Franco Bahamonde, Francisco 1892–1975. A cold, calculating and taciturn figure, Francisco Franco was made head of the Nationalist side in the Civil War and then, with the Nationalists’ victory in March 1939, became dictator of Spain until his death on 20 November 1975. He was born into a naval family in El Ferrol, Galicia, on 4 December 1892. He grew up very close to his mother, Pilar, a woman of traditional Catholic views, and entered the Toledo Infantry Academy at the age of 14. Franco’s early career was not a great success. He graduated 215th out of a class of 312. However, once he joined the Moroccan army in 1912 his fortunes changed dramatically. He proved himself both brave and dedicated in battle and in recompense in 1926 was made Europe’s youngest serving general. In 1923, he also married into a conventional upper-middle-class Asturian family, came to identify with the monarchy and, after being made the first director of the General Military Academy in Zaragoza in 1928, strongly supported the Primo de Rivera dictatorship (1923–30). Not surprisingly, given his background, Franco initially viewed the proclamation of the Second Republic with alarm. At first he was kept at a distance from the main centres of power. However, when the right took office following the November 1933 elections he took centre stage. In October 1934, he was made technical assistant at the Ministry of War, from where he coordinated the repression of the Asturian uprising.

In July 1936, with the left back in power, he joined the plot hatched by a number of high-ranking officers to overthrow the government. Once the attempted coup had become a civil war he was in a strong position to lead the Nationalist forces. He commanded the finest troops and was the best known military figure outside the country. Hence, in a meeting held near Salamanca on 21 September, he was confirmed as the commander in chief or Generalísimo. His political ideology was never very sophisticated. He had a number of idées fixes, chief among which were his hatred of liberalism, freemasonry and communism. Nevertheless, within these parameters Franco was willing to be flexible in order to remain in power. Hence, he allied with the West during the Cold War, and he also accepted the economic liberalization of Spain from 1957. Nevertheless, he always opposed significant political reform. Hence he would block plans by Manuel Fraga Iribarne to open up the regime in the 1960s, and make a transition to democracy impossible until after his death. (Angel Smith)