

The 'Reconquista' revival: An analysis of the utilisation of the Reconquista trope by the Spanish far-right party Vox.

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Introduction and Literature Review.

“No queremos, ni debemos olvidar, que hoy hace 527 años de la liberación de Granada por las tropas españolas de los Reyes Católicos, poniendo fin a ocho largos siglos de Reconquista contra el invasor musulmán.
#TomaDeGranada”¹

Taken from a @vox_es tweet dated the 2nd of January, 2019. “We do not and should not forget that today marks 527 years since the liberation of Granada by the Spanish troops of the Catholic Monarchs, putting an end to eight long centuries of Reconquest against the Muslim invader.”
#FallOfGranada

Tweeting a clip from the Spanish historical fiction TV series ‘Isabel’, winner of four Iris awards (including best fiction),² Vox took the opportunity of the anniversary of the fall of Granada to remind their followers of their nationalist sentiment. Their use of a video depicting the glorious end of the Reconquista by the Catholic Monarchs, Isabel and Ferdinand, indicates their strategy of tapping into a trope that has been solidified in public consciousness and remains popular to the present day. In all likelihood, those viewing the tweet would need not watch the three minute clip to ascertain its message, summed up in the last words spoken by the character of Isabel: ‘Granada is Christian, and all should know’.

Founded in 2013, Vox became the first far right party to enter the Spanish parliament since the end of the Francoist dictatorship after gaining seats in the 2019 general election, ending Spain’s exceptionalism as being almost the only European country unaffected by the rise of the populist far right. Vox calls on traditional conservative values and a defence of Spanish nationalism and the centralised state to garner support, and by extension utilises traditional images, seen in their mobilisation of the Reconquista trope.³ The idea of the Reconquista has been a common basis for the foundations of Spanish national identity for centuries, and a hallmark of conservative nationalism (notable and most recently during the Franco dictatorship) through the celebration of the supposed glorious victory of the Catholic Monarchs in uniting Catholic Spain against the ‘Moorish invasion’ that began in 711 and ended with the fall of Granada in the much celebrated year of 1492. However, its use has also been contested for its seemingly inaccurate nature in reducing an eight centuries long process to a single word, obscuring the chronological and political complexities of this period

¹ X (formerly Twitter). (2024). x.com. [online] Available at: https://x.com/vox_es/status/1080418155992940545?ref_src=twsrc%5E [Accessed 24 July 2024].

² Redacción (2013). *laSexta rompe el monopolio de La 1 en unos Premios Iris 2013 poco reivindicativos*. [online] FormulaTV. Available at: <https://www.formulatv.com/noticias/30743/lasexta-rompe-monopolio-la1-premios-iris-2013/> [Accessed 24 Jul. 2024].

³ Esteve-Del-Valle, Mireia, and José Costa López. "Reconquest 2.0: The Spanish Far Right and the Mobilisation of Historical Memory during the 2019 Elections." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2019, pp. 132-150.

of history.⁴ Despite, or perhaps because of this, the trope nevertheless carries a message of the strength of a united Catholic Spain which conservative politicians have deployed to prove their nationalist credentials.

It is the enduring nature of this historical imagery which has motivated the aims of this research project, which looks to assess the historiography of the Reconquista and its use throughout the spheres of Spanish nationalism, far right political actors and its appearance in popular memory. While this research assesses the Spanish case, the use of memory politics amongst the far right has increased across Europe in recent years, meaning the rhetoric of Vox is not an isolated example.⁵ Its methodology will also include taking a selection of the main ideals of the party and analysing how they express them linked to the Reconquista trope through their rhetoric and published manifestos. It will examine the importance of putting the current political climate into historical perspective, highlighting the dangers of misappropriating history, especially the use of such a long mythologized and weaponized concept as the Reconquista.

This paper employs studies that fall into two main strands: those that examine the rise of the party Vox, and those that examine the notion of the Reconquista, with the aim of incorporating the two into an analysis which will provide a historical perspective on the utilisation of the eponymous trope, which has been previously underexamined. Furthermore, a theoretical framework for assessing populist right-wing parties has been provided by Mudde in her study 'Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe'.⁶ Whilst written before the foundation of Vox, the core ideological positions of nativism, authoritarianism and populism of far right parties can be applied to the Spanish case, as can the importance of party propaganda. Similarly, the identity politics of a global division of 'good' and 'evil' can be applied to Vox, as they have been by the majority of the literature reviewed in this work. Likewise, a framework for the use of historical tropes by far right political actors, which has increased in recent years, has been provided by 'Memory politics of the far right in Europe'. The authors note the 'prominent rhetorical trope' of the defence of the Christian tradition in the face of an Islamic 'invasion', which ties into the 'trptych of culture, ethnicity and nationhood, that feature in the nostalgic myth-making of far-right memory politics'⁷, something that is echoed in the use of the Reconquista trope by Vox.

Whilst the relatively recent success of the party has not allowed for a vast corpus of research, 'VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right' provides insights into the characteristics of the voter base of Vox, who are seen to share a 'romanticised image of Francoist Spain' and a respect for the integrity of the Spanish nation and its traditional values, marking them out as the inheritor of the far-right politics of Franco, reviving them in

⁴ Kamen, H. (2020, February 28). Henry Kamen: "There was no Reconquest. No military campaign lasts eight centuries." *El País*. <https://english.elpais.com/arts/2020-02-28/henry-kamen-there-was-no-reconquest-no-military-campaign-lasts-eight-centuries.html>

⁵ Couperus, S., Tortola, P. D., & Rensmann, L. (2022). Memory politics of the far right in Europe. *European Politics and Society*, 24(4), 435–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058757>

⁶ Mudde, Cas. *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. Print.

⁷ Couperus, S., Tortola, P. D., & Rensmann, L. (2022). Memory politics of the far right in Europe. *European Politics and Society*, 24(4), 435–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058757>. p.493.

modern Spain. Vox is seen to have 'built upon its unapologetic Spanish nationalism and its reliance on national symbols to present itself as the sole political party disposed to advocate, with sufficient aggression, the unity of Spain'⁸, something that the authors argue contributes to their electoral successes. Apart from their opposition to regional independence movements, the party is also seen to oppose immigration and the feminist movement, especially abortion, favouring what they see as traditional conservative values.

The weaponization of the idea of the Reconquista in modern politics is explored by the authors of 'Reconquest 2.0: the Spanish far right and the mobilisation of historical memory during the 2019 elections'. They note that more and more attention is being paid to the role of 'memory and historical narratives' in far right politics, underlining the 'political salience' of medieval images such as the Reconquista in the modern day. Using methods of analysing data from over 800,000 tweets associated with the @vox_es account in the 2019 election campaign, they conclude that the non-specificity of the image of the Reconquista and its nature as a one word trope make it both easily recognizable and mobilised.⁹ The effectiveness with which an image of a united Catholic Spain can be communicated through the use of this trope underlines the importance of its study.

'Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox' points to opposition to regional independence movements as being a key driver of support for Vox,¹⁰ reducing the importance of the idea of the Reconquista. However, the link between the utilisation of the Reconquista by Vox and their support is made in 'Vox and the Legacy of Franco: A Study of the Rise of the Populist Radical Right in Spain' by Berenston. Positing that the success of the party can be attributed to its belief in Spanish democracy combined with its attachment to 'the Francoist views of a pure, unified, Catholic Spain whose origin was the Reconquista, and that Spain faces political and religious enemies that seek to destroy it', the party is therefore seen to exploit the trope to gain support, whilst distancing itself from the dictatorial nature of pre constitutional Francoism.¹¹

To put the use of historical tropes by the modern Spanish far right into historical perspective, it has been necessary to examine earlier manifestations of the utilisation of the Reconquista, by those such as Franco. A vast amount of research into the ideology of those who supported the Nationalist cause (before and during the Francoist dictatorship) exists, with Preston's work on the violence carried out by Nationalists providing a detailed account. In 'The Spanish Holocaust' Preston examines not only the violence exercised by Francoist forces during and after the Spanish Civil War, but also the ideological basis for these brutalities committed against those who did not follow nationalist-Catholic ideals. Preston identifies that 'the central symbol of rightist values was the Reconquest of Spain from the

⁸ Rama, J., Zanotti, L., Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J., & Santana, A. (2021). *VOX: The Rise of the Spanish Populist Radical Right* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003049227>.

⁹ Esteve-Del-Valle, Mireia, and José Costa López. "Reconquest 2.0: The Spanish Far Right and the Mobilisation of Historical Memory during the 2019 Elections." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2019, pp. 132-150.

¹⁰ Turnbull-Dugarte, Stuart J. "Explaining the End of Spanish Exceptionalism and Electoral Support for Vox." *West European Politics*, vol. 42, no. 5, 2019, pp. 974-996.

¹¹ Berentson, William. "Vox and the Legacy of Franco: A Study of the Rise of the Populist Radical Right in Spain." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 56, no. 3, 2021, pp. 456-476.

Moors¹² and thus outlines the way in which this symbol was woven into justifications for violence. Before, during and after the civil war period, the far right looked to identify 'the working-class with the Moorish invaders'¹³. This illustrates the centrality of the Reconquista trope in this period due to its utilisation in painting any who opposed the Nationalist cause as 'the other', or part of the anti-Spain. Preston notes the centrality of the Reconquista trope as the 'central epic of Spanish nationalism, the battle to liberate Spain from Islam'¹⁴, underlining its importance, which continued after the Civil War period during the nationalist Catholic dictatorship of Franco, before seemingly being abandoned after the transition to democracy and revived in the present day, as Vox continues to push their Islamophobic rhetoric.

The historiography of the Reconquista includes a vast array of literature that spans centuries, and while it warrants a literature review and analysis of its own, it is necessary to summarise the key debates in this paper which aims to examine the contemporary utilisation of the term by Vox. In 'La Reconquista: una construcción historiográfica' Ríos Saloma tracks the use of the eponymous term and its significance over time, noting its absence at the time of the military campaigns that culminated in the fall of Granada in 1492, and instead its subsequent use as a historiographical construction. He devotes the most attention to the nineteenth century due to the spread of European and Spanish nationalism (especially after the Napoleonic invasion of Spain in 1808) which was supported by, and in turn magnified the use of the term 'Reconquista' as 'the emergence of contemporary nation states called for the construction of a collective identity'¹⁵. The construction of modern Spanish national identity is said to be based upon this trope, which Ríos Saloma notes was not only (and not commonly) proposed by historians, but writers and politicians, who allowed it to enter into the public discourse without the application of much historical rigour, leading to a historical oversimplification which remains in Spanish popular discourse today, despite changing historiographies.

The Reconquista as a cornerstone of Spanish national historical memory is examined in 'Rejecting al-Andalus, exalting the Reconquista: historical memory in contemporary Spain' by García-Sanjuán. The nationalist discourse surrounding the idea of the Reconquista is seen to have reached its peak during the Francoist dictatorship as he was hailed the '*Caudillo de la nueva Reconquista*'.¹⁶ García-Sanjuán makes the link between this discourse and its utilisation by nationalist politicians more explicitly in 'Weaponizing historical knowledge: the notion of the Reconquista in Spanish nationalism', going as far to say that it played 'a decisive and unprecedented role as one of Francoism's most effective ideological weapons'.¹⁷ Whilst this discourse expectedly quietened during and after the transition to

¹² Preston, Paul. *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. London, HarperPress, 2013. p.83.

¹³ Preston, The Spanish Holocaust. p.75.

¹⁴ Preston, The Spanish Holocaust. p.58.

¹⁵ Ríos Saloma, M. (2011). *La reconquista : una construcción historiográfica (siglos XVI-XIX)*. Madrid Marcial Pons Historia ; México D.F. Universidad Nacional Autónoma De México, Instituto De Investigaciones Históricas. "el surgimiento de los Estados nacionales contemporáneos reclamó la construcción de una identidad colectiva" (p.153).

¹⁶ (Leader of the new reconquest). García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Rejecting al-Andalus, Exalting the Reconquista: Historical Memory in Contemporary Spain." *Journal of Medieval Iberian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2018, pp. 127-146.

¹⁷ García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Weaponizing Historical Knowledge: The Notion of the Reconquista in Spanish Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490-515.

democracy due to a reluctance on the part of the new democratic governments to associate themselves with Francoist nationalistic ideals, García-Sanjuán suggests that in contemporary politics the glorification of the Reconquista has been magnified, pointing to terrorist attacks such as the 2004 Madrid train bombings as moments when the image of the threat or invasion of Islam against Catholic Spain was exploited by far and centre right politicians. In the present day, it is Vox who have most manifestly utilised the Reconquista trope, along with the historically mythologized connotations that accompany it.

Putting Vox into historical perspective.

Vox have been touted as the inheritors of the nationalist Catholic ideology of Franco, breaking the Spanish record of an absence of a far right party in parliament since his death in 1975. Following the 1936 coup d'état against the Second Spanish Republic the subsequent civil war was won by the Nationalists, led by Franco. His ensuing dictatorship was characterised by his one-party state and violent repression of political opponents of his ideology. While Franco may have been the first to weaponize the Reconquista trope to enforce such ideals, in contemporary Spain it is Vox who look to revive the legitimising quality of the trope to garner support for their own, related ideology.¹⁸ It is the 'imagined community'¹⁹ that Franco imposed, in which Spaniards shared a collective narrative about Spanish national identity, that Vox now look to revive, taking their place as the first party to be representative of such beliefs since the Transition to Democracy.²⁰

Vox have not been the sole political actors to evoke the imagery of the Reconquista, with former Partido Popular Prime Minister José María Aznar tracing Spain's conflict with 'Islamic terrorism' (in the wake of the 2004 Madrid train bombings) back to the eighth century, rather than the 2003 invasion of Iraq.²¹ While Vox are not the first to utilise the Reconquista trope, they are discernible as the party which relies on it most heavily and interweaves it throughout their ideals; its use by other conservative politicians only emphasises its prominence in the collective memory of Spaniards.

As early as 1921 writers questioned the accuracy of calling 'a thing a Reconquest when it lasted eight centuries',²² an interrogation of the term that has been repeated by subsequent historians such as Henry Kamen. Despite this, its use has persisted. Indeed, its very anachronistic nature can be seen to be the root of its success in its enduring political utilisation by the Spanish far right. The memory politics of the far right favour 'replacing facts with ever new forms of national myth-making'²³, clearly seen in the reimagining of the Reconquista trope by Vox for their twenty-first century concerns. This hierarchy that rejects historical fact in favour of a fiction that suits their own ends is a necessity in an aim to downplay the aggressive nationalist violence that is 'intimately linked to the history of the far right'²⁴ and specifically Franco. Vox calls for the 'immediate repeal of the Law of Historical Memory'²⁵ [...] we must jointly pay tribute to all those who, from different historical

¹⁸ García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Weaponizing Historical Knowledge: The Notion of the Reconquista in Spanish Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490-515.

¹⁹ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Verso, 1983.

²⁰ Berenston, Daniel Robert, "Vox and the Legacy of Franco: A Study of the Rise of the Populist Radical Right in Spain" (2021). *Senior Theses*. 78. https://research.library.fordham.edu/international_senior/78.

²¹ Horswell, M., & Awan, A.N. (Eds.). (2019). *The Crusades in the Modern World: Engaging the Crusades, Volume Two* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351250481>

²² Ortega, J. (1974). *Invertebrate Spain*. University of Michigan. (English translation of original 1921 work).

²³ Couperus, S., Tortola, P. D., & Rensmann, L. (2022). Memory politics of the far right in Europe. *European Politics and Society*, 24(4), 435-444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058757>

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Passed in 2007, the Law of Historical Memory recognizes victims on both sides of the civil war, condemns the Francoist dictatorship and looks to aid the identification of the victims of Francoist violence who were often left in mass graves.

perspectives, fought for Spain.²⁶ EXPLAIN LHM Coupled with Vox's strident condemnation of the exhumation of Franco's remains from the Valley of the Fallen in 2019, a type of historical nostalgia and indeed amnesia is visible in their rhetoric surrounding Francoism. In reference to the exhumation of the tomb of Franco, party leader Santiago Abascal accused the government of wanting to 'tear down the cross', evoking the imagery of the Reconquista by suggesting an attack against the crucifix.²⁷ Their historical nostalgia only extends to the beginnings of the supposed Spanish 'Golden Age' that commenced with the reign of the Catholic Monarch and the Reconquista.

Despite the contentious nature of the use of the Reconquista trope, with it Vox has enjoyed many electoral successes since their underwhelming beginning of gaining 0.23% of the vote in the 2015 general election.²⁸ After the Catalan independence referendum and the Las Ramblas terrorist attack, party membership increased by a fifth in 40 days in 2017.²⁹ It was not until 2018 that Vox gained regional parliamentary representation in Andalusia, a year before they entered the national parliament in the April 2019 general election, going on to win 52 seats and be named the third largest party in the Congress of Deputies after the 2019 general election. Despite falling popularity and a loss of 19 parliamentary seats in the 2023 general election, Vox remains the third largest political party in Spain, and after hosting a meeting of worldwide far right leaders from Milei to Le Pen, a focal point of the global right in the twenty-first century.³⁰

²⁶ VOX. "100 Medidas para La España Viva." "VOX España", 4 Apr. 2019, https://www.voxespana.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/100medidasngal_101319181010040327.pdf. "9. Derogación inmediata de la Ley de Memoria Histórica. Ningún parlamento está legitimado para definir nuestro pasado, y menos excluyendo a los españoles que difieren de sus definiciones. No puede utilizarse el pasado para dividirnos, al contrario, hay que homenajear conjuntamente a todos los que, desde perspectivas históricas diferentes, lucharon por España."

²⁷ Xidias, J. (2021). "From Franco to Vox: Historical Memory and the Far Right in Spain". CARR Research Insight 2021.1. London, UK: Centre for Analysis of the Radical Right

²⁸ Público (2015). *Público*. [online] Público. Available at: <https://www.publico.es/resultados-elecciones/generales/2015/> [Accessed 7 Sep. 2024].

²⁹ Publico.es. (2017). *La afiliación al partido ultraderechista VOX aumenta un 20% en 40 días*. [online] Available at: <https://www.publico.es/politica/afiliacion-partido-ultraderechista-vox-aumenta-20-40-dias.html>.

³⁰ Gilmartin (2024). *Spain's Vox Party Is the Center of the Global Far Right*. [online] Jacobin.com. Available at: <https://jacobin.com/2024/05/vox-meloni-orban-milei-far-right>.

Primary Research.

The central tenets of the party ideology of Vox can be summarised in three main points: their advocacy for anti-immigration measures, their defence of the unity of the Spanish nation, and their espousal of traditional, Catholic, conservative values.³¹ With the central concept of the second Reconquista, Vox aims to defend such values from secessionists (most notable Catalan separatist leaders) and immigrants, the internal and external threats they identify as posing the greatest risks to their vision for Spain.³² Taking the stances of their opposition to immigration and the independence of the autonomous communities of Spain in turn, this essay will examine how the Reconquista trope has been employed to communicate and endorse each point within the Spanish historical context. The ideology of Vox is set out in their '100 Measures for a Living Spain' published in 2019 in the run up to the general election.³³ Each of the 100 bullet points set out their vision for Spain, under subheadings such as 'Immigration', 'Spain, unity and sovereignty', and 'Defence, security and borders'. As well as published proposals and manifestos, Vox delivers their message to supporters through speeches and social media such as twitter, using a 'personalization communication style' common to populist parties.³⁴ Due to the crucial role of social media in the circulation of 'medievalisms' such as the Reconquista trope,³⁵ this paper takes the rhetoric of Vox across multiple platforms into account to analyse their mobilisation of this trope.

³¹ Rama, J., Zanotti, L., Turnbull-Dugarte, S.J., & Santana, A. (2021). *VOX: The rise of the Spanish populist radical right* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003049227>.

³² Intelligence Bulletin Intelligence Bulletin Reckoning with Reconquista. (2023). Available at: <https://millercenter.rutgers.edu/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Twitter-Spain-Anti-Muslim-Rhetoric.pdf> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2024].

³³ VOX España. (2019, April 4). *100 Medidas para la España Viva* [PDF]. VOX España. https://www.voxespana.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/100medidasngal_101319181010040327.pdf

³⁴ Esteve-Del-Valle, M., & Costa López, J. (2019). Reconquest 2.0: The Spanish far right and the mobilisation of historical memory during the 2019 elections. *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, 25(2), 132-150.

³⁵ Ibid.

The anti-immigration rhetoric of Vox.

“La Reconquista comienza en tierras andaluzas y se extenderá en el resto de España.”³⁶

Taken from a tweet from @voxnoticias_es after the party gained 12 seats in the 2018 Andalucía regional elections. “The Reconquest has begun in Andalucía and will spread to the rest of Spain.”

The stance of Vox on immigration is clear throughout their ‘100 Measures’ published in 2019 in the run up to the general election.³⁷ Points fourteen to twenty-two are devoted to their proposed measures relating to immigration, which not only include steps to make the adopting of legal status or Spanish nationality more difficult (by preventing anyone who illegally enters the country from ever living in Spain legally, for example) but also descriptions of the features of immigrants that Vox would wish to be integrated in Spain. The proposed quotas of origin would favour those whose nations of origin share languages, cultures and ‘friendship’ with Spain,³⁸ suggesting a favouring of those from Latin America, which is supported by some of the rhetoric of Abascal as he welcomed such immigrants as compatriots in a 2021 speech.³⁹

Although not explicitly stated, the quotas of origin would seem to exclude those from Muslim majority countries. Abascal has made this link more clearly elsewhere, claiming that Spain has an advantage over other European countries in being ‘vaccinated’ against Islamic immigration during the time of Al-Andalus which he referred to as ‘eight centuries of occupation and eight centuries of reconquest’⁴⁰ in 2019 while visiting the ‘Brothers of Italy’, a national-conservative, right wing populist party, in Rome. This Islamophobic and anti-immigrant rhetoric seeks to illegitimise the presence of Muslim immigrants in modern Spain by employing the Reconquista trope, which has long been used to invalidate the Muslim presence in Spain during the Al-Andalus period. In particular, the noun ‘occupation’ seeks to portray this period as a time of hostility, something that has been contested in historiography that points to the ‘convivencia’ or coexistence of different religions in Al-Andalus, first proposed by Castro in 1948.⁴¹ As a legacy of nineteenth century

³⁶ X (formerly Twitter). (2024). x.com. [online] Available at: https://x.com/voxnoticias_es/status/1069342275048742912?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1069342275048742912%7Ctwgr%5E64e46ccaee9e45cc22d699fab477ef0e5ef6a952%7Ctwcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.elpais.com.uy%2Fmundo%2Fvox-la-ultraderecha-que-desde-andalucia-sacudio-a-espana [Accessed 18 Jul. 2024].

³⁷ VOX España. (2019, April 4). *100 Medidas para la España Viva* [PDF]. VOX España. https://www.voxespana.es/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/100medidasnqal_101319181010040327.pdf

³⁸ “La inmigración se afrontará atendiendo a las necesidades de la economía española y a la capacidad de integración del inmigrante. Se establecerán cuotas de origen privilegiando a las nacionalidades que comparten idioma e importantes lazos de amistad y cultura con España”.

³⁹ Navarro, F. de B. and Yeh, A. (2022). The Dangerous Discourse of ‘Us’ vs. ‘Them’: Spain’s VOX Discursive Practices. *Journal of Nationalism, Memory & Language Politics*, 0(0). doi:<https://doi.org/10.2478/jnmlp-2022-0005>.

⁴⁰ Pacho, L. (2019). Abascal proclama en Italia que ‘no todas las religiones valen lo mismo’. El País. [online] 22 Sep. Available at: https://elpais.com/politica/2019/09/22/actualidad/1569175849_637199.html [Accessed 16 Jul. 2024]. “La ventaja de España [respecto a otros países europeos] es que fue vacunada contra la inmigración islámica durante ocho siglos de ocupación y ocho siglos de reconquista”.

⁴¹ Castro, A. (1948). España en su historia. Castro saw the richness of Spanish culture’s origins in the blended influences of Muslims, Jews and Christians living in the Middle Ages.

nationalism, the idea of the Reconquista has played a 'crucial political and ideological role' in contributing to a view of Spanish history that delegitimizes the Islamic presence and therefore glorifies the Catholic victory over Muslim territory.⁴² In this way, Vox can be seen to employ a long used historical image that once illegitimised Muslims on the Iberian peninsula in the fifteenth century, to now question their right to live in modern Spain. The presence of non-Western foreign-born immigrants has been linked to the share of votes cast for Vox in the 2018 Andalusian elections, with some suggesting that although anti-immigrant sentiments may have existed before the rise of the party, they had not had a political outlet in the shape of such an unashamedly anti-immigrant party such as Vox.⁴³ Therefore, it is evident that Vox are able to utilise historical tropes and apply them to modern day politics by appealing to the already existing grievances of the electorate.

It is clear that the utilisation of the Reconquista trope has not been limited to discussions of immigration, but also the islamophobic rhetoric of Vox. Their islamophobia was met with a twitter ban in 2021 after a tweet warning of the 'dangerous Islamisation of Catalonia' violated the hate speech policy of the network, which went on to blame Muslims for 93% of police complaints despite making up 0.2% of the population.⁴⁴ The suggestion that most of these immigrants came from the 'Maghreb' adds a specificity to their targets, referring to the North and North West of Africa, the area from which those who would come to form Al-Andalus originated, creating a symbolic link between the two time periods.⁴⁵ Islamophobic speech recurs in the history of Vox, with Javier Ortega Smith, Secretary General from 2014 to 2022, stating in September 2018 that the 'Islamist invasion' was the common enemy of Europe.⁴⁶ With over two million Muslims living in Spain, this rhetoric poses a 'real danger for social coexistence'.⁴⁷ Ortega Smith's words clearly identify Muslims in Spain as a threat through repeating the words enemy and invasion, inciting both hatred and fear through their supposed threat to civilisation.⁴⁸ The excerpt promotes the incompatibility of Muslims within Spanish society, presenting the dichotomy between 'us' and 'them': the Spanish and the Muslims.⁴⁹ This speech was delivered at a rally of 200 supporters in Valencia, in September 2018, before receiving 12,000 views on the youtube channel of the party, two months before they entered the Andalusian Parliament.⁵⁰ By depicting this supposed invasion as a 'common enemy' Ortega Smith utilises the same rallying cry as the Catholic Monarchs themselves who looked to unite Catholic Spain against the enemy in Granada. The war

⁴² García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Weaponizing Historical Knowledge: The Notion of the Reconquista in Spanish Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490-515.

⁴³ Toshkov, D. (2018). Does immigration explain the comeback of the radical right in Spain? [online] EUROPP.

Available at:

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/europpblog/2018/12/07/does-immigration-explain-the-comeback-of-the-radical-right-in-spain/>.

⁴⁴ Euro Weekly News. (2021). Vox Party Account Suspended for Tweet Violating Hate Speech Rules. [online]

Available at:

<https://euroweeklynews.com/2021/01/29/vox-party-account-suspended-for-tweet-violating-hate-speech-rules/>.

⁴⁵ maghrib, n. meanings, etymology and more | Oxford English Dictionary. (2023). *Oed.com*. [online]

doi:<https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3185415761>.

⁴⁶ Isasi, Alex Cabo and Laia Tarragona. 2021. Case study: Far-Right Islamophobic Speech in Spain. Dangerous Speech Project. <https://dangerousspeech.org/publications>. "Nuestro enemigo común, el enemigo de Europa, el enemigo de la libertad, el enemigo del progreso, el enemigo de la democracia, el enemigo de la familia, el enemigo de la vida, el enemigo del futuro se llama la invasión islamista. Está en juego lo que entendemos o conocemos como la civilización. Está seriamente amenazada."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

'enormously enhanced' their prestige across Christian Europe where the campaign was considered to be a crusade.⁵¹ By using the common far right rhetorical trope of presenting the need to defend Christianity against the contemporary 'invasion' of Islam,⁵² this rhetoric depicts the party as following the same aims as the Catholic Monarchs. The traditional 'triptych of culture, ethnicity and nationhood'⁵³ in this example of the utilisation of a historical trope is clear through Ortega's warnings that 'civilisation is at stake' due to his perception that Spanish culture is threatened by the presence of Muslims, who he sees as incompatible with the Spanish nation.

During the 2018 Andalusia election campaign, the Reconquista featured as a central theme in party speeches, leading some to draw the connection that Isabel I, one half of the Catholic Monarchs who completed the Reconquista, was a role model for Abascal as a politician.⁵⁴ Throughout the anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric of his party it is clear that the Reconquista had been deployed with its most literal application - that of the need to carry out a second reconquest of Spain from the supposed invasion of immigrants Vox aims to demonise. By employing such a recognizable historical trope with a historiography that has long sought to delegitimize the presence of Muslims in Spain, the danger of such rhetoric is apparent.

⁵¹ Kamen, H. (2014). *Spain, 1469-1714: A society of conflict* (4th ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315797922>

⁵² Couperus, S., Tortola, P. D., & Rensmann, L. (2022). Memory politics of the far right in Europe. *European Politics and Society*, 24(4), 435–444. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23745118.2022.2058757>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Aguilera-Carnerero, C. (2019). *VOX and the Spanish Muslim community: the new 'Reconquista' of Spain*. [online] openDemocracy. Available at: <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/vox-and-spanish-muslim-community-new-reconquista-of-spa/>.

Whilst the anti-immigration rhetoric that Vox employs may make use of the Reconquista trope most obviously, through the idea of a reverse reconquest of the supposed immigrant ‘invasion’, it is not the only one of their most central ideas to employ this imagery. So does their defence of the unity of the Spanish nation, to which the first section of their ‘100 Measures’ is devoted. It is this stance that many have posited as being one of the most effective tools of the party to gain support due to the chronology of their first taste of electoral success in 2018.

The Catalan independence movement has a long history in which separatist sentiment can be traced back to the nineteenth century. The region experienced much autonomy during the Second Spanish Republic, which was subsequently restrained under the Francoist dictatorship. After his death and the transition to democracy, Catalonia became one of the 17 autonomous communities that made up democratic Spain, before the authority of its government was expanded by the 2006 Statutes of Autonomy. The recent history of the movement has been punctuated by independence referendums, unrecognised by the Spanish state, and electoral successes for separatist parties. It was after the separatist victory in the 2017 referendum, declared illegal by the constitutional court, that Vox seized ‘the opportunity to make political capital’ out of their opposition to the breakdown of the Spanish state, by acting as co-accusers of Catalan separatist leaders in a televised trial in 2019.⁵⁶

The vision that Vox holds for a united Spain is clear, occupying the primary spot of their ‘100 Measures’; the first point calls for a ‘suspension of Catalan autonomy until the unmitigated defeat of the coup d’état and the purification of civil and criminal responsibilities’.⁵⁷ Their nationalistic message is continued by a proposal for the ‘legal protection’ of the ‘symbols of the nation’ such as the flag and anthem, insisting that ‘no affront to them should go unpunished’.⁵⁸ Kamen maintains that the nation building of Spain ‘depended a lot on myth and legend’, noting that the national flag was not created until the late nineteenth century, while the famously lyricless national anthem was not adopted until the twentieth.⁵⁹ The nationalism that Vox seeks to promote builds upon these less than solid foundations, elucidating not only their intense defence of such symbolic elements of the nationalism of Spain, but also their reliance upon constructed historical tropes such as the Reconquista.

⁵⁵ “Spain, Unity and Sovereignty” taken from ‘100 Medidas para la España Viva’ (2019).

⁵⁶ Rodríguez, Jose Elías. ‘Spanish Far-Right Vox in Spotlight in Catalan Trial’. *Reuters*, 13 Mar. 2019. <https://www.reuters.com/article/world/spanish-far-right-vox-in-spotlight-in-catalan-trial-idUSKBN1QU255/>.

⁵⁷ 1. Suspensión de la autonomía catalana hasta la derrota sin paliativos del golpismo y la depuración de responsabilidades civiles y penales. Taken from ‘100 Medidas para la España Viva.’

⁵⁸ 3. Dotar de la máxima protección jurídica a los símbolos de la nación, especialmente la Bandera, el Himno y la Corona. Agravamiento de las penas por las ofensas y ultrajes a España y sus símbolos o emblemas. Ninguna afrenta a ellos debe quedar impune. Taken from ‘100 Medidas para la España Viva.’

⁵⁹ Kamen, H. (2020, February 28). Henry Kamen: "There was no Reconquest. No military campaign lasts eight centuries." *El País*. <https://english.elpais.com/arts/2020-02-28/henry-kamen-there-was-no-reconquest-no-military-campaign-lasts-eight-centuries.html>.

The prominence of the year 1492 in the national myth of Spain is due not only to the fall of Granada but also the supposed discovery of the 'New World' and the publication of the first grammar of Castilian.⁶⁰ While perhaps the least widely celebrated, the importance of the latter point highlights the significance of language in nationalism, as does the adage that a dialect is merely 'a language without an army'. Regional languages such as Catalan were relegated to the status of dialects or even banned under the Francoist dictatorship in an effort to impose a national identity. Point 62 of the '100 Measures' looks to make co-official languages such as Catalan optional in education, where Spanish would be the mandatory language.⁶¹ This attempt to establish a united national identity through a monolingual state not only mirrors Francoist methods, but also the endeavours of the Catholic Monarchs to unite Spain political, religiously, and culturally under their rule, through both their marriage and their efforts in the Granada War.

The use of the Reconquista trope supports the nationalist vision of Vox for a united Spain as it has been used as a foundational myth of Spanish nationalism since the epoch of the Catholic Monarchs, who promoted themselves as the unifiers of Spain. However, this has been disputed by historians such as Kamen who dismiss the supposed union of the country through the 1469 marriage of the monarchs from Castile and Aragon, going as far to say that 'in the two centuries or more that came after the merging of Isabella and Ferdinand's crowns, no measures were taken to achieve the political union of the Peninsula'.⁶² Nevertheless, the 1492 fall of Granada was seen as the last piece in uniting Spain in battle against the enemy, resulting in a united country under the control of Isabel and Ferdinand, an image propagated by their official propaganda. It is this image of a united Spain that Vox now wishes to glorify by utilising historical tropes such as the Reconquista: rather than the need to 'reconquer' a Muslim kingdom in the south of the country, Vox now seeks to restrict separatist ambitions in the northern region of Catalonia.

Many authors point to their defence of the unity of the Spanish nation as one of the party's main driving forces in attracting voters. After electoral successes in Andalusia in 2018, analysis found that those who wanted to see the autonomy of Catalonia reduced or reversed were more likely to vote for the party where the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE) had previously been electorally dominant.⁶³ The strident anti-independence rhetoric of Vox did not stop there. Two years later, Abascal was among those who rallied against the proposed pardon of the accused separatist leaders, calling it 'an act of treason' committed by an 'illegitimate and illegal government order'.⁶⁴ The 25,000 strong crowd that received this message was assembled underneath the largest national flag in Madrid's Plaza de

⁶⁰ Hertel, Patricia. *Crescent Remembered: Islam and Nationalism on the Iberian Peninsula*. Liverpool University Press, 2015. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=2083173>.

⁶¹ 'Garantizar el derecho a ser educado en español en todo el territorio nacional. El español debe ser lengua [sic] vehicular obligatoria y las lenguas cooficiales como opcionales. Los padres deben tener derecho a elegir la lengua de escolarización de sus hijos' Taken from '100 Medidas para la España Viva'.

⁶² Kamen, H. (2014). *Spain, 1469-1714: A Society of Conflict* (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315797922>.

⁶³ Turnbull-Dugarte, S. J. (2019). Explaining the end of Spanish exceptionalism and electoral support for Vox. *West European Politics*, 42(5), 974-996.

⁶⁴ the Guardian. (2021). *Spanish right rallies against plans to pardon Catalan separatists*. [online] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jun/13/spanish-right-rallies-against-plans-to-pardon-catalan-separatists>.

Colón, named after Christopher Columbus, whose 1492 voyage to the 'New World' was financed by the Catholic Monarchs in the same year as their completion of the Reconquista.

The Reconquista trope has been applicable to the modern nationalist message of Vox not only because of its connotations of a united Spain, but also due to its malleability. Its nature as a constructed historical trope allows for the creation of an identifiable, yet unfixed, enemy. It was this malleability that enabled those who opposed the Second Spanish Republic to utilise it prior to the civil war. Leftists were viewed as a 'threat to the nation's existence' and not truly Spanish. Preliminary to the 1933 election, calls were made for a crusade against the Republic and a reconquering of Spain from all those who had permitted measures in the 1931 Constitution such as increased autonomy to Catalonia, the legalisation of divorce, and the dissolution of many religious orders. Following the historical idea of the anti-Spain, the fifteenth century Muslim 'other' was replaced by any on the leftist political spectrum in the 1930s, who have now been replaced by those (from separatists to feminists to immigrants) who oppose the ideals of Vox in the present.⁶⁵

Vox has capitalised on opposition to the Catalan independence movement in order to maximise support for their nationalistic cause. While the trope of the Reconquista may not appear as obviously applicable to this central ideal as their anti-immigration stance, its long held position as the 'central epic of Spanish nationalism' has allowed Vox to evoke this sentiment, exploiting its malleability as a constructed trope.⁶⁶ The legitimising quality of the imagery of the Reconquista, due to its historical use, further highlights the effectiveness of such a trope.

⁶⁵ Preston, Paul. *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. London, HarperPress, 2013.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Why has the Reconquista trope been such an effective legitimising tool for Vox?

Party leader Abascal is seen riding horseback, reins held in one hand, as he leads supporters across the rugged Seville countryside in a 2018 tweet in the run up to the Andalucía elections. The message, accompanied by the *Lord of the Rings* soundtrack, proclaims that 'the Reconquista will begin in Andalucía'.⁶⁷ This simplistic advertising tapped into the recognizable trope of the Reconquista, conjuring up imagery of a traditional, united Spain for which Vox hoped supporters would vote. From the Francoist reimagined coat of arms featuring the Eagle of Saint John and the yoke and arrows of the heraldry of the Catholic Monarchs, to the modern social media presence of Vox, the imagery of the Reconquista and its executors have long been employed to communicate a message of a united, Catholic Spain.⁶⁸ Just as the one word nature of the trope oversimplifies this period of history, the use of imagery by both Franco and Vox likewise conveys an oversimplified message of Spanish history and national identity, discounting other views of the multiculturalism in the history of the nation, which emphasizes the peaceful coexistence of Christians, Muslims, and Jews, along with the cultural inheritance of all these groups. It is a recognizable trope not only due to its simplistic nature, but also subsequently its abundance of appearances in its traditional and romantic form in media, museums and exhibits.⁶⁹ 'Moros y Cristianos' festivals across Spanish towns and villages allowed for a 'supposedly historical event' to become ingrained in local communities as legend, illustrating how the imagery of the Reconquista is not only reproduced by political leaders but also Spanish citizens who have grown up in a country where it is embedded in the national consciousness.⁷⁰ Furthermore, this reception of the trope has not been limited to Spain, evidenced by former Klu Klux Klan leader David Duke congratulating Vox on twitter for their success in Andalucía.⁷¹

The Reconquista has not only been utilised due to it being a recognizable trope, but as a tool to legitimise far right politics through its long established history. Franco used it to legitimise his role in the civil war and subsequent dictatorship through drawing on its depiction of national Catholic identity, leading some historians to label it as his most 'effective ideological

⁶⁷ Dollimore, L. (2018). *News round-up: Oct 23rd - Nov 5th 2019*. [online] Olive Press News Spain. Available at: <https://www.theolivepress.es/spain-news/2018/11/13/watch-leader-of-far-right-vox-party-vows-taking-back-of-spain-will-begin-in-andalucia-in-putin-style-horse-riding-clip-after-thousands-gather-in-sevilla/> [Accessed 7 Sep. 2024].

⁶⁸ X (formerly Twitter). (2024c). *x.com*. [online] Available at: https://x.com/vox_es/status/1103337441723904000?lang=en [Accessed 7 Sep. 2024]. It has been noted that the helmet worn by Abascal dates to the sixteenth century, long after the completion of the Reconquista.

⁶⁹ López, C., M. Carretero, and M. Rodríguez Moneo. 2015. "Conquest or Reconquest? Students' Conceptions of Nation Embedded in a Historical Narrative." *Journal of the Learning Sciences* 24 (2): 252–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10508406.2014.919863> Lowenthal, D. 1985.

⁷⁰ Hertel, Patricia. *Crescent Remembered : Islam and Nationalism on the Iberian Peninsula*, Liverpool University Press, 2015. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/cam/detail.action?docID=2083173>.

⁷¹ García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Weaponizing Historical Knowledge: The Notion of the Reconquista in Spanish Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490-515.

weapon.⁷² Franco utilised the imagery of the Catholic Monarchs to legitimise his national militarist ideology. His role of Caudillo was therefore bestowed upon him by divine providence, to continue the plan that was revealed by nationalist Catholic ideology and historiography.⁷³ The idea of the anti-Spain (against which a strong nationalist leader has been tasked with fighting) has survived from Granadan Muslims to civil war era Republicans, all the way to modern day immigrants and regional independence leaders. By utilising and exploiting this imagery, Vox hope to be seen as the inheritors of this mission to protect their vision of Spain. While in Spanish national consciousness the trope may lend the party historical legitimacy, the term Reconquista itself can be deemed a modern neologism. It was not until 1936, and the start of the Francoist dictatorship, that the Dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy gave the term its specific significance of the 'recovery of the Spanish territory invaded by the Muslims, which ended with the taking of Granada in 1492'.⁷⁴

It is this malleability within various political climates that has allowed Vox to utilise the Reconquista trope, over five centuries after the fall of Granada. It was in the 1930s that 'the Spanish radical right began to see the working class as imbued with Jewish and Muslim treachery and barbarism',⁷⁵ utilising the hatred of the other, the anti-Spain, against those who did not support Nationalist Catholic ideals, carrying through the same dichotomy between good and evil of the fifteenth century to the twentieth. Marxism was seen to renew 'the eclipse of Culture and freedoms like a modern Saracen invasion' by those who echoed the warnings of the 'great Isabel' to watch Africa, in an age they saw threatened by 'a new kind of African domination'⁷⁶ substituting the image of the invading Muslim with the Republican politician. Franco utilised the Reconquista trope, posing as the inheritor of the glorious defence of religion of the Catholic Monarchs, yet saw no irony in employing Moroccan mercenaries to the Asturias miners' strike of 1934, in 'the only part of Spain where the crescent had never flown'.⁷⁷ This malleability indicates the usefulness of mythologised historical tropes which can be employed by various far right actors in vastly differing political climates, all the while using them to strengthen their ideologies through the recognizable and legitimising nature of such tropes. It is therefore evident how Vox has been able to utilise the Reconquista trope as an effective legitimising tool to garner support against the adversaries they now identify in modern Spain.

⁷² García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Weaponizing Historical Knowledge: The Notion of the Reconquista in Spanish Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490-515.

⁷³ Pedro-Ruiz Torres, J. (2001). Political uses of history in Spain. *Mediterranean Historical Review*, 16(1), 95-116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/714004574>

⁷⁴ García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Weaponizing Historical Knowledge: The Notion of the Reconquista in Spanish Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490-515.

⁷⁵ Preston, P. (2013). *The Spanish holocaust: Inquisition and extermination in twentieth-century Spain*. London: HarperPress. p.43.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p.46. Quotes taken from a 1933 article published by JONS 'Councils of National-Syndicalist Offensive'.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* p.82.

Conclusions.

The identification of a common enemy, the 'other' or anti-Spain has been a common thread through far right politics in Spain in attempts to unite the nation against a common foe, a useful and evening 'comforting' image that shifts the blame of contemporary national ailments onto an identifiable 'foreign' enemy.⁷⁸ In the 1930s a 'new Reconquista was needed to prevent Spain from falling into the hands of the modern foes', and it would seem that Vox have taken up this call in the twenty first century against the external and internal threats they distinguish in their rhetoric, namely Muslim immigrants, and those who wish to see the independence of autonomous communities.⁷⁹

As the leading far right political party of Spain, Vox have been able to deploy the Reconquista trope in the eleven years since their foundation due to its recognizable, legitimising, and malleable qualities, allowing for it to be easily mobilised to project images of their vision for a united, conservative, nationalist Spain. The historically 'weak national sentiment' of the country explains why Vox has had to rely on mythologisations and oversimplified tropes in their nationalist rhetoric in an attempt to give their radical ideology historical legitimacy.⁸⁰ The very nature of the Reconquista as a constructed historical trope has provided its most convenient function; as history can only be misused when mythologised, Vox are only capable of gaining political capital from their nationalist mythologization of Spanish history. It was nineteenth century Spanish nationalism that allowed for the generalization of the idea of the Reconquista, and its ideological origins have permeated into its present day use.⁸¹ Due to its duality of origins as both an academic concept and an ideological tool, the necessity for historians to critically address the Reconquista (and other historical tropes) removed from 'nationalist romantic stereotypes' is evident.⁸² The revival of the Reconquista trope by Vox therefore acts as a reminder not only of the 'political salience' of such tropes, but also the dangers of their unquestioned utilisation.⁸³

⁷⁸ Preston, Paul. 'The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain'. HarperPress, 2013.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Kamen, H. (2020, February 28). Henry Kamen: "There was no Reconquest. No military campaign lasts eight centuries." *El País*. <https://english.elpais.com/arts/2020-02-28/henry-kamen-there-was-no-reconquest-no-military-campaign-lasts-eight-centuries.html>.

⁸¹ Horswell, M., & Awan, A.N. (Eds.). (2019). *The Crusades in the Modern World: Engaging the Crusades, Volume Two* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351250481>.

⁸² García-Sanjuán, Alejandro. "Weaponizing Historical Knowledge: The Notion of the Reconquista in Spanish Nationalism." *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 55, no. 3, 2020, pp. 490-515.

⁸³ Esteve-Del-Valle, Mireia, and José Costa López. "Reconquest 2.0: The Spanish Far Right and the Mobilisation of Historical Memory during the 2019 Elections." *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Research*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2019, pp. 132-150.

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