

# **SPECULATIVE HISTORY**

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## **Resumo**

História especulativa ou alternativa é um campo de investigação histórica que utiliza a especulação contrafactual de eventos históricos para refletir sobre a sociedade atual e sobre a construção social da memória. Este artigo alisa os romances *The Plot Against America* (2004), do escritor judaico-americano Philip Roth, e *Soldados de Salamina* (2001, traduzido para o inglês como *Soldiers of Salamis*, em 2003), do jornalista espanhol Javier Cercas, que jogam com as possibilidades da história e questionam como pessoas inteligentes podem ser facilmente persuadidas a colaborar com ideologias baseadas na exclusão da alteridade.

## **Palavras-chave**

Javier Cercas; Philip Roth; *Soldados de Salamina*; História especulativa; *The Plot Against America*.

## **Abstract**

Speculative or alternate history is a field of historical inquiry that uses counterfactual speculation of historical events to reflect upon our present society and the social construct of memory. This article analyses the novels *The Plot Against America* (2004), by the Jewish-American author Philip Roth and *Soldados de Salamina* (2001, translated to English as *Soldiers of Salamis* in 2003) by the Spanish journalist Javier Cercas, which play with the possibilities of history and question how easily intelligent people can be persuaded to collaborate with ideologies based on the exclusion of the other.

## **Keywords**

Javier Cercas; Philip Roth; *Soldiers of Salamis*; Speculative History; *The Plot Against America*.

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Speculative or alternate history is a field of historical inquiry that uses counterfactual speculation of historical events to reflect upon our present society and the social construct of memory. As Gavriel Rosenfeld states, speculative history narratives can shed light on the evolution of historical memory. For him, to speculate about the past is to question the present: "We are either grateful that things worked out as they did, or we regret that they did not occur differently" (ROSENFELD, 2002, p. 90).

This kind of narrative gained popularity in the 1960's with the rise of science fiction. However, the advent of postmodernism caused other genres to rethink history as well. This is due to the alleged destruction of boundaries between fact and fiction, and the questioning of master narratives and structures that characterize postmodernism. If structures do not determine the outcome of human actions, then history could indeed be different. For Linda Hutcheon the narratives that emerge in postmodernism are aware of history and fiction as human constructs. They rethink and rework the past in both form and content. She coins the term *historiographic metafiction* to name this type of narrative, which is a genre that subverts conventions from the inside<sup>3</sup>. Though, it is acknowledged that the borders between genres have become more fluid, which allow the merger between history and fiction.

Historian Hayden White defends the concept that history should not be seen as separate from its literary dimension. In the work of organizing and giving meaning to historical accounts, historians employ narrative techniques which construct the mechanics of history as a discourse. In his view, history is composed of both empiricism and speculation and is not a neutral discursive form. Therefore, history and literature should not be seen as two dramatically opposed activities. Despite being grounded by structuralism's assumptions on his analysis, Hayden White's contributions to bringing together history and literature paved the way for the analysis of the similarities of these two fields. Even though White's historical relativism has come under heavy criticism from his fellow historians, it has been embraced more favorably by literary critics<sup>4</sup>.

Historians might engage in counterfactual history "with enormous unease," as philosopher of science Martin Bunzl claims<sup>5</sup>. Despite this, he thinks that counterfactual reasoning can hardly be avoided in the practice of history because it is implicit in the construction of inferences about the world. He separates counterfactual reasoning into two simple varieties: good and bad. Counterfactual reasoning is bad when it is groundless and it is just an act of imagination. Good counterfactual reasoning, however, is grounded on indirect evidence and on the use of methodologies such as game theory.

Although it is comforting to think that most of the world's nations now are democratic regimes, history teaches that democratic consolidation is hard to establish and that totalitarian ideologies can destabilize the institutions of a nation. Speculative history, in the form of well-crafted novels, can illustrate this and go beyond a conventional historical approach. The recent novels *The Plot Against America* (2004), by Jewish-American author Philip Roth and *Soldados de Salamina* (2001), by Spanish journalist Javier Cercas, translated into English as *Soldiers of Salamis* in 2003, play with the possibilities of history and question how easily intelligent people can be persuaded to collaborate with ideologies based on the exclusion of the other. In addition, they are good examples of how

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<sup>3</sup> See HUTCHEON, L. "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism", **Textual Practice**, Brighton, v. 1, n. 1, p. 10-31, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> For an appraisal of White's work, evolution and reception, see Kansteiner, Wulf. "Hayden White's critique of the writing of history". **History & Theory**, Middletown, v. 32, n. 3, p. 273-295, Oct./1993.

<sup>5</sup> See BUNZL, M. *Counterfactual History: A User's Guide*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004. p. 845-858.

literature and history can be combined to serve as a reflection of contemporary society.

José de Piérola identifies a new type of narrative that uses historical facts to critically evaluate the past and to question the standard methodology of historiography. He suggests using the term “reflective historical novel” to categorize these works, and takes as examples *Soldados de Salamina* and Roberto Bolaño’s *Estrella Distante*. If the traditional 19<sup>th</sup> century Hispanic-American novels – the area that he analyzes – attempted to construct national identities, the reflective historical novel does not aim to create identities, but to critically examine the past in an exploratory way, not seeking a single truth (PIÉROLA, 2007, p. 243). In these types of projects, Piérola claims, the characters portrayed could not be used in a different epoch and the plot is constructed in such a way that it makes the reader reflect on established history and the processes by which it is constructed.

Both novels that will be analyzed here subscribe to Bunzl’s view of good counterfactual reasoning and to Piérola’s view of reflective history. These novels draw heavily on real events and their protagonists are named after their respective authors. In *The Plot Against America* the narrator is a young Jewish boy named Philip Roth and in *Soldados de Salamina* the central character is a Spanish journalist and writer named Javier Cercas. The real Philip Milton Roth was born in 1933, just like the young Roth in his story, and the Cercas described in *Soldados de Salamina* is similar to the real Cercas.

## Roth’s plot

*The Plot Against America* tells the story of a Jewish family dealing with the changes in the United States, after Franklin Delano Roosevelt is defeated by the heroic aviator Charles A. Lindbergh, who had campaigned against the United States’ entry into the World War II. The historical Lindbergh did not run for president, but it is not hard to imagine him in the office, or his ideas being supported by someone serving in the presidency of the USA. It was probable because it was, in fact, considered by Roosevelt’s contemporaries.

Lindy, as he was popularly called, was known for his historical thirty-three-hour flight from New York to Paris in the monoplane “The Spirit of St Louis”. His was the first nonstop transatlantic solo flight. Afterwards, he received the nation’s highest military decoration, the Medal of Honor, and was commissioned colonel in U.S. Army Air Corps Reserve. In this position he visited Nazi Germany to report on aircraft development. He also attended the Berlin Olympic Games in 1936 and wrote favorably about Hitler. In return for his services to the Reich, the Nazi regime awarded him a gold medallion with four swastikas in it. When war broke out, the real historical Charles A. Lindbergh defended American isolationism against FDR’s interventionist policies. His speeches against US participation in the war attracted rising attention and a growing number of politicians, in the early 40`s, supported him as a candidate for president. However, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor sealed the fate of the USA and did away with isolationism<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> After the World War I, the pacifist movement was increasing in the USA. With the approach of war, the conflict over the defense of democracy and isolationism grew but was only settled after the Japanese attack on December 1941. This passage, from Doenecke and Wilz, summarizes how divided USA was before to the Japanese attack: “Could the United States remain faithful to its heritage as a beacon of democracy and at the same time stand by while democracy perished in Europe?... Radical pacifists pushed for American isolation, while conservative peace groups endorsed military aid to the British. Debate became increasingly sharp, than ended abruptly – on December 7, 1941”. See DOENECKE, J.; WILZ, J. E. *From isolation to war, 1931-1941*. Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1991. p. 16.

What is most interesting about Roth's novel is not only the "what if" scenario, but also the plausible and intelligible arguments of the isolationists. Roth uses historical facts and possibilities to question contemporary beliefs – in this case, the USA's long-term commitment to democracy, which has been historically praised. FDR was already serving in his second term as president and his third presidential campaign was unprecedented in North American politics. Lindbergh was a public hero and an advocate of isolationism. In his speeches he tried to gather political support to avoid that the USA entered a bloody war in Europe. Nevertheless, the bombing of Pearl Harbor determined the United States' position in the war, and had not it been for the Japanese attack, getting the country to fight this "European war" would not have been an easy task<sup>7</sup>. It was feared that engaging in a war would lead the country into another economic depression or, even worse, toward socialism: "Full-scale mobilization... must lead to inflation, price and wage controls, and compulsory unionization; thus socialism would be the war's one lasting result" (DOENECKE, 1991, p. 10). The political power given to the State to manage the economy for war mobilization was one of the conservatives' historical fears about entering the conflict, especially after the world's deepest economic depression.

Roth creates a work of speculative historical fiction that seems to be a perfect chronicle of the changes that would have occurred in a Jewish neighborhood in Newark, New Jersey. Through the eyes of a boy, the reader learns how the political reality created divisions within families and the Jewish community, as well as how the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA), to borrow Louis Althusser's concept, was used by the new hegemony in power. According to Louis Althusser's theory of ideology, the ISA are structures that regimes or states create to "maintain control by reproducing subjects who believe that their position within the social structure is a natural one"<sup>8</sup>. The ISA are composed of institutions that reproduce ideology, like the church, family and school.

What is most impressive in Roth's novel is how subtly the isolationist government changes the institutions of its society by establishing new ones and by using persuasive arguments. The main argument the isolationists use is that they aim to defend peace, which is a very hard argument to oppose<sup>9</sup>. They argue that not entering the conflict would keep the blood of millions of young Americans from being shed in a war that was not started by the USA, and did not directly involve the country. In the story, peace is not defended in a naïve form, but it is associated with internal armament. Along with the claim that the USA was actually getting stronger by not becoming involved in the European war, the government continued to arm itself in case it needed to use force.

In the story, Lindbergh flies to Iceland to sign an agreement with Hitler, which guaranteed peaceful relations between the two countries. This is interpreted as an achievement in the best interest of the United States, especially when the same president pushes to "continue to arm America and to train our young men in the armed forces in the use of the most advanced military technology" (ROTH, 2004, p. 54). It is a strategically defensible approach that would guarantee America's neutrality and internal support, as this quote shows: "In the aftermath of the Understandings, Americans everywhere

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<sup>7</sup> Even Roosevelt was not comfortable with mobilizing the country for war. Although sympathetic with the European democracies, he declared neutrality just after Germany invaded Poland. See David M. Kennedy's book *Freedom from fear: the American people in depression and war, 1929-1945* in the chapter 14 "The Agony of Neutrality".

<sup>8</sup> See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry for Louis Althusser. The notion of ISA was advanced by Althusser in the essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" (1970).

<sup>9</sup> The discourse of peace is not uncommonly used strategically by those who want war. One does not need to go further than remind people that the famous dove of peace was a sign explored by Stalin's Communist Information Bureau. See Peter Viereck, "The Trojan Dove" (*The Russian Review*, Malden, v. 12, n. 1, p. 03-15, Jan./1953), for further discussion about isolationism and its consequence.

went about declaiming, No war, no young men fighting and dying ever again! Lindbergh can deal with Hitler, they said, Hitler respects him because he's Lindbergh. Mussolini and Hirohito respect him because he's Lindbergh" (ROTH, 2004, p. 54).

What follows are policy changes toward Jews that are disguised as a way to integrate them into everyday American civil life. The government created an agency called the Office of American Absorption (OAA), responsible for a program named Just Folks. This program made youngsters from minorities (but, in reality, only Jews participated in it) live for a while in "real America", such as in a farm in the Midwest. Roth's older brother, Sandy, goes to Kentucky, enjoys the farm life, eats pork and likes the tranquility of just being a regular American, rather than being Jewish. When he returns, he despises his father's concerns toward the Lindbergh administration and the life of his family as "ghetto Jewish". In addition to the OAA, Lindbergh's government also creates a citizen army to militarily train eighteen-year-old American boys, and the Good Neighbor program, designed to relocate Jewish families and disperse them across the country. As was the case with Just Folks, the Good Neighbor program was meant to weaken the solidarity among Jewish families and to reduce the density of Jewish communities in certain regions, to diminish their electoral power.

The idea of co-optation permeates the strategies Lindbergh employs to undermine opposition. Co-optation can undermine opposition from a minority group by assimilating it or gathering the support of the group's key leaders. Such is the case, in this story, with a very prestigious and knowledgeable rabbi, Lionel Bengelsdorg. He supports Lindbergh early in the campaign and when the president is elected the rabbi is appointed to serve as director of the OAA. Bengelsdorg later becomes engaged to Phil's aunt Evelyn and goes to Roth's house for a family dinner. The rabbi addresses Phil's father's worries about Lindbergh in the following way:

This is not an evil man, not in any way. This is a man of enormous native intelligence and great probity who is rightly celebrated for his personal courage and who wants now to enlist my aid to help him raze those barriers of ignorance that continue to separate Christian from Jew and Jew from Christian. Because there is ignorance as well among Jews, unfortunately, many of whom persist in thinking of President Lindbergh as an American Hitler when they know full well that he is not a dictator who attained power in a putsch but a democratic leader who came to office through a landslide victory in a fair and free election and who exhibited not a single inclination toward authoritarian rule. He does not glorify the state at the expense of the individual but, to the contrary, encourages entrepreneurial individualism and a free enterprise system unencumbered by interference from the federal government. Where is the fascist statism? Where is the fascist thuggery? Where are the Nazi Brown Shirts and the secret police? (ROTH, 2004, p. 110-111).

These reasonable arguments do not pacify Herman. Instead, they make him more worried: "Hearing a person like you talk like that – frankly, it alarms me even more" (ROTH, 2004, p. 111). The change of institutions does not need to come as a revolution in the economic base, like the "fascist statism" or communist collectivization, suggests Lionel Bengelsdorg in order to dismiss the importance of the changes that were going on. The Lindbergh government was engaged in a passive revolution – as understood by Antonio Gramsci – to change the hegemonic thinking of society gradually<sup>10</sup>. The plot shows that traditional intellectuals, like the rabbi, and other sources of hegemony enforcement, like the press, became increasingly allied with Lindbergh's ideals. As one critic of Gramsci puts it, if Lenin was the theoretical father of the *coup d'état*, Gramsci developed

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<sup>10</sup> See Antonio Gramsci. *Prison Notebooks*, Vol. 2. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

the strategy of a preceding psychological revolution that would facilitate the eventual seizure of power<sup>11</sup>. To resist this type of revolution is even more difficult because it demands high psychological strength. It is this strength that the father loses with time, which does not happen to the whole family, since the mother takes his place as guardian of security and authority of the family.

## Spain's plot

As for Spanish 20<sup>th</sup>-century history, it is not necessary to imagine an authoritarian regime such as Roth does in America. After the Civil War in the 30's, a Fascist-like government under the command of General Francisco Franco, came to power, following the defeat of the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939). One of the founders of the Fascist-inspired party, known as the *Falange Española* (the Spanish Falange), was a writer named Rafael Sánchez Mazas. He was imprisoned during the war by the Republican side and was later sent to a firing squad in the last days of the struggle. By 1939, it was clear that the Republican side had lost. Sánchez Mazas miraculously survived the shooting and ran to hide in the forest. A manhunt is organized to find him. In spite of being discovered by one of the soldiers in the manhunt, Sánchez Mazas's cover is not blown because when the soldier returns he claims that there was no one in that area. Sánchez Mazas walks for some days in the forest in Catalonia and finds three deserted soldiers of the Republican side, who have abandoned the army and since then have been hiding, while they wait for the conflict to end. When the war was finally over, Sánchez Mazas returned to Madrid not only as a war hero, but also as a firing squad survivor, and becomes a minister in Franco's government.

Sánchez Mazas' real story is what sparks the narrative of *Soldados de Salamina*. The protagonist, a journalist called Javier Cercas, runs across this fact in an interview and writes a time-honored piece for a newspaper in 1999, the year that marked the sixtieth anniversary of the end of the Civil War. He compares the fate of the poet Antonio Machado, who fled to France in 1939 to escape the advance of Franco's troops, to what had happened to Sánchez Maza at almost the same period. For this article he received three letters from readers, among which is that of a historian who reveals more information about the story being told.

The novel – or “true tale”, as the protagonist calls it – is divided into three parts. In the first, the protagonist interviews people involved in the story, including survivors of the civil war, in an attempt to form a picture of the fighting in that period. The second part is a narrative of Sánchez Mazas' life and of his participation in the war. The third part centers on Javier Cercas' search for the soldier who saved Mazas. It is very hard to draw a line between reality and fiction in this narrative, since historical figures and dates are constantly displayed. This is the style of Cercas<sup>12</sup>, which bears some similarities to that of Roth. Even though there are true survivors who gave their testimony about Sánchez Mazas – and who are also in a movie version based on the novel – Cercas invents an ideal soldier who would have saved Sánchez Mazas, not to mention other imaginary characters such as Conchi. The first and third parts of

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<sup>11</sup> See Olavo de Carvalho, *A nova era e a revolução cultural*. Fritjof Capra & Antonio Gramsci. (Rio de Janeiro: Instituto de Artes Liberais & Stella Caymmi Editora, 1994). Also Norberto Bobbio, in “Left & Right”, recalls that the use of Gramscian theory is not an exclusivity of the left but has as well been used by a “few theoreticians of the neo-Fascist right” (p. 19).

<sup>12</sup> See for example Cercas' interview to British newspaper *The Guardian*, which describes him as “Spain's foremost patroller of the border between fiction and reality”.

the book are both similarly and clearly fictional accounts. The second part, however, is more journalistic in tone and is historically grounded.

The story is underlain by the inquiry Cercas makes on why his country had become polarized, and how this conflict was ultimately resolved in a bloody battle. In the investigation to understand Sánchez Mazas' political position, Javier Cercas attempts to identify how authoritarian ideas could gather so much support from both sides of the political aisle:

Life like in general, however, literary life was becoming more radical by the minute, heated by the convulsions shaking Europe and the changes that could be glimpsed on the horizons of Spanish politics: in 1927 a young writer called César Arconada, who had subscribed to the elitism of Ortega y Gasset and before long would be swelling the ranks of the Communist Party, summed up the feelings of many people of his age when he declared that a 'a young man can be a Communist, a fascist, anything at all, anything as long as he doesn't cling to old liberal ideas'. That explained, in part, why so many writers of the moment, in Spain and all over Europe, changed in so few years from the playful, sporty aestheticism of the roaring twenties to the pure, hard political combat of the ferocious thirties. (CERCAS, 2003, p. 75).

Spain was becoming increasingly polarized and even friends and artists, as this passage shows, started to depart from common grounds and tolerance to different points of view to opt for ferocious political choices. No wonder the Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset lamented that both liberal democracy and the philosophy of tolerance were dying throughout Europe. This quote from *Revolt of the Masses* (originally published in 1930) illustrates so:

Liberalism is that principle of political rights, according to which the public authority, in spite of being all-powerful, limits itself and attempts, even at its own expense, to leave room in the State over which it rules for those to live who neither think nor feel as it does, that is to say as do the stronger, the majority. Liberalism – it is well to recall this today – is the supreme form of generosity; it is the right which the majority concedes to minorities and hence it is the noblest cry that has ever resounded in this planet. It announces the determination to share existence with the enemy; more than that, with an enemy which is weak. It was incredible that the human species should have arrived at so noble an attitude, so paradoxical, so refined, so acrobatic, so anti-natural. Hence, it is not to be wondered at that this same humanity should soon appear anxious to get rid of it. It is a discipline too difficult and complex to take firm root on earth. Share our existence with the enemy! Govern with the opposition! Is not such a form of tenderness beginning to seem incomprehensible? (GASSET, 1957, p. 76).

As we can see, Ortega y Gasset was pessimistic about the future of liberal democracies in the world. The winds of totalitarianism were blowing and attracted supporters who would not have otherwise been described as adherents of an authoritarian ideology. Sánchez Mazas and the leader of the Falange Española, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, published articles and gave speeches in defense of their authoritarian ideologies. These included a mystical exaltation of violence and militarism. Primo de Rivera, for instance, liked to quote Oswald Spengler, who said that at the eleventh hour, it has always been a squad of soldiers that has saved civilization (CERCAS, 2003, p. 77). Steeped in the idea that it was their duty to save civilization, they saw themselves as heroes, and endorsed the outbreak of war.

Similarly to Ortega y Gasset, but from a different time perspective, Cercas tried to understand why some non-violent people became involved with the ideology of the Falange Española, which was the case with Sánchez Mazas:

I had known – but not understood and was intrigued – that cultured, refined, melancholic and conservative man, bereft of physical courage and allergic to violence, undoubtedly because he knew himself incapable of exercising it, had

worked during the twenties and thirties harder than almost anyone so that his country would be submerged in a savage orgy of blood. (CERCAS, 2003, p. 39).

He seeks all the information he can get about this author, who for a period was an important figure in Spain's cultural life, but was forgotten before the publication of this book. He reads Sánchez Mazas' works and reaches a middle-of-the-road judgment: Sánchez Mazas is a good poet, but not a great one. He was an ideologue of the Falangist Party, which caused the rest of the cultural community to deliberately consign him to oblivion after his death in 1966. Cercas quotes the writer Andrés Trapiello, for whom Sánchez Mazas, like so many Falangist writers, won the war and lost his place in the history of literature. So, it is paramount to ask: why recover his history and his work now? Indeed, it is Cercas' girlfriend, Conchi, who poses this question. She criticizes him for writing a book about a Fascist writer, "with the number of really good lefty writers there must be around!" (CERCAS, 2003, p. 58). However, to make Sánchez Mazas' work oblivious would be not to reflect upon the facts and the nature of what led so many people like him to support totalitarian ideologies, which is not a monopoly of the right-wing at all. No wonder *Soldados de Salamina* was a best-seller in Spain and was the basis of a movie directed by David Trueba in 2003. Judging from the successful reception the book had in Spain, audiences seem to have agreed that the history of Spain's Civil War cannot be told adequately if those who supported the Falange are hidden or dismissed.

## Similarities?

Both novels use history as a source of reflection and similarly end up creating heroes who justify what went wrong. In Roth's United States, Franklin Delano Roosevelt manages to return to power and put an end to the evil deeds of his Nazi-allied predecessor, thus becoming the hero of the novel. In *Soldados de Salamina*, Javier Cercas ended his story in heroic yet not democratic way, since Spain fell into a dictatorship. Cercas uses an anonymous soldier to encapsulate good morality and the ability to make right choices. This soldier fought on the Republican side in Spain and later in the French Resistance against the Nazis. This fictitious soldier, Antoni Miralles, is thought to have been the man who saw Sánchez Mazas in the forest and spared his life. However, he denies this in the story, which introduces another ambiguity in the novel. Despite a bloody war, he managed to coexist with the enemy.

In the novel, Miralles was only found after a long search and a chain of coincidences. In the narrative, Cercas already had his story constructed before meeting the former soldier. He knew who Sánchez Mazas was, how he had survived the fire squad and who Mazas had met in the forest, while hiding. Cercas thought he already had all the information that was necessary to write the book, except for a missing piece of the puzzle: the soldier who spared the life of Sanchez Mazas. Therefore, in the third part of the book, Cercas searches for this soldier, the one person who could answer to the journalist what the soldier had in mind when he saved the life of Mazas.

In an interesting passage that reflects upon literature, journalism and history, Cercas says that he had a meeting with Roberto Bolaño for an interview. Bolaño, an exiled writer and a political activist, talked about the function of his writing and the making of a hero. In the story, he is sad about his illness not because he is about to die, but because this will keep him from writing more books about his generation and from bringing to life young Latin American soldiers who died in unsuccessful wars. Bolaño, who died in 2003, in reality, did



not talk to Cercas as it is told in the story. However, he could have done so. The Bolaño in the novel suggests that Cercas invent the hero for his literary project. Bolaño says that Cercas has good material for a novel, but the Spanish writer refutes this idea, saying that he does not aim to write a novel, but a true tale, with real events and characters. Bolaño then says that they are the same, because "All good tales are true tales, at least for those who read them, which is all that counts" (CERCAS, 2003, p. 161).

The Miralles created by Cercas – who could pass off as totally real for an unwarned reader – is a soldier who fought on the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War and then crossed the borders into France, as did almost half a million people in the last days of war. There Miralles enlisted in the French Resistance and went to Africa to fight against the Nazi-occupied colonies. In all, he fought totalitarianism for nine years. When he is finally found by Cercas, he is living in an old people's home in Dijon, France. Alone and disremembered, he represents the voice of the anonymous soldier, who only gets a statue in some squares. In the conversation with Cercas, Miralles says that he misses all the friends in the army who died young and could not taste the good things in life, like having a woman and raising a family. The old soldier emphatically claims a place in history for his fellow combatants: "Nobody remembers them, you know? Nobody. Nobody even remembers why they died, why they didn't have a wife and children and a sunny room; nobody remembers, least of all, those they fought for" (CERCAS, 2003, p. 199).

As for Philip Roth he chooses more conventional characters as heroes of the resistance, like president Franklin Delano Roosevelt and New York's mayor Fiorello La Guardia. However, the touch of irony is that Lionel Bengelsdorg, who since the beginning supported the new government and its actions, ends up being a public hero after the Nazi plot is discovered and publishes a best-seller, *My Life Under Lindbergh*. It is a 550 page book sold as an insider diary that eventually becomes one of the major historical sources about this period. The collaborator turns out to be the writer of history while the account of Roth family's resistance would remain anonymous, as the author critically suggests.

Are the USA and Spain of these novels very close to reality? We argue that Cercas tries to understand – and gets the reader to think about– how totalitarian ideas conquered his country. Roth, in turn, wants to show that we should not dismiss the possibility of the same thing having happened in the US. These two books show that speculative historical fiction can be a good source for questioning the present and for shedding light on a country's key historical events. Besides, it also helps to illuminate the way history is recorded and remembered. As literary projects, they are better able to break the boundaries of conventional history, while they serve as a source of reflection and knowledge about the past.

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