

# THE “RECONQUISTA” TROPE

**IMPACT:** The historical myth of the *Reconquista* has been one of the most recurrent tropes used by far-right parties in Spain. The controversial concept—contested by many scholars— has been reappropriated, misinterpreted, and misused to build political bases and campaigns on anti-Muslim hate, conspiracy theories, and white nationalism in Spain and across Europe.

- The **“Reconquista”** refers to a period in current-day Spain’s claimed history that comprised a set of military campaigns during the eleventh and twelfth centuries C.E. These campaigns were carried out by Christian soldiers, including several military orders of warrior monks from the Iberian Peninsula and other parts of the continent, such as the Knights Hospitaller, Knights Templar, and the Order of Calatrava. **These “Iberian Crusades” sought to “liberate” Al-Andalus, a territory that comprised a significant part of what is present-day Spain and southern Portugal, from Muslim rule.**
- For eight centuries, Amazigh and Arab Muslims settled in the peninsula, from 711 C.E. until 1492 C.E. The Muslims of Al-Andalus were often referred to as “Moors,” which comes from the Latin word “Maurus,” the term that originally referred to Imazighen (the plural of Amazigh) and others from the Roman province of Mauretania. “Moors” became increasingly used by Christian Europeans to refer to Muslims in Iberia, North Africa, and Europe. By contemporary racial designations, Moors predominantly would be described as Black.
- The **“Reconquista” lasted for two centuries and attracted Christian knights from all over Europe.** The Iberian Crusades ended on January 2, 1492, with the surrender of Granada’s Emirate (“Toma de Granada”), the only remaining fortified site under the last Nasrid ruler Sultan Boabdil, to the Catholic Kings.
- The **contemporary use of the term “Reconquista” is a revival of historical and mythological patriotism through the recognition, remembrance, and political reenactment of so-called “glorious” events in Spain’s history.** The term began to be used at the beginning of the nineteenth century, replacing the word “Restoration,” as a political symbol at a time when those in the Iberian Peninsula sought to reinforce the formation of states while fighting the French Emperor Napoleon’s invading forces. **Historians generally agree the word is not found in medieval chronicles.** “Reconquista” was used again under Francisco Franco’s regime. Described as the “Leader of the New Reconquista,” the dictator vowed to rid the country not of Muslims but of atheists, masons, and communists.
- **Scholars have described the “Reconquista” as “a biased and simplified concept.”** This history of conquest (conquista) is incorrectly and ahistorically referred to as a reconquest (reconquista), implying a retaking of lands by the different Christian Kingdoms (Asturias, Navarre, Aragon, Castile, and León) cohabiting in the Iberian Peninsula. Prior to the invasion of Amazigh and Arab Muslims in 711 C.E., the kingdoms had also survived the invasions of Romans, Alans, Vandals,

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**Last updated August 4, 2021**

and Visigoths. **Scholars have pointed out that the revival of “Reconquista” entails ideological implications in which “true” Spaniards were Catholics and Muslims were the illegitimate invaders who should be expelled.** It is a narrative that frames Spain as “built upon its confrontation with Islam.” **The narrative neglects or erases the key role of Al-Andalus and the nearly eight centuries of Muslim and Islamic influence in the society and culture of what would later become Spain.**

- Today, **“Reconquista” has been strategically misused, reinterpreted and misapplied by nationalist and far-right political movements and parties to claim a “glorious” Spanish Christian history and use as a backdrop to their political agendas.**
- The **far-right VOX Party, founded in 2013, has made “Reconquista” a central element in their contemporary reconstruction of Spanish identity.** For VOX, the Reconquista is again taking place today, implying that the country needs “reconquering” from its enemies who, they claim, have again overtaken the country. Its political program lists both external and internal “enemies,” “immigrants who illegally trespass our frontiers,” and Catalan separatists and the current socialist-communist government of Catalan that, in the eyes of the the Vox Party , are a threat to the unity and stability of Spain.
- VOX has consistently evoked the Reconquista trope in its messaging and political campaigns. Since the beginning of the Andalusian campaign at the end of December 2018, VOX has highlighted historical victories of Christians over Muslims. When Santiago Abascal, VOX Party leader and member of the Congress of Deputies, visited Córdoba—a city that was the European center of culture (with a library of more than 400,000 volumes), knowledge (more than twenty-seven free schools and a university) and politics during the Umayyad dynasty—for an electoral meeting **he promised that with a VOX victory, the Great Mosque of Córdoba, would be considered “a Cathedral.”**
- The Great Mosque was originally a Roman temple later converted into a Visigoth Christian church that remained until Emir Abd ar-Rahman I built the Great Mosque on its remains. In 1236, when Ferdinand III conquered Córdoba, the mosque was converted into a Catholic cathedral. **The debate about the hybrid religious nature of the Great Mosque has always been at the center of Spanish politics and society—the Mosque** has the largest surface area after the Holy Mosque in Mecca and its outstanding architecture makes it one of the most visited tourist sites in the country.
- In the same campaign, **Abascal stated his preference for historical figures associated with historical violence against Muslims**, such as the Catholic Kings and Fernando González de Córdoba, also known as “El Gran Capitán,” over Almanzor (al-ManSūr was the Muslim Statesman leader of the Umayyad Caliphate of Córdoba and the de facto ruler of al-Andalus). Just a few months later, VOX launched its 2019 electoral campaign in Covadonga (a town in Asturias, in the north of Spain), the origin of the Iberian Crusades and cradle of Don Pelayo, a political commander who launched the armed campaign against Muslims. From there, VOX finished its campaign in Granada, retracing the military path of the Iberian Crusades. **In January 2020, Ortega Smith, VOX’s General Secretary, claimed, “The Reconquista has not finished against the Islamic radicalism.”**

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- In addition to VOX, **other political parties in Spain have evoked the “Reconquista” as an emblematic symbol for the country.** Pablo Casado, leader of the conservative party Partido Popular, mentioned the “Reconquista” during the party’s political campaign of 2019, stating that “the Reconquista will start in Granada,” following the reverse route (from Granada northwards) of the Iberian Crusades. It was not the first time the Partido Party’s leader used that trope. **In March 2019, Pablo Casado made reference to his party’s goal “to start the Reconquista of Spain,” to which VOX’s supporters reacted on social media, claiming that Casado was not worthy enough to be associated with such a historical event.** VOX supporters also posted a photo of their leader, Abascal, wearing a seemingly antique helmet. As reported in El Español, however, the type of helmet did not appear until the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—after the Catholic kings’ conquest of Granada.
- The annual January 2 commemoration of the end of the Catholic conquest of Muslims in al-Andalus, the Toma de Granada (the capture of Granada), has always been a central issue for VOX. In the last few years, the anniversary celebrations have become more publicly controversial, with several associations describing the festival as “discriminatory and sectarian.” VOX wants la Toma de Granada to be officially declared the Andalusian Day (Día de Andalucía). This demand was one of the official requirements they imposed on the Popular Party in exchange for their support to form a conservative government in the Andalusian Parliament after the 2018 elections. VOX was unsuccessful in its demands, however, and Andalusian Day is still celebrated on February 28, the origins of which are a 1980 referendum that led to Andalusia becoming an autonomous community of Spain.
- During the festival celebrating Andalusian Day in February 2021, VOX’s representative in the Andalusian Parliament, Francisco Ocaña, stated the Toma de Granada is “a celebration of the Catholic Kings’ legacy since it represents the end of the Islamic oppression on the Iberian Peninsula and the unification of the different kingdoms that made up the nation at that time.” The party’s official Twitter account wrote, “It still remains the feeling of indelible pride for a heroic deed that lasted seven centuries and the strong decision of not being subdued by Islam.”
- In recent years, **radical far-right organizations and movements all over Europe have adopted the Reconquista narrative as a unifying symbol for white nationalist movements pedaling anti-Muslim hate and conspiracy theories.** Examples of this can be found in Reconquista Germanica (RG), a German far-right network supportive of the Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland/AfD) that “organizes collective digital action against political opponents and pushes the agendas of far-right movements and parties in online space.” RG uses the term “Reconquista” in its own name and is a staunch proponent of “ethno-nationalism, anti-Muslim racism, anti-Feminism and the rejection of immigration.”

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