



BETWEEN SILENCE, OBLIVION AND RECOVERY: HISTORICAL MEMORY AND TROUBLED PASTS IN SPAIN AND EUROPE

Prof. Miguel Ángel del Arco Blanco
Department of Contemporary History
University of Granada

Thank you very much, Beppe Zorzi and Daniela Ferrari, and everyone here today. I understand that among us there are people joining from Ireland, Germany, Italy, Spain, Ireland, and France. We are all Europeans, and as such, we share a common past—a past that includes difficult and often tragic moments, particularly in the 20th century.

Before I begin, let me ask my friends from Dublin to forgive any mistakes I might make in English. As you know, English has become the common language of Europe, and it allows us to reflect together on our shared history. Today, I would like to speak about the memory of this troubled past in Spain and in Europe more broadly.

Let me start with an image. The picture you see was taken in 1955 near Granada, in Alfacar, at the very place where the world-famous poet Federico García Lorca was executed on 19 August 1936 during the Spanish Civil War. His body was never found. According to some accounts, it lay beneath the olive tree captured in that photograph. This image is a powerful metaphor for the violence of our past and for the silence and forgetting that often surround it. Lorca has become a symbol not only of oblivion, but also of the struggle to recover memory—both in Spain and in Europe.

My talk today will move in three stages. First, I will reflect briefly on Europe's troubled 20th-century past, using Germany and Italy as examples. Second, I will turn to Spain, focusing on three moments: the Civil War (1936–1939), the dictatorship under Franco (1939–1975), and the transition to democracy after 1975, which eventually led to the movement for the recovery of historical memory around the year 2000. Finally, rather than closing with firm conclusions, I would like to leave space for discussion. My students often tell me that a talk with strong conclusions can feel too closed, so I prefer to end by opening the floor for questions and debate.

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Europe's Troubled Past

The history of 20th-century Europe is, sadly, a history of destruction and violence. Compared with that, we are fortunate today: despite war, inequality, and environmental crisis, we live in one of the most peaceful and prosperous times Europe has ever known. Yet it is essential to remember that the world we inhabit was built on the ruins of the 20th century, and that history does not move only forward. Progress is not guaranteed; the past shows us how quickly societies can fall back into violence.

Think of the two World Wars. In 1914, after decades of extraordinary progress, Europe entered into the deadliest war the world had ever seen. Less than 20 years later, another world war devastated the continent. Cities such as Cologne were left in ruins. Genocides multiplied: the Holocaust is the most widely remembered, but we must also recall the Armenian genocide during the First World War, as well as colonial violence—often overlooked, but no less real.

We cannot ignore these events. They shape our political and social systems to this day. A good example is the work of British historian Dan Stone, who in his book *Goodbye to All That?* suggested that our democracy is fundamentally rooted in the memory of World War II. He is not the only historian to make this point; figures such as Tony Judt and many others have argued similarly. What they highlight is that our collective memory, in some way, is tied to the experience of the war. Our society was built on the lessons and consequences of those terrible times: we have a welfare state because of the devastation and the need for reconstruction, democracy because this system of government ultimately prevailed, and a European project because cooperation became essential after such destruction. Clearly, this past remains with us today.

How Europeans have faced their troubled histories varies widely: every country experienced the consequences of fascism, Nazism, and the world wars differently. For example, France emerged from World War II with the idea that it had simply been conquered by the Nazis, yet historical research shows that many French citizens actively collaborated with the occupying forces, including participation in the persecution of Jews—not all, but enough to complicate the national memory.

But how did Europeans confront this past? The responses varied from country to country. However, I will focus on just two examples: Germany and Italy. I chose these cases because, in my view, they illustrate two very different approaches to confronting the past. It goes without saying that dealing with a legacy of fascism, widespread violence, the Holocaust, and widespread destruction is extremely difficult. For democracies after 1945, coming to terms with these responsibilities and

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consequences was a monumental challenge. My aim is to explain how these two countries approached it in very different ways.

Germany: Facing Responsibility

Germany's case is often cited as an example of an active attempt to confront a difficult past. After the defeat of 1945, the Allied powers occupied the country and divided it into four zones of occupation. The Nuremberg Trials marked the first time international law judged the crimes of a regime at its highest levels. While not every Nazi party member could be prosecuted, there was at least recognition of wrongdoing, and leading figures were held accountable.

As Geraldine Schwarz explains in the first chapter of her book *To Be or Not to Be a Nazi*, many Germans—estimated at around eight million—belonged to the Nazi party, even if they did not take an active role in the Holocaust or Nazi policies. After the war, most of them chose to forget, and no responsibilities were assigned to the majority. Schwarz emphasizes that totalitarian regimes like fascism were not possible without the social support of ordinary citizens: denunciations and collaboration helped Hitler rise to power and implement his policies. The Nuremberg Trials, therefore, represented a crucial first step in seeking justice, even though it was impossible to prosecute all party members. They provided recognition that crimes had been committed and that the top echelons of the Nazi regime were accountable for their actions.

The Allies, particularly the United States and other Allied countries, promoted “denazification,” an effort to educate Germans about the principles of democracy and address the responsibilities of those who had supported Nazism. For decades, Germany wrestled with the role of ordinary citizens in the rise and implementation of Nazi policies. For many, these initial measures were sufficient to begin moving forward. However, by the late 1970s and especially the mid-1980s, the *Historikerstreit* (historians’ dispute) sparked a nationwide debate about Germany’s history and the responsibilities of German society. This was not an exercise in silence; rather, it was an effort to publicly recognize past crimes and critically evaluate the societal implications of collaboration with the Nazi regime. A very good example of this approach is the work of the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, who explored how citizenship and democratic identity can be constructed from such a difficult and traumatic past.

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Italy: Constructing a Myth

Italy presents a completely different example. After 1943, the country was divided, and when the war ended, Communist Minister Palmiro Togliatti declared an amnesty, stating that neither left-wingers nor right-wingers would be held accountable for any crimes. This was intended as a fresh start, a way to rebuild society from scratch. However, the downside of this approach was significant: the crimes and responsibilities of fascism, as well as some crimes committed by anti-fascist guerrillas, were effectively forgiven, excused, and forgotten.

This represents a starkly different model from Germany, where the Nuremberg Trials sought justice for crimes; in Italy, the amnesty model allowed society to move forward without confronting the past. Why was this path chosen? It is telling that a communist leader enacted it, as Italian society needed reconstruction after the war and a civil conflict among citizens. Togliatti recognized that reconciliation required starting anew to establish the democratic Republic of Italy.

This Republic was built on the “myth of anti-fascism”—the idea that all Italians had opposed fascism and had been dominated only by a few fascists. In reality, historians have shown this narrative was inaccurate: there had been widespread social complicity in the rise and policies of Italian fascism. As a result, there were no real policies to confront the past—the crimes and responsibilities of fascism were largely swept aside, and the new Republic relied on a simplified, self-flattering version of history.

At the same time, symbols of Fascism were publicly visible. For example, the grave of Benito Mussolini was placed in Predappio and could be visited by anyone. In Germany, this would be unthinkable—sites such as Hitler’s suicide location only have a plaque, not a monument. The amnesty and the myth-making created a tolerance toward the inheritors of Fascism. From the very beginning of the Italian Republic, neo-Fascist groups such as the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI) were established. Some scholars even argue that the successor of the MSI, whose symbol includes a flame—sometimes said to reference Mussolini’s grave—can be seen today in parties like Fratelli d’Italia.

These images—the figure of Palmiro Togliatti, Mussolini’s grave, the symbols of neo-Fascism, and the cultural myth represented by songs like *Bella ciao*—illustrate the complexity of Italian history. I am not saying that Italians did not fight for independence or against Fascism, but the truth is far more complex. Importantly, I am discussing history, not collective memory.

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Spain: Civil War, Dictatorship, and Memory

Now, let's turn to the Spanish case, which I will cover more briefly. Between 1936 and 1939, Spain was engulfed in a devastating civil war that, in many ways, became an international conflict. People from numerous countries participated, including members of the International Brigades, Axis powers, Soviet volunteers, and many intellectuals. The war was seen as a struggle of global significance because democracy itself was at stake: the Spanish Second Republic was a reformist democracy, and on 18 July 1936, some generals in the Spanish Army rose against President Azaña, igniting conflict across the country.

After 1939, a dictatorship lasting nearly 40 years took hold in Spain: the Francoist regime. This period can be divided into two stages—the immediate post-war years from 1939 to 1959, and the subsequent decades of development under Franco. Following his death, Spain faced a transition to democracy, culminating in the approval of the Democratic Constitution in 1978.

The victors shaped memory. The Francoist dictatorship controlled the memories of the Civil War for almost 40 years. Republican voices—those who had defended the Spanish Second Republic and had not joined the rebels—were systematically forgotten. They could not remember their past, tell their own version of events, and bury their loved ones properly. In contrast, the victors enjoyed the full benefits of shaping memory. During the first two decades, what became known as the “culture of victory” was established: the Spanish Civil War did not end with a peace treaty, only with Franco's triumph. Immediately after conquering the last territories, Franco propagated the idea that the conflict had not been a civil war, but a crusade—a holy war against the atheist Marxists who supported the Republic. Although the reality was far more complex, this narrative dominated Francoist propaganda.

Spain was thus portrayed as needing to close itself off from external, particularly European, influences. Franco idealized a Catholic and Castilian Spain—united, centralized, and morally pure—and this vision was imposed in the following decades. Commemorating the war became a tool to justify and legitimize his rule. A good example of this is the monuments scattered all around Spain called the “Crosses of the Fallen”, erected to honour the martyr heroes of the crusade.

Repression was severe and systematic. What happened during these years included widespread violence that was deliberately forgotten and excluded from any official memory under the Francoist regime. Military trials were held against Republicans, along with tribunals targeting political responsibilities, Freemasonry, and Communism. Prisons and concentration camps were filled with those considered enemies of the

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regime. In Spain, it is estimated that immediately after the war, around half a million men and women were imprisoned, and 90% of them for political reasons—they were not criminals, but Republicans. The concentration camps, while not extermination camps, were harsh environments; many Republicans died due to disease, poor nutrition, and terrible living conditions. The last camp was closed only in 1947, illustrating the extreme severity of Francoist repression.

Forced labour was also used extensively. For example, the Valley of the Fallen—where Franco was buried for many years—was built by prisoners, forced to work in penal battalions, while at the same time the regime implemented a “purge” of professions, excluding and dismissing workers and professionals considered to be opponents. The scale of the violence was dramatic: during the Spanish Civil War, Republicans assassinated almost 50,000 people, while the Francoist rebels killed fewer than 130,000, and an additional 50,000 were executed during the 1940s under the dictatorship. This was a violent regime, not only under Franco’s leadership, but supported by parts of society, echoing patterns seen in other European countries recovering from fascism and war.

But obviously, time passes, and the rhetoric of the Crusade used to legitimize the Francoist regime had to change, especially as new generations needed to be convinced. At that moment, Franco used his propaganda to justify his presence, saying, “I am not here because I am the winner of the Civil War; I am here because I am giving Spain peace.” A clear example of this is the extensive campaign in 1964 to commemorate the 25 Years of Peace under the dictatorship. The narrative shifted to highlight that Franco had guaranteed peace, framing the Spanish Civil War as provoked by the Republicans, a tragic conflict between brothers that should never happen again, and emphasizing that peace had been secured thanks to Franco.

This campaign celebrated Spain’s economic progress, comparing past hardships with present prosperity—the number of cars, reduction in criminality, and other indicators of development. The economy became a tool to silence the past and avoid discussing Francoism’s crimes or those committed during the Civil War. The 1960s and 1970s, known as the “Spanish Miracle,” saw Spain transform from an agrarian country to a modern, touristic society, similar to developments in other European countries, like Italy in the 1950s. Spain became a destination for tourists, and the regime portrayed itself as modern while systematically silencing the past. Forgetting the past was presented as necessary to move forward, trading collective memory for consumer progress.

The transition to democracy, known as the Pact of Forgetting, began after Franco’s death in November 1975. Transitioning to democracy was an extremely difficult

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project, especially considering the violence of the preceding decades. As in Italy with Togliatti's amnesty in 1946, Spain faced the challenge of building a democratic society while confronting its violent past. Spain succeeded, but at a heavy cost: the cost of forgetting.

Historians and cultural critics frequently refer to this approach as the Pact of Forgetting. Antonio Herrera, for example, has explained that the transition was not a rupture with Franco's dictatorship but a negotiation between reformist Francoist leaders and the democratic opposition. Both sides agreed on democratic reforms, constitutional approval, and, crucially, on leaving the past largely unexamined. The left-wing opposition pushed for a general amnesty to release political prisoners, which was granted, but it also prevented prosecution of crimes committed during the dictatorship, even as late as 1974.

The socialist government of Felipe González, elected in 1982, illustrates how this forgetting endured. By 1986, despite holding a strong majority, it declared that the Spanish Civil War should not be commemorated. The government stated: "A civil war is not an event to be commemorated, even though for those who lived and suffered through it, it was a decisive episode in their personal trajectory. The Spanish Civil War is, definitively history—part of the memory of the Spanish people and their collective experience". The Civil War was thus framed strictly as history, a component of collective memory, but not as a subject for commemoration. Although some compensation was provided to Republican families—pensions and economic support between 1978 and 1999, affecting around 700,000 people—but the broader memory of the victims was largely ignored.

The first mass grave exhumation, in the province of León in 2000, is considered the birth of the historical memory movement in Spain. Civil society began actively recovering and dignifying the remains of Republican victims. Often, it was the grandchildren of war victims undertaking this work, ensuring proper burials and recognition for those whom the Francoist regime had vilified, such as Federico García Lorca. These grassroots efforts forced the socialist government to begin developing policies for Spain's traumatic past.

The first Law of Historical Memory was approved in 2007, but it was both incomplete and came too late. Remember, Spain had a democratic constitution from 1978, yet we had to wait almost three decades for a law that addressed what to do with Francoist monuments, Franco's street names, the exaltation of Franco, and even the remains of the Republican victims, still neglected and forgotten. It took far too long. And even then, the law was very ineffective. The government itself admitted that it was more a "declarative" law. It stated what needed to be done but did not take responsibility for

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carrying it out. That was a paradox: saying, “Franco’s dictatorship was terrible, Franco’s crimes were terrible,” but then refusing to act. Instead, they gave funding to associations of historical memory and left the work to them—as if the troubled past of an entire nation could be privatized. This was deeply problematic, and understandably, the movement for the recovery of historical memory kept pressing the government. Eventually, the socialist government announced a new law, one that would give the state a stronger role. This became the October 2022 law, which also revealed how Spanish society remains, sadly, divided over its past.

Before that, the government had already taken on another symbolic but crucial mission: the exhumation of Franco. He had been buried in the Valley of the Fallen—a vast mausoleum built to celebrate the Nationalist victory in the Civil War, where the remains of victims from both sides were transferred in the 1940s and 1950s. Inaugurated in 1959, it also became Franco’s own burial place. For years, a democratic government allowed fresh flowers to be placed daily on the grave of a pro-fascist dictator. Clearly, something was not right with that picture—a democracy honouring a dictator, even in the late 20th century. Franco was finally exhumed because he was not, in fact, a victim of the Civil War—on the contrary, he lay buried alongside some of those he himself had ordered killed. A paradox, at the very least.

The Valley of the Fallen illustrates how unresolved our relationship with the past still is. Even today, political parties are divided over what to do with this legacy. The right-wing insists that the past should be left behind, invoking the well-known phrase “let’s not reopen old wounds,” fearing that pain would resurface. This rhetoric echoes the narratives of the 1960s and 70s under Francoism, which sought to suppress memory. But it is profoundly unjust: Franco’s supporters had nearly forty years to mourn and commemorate their dead, while Republicans were denied that same right—yet we are supposed to be living in a democracy.

On the other hand, the left sometimes instrumentalizes the past for its own purposes, often idealizing the Second Republic. But history was more complex: Republican forces also committed crimes during the Civil War. So here lies the problem—Spain’s major parties have never reached a consensus on how to deal with the past. Memory policy is developed when the left is in power, only to be halted or dismantled when the right returns to office.

Still, I don’t want to give the impression that memory is only a matter of state or government policy. Memory also lives in families, in communities, in civil society. Each of us, as individuals, carries a position toward the past. And memory, especially when troubled, cannot be silenced—it resurfaces. Bury it, and eventually it comes back to the surface. This is what we continue to see in Spain. The wounds of memory are still

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visible. Some cities still preserve Francoist monuments, such as the Monument to the Fallen in Señancas, which local associations are now urging the city council to remove. At the same time, other groups have taken the initiative to build new memorials, such as the monuments to the Exiles—recalling the 300,000 Spaniards who fled to France after the Civil War, or the Memory Viewpoint erected in El Torno, Cáceres, despite strong opposition from local councils.

All of this shows how memory in Spain is still contested—shaped not only by politics and laws but also by the persistence of civil society, families, and individuals who refuse to let the past remain buried

Memory wars continue in Spain. Newspapers and public debates reflect societal divisions: some commemorate Franco and his supporters, while others honour Republican victims. Cities like Señancas still preserve Francoist monuments, despite local opposition. At the same time, private initiatives have erected monuments for exiles or victims of Francoism, such as the Memory Viewpoint in El Torno, Cáceres, despite resistance from some city councils.

Conclusions

This narrative mirrors the challenges faced by Germany, Italy, and other European countries in addressing difficult historical legacies. Reclaiming and understanding the past requires democratic governments to actively educate citizens about their history, fostering European citizenship and culture. Memory can resurface unexpectedly, as seen in research on the Spanish famine, which had been silenced for decades. Despite the lack of official recognition, collective memory persists through family stories, particularly those of women who lived through harsh post-war conditions. Songs like “Hard Bread Bakers,” sung while baking bread, recount their suffering and loneliness. This example demonstrates that memory is not solely political; it resides within society itself, shaping daily life, education, and the broader European context

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