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Excavating Memory, Burying History. Lessons from the Spanish Civil War

Summary

This chapter deals with a case in which work that aimed at rekindling a critical memory of a conflictual past ends up producing a certain form of oblivion instead. The work in question is the archaeological research we conducted at two battlefields of the Spanish Civil War. During our work, we found the traumatic history of the war neutralized through memory practices sponsored, in one case, by government institutions and in another by grassroots associations. In both cases, the involuntary memories materialized in things insisted in disrupting the comfortable narrative that people tried to impose on them. I will argue that archaeologists should work to channel this material memory so as to construct critical accounts of the past that are helpful to foster a more reflexive citizenry.

Keywords: Archaeology of modern conflict; traumatic heritage; collective memory; memory practices; Spanish Civil War.

Dieser Beitrag handelt von einem Fall, in dem die Absicht, eine kritische Erinnerung an einen historischen Konflikt wiederzubeleben, eine bestimmte Form des Vergessens bewirkt hat. Bei dem besagten Fall handelt es sich um unsere archäologische Untersuchung auf zwei Schlachtfeldern des Spanischen Bürgerkriegs. Während der Arbeit wurde die traumatische Kriegsgeschichte durch Erinnerungspraktiken von Regierungsinstitutionen, in einem anderen Fall durch nichtstaatliche Organisationen neutralisiert. Spontane Erinnerungen, die sich an Objekten festmachten, störten jedoch in beiden Fällen dieses befriedende Narrativ. Ich erläutere hier, wie ArchäologInnen materielle Erinnerung für die Erstellung kritischer Erzählungen der Vergangenheit nutzen können, um eine stärkere Reflexion in der Zivilgesellschaft zu fördern.

Keywords: Archäologie rezenter Konflikte; traumatische Erinnerungen; kollektives Gedächtnis; Erinnerungskultur; Spanischer Bürgerkrieg.

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I Introduction

In this article, I would like to describe a situation in which work aimed at rekindling a critical memory ends up producing a certain form of oblivion instead. By ‘critical memory’ I refer to what in Spain has been called ‘historical memory,’ that is, an endeavour to retrieve and make public repressed memories of subaltern groups (in the case of the Spanish Civil War, it usually refers to the Republicans that were assassinated or punished during and after the conflict) with the aim of constructing a political system based on radical democratic values, as opposed to right-wing fundamentalist democratic principles.¹ I will work here with the distinction famously established by Pierre Nora between history and memory.² Nora links memory,³ which is “in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revive”, to premodern forms of collective knowledge of the past, as those of peasant cultures, and particularly to subaltern groups, such as the colonized and ethnic minorities, who “until now have possessed reserves of memory but little or no historical capital.”⁴ According to the historian, “the ‘acceleration of history’ [...] confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory – social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies – and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past.”⁵ History, as opposed to memory, is a prosaic, intellectual and secular production of knowledge that, released from the sacred, calls for analysis and criticism.⁶ Nora intended to establish a new relation between history and memory, one in which history is again reinscribed into the consciousness of people, into their memories.⁷ This implied a move away from history’s perpetual suspicion of memory and its true mission: “to suppress and destroy it”.

At the same time as Nora was trying to make history into a new form of memory, the postcolonial critique was casting doubts on history as an academic discipline. History was identified with the colonizers, slave masters or simply powerful, whereas collective memory was associated with the historical consciousness of indigenous peoples and the subaltern in general (working classes, women, slaves). This perspective has exercised a great influence in archaeology during the last decade and many practitioners have developed a genuine interest in the memories of marginalized groups.⁸ This process of decolonization of historical-archaeological narratives has gone hand in hand with a greater

1 On democratic fundamentalist see Cebrián 2011.

2 Nora 1989.

3 Nora 1989, 8.

4 Nora 1989, 7.

5 Nora 1989, 8.

6 Nora 1989, 9.

7 Assmann 2011, 134.

8 For example Colwell-Chanthaphonh and Ferguson 2006; Schmidt 2010; Schmidt and Karega-Munene 2010, 220–222.

engagement with contemporary society, which is manifested in the increasing relevance of both public and community archaeology and heritage management,⁹ especially what we could call popular or non-elitist forms of heritage. In all cases, what is at stake is the collaborative production of knowledge, guided by social concerns and not just by obscure scientific agendas that are imposed upon society by experts. The other aim is to deconstruct hegemonic history by paying attention to other voices and memories. Thus, Yannis Hamilakis reveals in his archaeological-ethnographic work the alternative memories attached to classical remains in Greece, such as those of the Ottomans and the Greek peasants, which have been cleansed away by generations of historians and archaeologists.¹⁰ In turn, Paul Shackel has shown how African-Americans have been trying to redress the racist image of the American Civil War portrayed in official monuments, memorials and museums, through alternative memory practices.¹¹

It is out of the question that this has been a crucial and praiseworthy move in archaeology. However, there seems to have been a tendency to eschew the most problematic forms of collective expressions of memory. Memory and non-hegemonic heritage are not necessarily progressive or emancipatory; neither is history or archaeology always a tool of symbolic oppression or of destruction of lively memory traditions (although it has often been). The fact is that there exist reactionary memories, even if they are popular, spontaneous and collective (think of the Neo-Nazis), and there are radical, critical histories and archaeologies, albeit being written in the ivory tower of university departments: consider Subaltern Studies,¹² the work of E. P. Thompson¹³ or the various Marxist archaeologies.¹⁴

In the cases that I will describe here the same neutralization of a painful, conflictual history is achieved by memory practices sponsored, in one case, by government institutions and in the other by grassroots associations. In both cases, the involuntary memories¹⁵ materialized in things insist in disrupting the sanitized narrative that people try to impose on them. I will argue that archaeologists should work to channel this material memory so as to construct critical accounts of the past.

The sites to which I will refer are battlefields of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). My colleagues and I have been studying a diversity of scenarios from the war and postwar period in order to produce a material narrative of the conflict.¹⁶ In this article, I will present two of these scenarios: the Offensive of the Alto Tajuña River and the Battle of the Ebro. The remains that we excavated are from 1938, a decisive year that saw the beginning of the Republican defeat at the hands of General Franco's armies.

9 Plantzos 2012.

10 Hamilakis 2011.

11 Shackel 2001.

12 Guha and Spivak 1989.

13 Thompson 1964.

14 McGuire 2008.

15 Olivier 2008; Olsen 2010, 117–119, 169–170.

16 González-Ruibal 2012.

2 Forgetting the forgotten battle

The province of Guadalajara lies to the northeast of Madrid. It is close to the capital (75 km) and is crossed by one of Spain's main roads, the one that communicates Barcelona and Madrid. For this reason, it played an important role during the early phase of the Civil War, when Franco tried to capture Madrid. After failing several times in the outskirts of the capital (November–December 1936) and in the Jarama valley (February 1937), another attempt was made by the Nationalists at Guadalajara in March 1937. The brunt of the attack was borne by the Italian volunteer corps sent by Benito Mussolini to help Franco. The Republican troops, however, managed to stop the advance with the help of the International Brigades and prevented once again the capture of Madrid by the rebels, which would remain in loyalist hands until the end of the war. After the front stabilized in 1937 there was little fighting in the area for the rest of the conflict, with one exception: the Offensive of the Alto Tajuña River. The battle took place between 30. March 1938 and 16. April. The Republicans were at that time engaged in heavy fighting in Aragon and faring badly. The attack in the Alto Tajuña basin intended to relieve pressure in Aragon by distracting Nationalist troops from the main front. Despite the initial thrust, the offensive soon stalled, a Nationalist counteroffensive was launched, and by mid-April the front was stabilized again with little territorial (and no strategic) gains for the Republic. Perhaps for this reason and for the fact that it was seen as a minor encounter in the larger and decisive Aragon campaign, the battle was utterly forgotten and it does not appear in any major synthesis of the Spanish Civil War.¹⁷ Despite the hundreds of thousands of troops involved, the mobilization of artillery, tanks and airplanes by both sides and circa 8000 casualties, the confrontation slipped away from collective memory and academic history alike.

At least until 2010. This year, under the request of a local historical association based in the tiny village of Abánades (Asociación de Amigos de los Espacios Históricos de Abánades), we started an archaeological project to recover the material traces of the battle.¹⁸ Between 2010 and 2012 we conducted three field seasons in which we excavated Republican and Nationalist positions, first lines and second lines, and sites from before and after the battle. After the end of the last season we were in a position to offer a narrative of life and death in this front from an archaeological perspective. Some of the most interesting evidence came from the scenarios where the Offensive of the Alto Tajuña took place. We were able to document in detail here the close quarters combats in which hundreds of soldiers from both sides died in the first week of the battle.

Particularly dramatic was the situation revealed in one of the scenarios, the so-called Enebrá Socarrá. Here we excavated a sheep pen where a group of Nationalist soldiers

17 For example Thomas 2001; Beevor 2006.

18 González-Ruibal 2011; González-Ruibal 2012.



Fig. 1 A medal of Pope Pius XI, in all likelihood belonging to a Nationalist soldier, and a red star of the uniform of the Popular Army of the Republic. They appeared only a few centimeters apart (Abánades, Guadalajara).

sheltered for a while and resisted the Republican advance. We found abundant evidence of the combat, including exploded artillery and tank shells, mortar rounds and grenade fragments, pistol and rifle shell casings and a large amount of incoming bullets. We retrieved also things more intimately related to the soldiers that were involved in the fight, such as religious medals (one of Pope Pius XI and another of the Christ of Limpías, a place in northern Spain), a tag showing membership to the Spanish Fascist Party (Falange Española), a cuff link, military insignia (including a red star of the Republican Army), coins, a toothbrush ... (Fig. 1).

The most shocking finds were the remains of several Nationalist soldiers who were killed in the battle, some of them in gruesome ways. They were expediently buried after the fray by the Republicans who captured the position. One of the best preserved bodies belongs to a very young man, around 20 years old or less, with ammunition pouches full of clips for his German Mauser rifle, some coins in his pocket and a lighter. He was hit by an artillery shell: a large fragment was found stuck in his neck and smaller pieces elsewhere in his body. Despite the seriousness of the wounds, they were not immediately lethal: we found evidence of a coup de grace. In another pit we recovered several bones, including part of a leg and foot with the boot still put, probably the remains of another soldier hit by artillery fire (Fig. 2).

The finding of human remains was received with alarm by some people, including the major of Abánades, who considered that publicly showing the bones (as we did in our blog)¹⁹ could reopen old wounds and be traumatizing for some. This, however, created no problem among the elderly neighbours of Abánades, with whom we talked and who even encouraged us to find the remains of the war dead and provided valuable information to retrieve the bodies. For them, the corpses scattered through the fields after the war had been a common picture. It is important to note that they were not

19 <http://guerraenlauniversidad.blogspot.com.es/2012/09/recuperando-vidas.html> (visited on 22/03/2017).



Fig. 2 Part of a leg of a Nationalist soldier hit by artillery fire near Abánades.

related to the killed, who came from all parts of Spain. There was however the impression among people from the local association that the appearance of human remains could ‘politicize’ the project, which was regarded as ‘apolitical’ until then. This is an interesting issue. On the one hand, there is the idea that excavating corpses immediately associates a project with the search for the Republicans assassinated during and after the war, which is carried out within a political framework.²⁰ On the other hand, people grant bones an extraordinary agency: bones can derail history, at least history of the pacified kind. This is surprising since it is not at all strange that bodies of soldiers appear in a battlefield. The reason people feel alarmed, apart from the ‘contamination’ from the historical memory campaign, is that, after all, dismembered, wounded bodies remind us in an unambiguous way how the war was (something quite removed from epic military stories), but, more than that, it shows that the war simply *was*. It is not the obscenity of

²⁰ Ferrándiz 2009.



Fig. 3 Displays in the Museum of Abánades.

violence which is in itself important, but rather the realization of the fact that *this* happened here²¹ – this unspeakable violence that we tend to associate with remote places, peoples and eras. The dead from recent conflict convey an uncanny impression of a warning or a threat. For some reason, it is regarded as indisputable evidence, more than trenches, artillery fragments or cartridges. In any case, despite initial misunderstandings with the major, the situation in Abánades was clarified and no obstacles were created to our research by the authorities or other instances – quite the opposite. We managed to make clear that, notwithstanding our political sympathies, we were first of all scientists that employed a scientific method to recover material evidence of the war – tin cans, bullets, trenches or human bones – and that we did that with the utmost respect for the dead.

It is important to note that our archaeological research was just one form of memory work among others that were developing simultaneously. The interviews conducted by the historical association of Abánades with the elderly people of the village have been crucial in complementing the archaeological record with the oral memory of the local population, and, more importantly, in involving the neighbors in the project. Besides, members of the association have established a small, but very well-organized museum with objects related to the war and postwar period (Fig. 3).

This is an important initiative because it keeps the memory of the war active and its material traces visible when excavations are not being carried out. At the same time, the museum works as a space of collective remembrance for the people of Abánades: they donate artifacts and documents that they have kept in their attics as well as stories. Also, the association has managed to involve different actors in the project, such as metal detectorists, filmmakers, and prison inmates from a rehabilitation program. In turn, we

21 Sontag 2003, 88.

added military re-enactors, cultural anthropologists and even a group of Californian visitors from a university program abroad. Regarding re-enactors, we have been working with them since our first excavation of a Civil War site in Madrid in 2008. The reason to cooperate is twofold: on the one hand, they have an in-depth knowledge of the material culture of the war, which is very useful during our work, in order to identify and interpret artifacts. On the other hand, they are concerned with the public dissemination of civil war history and their performances are actually very appealing to non-specialists and complement well the outreach activities of archaeologists. Thus, the sites of Abánades became the anchor of a true memory network through which different groups and individuals have established relations which have been carried to different levels according to the interests of those involved, as we will see.

How is the war remembered in this multivocal scenario? The museum itself has little information on the history of the war, but this is understandable, given the small space available and the absence of texts – beyond identification labels. It is also probably too much to ask for a complete and nuanced narrative in a local war museum. As it happens with other similar places in Spain, the exhibit is artefact-centred and all emphasis is put on the military events and daily life, with no mention to the political context or the political affiliations of the soldiers. As the collection grows and diversifies, however, it is inevitably faced with the political consequences of the war. This is in part due to the fact that some of the objects and documents that have been donated lately have to do with the postwar period, such as a ‘camisa azul’ (the uniform of the Spanish fascist party, *Falange*) or a bunch of forms to enlist in the Blue Division to fight with the Nazis in the Eastern Front. Unlike bullets and tin cans, these artefacts are less politically innocent. They speak bluntly of a fascist dictatorship. An attempt to cope with the aftermath of the war is a poster that was placed in the museum in 2012.

It reproduces an original letter by a former Republican soldier who fought in the area and was sent to a concentration camp after the war. The veteran, a Catalan musician, has to beg their former enemies to return him his saxophone so that he can eke out a living. The letter starts and ends with the compulsory hails to General Franco. Without any need of interpretation, the text is already a denunciation of the Francoist regime. Within the local association there are those who take a more political (left-wing) stance (such as the designer of the aforementioned poster), and others, more conservative, that prefer to bypass the political side at all.

There is however another memory practice that deserves attention, because of the number of people it involves and the vision of the past that it provides. During our first field season in Abánades, we organized an open day, which consisted in a lecture, a guided visit to the site, an excavation for children, and an exhibition of the most relevant findings. A central role in the event was played by the small group of reenactors



Fig. 4 The hug that never was: reenactors embrace after the reconstruction of an episode of the Forgotten Battle.

from the association Frente de Madrid,²² with whom we had contacted in 2008. They dressed as Nationalist soldiers (we were excavating a Nationalist position then). After this experience, the local historical group and the reenactors decided to organize a major living history performance to commemorate the battle. This has taken place yearly since 2010 under the evocative title ‘The forgotten battle.’ We have collaborated in the first two events giving lectures on our archaeological excavations. Other activities are also organized by the local association, such as guided visits to the museum, a short film competition, a photography exhibition and music performances in which Spanish songs from the 1930s are interpreted by artists dressed in war-era clothes. In this memory network, that includes more and more actors every year, archaeologists play just one role – and not necessarily the most important one.

Around 80 re-enactors participate in the event. They prepare themselves carefully in order to reconstruct the uniforms, tactics and even bodily gestures and forms of speaking of the military involved in this particular war episode. Thus, the reconstruction has a high degree of verisimilitude. Except for one thing: once the battle is finished, the combatants from each side, dead and alive, come together and embrace in a fraternal hug (Fig. 4).

With this, re-enactors want to symbolize the purpose of the event as an act of reconciliation: it is not for opening old wounds, but for showing that they have been healed. But have they? The problem is that the historical truth was quite different: the soldiers from one side and the other did not embrace. After the war, the victors imprisoned half a million Republicans, of which approximately 50 000 were executed and several thousand more died of starvation, disease or torture inside prisons and internment camps.²³

22 <http://www.frentedemadrid.com> (visited on 01/04/2017).

23 Juliá 1999; Gómez Bravo 2009.

The wounds of the war and postwar violence were never healed, since Franco organized the exhumation of the Nationalists killed by Republican forces and commemorated them,²⁴ whereas the Republican dead were condemned to oblivion and mourning was severely hindered.²⁵ It is only since 2000 that the situation started to be redressed with the proliferation of initiatives to exhume mass graves with victims of the Nationalist repression.²⁶ The reenactment of the forgotten battle, then, produces a biased image of the war, which is in keeping with popular perspectives of the war as a conflict between brothers, where both sides had more in common than reasons for fighting each other. This apolitical vision of the war has been made durable in Abánades in 2013 with the inauguration of a plaque in the local museum that reads, in capital letters: IN REMEMBRANCE OF ALL. What does it mean *all*? Those who fought for democracy and those who fought against it? Those who started the war and those who were smashed by it? Those who raped and looted, who killed civilians, who tortured people in concentration camps? Those who sculpted the effigy of the Republic deserve the same remembrance as those who scribbled “Viva Franco” in the trenches? Why should fascists, serial killers or rapists be remembered at all? This reminds Žižek’s comment on a Steven Spielberg’s animated series *The Land before Time*,²⁷ where dinosaurs, of all sizes, shapes and attitudes, are the protagonists. In the series, the same message is repeated all the time: we are all different, but we should learn to live with these differences. “It takes all sorts to make a world”, says the song: “Does that mean nice and brutal, poor and rich, victims and torturers?” asks Žižek. In the series, as in our neoliberal society, “Any notion of ‘vertical’ antagonism that cuts through the social body is strictly censored, substituted by and/or translated into the wholly different notion of ‘horizontal’ differences with which we have to learn to live because they complement each other.”²⁸

This image of the war in which all sides are victims also tallies well with the depoliticizing stance of neoliberalism²⁹ and that is perfectly manifested in the Neue Wache memorial in Berlin. Here, the political identity and responsibilities of collectives are erased to create a global, apolitical victim with whom all the nation is supposed to identify.³⁰ The bronze plaque at the Neue Wache equally commemorates soldiers killed in action (even if they were SS and were committing crimes at the time of being killed) and civilians who were murdered in the extermination camps. Similarly, the acts of commemoration of the Forgotten Battle in Spain clearly level out memories and responsibilities. The commemoration helps to forget the actual history of the war, which was heavily ideological and brutal: a typical conflict of the period, where no human rights, military codes or war laws were respected and where the enemy was often characterized

24 Rodrigo 2008, 202–203.

25 Renshaw 2011.

26 Ferrándiz 2009; Ferrándiz 2010; Gassiot and Steadman 2008.

27 Žižek 2002, 64–65.

28 Žižek 2002.

29 See Žižek 2000, 54–63.

30 Till 1999, 272.

as less than human. In the trenches, we have brought to light the material memory of a war, in which people celebrated the war against Fascism or hailed Francisco Franco, depending on the side: this is clearly seen in the many political graffiti that can still be found in the area. We have documented the brutality of close-quarter combats, which did not precisely end with hugs, but often with the killing of prisoners (as has been documented for Nationalist troops in Abánades by our colleague historians). Yet this material memory tends to be silenced and with it the history of the war, in order to construct an apolitical narrative without sides or ideals: only victims.

3 One site to bring them all and in the darkness bind them

If the Offensive of the Alto Tajuña was forgotten, this was certainly not the case with another battle that we studied: the Battle of the Ebro. This was the longest, bloodiest and most decisive confrontation of the Spanish Civil War. It started on 25. July 1938 and ended on 16. November with around 80 000 casualties (dead and wounded) and with irrecoverable human and material losses for the Republic.³¹ The defeat opened Catalonia to the Nationalist armies, which fell less than three months later. The Battle of the Ebro was for Spain a sort of Verdun for the French, in that a large percentage of the soldiers that took part in the war participated in this battle at one time or the other. It was also an international confrontation, which saw the involvement of Moroccan, Italian and German troops on the Francoist side and British, American, German, Polish and many other nationalities on the Republican one. Thus, the Battle of the Ebro became not just an integral part of Spanish collective memory, but also of the world. In the aftermath, monoliths and memorials dotted the landscape, remembering the actions of the troops that fought for the Francoist cause.

Our research on the Ebro battle was done in collaboration with heritage experts Francesc Xavier Hernández Cardona and Mayca Rojo Ariza from the University of Barcelona and a local heritage association (Lo Riu). It consisted in a specific intervention in a trench located near the village of La Fatarella (Tarragona) that witnessed action only during the last two days of combat (November 14–15). The Republicans created a belt of fortifications around their last bridgeheads on the Ebro to protect the many troops that still resisted on the right bank of the river.³² The units that volunteered to make the last stand were mostly annihilated, but were crucial to save the lives of thousands of Republican soldiers. We excavated a trench and a concrete pillbox that were part of the last line of fortifications. Despite the fact that both structures had been severely altered after the war (the pillbox was blown up and backfilled with debris and the trench cut

31 Reverte 2003; Besolí 2005.

32 Besolí 2005, 293.

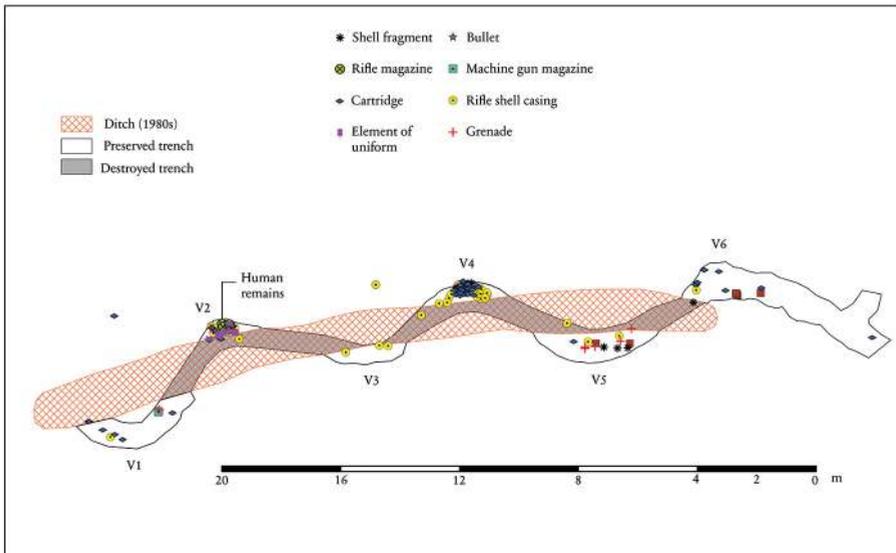


Fig. 5 Map of the excavated trench with distribution of finds per type (La Fatarella, Tarragona).

across by an irrigation ditch), the excavation was extremely successful. In the pillbox, we were able to reconstruct the attack: we found evidence of two artillery impacts, probably from Republican tanks captured by the Nationalists, rifle fire (bullets incrustated in the wooden planks that lined the embrasures), and grenade throwing (a detonator from a Spanish Lafitte bomb). After the position was taken, Nationalist soldiers lived there for a while, as proven by many tin cans, an unexploded Polish grenade and German ammunition that was recovered in one of the galleries of the bunker.

The excavation of the trench was even more fruitful (Fig. 5).

In each of its preserved vertices we discovered a different kind of evidence: several offensive grenades (that illustrated the way in which the fortification was taken); dozens of shell casings from the Soviet Mosin Nagant rifle (indicating the position of a Republican shooter, desperately trying to stop the Nationalist advance); packs of Soviet ammunition (still wrapped in paper, waiting to be used), and, the most impressive find: the remains of a Republican soldier exactly in the same place where he fell dead the last day of the Battle of the Ebro. The excavation showed that he had emptied at least three magazines of his Mosin Nagant on the enemy before trying to return a grenade. The artifact exploded in his right hand, which was obliterated. Fragments reached his right lung and spinal cord and broke his right femur (Fig. 6).

From his side bag we recovered two unused fragmentation grenades, several magazines and packs of ammunition, a razor, a mess tin, a medicine bottle, a shaving bowl,

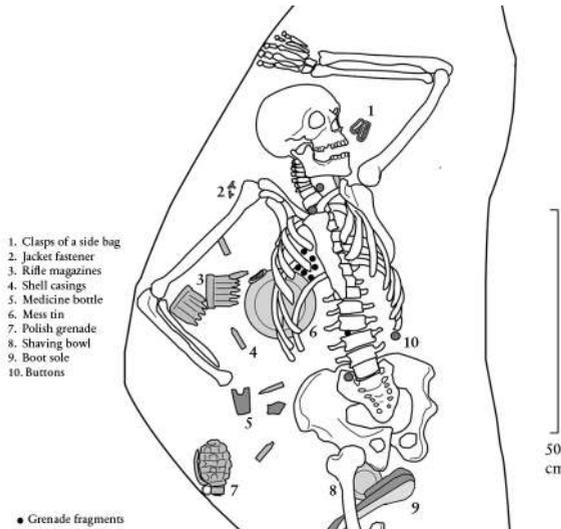


Fig. 6 Plan of the skeleton with associated artifacts belonging to a Republican soldier found during our excavations in La Fatarella.

toothpaste, and a military leaflet. Our research brought this unknown Republican soldier back to life. Through the media and our own blogs,³³ he was remembered and his actions commemorated. Unfortunately, the discovery did not only bring the attention of the general public and the media, but also the Government of Catalonia (*Generalitat*).

The law of Catalonia regarding human remains from the Spanish Civil War is quite unique. In the rest of the country, families and grassroots associations actively promote the location and exhumation of mass graves from the war and postwar period and their work is relatively unhindered by institutions or authorities. Between 2008 and 2012, exhumations were mainly funded by the central government through public grants. In Catalonia, there were several attempts at excavating unmarked graves, but most were thwarted by one reason or the other, sometimes by the *Generalitat* itself.³⁴ A law was eventually passed that asked for a series of criteria to be conducted before permission

33 <http://guerraenlauniversidad.blogspot.com> (last visited on 01/04/2017).

34 Íñiguez Gràcia and Santacana 2003.

was granted to conduct an exhumation.³⁵ These criteria are so difficult to meet that in fact very few mass graves have been opened in Catalonia. Furthermore, it is compulsory to contact the administration if human remains related to the conflict are found by chance. It is the Generalitat that is in full charge of exhumations.³⁶ The Generalitat hires a forensic expert to carry out the exhumation, remove the corpse and produce an anatomic-forensic report. This is of course not always done: human remains appear regularly during agricultural and construction work and they are simply disposed of or taken to the memorial of Camposines to which I will refer later. In addition, before the law was passed an institution had already been created – Memorial Democràtic³⁷ – to manage the sites of memory related to the Civil War in Catalonia (including graves).³⁸ What the administration does not seem to have taken into account is the possibility of archaeologists finding human remains during a project focused on Spanish Civil War remnants but not specifically on Civil War dead. When we found the corpse during our excavation, we duly notified the authorities of our finding and then proceeded to excavate the remains and communicate the discovery to the media.

The authorities were not happy at all with our actions: firstly, because they had wanted us to stop the excavation until they sent their own expert. This seemed ludicrous: we are trained archaeologists and capable of exhuming human remains. Nobody has to stop a Neolithic excavation because a skeleton turns up. It is important to note that this was not regarded as a forensic context, in the sense that the remains could not be used as evidence in court – not even the corpses of the murdered Republicans in mass graves are accepted as criminal proof in Spanish courts and judges refuse to attend exhumations.³⁹ Besides, the moratorium would have implied leaving the corpse for three days to its own devices until the forensic team arrived, since we discovered the bones on Thursday, managed to communicate with the administration on Friday morning and they told us that they would not be able to send anybody before Monday. By then, the human remains would have been altered (heavy rains were announced) or looted. When I pointed out the risk of looting (very high in the scenarios of the Battle of the Ebro), the person from Memorial Democràtic told me that they could have sent a couple of policemen to veil the corpse the entire weekend. It is, of course, quite unreasonable, but shows the degree to which the administration wants to control the spectral presence of the war dead. Secondly, the authorities criticized our public announcement of the finding. They told us that these things had to be handled with utmost care and without

35 “Llei 10/2009, del 30 de juny, sobre la localització i la identificació de les persones desaparegudes durant la Guerra Civil i la dictadura franquista, i la dignificació de les fosses comunes.” <http://www.gencat.cat/diari/5417/09176147.htm> (visited on 04/01/2017).

36 Article 7.1 of the 10/2009 Law; <http://www.gencat.cat/diari/5417/09176147.htm> (visited on 04/01/2017); Gassiot 2008, 126–127.

37 <http://www20.gencat.cat/portal/site/memorialdemocratic> (visited on 04/01/2017).

38 Guixé 2008.

39 Gassiot 2008, 124.

contacting the media, due to all the political trouble that they might generate. Which trouble, I wonder? Is it a secret that there was a battle in the Ebro in 1938 that took the lives of 15 000, many of whom still have their bones scattered all over the countryside? It was certainly not a secret to the neighbors of La Fatarella: after finding the bones, many came to us to notify the appearance of human bones in their fields. The situation degenerated in a conflict between the research team and the Generalitat, which soon reached the media and made things worse. The Generalitat was precisely trying to avoid all media attention in the controversy and, when it failed, it adopted a more intransigent attitude towards us.

Incidentally, it is interesting to note that, although the intervention was a joint project between the Spanish National Research Council and the University of Barcelona, when the conflict gained momentum the University of Barcelona disappeared from the news – especially in government media. The message that was conveyed was that researchers from Spain had come to Catalonia to meddle in Catalanian history. Thus, a memory of political conflict became entangled with other contemporary conflicts. In fact, one of the defendants of the Memorial Democràtic, historian Queralt Solé,⁴⁰ explicitly casts the memory problem in Catalanian terms: against the heavily politicized memory that prevails in the State (Spain), she proposes a national (Catalonian) memory that remembers all dead alike, without making distinctions. The war is presented as a tragedy for Catalonia as a people (which it undoubtedly was), irrespective of the political affiliation of the dead.⁴¹ In this way, Solé finds in the memory of the war a productive way of constructing a post-political (Catalonian) nation in which all other conflicts (of class, gender, or race) are erased.⁴² Strikingly enough, the historian does not seem to consider a (conservative) nationalist agenda to be political.

Despite our attempts to retain the rights to study the human remains, we were ordered to hand in the bones to Memorial Democràtic. We offered to conduct the forensic analysis at our own expenses (at the University of Barcelona and by qualified forensic experts), before handing over the remains. This, however, would go against the protocol established by the law and would mean relinquishing power. Thus, the Memorial insisted in taking care of the bones and hiring a forensic anthropologist. We did transfer the human remains and then they disappeared. Nobody knows for sure where they are now or what were the results of the forensic analysis, as they are kept secret (notwithstanding the fact that the report is paid with public taxes). Although the fate of the remains has not been made public, it can be easily discerned. They are probably resting

40 Solé 2010.

41 Solé 2010, 128.

42 I use the concept 'post-political' here following Mouffe 2005. The post-political is the negation of

the political by the neoliberal order, which presents itself as neutral and beyond ideologies (which is itself, of course, a clearly political position).



Fig. 7 Memorial of Camposines with plaques remembering fallen soldiers.



Fig. 8 One of the displays in the museum of Corbera d'Ebre.

in the Memorial de Camposines. This is an ugly monument built in one of the most beaten areas of the Battle of the Ebro (Fig. 7).

Its purpose is to store the bones of all the combatants that are retrieved in the former battlefields, irrespective of their side and political ideas. This is an initiative to deal with the war in an allegedly apolitical, even-handed way.⁴³

The Memorial de Camposines is in fact just part of a larger memory network that involves all sites affected by the battle (COMEBE: Consorci Memorial dels Espais de la Batalla de l'Ebre).⁴⁴ The network includes small museums, interpretation centers and specific landmarks evenly distributed throughout the Ebro region. There is much to be praised in this initiative, which is unique in Spain. The museums host excellent collections and the displays are often engaging, innovative and well designed (Fig. 8).⁴⁵

There are at least two main problems, though. One of them is of a scientific and ethical nature: part of the exhibited materials comes from private collections of looters and lacks information on provenance, something which would be unthinkable in a local museum covering other periods and that inevitably devalues modern archaeological artifacts.⁴⁶ In this way, the systematic destruction to which the battlefields of the Ebro have been subjected is officially condoned and even sanctioned. The other problem is political: the same message of the Camposines Memorial is transmitted in each and every site, center and museum. Both sides are depicted in equal terms: it is actually difficult to know for what they were fighting, as very little information on the causes and political contexts of the war is provided (in that, these public museums are not that different from the private-run Museum of Abánades). A heavily ideological war ends up being described as a dynastic or territorial conflict of the eighteenth century, by focusing on

43 Solé 2010, 129.

44 <http://batallaebre.org/app/index.php?page=comebe> (visited on 04/05/2017).

45 For a more critical perspective see Martín Piñol 2011.

46 Martín Piñol 2011, 162.



Fig. 9 Photo of a group of international brigadists shown in the museum of La Fatarella.

military details, territorial gains and losses, weaponry, uniforms and daily life. Perhaps where the trickiness of the Memorial Democràtic is best exposed is in the center devoted to the international participation in the battle, which is located in La Fatarella. If one was expecting a museum on the International Brigades, one would be disappointed. There is nothing wrong, however, with the idea in itself: “The exhibition examines the political aspects and international diplomacy linked to the Spanish conflict, and volunteer movement, which emerged in response to the non-intervention of democratic countries.”⁴⁷ The problem is that, as it happens in the other centers, both sides are presented equally: thus, hanging on one wall we have photographs of international brigadists (Fig. 9), and on the other Italian, German and Moroccan troops fighting for Franco (Fig. 10).

The ultimate purpose of the Memorial Democràtic, as its name implies, is fostering a ‘democratic memory’ in Catalonia.⁴⁸ However, to offer a vision of the past in which the events are not explained in the first place, in which the origins of the war are not discussed, and in which the reasons for which the combatants were dying and killing are whisked away does not seem to be the best way of building a solid democratic memory

47 As quoted from a poster at the museum.

48 Guixé 2008.



Fig. 10 Photo of one of Mussolini's soldiers shown in the museum of La Fatarella.

and transmitting democratic values. Building a mausoleum to put together those who strove to destroy democracy and impose a fascist-style dictatorship with those who were fighting on the side of a legitimate, constitutional government does not seem to buttress democracy either. This does not mean that a partisan display, one that celebrates a set of values and decries others, has to be acritical. Of course, there were many fighting on the Republican side who were anything but democrats in any imaginable sense or sensitive to human rights (such as Commander Lister or the brutal FAI assassins). In fact, that the repression in Republican-controlled Catalonia was among the bloodiest in Spain has to be fully acknowledged. Yet I am not saying that we have to give a eulogy of the Republic. Forgetting the painful, murky aspects of history is neither emancipatory nor democratic, but neither it is to put all sides at the same level.

What are the Memorial Democràtic and the COMEBE actually remembering? What values are they transmitting? In my opinion their work does not help to remember, but to disremember, by offering a sanitized, amnesic history (amnesic inasmuch as it does not recall its origins). The values that they transmit are the post-political principles of the neoliberal order, which only a cynic could identify with truly democratic values. In typical neoliberal fashion, a variety of voices are put on display without privileging anyone – the fascist, the Stalinist or the democratic. Furthermore, as few interventions are actually conducted into what already exists, the landscape of the war is still very much the one bequeathed to us by the victors, with no critical commentary. Thus, the makeshift monument erected by international brigadiers by their comrades during the Battle of the Ebro crumbled into oblivion and had to be restored by private individuals (Fig. 11), whereas the sturdy monument to Gustav Trippe, a German commander with the Nazi Condor Legion who was killed in front of the trench that we excavated, continues its work of commemoration undisturbed (Fig. 12).



Fig. 11 Restored monument of the International Brigades to their fallen comrades.



Fig. 12 Monument to German tank officer Gustav Trippe in La Fatarella.

This pseudo-neutral and pacified vision of the war is disrupted every time bones are brought to light. With their involuntary memory they break the dominant narrative and spread panic. In order to re-establish the natural order, the bones have to be kidnapped and taken to Camposines: one place to bring them all – democrats and totalitarians, rightist and leftists, heroes and villains, criminals and innocents – and in the darkness bind them. Not in the Land of Mordor, but in the Ebro, where the shadows (also) lie.

4 Conclusions

In this article I have tried to show that, notwithstanding the good intentions of archaeologists, excavating sites of conflict can be a way of fostering memories while at the same time erasing history – and by that I mean knowledge of the past produced through the systematic, objective analysis and continuous critique of contrasted empirical sources. Memory practices are often celebrated as democratic, bottom-up, open-ended and inclusive, in opposition to official discourses of the past.⁴⁹ However, without denying the necessity to retrieve repressed subaltern experiences, I have tried to show here that collective memories may also become a weapon for conservative forces to neutralize a trou-

⁴⁹ For example Shackel 2001; Hamilakis 2011.

bling history that insists in haunting the living and replace it by a form of commemoration that is acceptable, and therefore neutral. *Lieux de mémoire*, then, are not necessarily the product of state intervention alone (as in Camposines), but can also be the end result of spontaneous initiatives of specific communities (as it happens in Abánades). In that, there is no distinction between official and unofficial standpoints, government and collectives. I have reviewed here two archaeological interventions in Spanish Civil War sites conducted by my research team: in one of them, a potentially critical memory is neutralized by a popular memory discourse that portrays the Spanish Civil War as a fratricidal nonsense; in the other, the result is the same, although in this case it is the government that strives to bypass history by presenting an abstract memory of suffering in its place through a *lieu de mémoire*: the Memorial of Camposines. In both cases, the Spanish Civil War is restricted to the period covered by armed confrontation (18. July 1936 to 1. April 1939) and to specific regions – the Alto Tajuña or the Ebro – with their micro-networks of memory sites. There is no discussion of the causes that led to war in the long term or of the reasons that justified the use of violence for each side. There is no understanding of the wider geography of the conflict either. The brutal punishment of the defeated is elided in the first case, and narrowly presented as a national (Catalonian) catastrophe in the second. By portraying the war as a natural disaster in which people killed and got killed, no distinctions are made between those who pursued legitimate ideals (many of which still guide our current democratic system) and those who did not. Furthermore, it prevents us from constructing a really democratic master narrative that is still lacking. The monolithic Francoist view of the past has disappeared as the only and dominant discourse. However, its disappearance has not given way to a democratic master narrative, but rather to a very postmodern multiplicity of competing narratives (fascist, rightists, leftists, democratic, totalitarian), all at the same level.

Gabriel Moshenska has pointed out that “the representations and uses of controversial archaeological research will remain largely outside the archaeologists’ control; we must weigh up the values and risks with a careful and critical eye.”⁵⁰ The dangers are particularly clear in the context of the Spanish Civil War, where we still lack an established master narrative and fascist views cohabit comfortably with democratic ones. The sites and landscapes of war are always open to multiple views, some of them reactionary and antidemocratic. While I still believe that the role of the archaeologist is to make things public and encourage debates about the past using material evidence,⁵¹ I do not think that her or his job should consist in just managing a diversity of views and memories. As engaged researchers, we have to listen to all voices but privilege narratives that are fair to the facts, politically critical, and that do not balk at dissension or the lack of consensus. A critical archaeology does work with (local) memories, but it also has to transcend

50 Moshenska 2008, 165.

51 González-Ruibal 2007.

the emotions, images and recollections evoked by places of memory and insert them in the wider geographical and temporal framework – in the case of the Spanish Civil War, the history of social inequalities, global economic crisis, rising European fascism, totalitarian states and militarism that characterized the 1930s, as well as the history of dictatorship that followed the war in Spain. In our research, we have worked in different sites from the war and postwar period all over Spain. The idea has been to evince the connections that exist between a diversity of places, events and historical actors related to the conflict. We have worked with local communities, but we have also insisted in the necessity of looking at the long term and the global context. Because at times, we have to forget memory and remember history instead.

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