-Republican militia defending Catalonia during the war contributed to his rejection of midcentury communism. He remained, however, a committed Progressive Democratic Socialist. In life as well as in language, he bothered—passionately—to discriminate.

In March 1944, two years before his celebrated "Politics and the English Language," Orwell published an essay in his "As I Please" column, which asks, "What is Fascism?" At the height of the world war against fascism, Orwell observes the term's application by pretty much everyone to pretty much everyone else: conservatives, socialists, Communists, Trotskyists, Catholics, war resisters, war supporters, and every stripe of nationalist. "In conversation, of course, it is used even more wildly than in print. I have heard it applied to farmers, shopkeepers, Social Credit, corporal punishment, fox-hunting, bull-fighting, the 1922 Committee, the 1941 Committee, Kipling, Gandhi, Chiang Kai-Shek, homosexuality, Priestley's broadcasts, Youth Hostels, astrology, women, dogs and I do not know what else." He concludes that the word *fascist* has become all but "meaningless" except as a synonym for *bully*. "All one can do for the moment is to use the word with a certain amount of circumspection and not, as is usually done, degrade it to the level of a swearword."¹⁶

The word *fascism* is hardly alone in its weaponized promiscuity of late, Mr. Orwell. We haven't been listening, sir.

NOTES

1. George Orwell. *My Country Right or Left 1940–1943: The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 2, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 423.
2. "Roosevelt Speech at Antietam," *Boston Herald*, September 19, 1937, Western Maryland's Historical Library, <http://www.whilbr.org/itemdetail.aspx?idEntry=2400&dtPointer=4>.
3. Ibid.

4. This brief discussion of a single rhetorical move does not intend to be anything else; one should not infer a general charge of racism in Roosevelt's policies or person.
5. The term Abraham Lincoln Brigade is something of a misnomer because there was no such military unit. There was an Abraham Lincoln Battalion and a shorter-lived George Washington Battalion. The term Abraham Lincoln Brigade refers to all volunteers from the United States regardless of their military assignment.
6. For too many Spaniards, the choices were not easy. One's allegiances, needs, and desires did not readily resolve. There were influences and pressures of family, region or village or neighborhood, and the need to secure work. Often, the decision lay out of the individual's hands. People switched sides. People hid. People pretended. People sought to survive.
7. Federación Anarquista Ibérica; Confederación Nacional del Trabajo; Unión de Hermanos Proletarios; Partido Comunista de España; Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista. Although "acronyms of yesteryears" is not entirely accurate, as some of the organizations from the 1930s remain active.
8. Germany is not actually named either. "Antietam Address, radio broadcast, undated," Box 12, Folder 14, Pinchos J. Chazin Papers, Temple University Libraries. Though undated in the archives, the document's language exactly matches that quoted by the local newspaper "Rabbi Scores Dictatorship. Visiting Jewish Clergyman Gives Stirring Address Here." *The Daily Mail*, Monday, September 13, 1937, 7F. See also the announcement of the upcoming talk, which mentions that the speech would be broadcast over station WJEJ: "Rabbi Chazin Will Speak at Service Here. 'Antietam Speaks to Dictatorships' Will Be Sunday Topic." *Hagerstown Herald-Mail*, September 10, 1937, www.whilbr.org/itemdetail.aspx?idEntry=2393&dtPointer=7.
9. Helen Graham, *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 44. Graham's figure is for all international volunteers, not just those from the United States.
10. "Letter from Canute Frankson, Albacete, Spain, July 6, 1937," in *Madrid 1937: Letters of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade from the Spanish Civil War*, ed. Cary Nelson and Jefferson Hendricks (Routledge, 1996), 33–34. For additional examples, see the writings by Salaria Key and James Bernard (Bunny) Rucker in *The Good Fight Continues: World War II Letters from the Abraham Lincoln Brigade*, ed. Peter N. Carroll, Michael Nash, and Melvin Small (New York University Press, 2006), 27–28, 137–38.
11. See Gayle Rogers, "Negro and Negro: Translating American Blackness in the Shadows of the Spanish Empire," in *Incomparable Empires: Modernism and the Translation of Spanish and American Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2016).
12. Peter Beinart, "The Rise of the Violent Left," *The Atlantic* (September 2017). Although this issue of the magazine appeared after the weekend in Charlottesville, the article does not mention the event—a fact that suggests it was written and sent to press prior to that violence.
13. Ralph Bates, "Compañero Sagasta Burns a Church," *The Left Review* 2, no. 13 (October 1936): 681–87.

14. “While the Klan’s list of adversaries was long, some historians have suggested that [in the 1920s] anti-Catholicism was the strongest and most nationally consistent rallying point.” Kenneth C. Barnes, *Anti-Catholicism in Arkansas: How Politicians, the Press, the Klan, and Religious Leaders Imagined an Enemy, 1910–1960* (University of Arkansas Press, 2016), 98.
15. The fall of 2017 also saw the terrorist attack in Barcelona that left thirteen dead and the Catalanian independence crisis.
16. George Orwell. *As I Please, 1943–1945: The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), 111–14.