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Memories of the Past:

Engagement with Colonial Narratives in Modern-Day Spain

International Studies Senior Capstone Thesis

By

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Abstract

Over the past fifteen years, the way colonialism is remembered and taught has come under fire. In Spain, dominant political forces strike against one another on what the "correct" history of colonization looks like. Of particular concern is how the stories of colonialism have been remembered and taught and what these stories might look like moving forward. This paper examines the rise and fall of the Spanish Empire and the long-term impacts of the colonial period and then discusses how the colonial period is remembered in Spain and the impact of collective memory on national identity. It does so through examination of certain colonial narratives (the Black Legend, the White Legend, Hispanism) and a close look at the education of colonialism (looking at museums, textbooks, and celebrations from modern-day Spain). Finally, it examines the impact that such education has on modern-day Spanish politics, arguing that the maintenance of colonial narratives that ignore the unsavory elements of colonialism leads to modern political conflict, both domestically and internationally.

Introduction

In Spain, the year 1492 C.E. holds a particular significance in national consciousness; it marks the victory of the Reconquista, the establishment of a Catholic monarchy over the entire Iberian Peninsula, and the arrival of Christopher Columbus to the Americas. As per the last item, it would also signal the beginning of the Spanish Empire, which, at its greatest extent, encompassed 13.7 million square kilometers across the globe (Taagepera, 1997). For over 400 years, Spain controlled territory overseas, commandeering resources, people, and land from the "New World" to build one of the richest empires the world had ever seen. The effects of the colonization that enabled this wealth, however, were devastating and long-lasting. In only 100 years after European arrival to the Americas, the indigenous population drastically declined from 60.5 million to 5.6 million as a result of epidemics, warfare, enslavement, and famine (Koch, et. al. 2019). The way colonialism in Spain is remembered, however, tends to err on the side of positivity or surface-level neutrality; textbooks frequently minimize or ignore violence, identify the "West" with progress and freedom, and focus on the importation of Spanish culture to "new" territories (Pousa, M. & Facal, R.V., 2013). Museums also struggle with discussing negative aspects of colonialism, tending again to focus on the spread of Spanish culture globally. The curious contradictions between narratives of colonialism (violent vs benevolent) thus create tension in what constitutes "real history" across Spain, a tension that has bled over into modern-day Spanish politics. By examining how the colonization of the Americas is remembered in Spain through school textbooks, museums, and celebrations, I argue that Spain has historically propagated narratives that ignore the cruelty of colonialism. These narratives clash

with the modern academic and political drive to acknowledge the issues of coloniality, which has led to both internal and international conflict.

The Spanish Empire & Colonialism

Christopher Columbus, or Cristobal Colón, as he is known in Spain, never set foot on the American mainland. His encounter with the Americas began and ended in the Caribbean, and he remained convinced that he had circumnavigated to Asia until his death. But his arrival to the Caribbean in 1492 would signal the beginning of the Spanish project of expansionism in the Americas. Over the course of about 60 years, the Spanish would establish dominion over territory that stretched from the modern-day United States to Chile.[1] In the Americas, with land and conquering would come enormous wealth; the Spanish international enterprise would become so successful that the Spanish Empire's money supply increased by tenfold over a 300-year period (Chen Y., Palma N., & Ward, F., 2021). There were also immense socio-cultural impacts; with the *conquistadors* came the Catholic Church, which would become an extensive element of spiritual authority and the dominant religion across the colonies. Per Cartwright (2022), as their hold on power solidified, the Spanish monarchy formed new systems for governance of their new territory, creating administrative divisions of land that would later inform the borders of countries across the Americas; these viceroyalties, as they were called, can be seen in Figure 1 below.[2] The long-term impacts of Spanish colonization across the world are indelible; post-colonial countries would certainly not look the way they do without it.

[1] To note, Spain's empire extended beyond the Americas; they would hold what is now the Philippines from 1521 to 1898, and also claimed land in Africa (parts of Morocco & Equatorial Guinea)

[2] To note, some people consider viceroyalties to be a different entity than a colony; regardless, the presence of the Spanish in the Americas is still colonization as the overall societies were colonial.

Figure 1:

Map of the Spanish Empire in the Americas in 1780 (Spanish-controlled territories in green)

Note. Spanish viceroyalties and Portuguese territories in the Americas, 1780. From Encyclopædia Britannica. (2024, March 7). https://www.britannica.com/place/Viceroyalty-of-New-Spain

The success of the Spanish, however, was built off of exploitation. The devastation of the pre-colonial peoples, the confiscation of their land and resources, and the introduction of the transatlantic slave trade would have adverse effects on the colonized regions for years to come. The sheer scale of loss in the Americas was staggering; from 1500 to 1600, the Earth experienced an atmospheric drop in CO_2 as a result of the abandonment of land across the Americas due to the deaths of indigenous people (Koch et al., 2019). That is to say, so many indigenous people died from disease, famine, and warfare that there was an impact on worldwide climate. Life under the colonial regimes was also difficult; though enslavement,

state-enforced violence, and rigid social class were certainly not new phenomena in the colonized territories, the Spanish turned it into the backbone of their empire. A strictly enforced race-based hierarchy was developed, one in which whiteness granted superiority over all; Indigenous peoples were classified as “perpetual minors and wards of the crown” and black persons/”mulattos” were regarded as “repellent” and “viles, traidores, ociosos, borrachos [translated: ‘vile, traitors, idlers, and drunkards’]” (Mcalister 1963, pp. 355-358). Though the Spanish were forced to concede certain levels of authority and autonomy to indigenous peoples and groups to maintain their rule, they sat firmly above them socially even if they could not do so economically. The Spanish usurped indigenous stewardship over land, created broad systems of enslavement, and conducted small-scale brutal violence in the post-conquest period to demonstrate what would happen if they were opposed by individuals. To be clear, the Spanish colonial enterprise does not stand out as particularly brutal or violent in comparison to other European colonial powers; as Keen notes, “acceptance that the traditional critique of Spanish colonial practices [is] valid in no way implies superior practices by other imperialisms'' (1969, 719). In the post-conquest years, the Spanish were able to prevent high incidences of “large-scale collective violence,” which would contribute to about 200 years of relative peace in the Americas (Gabbert, 2012, pp. 261). The Spanish were also not uniformly cruel, and many dedicated themselves to trying to improve the lives of the people around them; Keen points to “the devoted labors of many clergy in the fields of scholarship, education, and protection of the natives [and] the cultural flowering that occurred in some parts of the region during the eighteenth century” (1969, pp. 790). But what is apparent is that the Spanish were not a distinctly benevolent entity in the Americas, and cannot be understood as such.

Despite its initial wealth and success, the Spanish Empire was not inherently stable; it would begin to show signs of faltering in the mid-18th century, and its decline would become apparent as its territories began to declare independence in the early-mid 19th century (Gabbert, 2012). The losses of Cuba and the Philippines in 1898 were the death knell for the international enterprise of the Spanish crown. But the end of the Spanish empire in the Americas did not signify an end to the impact of colonialism. Independence movements were "essentially conservative movements intended to prevent major social changes" that did not bring about indigenous success but rather the establishment of a "new elite of American-born Spaniards" (Gabbert, 2012, pp. 269). The social hierarchies that the Spaniards had established did not fade away but were simply altered to account for the ascendancy of the new elite and funnel national resources toward the top, enforcing deep inequality across the Americas that is still prevalent today.[3] Spanish colonialism also had long-term general economic impacts. James Mahoney (2003), alongside other scholars, argues that the colonial territories on the American mainland that were the centers of the Spanish colonial empire typically tend to have become the region's poorest in the post-colonial period.[4] With these legacies in mind, the Spanish colonial period remains highly relevant in the present-day, which exemplifies why education about the colonial period cannot be disregarded as irrelevant and unimportant.

Historical Narratives of Colonialism in Contemporary Spain

Given the facts of the legacies and impact of colonialism, this paper can now move to discuss the prevailing narratives of how colonialism is understood in Spain. Over the past 150

[3] Domestic and gender-based violence is also linked with colonialism internationally; high-levels of intimate partner violence are associated with the risk context of patriarchal post-colonial societies (Brown et.al, 2023).
[4] The issue of Spanish colonial strategy served as an overall impediment to the post-colonial landscape as well; per Acemoglu (2017), colonial strategies based in long-term extractivism (which was the case across the Spanish Americas) are generally associated with poverty.

years, one of the most dominant elements of discourse on Spanish colonialism has been the specter of the "Black Legend." The term, "Black Legend," can be split into two: "Black" is the idea that Spanish colonialism and colonial atrocities were brutal and violent, and "Legend" is the idea that this idea is untrue. Thus, the "Black Legend," as it was coined by Spanish Crown official Julián Juderías in the early 20th century, holds that much of the world believes that Spanish colonialism was particularly awful, but that this belief is a "legend" (Keen 1969). Per Keen above, we might examine the "Black Legend" as "no legend at all," given that the "so-called Black Legend" is substantially accurate, if stripped of its rhetoric and emotional coloration" (Keen 1969, pp. 790). That does not mean, however, that the image of a Black Legend has not had pervasive effects on narratives about colonialism in the 20th century onward. As Gabbert notes, the response to the idea of the Black Legend prompted "apologists of Spanish colonialism" to create a "White Legend," in which they "downplayed colonial violence," "suggested that the Spaniards had put an end to cannibalism, human sacrifice, and other barbarities allegedly practiced in native societies, and had introduced Christianity [and] civilization" (2012, pp. 255).[5] This assertion is echoed by Keen, who similarly argues that "concept of a Black Legend [...] has served to engender a thoroughly misleading counterlegend of Spanish altruism and benevolence to the Indians'' (1969, pp. 790). Despite the scholarly recognition of the Black Legend as a general myth, however, the idea that Spanish colonial atrocities were exaggerated remains prevalent across the world, particularly in Spain.

Education and cultural narratives in Spain about colonialism over the past 100 years has also been heavily influenced by the concept of "Hispanism." Developed during the late 19th and

[5] The term "White Legend" is synonymous with "Pink Legend" and "Rose Legend" or "Rosy Tradition" (other terms used to describe the same phenomenon).

early 20th centuries in an effort to emotionally make up for Spain's imperial decline and promote the superiority of Spanish culture/nationalism, "Hispanism/*Hispanidad*'' was the idea of a global Hispanic cultural and economic identity created by colonialism, intended to tie Latin America in particular with Spain (Arbaiza, 2020). Within this concept, the spread of Spanish culture across the world due to colonialism is conceived as a victory, a project of glorious nation-building, and this has clearly manifested in Spanish colonial memory. This is not to say that Spain's former colonies do not bear Spanish cultural and ethnic legacies; many people in the Americas can trace their heritage to both indigenous and Spanish roots. But the idea of a "transatlantic brotherhood" brushes off the issues of exploitation, hierarchy, and long-term loss (Leinaweaver 2017). Hispanism would go on to become a backbone of the Francisco Franco regime's approach to colonialism and the rebuilding of the country's domestic economy and international ties. El Museo de América, which will be discussed further later in this paper, is a key example of the Franco project to reconstruct Spain's international reputation. Per Leinaweaver, Franco frequently "used museums as propaganda to promote a particular narrative of national history," and the Museo is no exception, as its founding decree clearly emphasized Spanish "heroism, culture, and extraordinariness" in its American collections (2017, pp. 4). Hispanism, it can be said, "has consistently been called out as a nationalistic discourse of imperial nostalgia" (Arbaiza, 2020, pp. 3).

Interestingly, many of the narratives discussed above were popularized or developed from the past 140 years or so, not during the colonial period. This occurs for a variety of reasons; as mentioned above, Hispanism was developed in response to the losses of Cuba and the Philippines in 1898, an event that would spark the "year of Disaster," a reckoning of national

identity in Spain (Blinkhorn, 1980, pp. 5). The national outpouring of something that resembles grief, Blinkhorn notes, would not have been possible in the 1820s,[6] when few Spaniards possessed "consciousness of empire or attachment to it" (1980, pp.6). Yet over the course of the 19th century, the country's pride would become attached to its territorial possessions overseas as the age of imperialism swept Europe. By the time 1898 rolled around, the losses of Cuba and the Philippines were a blow to national pride, and the lack of money from the American territories overall only made things worse. Early 20th century Spain was "extremely poor by European standards," while the rest of Western Europe was reaping the rewards of their imperial ambitions (Orihuela & Whitelaw, 2024). Over the next few decades, Hispanism and Spanish imperial myth would become a key element of doctrine for the Spanish right, particularly into the Francoist period, as a response to that loss of pride and domestic conflict.

These events feed into collective memory and national narratives, the impact of which is well-documented, even if the idea that collective memory can be entirely distilled in a country as a "large organism [with] intentions, desires, memories, and beliefs," is generally refuted (Wertsch 2008, pp. 121). Wertsch especially points to the way collective memory is instilled in textual resources, focusing on the power of historiography to shape the way the past is represented. Importantly, different impressions of history can be obtained through a variety of factors that extend beyond state control, though it should be noted that the state is one of the foremost influencers of historical narratives. Both groups and states form certain pattern narratives, and though the impact of these narratives on people may differ, they help form national narratives that affect the collective memory within groups (Wertsch, 2008). A

[6] Around when many of the territories in the Americas declared independence

self-reinforcing loop forms, which allows for the propagation of Hispanism and the White Legend through communities. We can see above that the loss of 1898 sparked an emotional response that formed into a nation-wide narrative about loss, which is well-remembered across Spain (Blinkhorn, 1980).[7] It is these emotions and the events that followed (The Spanish Civil War, Franco, etc.) that allowed the colonial narratives (Hispanism and reinforcement of White Legend ideas) to really permeate Spanish society within the context of loss and victimhood. The result is a modern Spanish society that has different impressions of historical memory as these older loss narratives collide with more recently popularized narratives that include colonial abuses.

Museums, Textbooks, & Celebrations: the Education of Colonialism

With this context in mind, the question remains; how does modern-day Spain remember colonialism, and how do the narratives above shape instruction? This paper will specifically look at museums and textbooks in order to demonstrate in concrete ways how Spanish people learn about and engage with their colonial past.

In their examination of the *Museo de América* in Madrid, Jessaca Leinaweaver (2017) notes that the project of the museum (which features artifacts and narratives from across Latin America) draws in a Latin American immigrant audience and emphasizes the integration of migrants; an "innovative, pro-immigrant project" (pp. 1). At the same time, however, the museum does so by emphasizing narratives of colonial benevolence and brushing off the darker aspects of the period; that is, "the inequality and violence of the conquest and the colonial period" (Leinaweaver, 2017, pp. 7). Home to artifacts from across the Americas, objects are

[7] This response is well-remembered in modern-day Spain due to the literary soul-searching performed at the time and over the next two decades or so by the so-called "Generation of 98"

removed from certain contexts in favor of others; emphasis is placed on what is related (a 15th-century Chimu boat is placed alongside a modern model of a taxi to indicate the theme of transportation being shared across culture), but the process by which the boat came to Spain (colonialism) is brushed off as a condition of transit rather than an act of removal (Leinaweaver, 2017, pp. 1). The intent of the museum is, as Leinaweaver points out, to exist as a pro-immigrant project, but in doing so, it pulls on the history of Hispanism, offers only stories of colonial benevolence in the vein of the White Legend, and ignores the roots of the shared identity Spain proclaims to share with Latin America (2017). To identify this, we might look at *mestizaje,* the "process of interracial and/or intercultural mixing" that has become a key element of identity across Latin America (Martinez-Echazabal, 1998, pp. 21). The Museo attempts to normalize and integrate migration and *mestizaje,* but does not acknowledge "their violent or extractive antecedents" or suggest that the condition of *mestizaje* itself did not emerge out of some understanding of racial equality but rather a series of other issues (Leinaweaver, 2017, pp. 10).[8] Joshua Tucker, like Leinaweaver, also takes issue with the overall images of contact, noting that in 2012, "visitors searching for references to the extirpation of indigenous religion, or to wars of extermination" would find little except the idea that the "dislocations" caused by Spanish colonialism were basically the same as the conflict that had occurred between indigenous peoples in the pre-colonial period (Tucker, 2014, pp. 912).

Other museums, particularly looking at state-sponsored or larger museums, struggle with similar issues. Every year, Spain celebrates *Dia de la Hispanidad*, which celebrates the

[8] These include (but are not limited to), the goal of "whitening [of] Latin American society," and the shortage of Spanish women at the outset of the colonial period that caused Spanish men to have relations with indigenous women (relations that would decrease as racialized hierarchies solidified and more Spanish women came over) (Martinez-Echazabal, 1998, 26 & Hartch, 2002).

arrival of Columbus to the Americas, and in 2021, Madrid introduced a celebration of arts and festivities called Hispanidad 2021. Like in the *Museo de América,* Hispanidad is branded by Hispanidad 2021 as an inclusive movement by which all people sharing the identity of Hispanidad can be welcomed in Spain (Sun 2021). But, as is seen above, this is achieved through the brushing over of colonial wounds. At the *Museo Nacional de Prado,* one of the biggest and most famous historical art museums in Spain, the exhibition "Return Journey: Art of the Americas in Spain" was put on display. The idea behind the placement of art from Latin America (largely produced by mestizo or non-Spanish white artists) in the Prado "envisions a more plural art history," as such pieces, despite being fine art, were typically placed in ethnographic museums over fine art museums (Sun 2021). But, as per Emily Sun, the "sampling of representations of people of the Americas [allows] viewers to visualize social classifications while glossing over their continued enforcement" (Sun, 2021). The grandeur of the exhibition and focus on the art as simply art ignores underlying issues as "artists identified as 'mulatto,' [...] are lumped together with Spanish emigrants" (Sun, 2021). In recent months, there has been a movement in Spain to review state-run museums "to enable them 'to move past a colonial framing' of people and the past" (Jones 2024). Clearly, there is a cognizance of the issues of representation of colonialism in Spain. But, as will be discussed later and is represented above, old narratives still hold on.

Textbooks and education are also elements by which colonial narratives are dispersed and absorbed. One study of Spanish textbooks, published in 2013, examines how colonialism is treated in said textbooks, analyzing a sample of six history textbooks sampled from five of

Spain's major publishers from 2002-2008 (Pousa & Facal, 2013).[9] It looks at written content, pictures, and maps in its examination of content, examining both Spanish and non-Spanish colonialism. Their analysis finds that the textbooks consistently minimize mention of massacres or genocide during the colonial period and omit the fates and lives of the indigenous peoples. The "West" is identified with the values of "progress and freedom" (despite the long-standing institution of slavery) and discussion of religion is limited to Christianity and mostly Catholicism at that, eliminating any exploration of indigenous religions (Pousa & Facal, 2013, pp.111). Colonial-age photos in the textbooks are most frequently pictures of "natives performing physical tasks or reiterating stereotypes of poverty or exoticism" and images of the colonizers focus on them in benevolent or seemingly neutral roles (Pousa & Facal, 2013, pp. 113). Map representations too are complicit in the process of brushing off violence; maps frequently reflect the concept of *terra nullius*, the idea of an empty land with no people, just resources and wildlife (Pouse & Facal, 2013). In general, the study concludes, the historiography in these textbooks ignores a significant portion of history in favor of Eurocentrism. In addition, it notes, historical narratives that account for these gaps are not novel; they refer to the "so-called New Cultural History that opened up new perspectives, [..] giving voice to groups such as the colonized people," a historiographical position that emerged in the 1980s (Pousa & Facal, 2013, 117). The overall result, the study asserts, is a lack of an overall critical-analysis based history education.

Another study on textbooks, published in 2002, notes the differences in historical instruction between Spanish students and Mexican students (Carretero et al., 2002). Though the

[9] These textbooks are designed for students from ages 16 to 17

content in these textbooks typically diverge, they do converge on a certain point: the "discovery" of the Americas.[10] The differences between how the "same" events are studied forms the basis for comparison here. The textbooks analyzed are from 1994, 5 from Mexico and 4 from Spain, and the target age range runs from about 9-13 years old (Carretero et al., 2002). Immediately, the study notes key differences in simple points like event labeling. In the Spanish textbook, Columbus' arrival to the Americas is framed as a "discovery;" in Mexico, it is referred to more as an "encounter" between "two worlds" (Carretero et al., 2002, pp. 652). The stories of the arrivals themselves are also discussed differently; the study shows an illustration used in both a Mexican and Spanish textbook and notes the differences between the captions. The Mexican textbook asserts extractive intentions and the desire to spread religion. In contrast, the Spanish textbook highlights the natives offering gifts to Columbus and points out that the natives were naked. In the Spanish textbooks, Columbus plays "a central role as the 'hero' discovering America," and emphasize his "courage, experience, steadfastness, intelligence, and 'great intuition,'" whereas "the majority of Mexican texts avoid any type of personal value judgement of Columbus" and frame his arrival to Hispaniola as an accident (Carretero et al., 2002, pp. 656). The Spanish textbooks also omit Columbus' post-arrival fate, in which he was stripped of his status of governor by the Spanish Monarchs due to mismanagement. Generally, the study concludes, the Spanish textbooks (which were drawn from textbooks that were "most widely used in Spanish elementary schools for all grades"), "contain no information about the socio-economic, cultural, or political life of people living in America before Columbus's arrival," reject and neglect Indigenous voices and agency, and focus above all on the "[adoption] from

[10] As Spanish students mostly study Spanish history and Mexican students mostly study Mexican history

Spain those elements that would change their identity: its language and its religion" (Carretero et. al., 2002, pp. 659). By highlighting Spanish heroism and suffering, trivializing or outright ignoring indigenous experiences, and focusing on the importation of Spanish culture, the textbooks propagate key elements of Hispanist and White Legend discourse, leaving students with an impression of Spanish colonialism that does not account for the lives it extinguished and oppressed.

Holidays and celebrations are also a key contributor to historical memory and narratives; in Spain, this is perhaps best represented by *Día de Hispanidad,* or Hispanity Day. This national holiday, celebrated every 12th of October across Spain (and in many of Spain's former colonies) commemorates Columbus' arrival to the Americas in 1492 (Aguilar & Humlebæk, 2002). It should be noted, however, that this holiday has only existed since the early 20th century, long after the peak of the Spanish Empire. The *Día de Hispanidad* is founded on the idea of the aforementioned Hispanidad, and would later be used by the Francoist regime to "exalt the heroic image of the old Spanish empire and the period when Spain was amongst the most important powers of the world" (Aguilar & Humlebæk, 2002, pp. 137). When Spain democratized, the *Día de Hispanidad* went along with it, particularly as King Juan Carlos I attempted to use it as a way to maintain the support for national unity.[11] But as Spain moved into the 1980s, the *Día de Hispanidad* became more controversial; it was rebranded into "the Day of the National Holiday of Spain" and references to colonialism and Columbus were lessened (Aguilar & Humlebæk, 2002, pp. 138). However, as Aguilar and Humlebæk note, "even though the political and economic aspects of the conquest were thus silenced to soften the

[11] Spain, one of the most decentralized countries in Europe and home to multiple separatist movements (in Basque Country and Catalonia) frequently struggles with questions of national unity.

imperialist ring, it nevertheless remained an imperialist discourse" (2003, pp. 139). In 1992, when the fifth centenary of the "discovery" was held, the state attempted to focus mostly on the idea of the large cultural community united across the Atlantic. However, during the commemoration, the Spanish issued special edition banknotes that featured Francisco Pizzaro and Hernán Cortés, two *conquistadors* well-remembered for their brutality in the Americas, which certainly did little to support the idea that the *Día de Hispanidad* could exist without imperialist connotations (Aguilar & Humlebæk, 2002, pp. 139-140). Aguilar and Humlebæk again summarize it best; "Despite the continued attempts to modify the commemoration since the end of Francoism, [*Día de Hispanidad*] continues to bear the ideological imprint of cultural imperialism" (2003, pp. 140).

Modern-Day Impact on Spanish Politics

As demonstrated above, the historical narratives about colonialism that are most prominent in Spain have the effect of erasing certain elements of colonial history to present a sanitized version of the past in which the Spanish can be idealized as heroes, or at least as neutral parties on the quest of discovery. As a result, both Hispanism and White Legend-narratives (the idea that Spain's atrocities were over-exaggerated) have been disseminated by textbooks, museums, and other methods of historical transmission (oral tradition, monuments, etc.). The result is that a non-insignificant portion of people in modern-day Spain do not understand where the desire to re-examine history comes from and double down on the image that the "White Legend" presents, a section of the population that is now represented by the Spanish political right. To be clear, not all Spaniards necessarily think that the Spanish Empire was a good thing; in a survey from YouGuv, surveyists found that only

11% of their Spanish surveyees thought the Spanish Empire was something to be proud of, where 51% said it was neither something to be proud or ashamed of (Smith, 2020). We can see through the efforts of attempted museum reform and the changes to the *Día de Hispanidad* that there is a concerted effort to revise long-held colonial narratives. Spain has begun to move toward reevaluating the presentation of colonialism in state-run museums, a charge that has been led by the Spanish political left; Ernest Urtasun, culture minister and member of the leftwing Sumar platform, noted to a congressional culture committee that the ministry was working to "'move past a colonial framing or one rooted in old gender or ethnocentric habits.'" (Jones, 2024). But what is telling is that these movements are being opposed; in response to Urtasun, Joaquín Robles (culture spokesperson for the Spanish radical-right party Vox) accused Urtason of "falling victim to the centuries of anti-Spanish and anti-Catholic propaganda known as the Black Legend" and "suggested [that] Spain had been beneficent by comparison [to the Congo]" (Jones, 2024). This political conflict is not isolated to simple museum reform. It permeates Spanish politics, both domestic and international, as will be discussed further henceforth.

Looking specifically at domestic conflict about colonialism, we can see that, as per the museum-refocusing discourse from above, the issues of colonial narratives are largely distilled in the political factions that divide Spain: the right (Vox & the Partido Popular) and the left (PSOE & Sumar). Representatives from the right tend to lean toward and propagate White Legend and Hispanist narratives in their capacity as general conservative nationalists (political parties on the right in Spain tend to emphasize unity and oppose the separatist movements within the Basque Country and Catalonia). This can be seen in the rise of conservative

organizations; Arbaiza points the establishment of the Hispanic Civilization Foundation in 2017, whose stated goal is to promote "the Hispanic civilization" that finds a balance between "two ferocious extremes; Marxist totalitarianism and the selfish and exclusive capitalism" because "[the Hispanic civilization] is imbued with Christian humanistic values" (2020, pp. 2). "Regardless of the success of the foundation," Arbaiza notes, "the establishment is itself quite symptomatic of a surge of Spanish conservative nationalism" (2020, pp. 2). It can also be seen in general statements from officials from right-wing parties (particularly Vox); as one Vox official stated in response to Urtasun's museum review movement, "Spain didn't have colonies. It simply governed large parts of Latin America, and built universities and churches while at it" (Orihuela & Whitelaw, 2024). Above, we can see clear iterations of White-Legend and Hispanist-derived beliefs; the "universities and churches" emphasizes the civilizing role of the Spanish and cultural importations, ignoring the abuses of the Inquisition in the Americas. The Spanish left's response ranges from outright opposition to small-scale acceptance. The Spanish left-wing government has rejected calls to apologize for colonial abuse, but the Spanish left generally tends to find these historical narratives and right-wing rhetoric concerning, many of whom say "they fear the conservative center in Spain is becoming more extreme" (Casey, 2021).

Next we can turn to conflict between Spain and other countries or international entities. As per above, most of the attacks on historical narratives of colonialism derive from the Spanish right; conflicts between non-Spanish entities and Spain concerning colonialism also tend to stem from the right, though this is not a foregone conclusion. These incidents range from simple internet spats to actual political conflicts. For example, we can turn to the Spanish right's attack on U.S. President Biden's message delivered on Columbus Day in 2021 (U.S. Holiday). In his

statement, President Biden noted a “wave of devastation” that followed Columbus’ arrival, and “urged Americans not to ‘bury these shameful episodes of [their] past’” (Hedgecoe, 2021). The Spanish right-wing was quick to address this delivery, with the leaders of both the Partido Popular (PP) and Vox responding in opposition; Pablo Casado, leader of the PP, derided the idea of apology, asking his viewers in a video post “does the kingdom of Spain have to apologize because five centuries ago it discovered the New World, respected those who were there, created universities, created prosperity, built entire cities? I don’t think so” (Hedgecoe 2021). Vox’s leader, Santiago Abascal, took it even further, “describing the Spanish colonies as ‘the empire of human rights’” (Hedgecoe 2021). Here, we again see the evocation of White Legend and Hispanist narratives; Casado’s statement focuses on Hispanist doctrine, emphasizing cultural importations and civilizing work (ignoring the cities that had already been built in the Americas and the blatant disrespect the Spanish had toward the indigenous persons, represented in the strict social hierarchy). Abascal clearly leans into White Legend ideas, erasing the issues of Spanish violence and instead calling the Spanish empire a champion of human rights. President Biden is also not the only international figure to come under fire from the Spanish right. In 2021, Pope Francis became a source of ire for Spanish conservatives when he called for a reexamination of the role of the Roman Catholic Church over the conquering of the Americas, calling upon the clergy to “recognize the painful errors committed in the past” (Casey, 2021). Isabel Diáz Ayuso, conservative leader in Madrid, noted her surprise at such a statement, arguing that “Spain had brought ‘civilization and freedom’ to the Americas, points that are again, drawn from the narratives mentioned above (Casey, 2021). General calls for apologies are typically met with Spanish conservative furor; in 2019, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López

Obrador wrote a letter to Spanish King Felipe VI asking for an apology for the conquest 500 years ago.[12] The Spanish political response was about the same as above; Albert Rivera, leader of center-right party Ciudadanos called the letter "an intolerable offense to the Spanish people," while some figures from the left stated they felt the letter had every right to be sent (Agren & Burgen, 2019) Interestingly, the government itself responded to the letter negatively, arguing that "our closely related peoples have always known how to view our shared history without anger and from a shared perspective" (Agren & Burgen, 2019). In general, the attacks on international figures in spats concerning colonial history again follow Hispanist and White Legend narratives, reinforcing the power of said narratives in Spanish culture.

Conclusion

The way in which the history of colonialism is engaged with and taught in Spain has real-life implications, as demonstrated above. Per Gabilondo, Spanish historiography of its colonial period is anachronistic, romantic, neonationalist, and imperialist, which leads to a substantial subsect of society being uninformed of the less positive legacies of colonialism (2003, pp. 253). The adoption of historical narratives like Hispanism and White Legend ideas represent a desire to ignore the less-pleasant legacies of the past and embrace a supposedly reconciled and reasonable present. Yet despite these desires, colonialism, though it has since ended, plays a large role in the way modern societies across the globe operate and conceive of themselves. Spain is no different even though its empire ended earlier than its other European contemporaries. This is reflected in the modern political conflicts experienced in Spain and

[12] It should be noted that President López Obrador's intentions have their own politically charged context, as he often employs grandstanding and frequently attacks any opinions that diverge from his own; this letter is a key example of his behavior in this vein.

between the Spanish right and other international figures. The goal of re-examining historical narratives, it should be said, is not to make moral judgements about modern-day countries. Rather, it is to try and understand history outside of the scopes that have historically not accounted for non-European voices or experiences and to view history with a larger lens that engages with both the “good” and the “bad.” National history in Spain must reckon with its colonial narratives and include that larger lens; the consequences of keeping what it has in place are already manifesting in Spanish society and politics, creating unnecessary conflict that serves no collective noble aim. Reassessing narratives that have whitewashed colonial cruelty could easily serve as a catalyst for the long-desired smoothing of post-colonial grievances and relationships; the only step that remains is to actually do it.

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