Weapons of the Condemned:

The Texts that Political Prisoners and their relatives sent to Francisco Franco requesting his Pardon

Les armes des condamnés :

Les textes que les prisonniers politiques et leurs proches envoyaient à Francisco Franco pour obtenir un pardon

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Abstract.

This article uses documents previously unknown: the letters that common Spanish people sent to the dictator Francisco Franco. Some years ago, the author discovered one hundred and thirty thousand of these letters. In this case, the paper analyzes the letters that political prisoners and their families, including children, sent to Franco, to his wife and to his daughter, requesting pardon for their supposed crimes and the reduction of their sentences. In these texts, the use of what has been called “weapons of the weak” can be seen, utilizing discourse, vocabulary and situations that sought to make use of the contradictions of official language and Franco’s political proposals. The aim of this article is to study the attempts to survive in a context of repression and injustice, when the victims of the perpetrators often request pardon.

Keywords: political repression, dictatorship, death sentence, pardon, weapons of the weak.

I. Justice and Death in Postwar Spain.

Based on the high level of violence that occurred in Spain during the Civil War and the first years of the dictatorship, some authors have begun to speak in recent years of the existence of an authentic genocide and even of a holocaust in Spain.¹ A few authors

within this trend have even criticized their colleagues for not having given due importance and the correct interpretation to these facts, that is, for having put aside or not sufficiently valued the magnitude of the Francoist repression. This is not the place to discuss in depth if there was genocide or not in Spain, which I don’t believe occurred or that it should be called such. Neither do I believe, as I have explained elsewhere, that Spanish historians have not given sufficient attention to the repression, in fact I believe that the opposite is true. The analysis of the political violence of the war and the postwar repression can benefit greatly from the study of other contemporary phenomena of mass violence, including genocide. At the same time, the case of Spain offers valuable elements that can be used to better understand certain aspects as, for example, the relationship between victims and perpetrators first during a war and then within a dictatorial system. In this last sense, the article presents the original topic of the letters that Spanish political prisoners or their family members wrote to the dictator Francisco Franco requesting pardon, either in the form of commutation of the death sentence or reduction of their prison sentence. However, in order to better understand this process, we need to first look at the context of violence and repression in Spain in the thirties and forties.

The violence in the rearguard during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) was both intense and extensive. In Republican territory, it is possible that some 50,000 people were assassinated, although it could have been fewer (perhaps over 38,000). In Rebel territory, the supporters of the military rebellion (of Franco) killed some 100,000 people. The end of the war did not bring about an end to the executions. Between 1939 and 1945, perhaps another 50,000 republicans (this number has been recently disputed and reduced) were executed. The most intense period of repression lasted until 1941, declining significantly afterwards. These victims of Franco’s judicial system waited out their fate in the overcrowded prisons of the dictatorship. For example, by the end of 1940 there were some 240,000 political prisoners, of which 7,700 were condemned to death and tens of thousands still had not been tried. In 1941, a partial pardon was issued for prisoners with sentences of less than twelve years, and the prison population dropped substantially. Nevertheless, in February of 1943, there were still 97,886 political prisoners in Spain. With them lived their 9,050 children who had nowhere to go. At the end of that year, another partial pardon freed those prisoners sentenced to fewer than twenty years.

As Julius Ruiz has demonstrated, the most dangerous period for the condemned – when the possibility that their death sentence be carried out instead of being commuted for a prison sentence – was during the first years of the regime. In Madrid, for example, between March 1939 and April 1943, only 38% of death sentences were commuted, but the highest proportion of executions occurred in 1939-1941. In 1939, two thirds of death sentences resulted in executions; and in 1940-1941 this proportion dropped to approximately 50%. However, from 1942 on, more sentences were commuted than carried out. The majority of the victims of the Francoist executions were of humble

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origins, mainly agricultural and manual laborers, which lead Ruiz to the conclusion that middle-class people (and women) had more possibilities than the former of seeing their death sentence commuted.⁵

Military courts sentenced those who were condemned to death in the postwar period. These tribunals were regulated mainly by an arbitrary interpretation of the Military Justice Code. This means that the republicans were convicted for acts committed in supposed rebellion against the legitimate government, that of Franco, whom the dictatorship considered the essential representative of the true Spain. This government, however, did not exist in July 1936 (the first regular government under Franco was formed in January 1938). In fact, these people were condemned for opposing the military rebellion, called the Movimiento Nacional [National Movement], which began on July 17, and which triggered the war. From a legal standpoint, this interpretation made no sense. The legitimate Government of Spain in 1936, recognized internationally, was the Republic, and it continued to be so until the Civil War was lost in March 1939. But this did not prevent the new dictatorial regime from punishing those who defended the Republican constitution, or from adopting the legal aberration of retroactive justice, that is, to consider, by means of the Law of Political Responsibilities of 1939, as illegal past actions that at the time were legal. This legal form is called the principle of essential legality, as opposed to the one in force in countries that respect the Western legal tradition, that follow the principle of formal legality. The Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and Italian fascism, among others, did the same as Franco.

Political repression did not, by any means, end with the convictions of the military courts, as irregular as these may have been. Being in prison in postwar Spain, or having a husband, father, or working-aged son in prison, could be a death sentence in itself for the prisoner and even for the rest of the family. Prisons were so overcrowded and the lack of food and hygienic conditions so severe, that thousands of prisoners—we don’t know exactly how many—died of hunger or disease even before being tried, or when they had been given only relatively light prison sentences, which in these cases became death sentences. For example, in Cordoba there were between 3,500 and 4,000 prisoners in 1941. Of these, 502 died of hunger and disease that year, that is, approximately 12-14% of the prison population.⁶ In addition possibly as many as 200,000 more people died of hunger and related diseases in Spain between 1939 and 1945. This occurred because the Francoist food rationing system was incomplete and corrupt and in practice left the poor to their fate. Many of these victims—again, we have little information on the subject—were relatives of the prisoners, or people with a bad political history, who were excluded from the workforce and even from public and private charity, or they were robbed of their properties, leaving them destitute, and often condemned to die of hunger. This phenomenon was unparalleled in Western Europe in the context of the Second World War, and certainly far more dramatic and fatal than other much better-known or


remembered famines, such as the Dutch famine of the winter of 1944-1945 or the hardship suffered by the French population during the Nazi occupation that led to high rate of mortality particularly among sick people. Unlike these two examples, the Spanish famine was not imposed by a foreign military power occupying the country, but by a government that called itself national and declared that it had saved Spain from moral and material ruin.7

The legal repression must be understood as part of a much greater and more lethal process of political and social repression that affected the millions of Spaniards who fought or identified with the republicans. In 1940, the regime had accumulated in its official archives some three million files of politically contaminated Spaniards. This number seems enormous, but the process of politically cataloguing the population did not stop: that year, police and other security services of the dictatorship filed another 800,000 political reports.8 Spain was an enormous prison – in total, some 300,000 people passed through Franco’s jails – if not for all Spanish people at least for the millions who were repressed, mistreated physically and morally and, often, assassinated actively or passively by the dictatorship. Paradoxically, on many occasions, the victims had no choice but to request help, out of desperation, from the main cause of their unfortunate situation, and this is why they wrote letters to Franco.

Francisco Franco, dictator of Spain between 1939 and 1975, accumulated a power that was unequalled in the modern history of the country. At the end of the war, on April 1, 1939, he was Prime Minister, Commander in Chief or Generalissimo of the Army, Leader of the Falange (the single party), Head of State and, finally, charismatic leader or Caudillo of the Spanish nation. Moreover, there was no constitution or higher regulation to limit his power. He was what has been called a strong dictator, who had at his service a well-oiled repressive machine, full of men willing to blindly obey him and to “avenge” the crimes, both real and alleged, of the republicans, while denying having committed any crimes themselves. In any case, in September 1939, the dictatorship passed an Amnesty Law only for its supporters, waiting until 1969 to pardon – but not to grant a real amnesty since their crimes and their sentences continued to be recognized as valid by the State – the republicans. One of the powers that Franco held was to pardon or reduce the sentences dictated by the courts. Therefore, he was often the last hope of the condemned or their families.

The propaganda machine presented Franco as a kind and charitable Christian leader.9 The dictator supposedly had, among other attributes, a natural and constant smile, and he couldn’t sleep thinking of the sentences that would be executed and he wished to pardon his enemies so that they could help to rebuild a Spain destroyed in many ways by the civil war. However, his alleged generosity was conditional. His victims had no choice but to give in to this all-powerful man in the terms that the official ideology of the regime dictated: requesting pardon using the language and ideas that the propaganda repeatedly

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claimed to be the official truth. This subjugation of the victims to their executioner reached sadly pathetic extremes, which the dictatorship was in charge of publicizing. For example, in a collection of poetry written by political prisoners and published in 1940, when mass executions were frequent, José María Sánchez de Muníaín, a member of the central board for Sentence Reduction – a system in which prisoners did jobs in public works for a small amount of money in order to reduce their sentences – said the following of the dictator in the prologue of the book:

It is the summer of 1940. The date will resound with majesty in the years to come. Spain has the opportunity to again become an instrument of Providence: evangelizer, redeemer of the people, budding Christianity. We are the envy of the people, guided by the cleanest sword of modern times. This is not boasting, but the most certain truth. 10

But what the political prisoners wanted, when they praised the dictator, was the freedom that could only come through the pardon of Franco. This is the reason that the prisoner Félix Paredes wrote a poem called Gratitud al Caudillo [Gratitude to the Caudillo], in which he expressed his hope for freedom, which he presented as a certainty given the well-known compassion of the dictator:

And the pardon comes, It comes! And the prisoner receives it, as he who is revived by the dawn receives it and before that good omen of consolation and peace the hands of the prisoner open and he falls to his knees the eloquent moment bearer of the enterprise that turned the prisoner’s anxiety to surprise and always sure of the truth he intones, proudly confirms that the Caudillo pardons. 11

Many prisoners wrote to Franco requesting reprieve, but they were still a minority. Certainly many, possibly tens of thousands, did not have time to do so since the first months after the war were marked by mass executions that were carried out quickly. What also occurred was that the dictatorship sent instructions for the requests for reprieve to be sent to the General Headquarters of the respective military regions, which the court-

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10 [Es el verano de 1940. La fecha puede resonar con majestad en los años venideros. España está en ocasión propicia de volver a ser instrumento de la Providencia: evangelizadora, redentora de pueblos, pimpollo de la cristianidad. Somos envidia de las gentes y nos guía la espada más limpia de los siglos modernos. Esto no es vanagloriatura, sino verdad certísima.] Ministerio de Justicia, 1940, Musa Redimida. Poesías de los presos en la Nueva España, Madrid, Editorial Redención, p. 10.

11 [Y llega el perdón ¡llega! Y el preso lo recibe, como recibe al alba quien al alba revive y ante aquel buen augurio de paz y de consuelo las manos del recluso se abren y salta al sueño el minuto elocuente portador de la empresa que introdujo en el ansia del preso la sorpresa y que siempre seguro de la verdad que entona, ratifica orgullosamente que el Caudillo perdone.] op. cit, p. 99.
martial were dependent on. In any case, we have an incomplete view of whether pardon was granted or not during the first years of the dictatorship and an even poorer one of the relationship between the dictator and the convicted and their families. That is, we know more about what was called Franco’s justice – about how the legal system worked – than about the role, both real and figurative, of Franco in the justice system of his regime. As can be seen in the following two figures, the total number of prisoners who requested reprieve to Franco, according to official sources for the period from December 1939 to December 1944, was only 10,953 requests. This was during a period in which the great majority of the 50,000 total executions in the postwar period. Putting this in perspective, it means that probably less than 10% of the total number of condemned prisoners and certainly scarcely 20% of the total number of prisoners executed requested pardon from the tyrant, barely 3.6% of prisoners convicted by the dictatorship. The rest, either was not able or did not wish to, but in any case very few accepted the highly proclaimed and false compassion of Franco. Furthermore, after the great massacres of 1939 and 1941, it seems that the hope of receiving pardon from Franco was not very high since the number of requests decreased dramatically from the second half of 1941 and became obvious in 1942.

Figure 1. Evolution of the number of letters sent to Franco requesting pardon by trimester 1/12/1939-31/11/1951

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>2e Trimester</th>
<th>3er Trimester</th>
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<td>590</td>
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<td>320</td>
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<td>534</td>
<td>370</td>
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<td>2,416</td>
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<td>1943</td>
<td>320</td>
<td>2,824</td>
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<td>370</td>
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<tr>
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II. The Letters of the Victims’ relatives.

As previously mentioned, we have a fairly good idea of how Franco’s justice system worked, but we do not yet have a clear idea of the role of Franco in the justice system, or of how he was perceived both by his victims and by his supporters. This last aspect has recently been explored in a book on letters and messages written by prisoners. However, while there is little known about the relationship between Franco and his victims, what we do know about is what the prisoners, or rather their relatives, said to the dictator when they were able or they dared to write to him to ask him directly for pardon.

In 2011, I discovered some 130,000 letters written by Spanish people to the dictator between 1936 and 1975. These letters are deposited in the Archives of the Royal Palace in Madrid, which was the official seat of the Head of State (albeit Franco mostly lived and worked at El Pardo Palace). In these letters, the Spanish people asked the tyrant all types of favors, redress, justice, or they simply let him know of facts that they considered unjust or that the dictator was unaware of. The texts are an analysis of postwar Spain, although naturally this reality is quite distorted by the necessity of the authors of the letters to use language that is respectful and full of clichés when addressing the dictator. More than a faithful mirror, they can be said to be a striking distortion of reality.

For the purposes of this study, we consider of interest the letters relating to repression. These were written mainly by the relatives of the prisoners and of the victims of reprisals—parents, wives, children—and they were addressed not only to Franco, or

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12 Sierra Blas, V. (2016), *La correspondencia carcelaria en la Guerra Civil y el franquismo*, Madrid, Marcial Pons.
13 Cazorla Sánchez, A. ed. (2014), *Cartas a Franco de los españoles de a pie*, Barcelona, RBA.
sometimes to his immediate assistants, but also to the wife of the dictator, Carmen, and to their daughter, Carmencita. In these last cases, it was normally women who wrote to la Señora (as Franco’s wife was formally known. She had her own official bureau) begging her to intercede for their husbands and sons, hoping that being a wife and mother would make Carmen more receptive and understanding than her husband, whom she would supposedly immediately ask to pardon the prisoner. The same can be said of the letters from the children to Carmencita, the daughter of the dictator. These letters, which on many occasions were clearly prompted by adults, attempted to find an understanding between the children, and especially the daughters, of the prisoners and the only daughter of the dictator, in their common role of innocent children who wanted a better Spain, and who very much loved their fathers for whom they wished a happy life back in their family home. Obviously, we are talking about a very unequal relationship between those who held the power, on the one hand, and, on the other, those who could not openly oppose the dictatorship without putting themselves in danger of suffering the consequences of their actions. Therefore, the discourse and the rhetorical strategies of the victims of the Franco regime can be considered as fully part of what James C. Scott called the “Weapons of the Weak”, that is, the repertoire of strategies of the weak used against the strong in order to survive and, if possible, advance their interests. The Franco years were certainly the period in the history of Spain when the powerful were more powerful and the weak were more at their mercy than ever. For this reason, the study of these letters is useful for understanding what the victims thought of the Franco regime by the way they presented their reality to the authority. In this way, that reality, which was terrible, is partially presented to the contemporary reader. Below there is a general description of the main themes and the discourse of these letters, and what defense techniques their anxious authors used.

Firstly, among the first letters written to Franco, the ones that stand out are letters from the families of officers, soldiers and policemen who, having remained faithful to the Republic, were made prisoners by their rebel comrades-in-arms. The fate of these prisoners was very difficult, and interestingly, has too often been forgotten in the narratives of the Civil War. The Spanish army had some 200,000 members in July 1936, of which approximately 90,000 remained loyal to the government. Added to these were at least 25,000-30,000 police officers (Civil Guard, riot police, border guards and others) who also maintained their allegiance to the Republic. The fate of these men was tragic. Many officers and petty officers who were arrested were often promptly executed, many more endured prison sentences, and all of them lost their professional careers. The most dangerous moments in the lives of these uniformed republicans were, as with the rest of the Spanish people, the months of the summer of 1936, since the arrests were often quickly followed by executions that were not even authorized by any court. This makes the letter to Franco reproduced in part below even sadder if possible. The wife of an officer who was arrested in July 1936 wrote this missive. Unknown to her wife, he was shortly after assassinated by his former colleagues. The letter is dated December 8, 1936, and it is possible that by then this officer was already dead. At the time of the military

\[14 \text{ Scott, J. C. (1985), } Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance, \text{ New Heaven, Yale University Press.} \]

\[15 \text{ Aróstegui, J. (2006), } Por qué el 18 de Julio... y después, \text{ Barcelona, Flor del viento, pp. 90-94, 159-166.} \]
rebellion, he was stationed in Melilla (a city in the north of Africa where the military uprising began against the Republic):

With my love for the homeland intensified on this day that we celebrate the patron saint of our beloved Spain and of our glorious infantry, with my heart in pain to see that my husband is not beside his colleagues fighting to make Spain great, I am writing to Your Excellency as a Spaniard, the only title under which I dare to write to Y.E., the greatest Spaniard, to see if you might be able to do something so that the father of my children can come to the battlefield. My husband is Lieutenant of Infantry […] and according to authorized opinions the punishment for his case will be mild […] According to my information, he is there [in Ceuta] because since he was stationed in Melilla, where the movement began [and he didn’t] know anything about it, not even the nature of it, he did not join for lack of information only remembering the military ordinance which says that they must always remain faithful to the constituted government: with this gesture he showed courage and loyalty since with no expectation that his colleagues or soldiers join him in his decision, told them not to count on him. Y.E. knows that many of those who are fighting today, and besides those who do it elevating the name of Spain, if they had been in the same situation, they would have done the same, and you will also understand that there was no calculation or Sanchopanzism (opportunism) in his behavior, only thoughtlessness which he has already been punished for by being deprived of fighting alongside his colleagues. 16

This woman attempts to establish a link between the military honor of her husband and the similar values that Franco claimed to defend. According to her, her husband had behaved well in principle, but had committed an error because he did not have all the information necessary to act correctly. In fact, she asks Franco to bring her husband back to join the cause that he leads, since her husband is as good a patriot or better as many other officers who fought with the rebels. The authenticity of the message is facilitated by the supposed condition of equals – of true patriotic Spaniards – of this woman and

16 [Exacerbado mi amor por la Patria en el día de hoy en que se celebra la fiesta de la Patrona de nuestra amada España y de nuestra gloriosa Infantería, con el corazón dolorido de ver que mi marido no está al lado de sus compañeros peleando por hacer una España grande, me dirijo a S.E. como española, único título que puedo ostentar para atreverme a escribir a S.E., el más grande español, para ver si puede hacer algo porque el padre de mis hijos venga al campo de batalla. Mi marido es el Teniente de Infantería [...] y según opiniones autorizadas su causa tendrá poco castigo [...] Según mis informes, está allí [en Ceuta] porque como él estaba destinado en Melilla, donde fue el comienzo del movimiento y no sabía nada de este, ni el carácter que tendría, no se unió a él por carecer de datos y solo recordando las ordenanzas militares en las que se dice deben permanecer siempre fieles al Gobierno constituido: con este rasgo demostró valor y lealtad, puesto que lealmente y sin pretender que se sumasen a su determinación ni compañeros ni soldados, dijo no contásemos con él. S.E. sabe que muchísimos de los que hoy combaten, y además de los que lo hacen quedando muy alto el nombre de España, si se hubiesen encontrado en estas condiciones lo mismo habrían hecho, y comprenderá también que en su conducta no hubo calculo ni Sanchopancismo sino irreflexión, que bien castigada está con verse privado de combatir al lado de sus compañeros.] Cazorla (2014), Cartas a Franco de los españoles de a pie, Barcelona, RBA, pp. 54-55.
Franco, and as such she hopes that he will act with the generosity and also the justice that the propaganda of his group attributes to him. In this way, three Spanish patriots and supporters of the army – hence the references, not at all coincidental, to the date of the letter, the day of the Saint Patron of the Infantry – can all continue to serve Spain. Lastly, even knowing about the constant executions of republicans that have been taking place since July, and that the Francoist authorities never acknowledged their own misdeeds, this woman pretends that there is an unspecified consensus that the punishment of her “mistaken” but honorable husband must be mild. However, as we know, the result in this case was null, and the officer in question was executed. His body has yet to be found.

Resorting to military honor could not have been an effective argument for the convicted civil population, whether they had been sentenced to death, or to prison and/or loss of employment. However, there was a value, besides patriotism, that could connect these victims with Franco: religion. The emerging dictatorship claimed to be not only Catholic but a firm defender of this religion, which was presented as an innocent victim of the secular Republic. For this reason, the main rhetorical weapon of the weak consisted of presenting the victim of Franco also as a defender of the Catholic religion and therefore, a real or potential victim of the republicans. That is, this particular republican political prisoner was presented in fact a good Catholic. He (or she) could not be punished by the Catholic regime since in essence, beyond occasional actions, which supposedly occurred as a result of a misjudgment or of temporary information, the prisoner and his family were defenders of the religion and as such, they now realized that they had always been pro-Franco. This argument was reinforced using the Catholic logic and language of repentance, punishment and forgiveness. In this cultural tradition, if a good Catholic sinner showed sincere repentance, it was up to the Christian authority to impose a minor sentence that would soon lead to total pardon and reintegration into the Catholic community, which in this case is none other than Franco’s Spain. This strategy is seen clearly, for example, in the letter that the father of a republican teacher who was in prison (and, naturally, dismissed from her employment) sent to the dictator on May 15, 1937. Note how the author points out that at the time this woman was arrested for being a republican, she had in her possession a religious robe, showing in this way the incongruence of a Catholic State repressing a good Catholic simply because she had had a sporadic relationship with a subversive charity organization. Besides, the father attributes the arrest of his daughter, making use of another frequently used argument, not to political causes, but to motives of revenge or envy, that is, false from the point of view of Franco’s justice:

My General, I have a daughter who […] by making sacrifices I was able to put through university; this daughter with permission from the Military authority was on vacation in Zamora, at the house of a sister of mine and on August 23, by order of the Military Authority of Avila a pair of Civil Guards arrived and proceeded to arrest my daughter, who at the time of the arrest had in her possession since four years ago the habit of the Virgen del Carmen, and they did not present any documents that might compromise her and she is accused of being a Marxist and that her name is in the book of Socorr0 Rojo [Red Aid], but her signature does not appear anywhere and no
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one has come to my house to collect payment, this was done without a doubt by someone who wants to hurt her out of envy or personal vengeance.\textsuperscript{17}

This same recourse to the religion of the victim appears in another letter dated February 11, 1938, from a mother who asks Franco to pardon her son. This son, as in the previous letter, is presented as a good Christian who is ignorant of politics and who is in prison for having made a mistake. The letter begins by praising the military bravery of Franco, his defense of religion and his fair character. The connection of this woman with the dictator is that both are good Catholics, besides appealing to a central theme of Catholic identity: the pain of a mother for the suffering of a child, similar to that of Maria when faced with the suffering and death of Jesus. As in other texts, these supposed connections between the dictator and the families of the victims are transformed into a declaration of loyalty that the author hopes will be replicated by the generosity of Franco. This letter is full of spelling errors which indicates that both the author and her son probably belong to a lower social class:

Such courage of our dear Spain and defender of our Religion E.M. General I turn to you infinite and incomparable religious kindness requesting pardon for my son Francisco G. C. who is in Badajoz arrested 10 months ago pardon for a poor innocent who never had bad ideas since he is religious and good he was never a nonbeliever or evil-minded he always defended our Sacred faith because that’s what his Mother taught him.\textsuperscript{18}

Almost all of the letters have three elements in common: the Catholic religion argument, reporting an injustice and praising Franco as a fair and merciful man. By putting themselves in his hands, the victims made a distinction between some of the dictator’s bad subordinates, who they accused of badly serving the cause and Franco, and Franco himself, who must be—as in the myth of the good absolute king surrounded by bad courtiers and advisers—unaware of the bad actions that would have caused the unfair situation that was being reported. This argument is taken to a particularly sad extreme in the following case. The letter was penned by the son of a republican Guardia de Asalto [Riot Police] officer assassinated by Franco’s troops after the taking of the city of Malaga in February 1937. The son wrote to the dictator on December 1, 1939 to ask for a job so

\textsuperscript{17} Mi General, un servidor tiene una hija que [...] á fuerza de sacrificios pude darle la carrera; dicha hija con permiso de la autoridad Militar se hallaba de vacaciones en Zamora, en casa de una hermana de un servidor y el día 23 de Agosto último, se presentó por orden de la Autoridad Militar de Ávila una pareja de la Guardia Civil procediendo á la detención de dicha hija, la cual en el acto de la detención poseía hacia cuatro años el hábito de la Virgen del Cármen, y no se le ocupó documento alguno que pudiera comprometerla y á la cual se la acusa de marxista y que figura en el libro del Socorro rojo, pero sin que aparezca su firma en ningún sitio, ni hay ido ninguno á mi casa á cobrarlos recibos, esto sin duda lo ha hecho alguna persona que la quiera mal por envidia ó venganza personal]. Cazorla (2014), Cartas a Franco de los españoles de a pie, Barcelona, RBA, pp. 151-153.

\textsuperscript{18} Tal balor de nuestra querida España i de fensor de nuestra Religion E.m. Jeneral a uste bonda infinita Religioso in compara ble acudo pidiendo le perdón para mi ijo Francisco G. C. que se en cuenta en Badajoz detenido ace 10 meses perdón para un pobre infeliz que jamas tubo malas ideas pues es religioso i bueno nunca fue incrédulo ni malpensado siempre de fendio nuestra Santa fe porque a sin selo enseño su Madre.] Cazorla, op. cit., pp. 160-161.
that he can help to feed his hungry brothers. In this letter, the boy, who was barely fifteen years old, explained that his father, who was a good Catholic, was executed despite having helped to save the life of the bishop of that diocese during the anticlerical massacres that took place in Malaga (and in other republican areas) in the first months of the war. Besides, his father wasn’t really a republican but a person of order, that is, practically a Franco supporter. His execution, explained his son, must have occurred because it took place at a time when many people were executed too quickly. His death must have been a tragic error that Franco could not be blamed for. The author, who made it clear that he was educated in a religious school, wrote to Franco because he said he has heard that he listens to the suffering of humble people like him, who don’t have anyone to protect them. That is why he asked Franco to be the protector of his family:

In February it will be three years since I lost my father executed by Your Excellency’s courts. My four siblings and I were orphaned and my mother widowed and left with no means to live. The mercy of some first and then the protection of the family has kept us going until now. My father was good and proof of that is that we went to the Salesian School in Malaga until the movement broke out he was one of the ones who saved the life of the Bishop of Malaga. My father was a riot police officer and detested anarchy and disorder and denounced the abuse and looting that the reds committed. My father was recently taken in Malaga, when processes as Y.E. knows were hurried along. I am the oldest of five siblings and I am only fifteen years old. I turn to Y.E. to beg you to help me by giving me a job where I can earn a little to help my mother and younger siblings. They tell me that Y.E. looks after these extreme cases so I’m writing to ask for your protection since I have no means or influence. I hope Your Excellency will help me. May God keep H.E. many years.  

One weapon of the weak, sometimes a very effective one, is to present themselves as extremely weak. Taking advantage of the special consideration that women and children have in most societies, and in particular that they need the protection of the powerful and they should not suffer, women and children of Franco’s victims sought to establish complicity with the dictator, which sometimes extended to his wife and their daughter. In these cases, they sought to establish a supposed identification, based on the unique experiences and expectations of femininity and infancy, to pass on to the dictator the voice of compassion, of innocence and in short of the undeserved suffering of those who, 

19 [En febrero va a hacer tres años que perdi a mi padre fusilado por los tribunales de V.E. Quedamos huerfanos cinco hermanos y mi madre viuda y sin medio alguno para vivir. La misericordia de unos primero y después la protección de la familia nos ha ido sosteniendo hasta ahora. Mi padre eran bueno y prueba de ello es que nos educaba en Málaga con los Religiosos Salesianos hasta que estalló el movimiento fue uno de los que salvó la vida al Sr. Obispo de Málaga. Mi padre era guardia de asalto y aborrecía toda anarquía y desorden y censuraba los atropellos y saqueos que hacían los rojos. Mi padre cayó recién tomada Málaga, cuando en los procesos como V.E. sabe se iba muy de prisa. Yo soy el mayor de mis cinco hermanos y tengo ahora solo quince años. Acudo a V.E. para rogarle que me ayude dándome alguna colocación donde pueda ganar algo para ayudar a mi madre y hermanitos pequeños. Me dicen que V.E. atiende a estos casos extremos por eso me dirijo pidiendo protección, ya que carezco de medios y de influencias. Espero que V.E. me atenderá. Dios guarde a S.E. muchos años.] Cazorla (2014), Cartas a Franco de los españoles de a pie, Barcelona, RBA s. p. 201.

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by virtue of their sex or age, were simply defenseless victims of circumstances out of their control. Therefore, the good Christian leader, being fair and gentlemanly, had to help: it was his moral obligation. Once again, the use of religion served to reinforce the connection between the dictator and his victims. Such is the case of the letter, supposedly written by a six-year-old girl to Franco on June 9, 1938, in which, taking advantage of the fact that she is about to do her first communion, asked the dictator to free her uncle from prison. The first communion is an important event (as well as a sacrament) in the life of a Catholic, second only to baptism. In Spain, the children traditionally receive gifts, which in this case would be the freedom of the child’s uncle and the end to the pain – another Christian image – of her grandparents who were also ill. In this way, the author puts on Franco the responsibility of rewarding an innocent Spanish child on one of the most important days of her life as a Catholic and of preserving the life of the poor old couple. The child and her grandparents are innocent victims, but are willing to maintain their faith and loyalty to the Caudillo and to God, whom the child prays to on her knees, dressed in white, symbol of purity and innocence:

On this day of my first Communion in my white dress on my knees beside my grandma I ask for the six-year reprieve for my uncle Samuel A.R. who is our shoulder to cry on and support of my very old and sick grandparents. They say that nothing is denied us on this happy day Father of the Spanish people don’t deny me what I ask for my poor uncle as good as gold. At the feet of Your Excellency with pardon, […] six years old on the day of her Communion.  

The same occurs in the next letter, dated August 29, 1938, in which a girl writes to Carmencita, the daughter of the Caudillo, asking him to pardon her brother, a Civil Guard expelled/discharged from the force, probably for his republican sympathies. Here the complicity that is sought is that which supposedly exists between two innocent young girls, who because of their age and sex only want to do good. The author reinforces her message with a political declaration when she claims to be a member of the youth group of the single party, the Falange. Besides, the father of the author and of the recipient of the letter, to Franco, whom the message is really addressed to. As in the previous cases, the parents are also ill and suffering. This family has already punished the sins of the brother with prison, tears, illness and sadness. So they now ask for the compensation of Christian justice, which consists of receiving pardon and redemption:

I am a young girl like you, since I’m thirteen years old and I am an arrow (junior member) of the Falange of La Coruña, turning to you to call on your

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20 [En este día de mi primera Comunión con mi blanco atavío de rodillas junto a mi abuelita pido el indulto de los seis años de mi tío Samuel A. R. que es nuestro paño de lagrimas y sostén de mis abuelos muy ancianos y enfermos. En este feliz día dicen que nada nos niega Padrecito de los Españoles no me niegue lo que le pido por mi pobrecito tío mas bueno que el pan. A los pies de V.E. con perdón, […] de seis años de edad en el día de su Comunión.] Cazorla (2014), Cartas a Franco de los españoles de a pie, Barcelona, RBA, p. 192.
generous heart so that you will ask your good father, who is our undefeated Caudillo, to readmit my poor brother to the Civil Guard. His name is Guillermo C.F. and last month he was dismissed from the Civil Guard without doing anything bad, only because some bad colleagues of his who were with him in Torrelavega when that town belonged to the reds wanted to hurt him; but he never hurt anybody because if he had he would be in prison. When your father comes to Las Torres de Meirás and you see him, I would like you to ask him a lot because I love him a lot and since he is the Savior of our dear Spain he would pardon any little offence and they would readmit him, and here is a picture of him so you will know him and take pity on him. My father is on the front at Castellon and my mother is sick and I have another sister and the three of us cry a lot for our dear brother, and it will be a great joy for us if he became a Guard again.²¹

The supposed complicity between women is shown in the dramatic case of a letter dated July 1, 1940. In this case, the wife of a man condemned to death asks Carmen, Franco’s wife, for mercy, stating that only God and she can help. The references to Catholicism appear again in this text, as well as the presentation of the crimes of the victim as few, minor and the product of the deception of others, in this case of the republican leaders now in exile. That is, the victim is not really a republican. The final argument is that of the pain of an innocent Christian woman whose misfortune, which the author asks Carmen to imagine, will be greater if she becomes a widow. All of this becomes even sadder when the woman says that she always advised her husband to behave differently, but that he was under the bad influences previously mentioned, being a laborer with limited knowledge. Besides, their three children would be orphaned, one of which was unable to work after being crippled in an accident:

Your Excellence, Madam: In the family tragedy that overwhelms me I have exhausted all the paths in this world. All I have left is my hope in God and as a last resort the mercy of Y.E. My husband Antonio B.F. has been subjected to Franco’s Justice in Sabadell and with a sentence given on February 27 was condemned to capital punishment and he is imprisoned in the Modelo prison in Barcelona. Only the compassion of Y.E. can save his life for the family. I can absolutely confirm that our home […] has always been a Christian home by family conviction and tradition. If my husband committed an act against these convictions and against the law of God and

²¹ [Soy una niña como tú, pues tengo trece años y flecha de la de la Falange de La Coruña, que acudo a llamar a tu generoso corazón para que pidas a tu buen papá, que es nuestro invicto Caudillo, que readmitan otra vez en la Guardia Civil a mi pobre hermano que se llama Guillermo C. F. y que el mes pasado le separaron de la Guardia Civil sin hacer nada malo, solo porque le querían mal unos malos compañeros suyos que con él estuvieron en Torrelavega cuando aquel pueblo era de los rojos; pero no hizo daño a nadie porque sino lo tendrían preso. Yo quería que cuando venga su papá a las Torres de Meirás y cuando lo vieses le pidas mucho porque le quiero mucho y como es el Salvador de nuestra querida España le perdonaría cualquier faltita y lo volverían a admitir, y aquí le mando el retrato para que le conozcas y tengas compasión de él. Mi papá está en el frente de Castellón y mi mamá está enferma y tengo otra hermana y las tres lloramos mucho por nuestro querido hermano, y será para nosotros una alegría muy grande que volviera a ser Guardia.] Cazorla (2014), Cartas a Franco de los españoles de a pie, Barcelona, RBA, p. 193.
those of men in moments of extremism, that justifies the terrible verdict that weighs on him, it is because of the wicked influence that the propaganda of the red leaders had on modest workers, leaders who now comfortably contemplate from afar the effects of their campaigns, so difficult to counteract with the humble advice of a wife. My husband is one of the many victims who will pay the serious responsibilities of the fugitives. And the result, if the compassion of Y.E. does not prevent it, would be that a poor widow, a fifteen-year-old son unable to work because of an accident and a two-year-old son will be left defenseless in the world, adding to the sadness of being widowed and orphaned, the horrors of poverty. Only an act of compassion of Y.E. requesting from the undefeated Caudillo of Spain a reprieve or at least commutation of the sentence can relieve the situation that I present to Y.E. Knowing the maternal and Christian feelings of Y.E. that I am certain are always strong and well-disposed, I dare to turn to them as a last resort. For God, for Spain and for Franco, I know that these invocations are what most move the good Spanish people, I beg Y.E., in whom all good will is reflected, for an act of compassion, one of those acts that most exalts justice. Excuse me Madam, in the magnitude of my pain for taking the liberty of bringing it to Y. E. 22

We are quite familiar with the repressive machine of the dictatorship of Franco. Besides, in recent years we have advanced notably in our knowledge of both the perpetrators and the victims of the regime. Nevertheless, both the real and symbolic role of Franco in the

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22 [Excma. Señora: En la tragedia familiar que me agobia he agotado ya todos los caminos de este mundo. Solo me queda la esperanza en Dios y como supremo recurso la misericordia de V.E. Mi marido Antonio B. F. ha sido sometido a la Justicia de Franco en Sabadell y con sentencia de 27 de febrero último condenado a la última pena y está recluido en la Cárcel Modelo de Barcelona. Solo a la piedad de V.E. es dado desde su altura salvar para la familia su vida. Puedo afirmar en absoluto que nuestro hogar [...] ha sido siempre un hogar cristiano por convicción y tradición familiar. Si algún acto pudo haber cometido mi esposo contra estas convicciones y contra la ley de Dios y las de los hombres en momentos de exaltación, que justifique el terrible fallo que sobre él pesa, se debe a la influencia maldita que sobre los trabajadores sencillos ejercieron las propagandas de los dirigentes rojos que contemplan ahora comodamente los efectos de sus campañas, tan difíciles de contrarrestar por los humildes consejos de la esposa. Mi marido es una de las tantas víctimas que pagarán las graves responsabilidades de los huidos. Y el resultado, de no impedirlo la piedad de V.E., sería que quedarán desamparados en el mundo una pobre viuda, un hijo de quince años inutilizado por accidente del trabajo y otro de dos, que añadirían a la tristeza de viudedad y orfandades los horrores de la miseria. Solo un acto de piedad de V.E. pidiendo el indulto o por lo menos la conmutación de pena al Invicto Caudillo de España puede aliviar el cuadro que someto a V.E. Conociendo los sentimientos maternales y cristianos de V.E. que me constan siempre vivos y dispuestos al bien me atrevo a acudir a ellos como último recurso. Por Dios, por España y por Franco, que estas invocaciones que yo se que son las que más convueven a los buenos españoles a V.E. en la que se reflejan todas las buenas voluntades, suplico un acto de piedad, uno de éstos actos que más enaltecen la justicia. Excuse, Señora, en la magnitud de mi dolor el atrevimiento de haberlo llevado hasta V.E.]. Cazorla (2014), Cartas a Franco de los españoles de a pie, Barcelona, RBA, pp. 169-170.

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repression has been less studied. In this respect, this article analyzes a key aspect of the relationship between the dictator and his victims: how the latter sought the pardon of the former. Our initial data indicate that only a minority of Franco’s victims sought his pardon directly. But, in absolute terms, many worked in different ways since hundreds of thousands of Spanish people wrote to the dictator during the long period he was in power; and they often wrote asking for clemency for themselves or for their families. This article analyzes some of these letters selected by me. In the messages analyzed, we confirmed how the victims to create links with the dictator and force him to honor his role as Christian leader used the Catholic language and Christian paradigm. We have also seen how this language formed a part of a wider discourse of loyalty and patriotism, in which the legitimacy of Franco’s power was accepted in exchange for him behaving just as the propaganda described him: with justice. Finally, we have seen how sick people, women and children attempted to utilize their extreme weakness as an argument to create cultural and gender obligations and force a pardon. We have seen, in short, a repertoire of the weapons of the weak used against the powerful dictator. We do not yet know if these letters were effective or not, and why. It also remains to be seen if these strategies have been used in other contemporary situations of mass violence and dictatorship in other countries. It is more than probable that they have; although it also seems logical to think that during many genocide processes – especially those carried out quickly – the victims would not have much time to attempt to use, as a last resort, the same “weapons of the weak” that the Spanish used during the Civil War and the dictatorship. All in all, there is no doubt that if not these weapons other strategies more appropriate to the circumstances have been used. The similarities and differences in the repertory of survival strategies in dictatorships remain to be seen. This will serve to better understand how the victims of violence attempt to survive a despotic and criminal regime. In this sense, we are certain that the case of Franco’s Spain was no exception. However, further quantitative and qualitative analysis of the letters are needed. This topic, no doubt, deserves to be the object of at least a doctoral dissertation.

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