

# **Travelling Europe. Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Place and Space**

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### **The recovery of memory sites in the city of Barcelona: Discovering the past through new media**

By Oriol López-Badell

#### **Spain: turbulent history but limited memorial policies**

All societies should be aware that the past exerts an extraordinary influence on the way they develop its present. Therefore, if a country has experienced a conflict in the recent past it will have to face it sooner or later. This article takes a brief glance to the turbulent twentieth century in Spain and to the few reparation and memorial policies that have been implemented by successive governments in this country. This serves as introduction to explain a civil society project that addresses the silent past by the recovery of historical and memorial places in the city of Barcelona through new media.

In 1930s' Europe, when fascism gained ground, the progressive Government of the new Spanish Republic, established in 1931 after the local elections that led to power the Republican parties, put in place a series of reforms to modernize the country. These policies included land reform, new education system, the women's right to vote and the recognition of the trade unions' role in the productive system, to name a few. This was not accepted by the most conservative part of society and an important group of military commanders, under the leadership of General Franco, rose up against the elected government resulting in a Civil War (1936-1939).

The victory of the military rebels, supported by Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy, brought a dictatorship that lasted almost 40 years and a hard repression against those who did not support the new regime. Because of this, at the end of the war 470,000 people went into exile, with 10,000 deported to Nazi camps where half of them died.<sup>i</sup> For years, this part of the Spanish history was silenced by Franco's authorities. In contrast, the war victims who had supported the military rebels were widely honoured and financially compensated during the dictatorship. Franco gave a manipulative speech about history and memory to justify his authoritarian regime, impose silence on the defeated.

With the restoration of democracy in the second half of the 1970s, a pact between Franco's successors and the democratic opposition kept silent about the horrors of the Civil War and the dictatorship; in order to uphold social peace. In 1977 the Spanish Parliament passed an Amnesty law that did not confront the past and applied not only to pro-democratic political prisoners but also to the perpetrators of violent crimes ordered by the dictatorship, such as policemen and army personnel, who were never brought to trial. However, the great political pact was the new Constitution that was passed by the Parliament on October 31<sup>st</sup>, 1978 and ratified by the Spanish people in a referendum on December 6<sup>th</sup>, showing its desire for a political and social change.<sup>ii</sup> At the same time, some segments of society demanded the truth about the past and wanted to pay homage to the victims who had been forgotten for decades. Several associations and anonymous citizens fought for the right to remember. Meanwhile, the new democratic State just offered some financial compensation to those who had been injured fighting against the military coup and their widows and, through the years, to those who suffered imprisonment for their political ideals too.<sup>iii</sup> But they were not honored in any act of public acknowledgment.

The majority of organizations claiming for historical justice were primarily war veterans, widows, exiles or members of democratic political parties that had survived Franco repression; but in the late 1990s and in the early 2000s new associations and movements appeared. Many of these were formed by second and third generations that had not lived either during the war nor the dictatorship; youngsters in their way to find a legacy that had been snatch. Social pressure led to the promotion of memorial and repairing

policies, and in 2004 the Autonomous Government of Catalonia, led by a coalition of three left-wing parties, was the first public administration to respond to these demands in Spain creating the *Memorial Democràtic* a public institution which aimed to recover and promote the democratic memory from the period 1931-1980.<sup>iv</sup> In December 2007 the Spanish Parliament passed the so-called Law of Historical Memory which had been presented 18 months before by the socialist government of Mr. Rodríguez Zapatero.<sup>v</sup> Finally, after long negotiations and the reduction of several of the initial provisions, the law was passed despite a veto by the right-wing *Partido Popular*. The approval of this law led to much criticism, especially from the conservative sectors of society which argued that the application of the rule would “divide the Spanish society” and “open old wounds”.<sup>vi</sup>

Four years later, with the conservative government of Mr. Mariano Rajoy in power, these remembrance policies were blocked, arguing that due to the economic crisis, there was no budget for these measures. Meanwhile, the new regional government in Catalonia, led by the liberal and Christian democrat alliance of *Convergència i Unió* which rose to power in December 2010, kept the institution of the *Memorial Democràtic* but with a minimal budget, lack of professionals and without relevant activities to develop.

In this context, in January 2014, the UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion of truth, justice, reparation and guarantees of non-recurrence, Pablo de Greiff, visited Spain to assess the measures adopted by the authorities relative to the gross human rights violations committed during the Spanish Civil War and under the Franco dictatorship. After ten days of meeting members of the Spanish Government such as the Minister of Foreign Affairs José Manuel García-Margallo, along with judges, ombudsmen and victims, De Greiff declared that he was very surprised to see the “immense distance” existing between the State and the victims of the Francoist repression. De Greiff added that Spain must repeal the Amnesty law from 1977, which in practice "has been used to archive almost all the cases that reached the courts." Finally, he stressed the need for the Government to develop a State policy to compensate the victims of Francoism, and to do it urgently because many of them are elderly.<sup>vii</sup> Two months before De Greiff's visit to Spain, the Spanish ambassador to the UN in Geneva, Ana Menéndez, in her final speech to the UN Committee on Enforced Disappearances regretted that the UN was paying “excessive attention” to the enforced disappearances during the Spanish Civil War and under Franco's dictatorship.<sup>viii</sup>

### **Recovering the memory sites in Barcelona**

Today it is mainly civil society, academia and some local governments who work to remember the events from the twentieth century in Spain. Historical dialogue and memorialization can redress human rights violations by acknowledging and dignifying all the people concerned. In this regard, the *Associació Conèixer Història* (Discover History Association), a non-profit organization created in 2008 by young historians, has conducted a research to record the historical and memorial sites of Barcelona. The city was systematically bombed during the Spanish Civil War, suffered a hard repression under Franco's dictatorship and experienced the struggle for democracy in the streets during the 1970s. Locating, cataloguing and interpreting the public spaces of Barcelona in which democracy was attacked, defended and vindicated should be useful to provide society, especially the younger generations, with the tools to remember the origins of today's rule of law. In doing so, the aim is to reinforce the democratic foundations of the present society.

Once restored democracy in Spain, collective memory was displaced to the public opinion and all glances to the past were restricted to the private sphere and the professional history. Unfortunately the work of the academia, which did a good job during the 1980s and 1990s, did not reach the public easily. Now the *Associació Conèixer Història* hopes to widely disseminate the facts of the past among citizens through new media. The result of this bibliographical and archival research is a database with more than 100 historical sites and memorial places, most of which can be easily accessed through *Memòria Bcn*.<sup>ix</sup> A multilingual website and a smart phone app reveal the most significant sites of the city through ten different routes that can be followed by both locals and visitors. The user can access the information of each site through a specific fact sheet or locating it geographically on the city map. The app and the website also include more than 250 current images and photographs from archives and a graphical

chronology of historical events related to the Spanish Second Republic, the Civil War, the Franco dictatorship and the transition to democracy.

**MEMÒRIA BCN** Routes around Barcelona to discover the city's recent history

ASSOCIACIÓ CONÈIXER HISTÒRIA

Eixample dret | Gòtic & Raval | Gràcia | Horta-Guinardó | Les Corts & Eixample esquerre | Ribera & Barceloneta | Sant Martí | Sant Andreu | Sants-Montjuïc | Sarrià-Sant Gervasi

mobile app | map

**Chronology**

1931	1932	1933	1934	1936	1937	1938	1939	1941-1945	1944	1945	1951	1960	1966	1971	1974	1975	1976	1977	1979	1980
SECOND REPUBLIC				CIVIL WAR				FRANCOISM								TRANSITION				
Barcelona & Catalunya				Spain				World												

The project received academic support from the University of Barcelona Solidarity Foundation, which promotes similar initiatives through the European Observatory on Memories,<sup>x</sup> a network of universities and memorial organizations that have the goal to analyze, discuss and reflect on the different remembrance policies that are being developed in Europe and other continents. The Barcelona City Council, which considered the project a useful tool to boost the ten city districts from a cultural point of view, also collaborated with this proposal implementing the app for smart phones. And the former Spanish Government, which was a promoter of remembrance policies from 2007 to 2011, funded part of the research. Thanks to their support and the work done by the *Associació Conèixer Història* today we are able to discover different types of historical and memorial places in Barcelona including sites of war, sites of repression and places where democracy was vindicated. The remainder of this paper will consider a few case studies out of what has been uncovered by this project.

### **Anti-aircraft defences on *Turó de la Rovira* hill**

During the Spanish Civil war, the city of Barcelona became renowned for being the first European city that lived through ceaseless bombings for days. Barcelona was bombed on 194 occasions; both by Francoist ships but primarily Italian and German planes which supported the military uprising. Hitler and Mussolini used the conflict in Spain to test their weaponry with a view to the start of a new World War. The objective of these bombings was not only to destroy weapons factories and infrastructure, but also to demoralize and spread fear amongst the civil population in the rearguard. It is calculated that more than 1,400 air-raid shelters were built in the city during the war to protect the population against Fascist bombing. Some years later, Sir Winston Churchill said in his famous "Their Finest Hour" speech (18 June 1940): "I do not at all underrate the severity of the ordeal which lies before us; but I believe our countrymen will show themselves capable of standing up to it, like the brave men of Barcelona."<sup>xi</sup>

Given this, in 1937 the Spanish Republican Government set up several bodies to coordinate air raid defences. Under the supervision of DECA (Special Defence Against Aircraft) anti-air raid defences were built on *Turó de la Rovira* in Barcelona to combat attacks by planes coming from the island of Majorca. The hill, which stood 262 metres above sea level, was considered the best strategic point in the city for the installation of these defences. Seven batteries were built, along with facilities for officers and men such as dormitories, kitchens and showers. The cannons used were Vickers 105 mm guns, which had a maximum range of 13,400 metres. In truth, these batteries were not particularly effective. Too far from the coast from which the airplanes arrived, they mainly played a dissuasive role. After the war, in the mid-1940s, the site occupied by these batteries became one of the main centres of informal housing, with up to 110 shanties built here to house around 600 people who had come to Barcelona to seek work in Catalan industry.

### **“Women of 36” square**

This square is dedicated to the “Women of 36”, a generic term that refers to all the women and children of courage who were affected by the Spanish Civil War, Francoist repression and the Nazi camps. They were citizens who played their part in defending republican legality, freedoms, democratic values and women’s rights.

During the Second Spanish Republic (1931-1939), this heterogeneous women’s group campaigned for a fairer, more equal society in several fields: education, politics, unions, etc. During the Civil War (1936-1939), the group played an active role in defending freedoms, both at the front and in the rearguard. Finally, during the Franco dictatorship (1939-1975), they suffered repression at the hands of the regime, and many were imprisoned.

In 1997 the association *Les Dones del 36* (Women of 36) was founded in Barcelona with a view to bringing together different female voices that had played a leading role in defending such values. After decades of silence imposed by the dictatorship and the early years of democracy, these anonymous fighters were given a platform from which to transmit their experience to citizens and in particular younger generations. The association was formed by women aged between 60 and 80 years (most in their 60s) that had been in the militias, worked as nurses, worked in factories to replace men at the front, had been exiled or were members of left-wing political parties. The group originally formed as a one-year project but their work was able to continue for another ten years until the advanced age of the members forced them to retire.

The “Women of 36” square was officially opened in August 2009 in the Gràcia district, not without controversy, as the local residents viewed the fence that locks it at night as preventing free use of the public space. The members of the association *Les Dones del 36* also lodged a formal complaint with the City Council, noting that the fence was reminiscent of repression under Franco. Despite these criticisms, since it was inaugurated the square has become an important venue for cultural and civic events in the district.

### ***La Pedrera* mass grave**

For years, the bodies of the poor and unidentified had been buried at the *Fossar de la Pedrera* (quarry cemetery) located at Montjuïc mountain; during the Spanish Civil War victims of the rearguard repression and fascist bombardments were also laid to rest here. However, the site is particularly infamous because after the war it was used as a mass grave for those executed in Barcelona by Francoist authorities. Nearly 1,700 prisoners shot by the Franco regime between 1939 and 1952 were buried here. The victims of these executions were people accused of military rebellion by military tribunals set up by the new regime.

With the entry of Franco’s troops into the city, harsh repression began which affected political parties, trade unions and organisations that had lent their support to the Republic. Those who were arrested were tried in court martial proceedings and convicted of military rebellion. The ones sentenced to death were usually shot in *El Camp de la Bota* (the Boot Camp) and later moved to the *La Pedrera* mass grave in wooden boxes that were thrown into a ditch and covered with quicklime and earth to decompose the bodies as rapidly as possible.

Once the victims had been executed, relatives could go to Montjuïc cemetery to identify the bodies before burial, but they often did not find out until they had already been buried. Sometimes, permission was

given to the family to bury the bodies in an individual niche but they were generally buried in the mass grave. Those that were not identified were buried directly in the mass grave. Lluís Companys, President of the Government of Catalonia and shot at Montjuïc castle on 14 October 1940, was to be buried in the mass grave, but his sister arrived in time to identify the body and request that he be buried in a niche she had rented. The President was eventually buried in the family niche, yet with a plaque that did not state his name to prevent his tomb from becoming a place of commemoration for those that had defended the Republic and the freedoms of Catalonia.

In 1976, following the death of the dictator, the first memorial commemoration of those buried there took place, as any kind of tribute was prohibited during the dictatorship. In 1985, the place was honoured with a project comprising the mausoleum of President Lluís Companys, a set of columns bearing the names of the victims of the repression (though some of them are not buried there) and a large garden.



### ***Passeig de Sant Joan Avenue***

The first major demonstrations after the death of Franco took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> of February 1976. In several parts of the city, the people took to the street demanding freedom, amnesty for political prisoners and a Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia. In particular large numbers of demonstrators assembled at *Passeig de Sant Joan Avenue*, where the police charged violently at the crowd.

Although these demonstrations were banned by the authorities, citizens assembled in huge numbers to take part in the first demonstration, which was to begin near the *Ciutadella Park*. This led to police charges against pedestrians in that area. Word was then passed that the rally would take place at the *Passeig de Sant Joan*. According to reports between 4,000 and 12,000 people gathered at this location around 11 am. The crowd marched down through this avenue where large contingents of police forces were waiting. The demonstrators sat down on the ground to show their pacifism. Nevertheless the police charged with batons, rubber bullets and smoke bombs resulting in the crowd dispersing to other points in the city.

At the demonstration on the following Sunday, February 8<sup>th</sup>, confrontations with the police also took place at different points in the city and *Passeig de Sant Joan* was once again a scene of disturbance, with many people arrested and injured. However, Government repression did not weaken the democratic cause, but strengthened it. Over the following weeks, more and more sectors went on strike and many local authorities and organisations joined the call for amnesty. However, it was not until Adolfo Suárez was appointed as president of the Spanish government that the first signs to respond at the people's demands were seen. On 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1977, the first democratically-elected Parliament finally approved plans to grant an amnesty.

## Conclusion

Under the Franco dictatorship the Spanish authorities disseminated a manipulated history to honour those who had died fighting for the military uprising and to dismiss those who had defended democratic ideals. Subsequently, the agreements on the Transition did not take into consideration the demands of citizens who had lived through the Francoist repression and left many open wounds that have hindered the development of a fully democratic state. It is true that the Transition gave way to restore democracy but it also led to silence and an erasure of the past. Once Spain reached a stable democracy neither the State nor the regional governments played a decisive role in recovering the historical memory until the 2000s. However, those remembrance policies have proven to be insufficient according to people's demands and the United Nations recommendations.

In the end, it is civil society which defends the importance of addressing the past in order to achieve a more robust democracy; dignifying the victims and those who fought to achieve a fairer society in the recent past. The defense of democratic values should not be debated and both the present and future generations should accept these arguments much more naturally than previous generations. *Memòria Bcn* project is therefore a useful tool to reflect on our past and to better understand the current society through historical dialogue and urban spaces. As professor Andreas Huyssen stated "the cultures of memory are intimately linked, in many parts of the world, to processes of democratization and struggles for human rights, to expanding and strengthening the public spheres of civil society (...) expanding the nature of public debate, trying to heal the wounds inflicted in the past, nurturing and expanding livable space".<sup>xii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Javier Rubio, *La emigración de la guerra civil de 1936-1939* (Madrid: Ed. San Martín, 3 vol,1977) vol. 1, page 72

<sup>ii</sup> The new Constitution received the 87.78% votes in favour. The 58.97% of the electoral register took part in the referendum (<http://www.congreso.es/consti/constitucion/elaboracion/index.htm>)

<sup>iii</sup> Decree 670/1976 (5th of March), law 5/1979 (18th of September), law 35/1980 (26th of June), law 6/1982 (29th of March); law 37/1984 (22<sup>nd</sup> of October) and law 4/1990 (29<sup>th</sup> of June).

<sup>iv</sup> In 2004 the Government of Catalonia launched a program for the creation of the *Memorial Democràtic* that was legally created in October 2007 (Law 13/2007 passed by the Parliament of Catalonia).

<sup>v</sup> Law 52/2007 (26<sup>th</sup> of December) to acknowledge and extend rights as well as to establish measures in favour of those who suffered persecution or violence during the civil war and dictatorship.

<sup>vi</sup> In October 2007 the *Partido Popular* general secretary, Mr. Angel Acebes, said that the government of Mr. Rodríguez-Zapatero wanted to "divide and confront the Spaniards, forgetting the Transition." He also stated "It is the law of division" and "the government is committed to opening old wounds." Quoted from El País newspaper. Anabel Díez. El País. "El Gobierno desbloquea la Ley de la Memoria Histórica" Accessed: 8 October 2007 <[http://elpais.com/elpais/2007/10/08/actualidad/1191831420\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/elpais/2007/10/08/actualidad/1191831420_850215.html)>

<sup>vii</sup> Quoted from the press release of the United Nations Office for the High Commissioner of Human Rights published after De Greiff visit to Spain <<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=14216&>>

For further information, check the complete report (A/HRC/27/56/Add.1) , 22 July 2014 <[http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage\\_e.aspx?m=193](http://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?m=193)>

<sup>viii</sup> Quoted from Rtv.es "El Gobierno se queja por la "excesiva atención" de la ONU a los desaparecidos del franquismo" Accessed: 6 November 2013 <<http://www.rtve.es/noticias/20131106/gobierno-se-queja-porque-onu-pone-excesiva-atencion-desaparecidos-del-franquismo/785380>>

<sup>ix</sup> <http://www.memoriabcn.cat>

<sup>x</sup> <http://europeanmemories.net/>

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<sup>xi</sup> The Churchill Centre. “Their Finest Hour”

< <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/learn/speeches/speeches-of-winston-churchill/122-their-finest-hour>>

<sup>xii</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts. Urban palimpsests and the politics of memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003) page27