FROM THE BATTLEFIELD TO THE LABOUR CAMP: ARCHAEOLOGY OF CIVIL WAR AND DICTATORSHIP IN SPAIN

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The author explores responses to political violence through the materiality of three aspects of the civil war in Spain: military lines in the battle for Madrid, a concentration camp in Extremadura and a remote settlement of forced labourers and their families. He shows how archaeology’s revelations reflect, qualify and enrich the story of human survival under the pall cast by a dictatorship. Sharing the inquiry with the public of today also revealed some of the disquieting mechanisms by which history is composed and how archaeology can be used to deconstruct it.

Keywords: Archaeology of the twentieth century, Spain, War, conflict, social control, ideology, totalitarianism, Catholic Church.

Introduction

Modern wars transform entire landscapes: from the trenches in the frontline to the internment camps and weapon factories in the rearguard, no place is spared (Saunders 2001; Schofield 2005: 19-20, 43-51). The material effects outlast the conflicts themselves and shape daily experiences and memories for decades. In the case of totalitarian regimes, spaces of internment often follow the end of hostilities and continue the politics of war in time of peace. Modern conflicts are messy. They blur the distinction between war and peace, combatant and non-combatant, producing hybrid sites: bombed civilian settlements, clandestine detention centres, guerrilla bases.

One of the most promising lines in the archaeology of modern conflict addresses the complexities of entire landscapes altered by war (Saunders 2001; Schofield 2005; Saunders
and Faulkner 2011). By studying landscapes and processes, instead of particular sites in isolation or categories of material culture, we are in a better position to grasp the logic and repercussions of twentieth and twenty-first century wars. ‘War in this period’ Schofield (2005: 25) reminds us, ‘typically extended beyond the confines of a discrete battlefield, first to take in (and ultimately to take out) the entire landscape... extending to a global scale... and impacting on everybody, however far from the front-line they may be’. Following this perspective, my colleagues and I have been working since 2006 in different scenarios of the civil war and postwar period in Spain. The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) has recently achieved international prominence due to the upsurge in exhumations of victims of political violence (cf. Ferrándiz 2006; Renshaw 2011), which claimed as many as 200,000 lives (75% Republicans). However mass graves are only part of the picture. To fully understand the experience of the war and the logic of political violence, we must look beyond graves and examine battlefields, buildings, memorials and spaces of punishment: the entire geography of conflict that shaped the nation after the war began in July 1936.

The objectives of the research project on which this article is based were threefold: to create an archaeological account of the period—that is, to write history from things; to demonstrate the relevance of materiality in modern conflict, and to deconstruct a geography largely shaped by the subsequent politics of the victors’ regime (1936-1975). In this article, I will lead you through three archaeological landscapes that exemplify the cycle of conflict: a history of violence that starts with the siege of Madrid in November 1936 and ends in the same place with the closure of the forced labour camps 15 years later.

The Battle for Madrid

In November 1936, only three months after their attempted military coup that provoked the Civil War, the Nationalist army arrived at the gates of Madrid. For the first time, the Republicans were able to stop the advance of Franco’s Army of Africa, marching from the south (Reverte 2004). One of the neighbourhoods where this happened was the university campus. The Battle of Madrid began on 8th November 1936 and ended two weeks later with the Nationalist army deeply entrenched inside the campus, but unable to proceed any further. For the rest of the war, the university was part of the frontline and a large part of it was
devastated. After the war, a new landscape of commemoration began to be erected over the ruins, obliterating or concealing most traces of the war. The new architectural setting openly celebrated the triumph of the Francoist armies and mourned the Francoist dead. The Battle of Madrid itself (actually a fiasco for the Nationalists) was largely forgotten. This overtly totalitarian landscape was gradually accepted as normal by the citizens of the capital (Figure 1).

In November 2008, we began to research the forgotten traces of the war, which, surprisingly, proved to be plentiful and ubiquitous (González-Ruibal et al. 2010). The act of retrieving these remnants was rewarded with another version of the past, owed to another way of exposing it. The project was designed to locate trenches in order to sample the materiality of both Nationalist and Republican soldiers.

Figure 2 shows part of a Republican trench system explored by archaeological excavation. The system was a long linear defence, of a type widely employed by the Allies in the First World War. The shelters were not state of the art: they were constructed using construction debris, and their entrances faced the enemy, despite the obvious danger that this represented. There were traces from the first combatants around Madrid during late 1936, in which the International Brigades were involved: fragments of hand grenades, indicating close combat (absent from this area after January 1937), and ammunition of the kind used by Brigadists: four 0.303 shell casings dated 1916 (from First World War surpluses). They were fired by the P14, a British rifle widely used by the International Brigades in Madrid in November 1936. We also found older ammunition, belonging to Remington and Vetterli Vitali rifles (Figure 3), both from the 1870s, probably fired from Austrian rifles as noted by veterans of the battle (Arthur 2009: 217). Soviet supplies gradually replaced these archaic weapons. Five spent cartridges from a Mosin Nagant, with its magazine, appeared in situ on the floor of one of the sniper pits from 1938. Until the end, Republican troops were armed with a variety of weapons. This is clearly reflected in the archaeological record: we recovered cartridges of different calibres from half a dozen countries, including Germany. The Nazis sold some war materials to the Republic (Heiberg and Pels 2005: 167-168), but they might also have been captured from the enemy.

In general, shell casings and tin cans were few, probably because metal was systematically
recycled. The command of the 7th Division, which was in control of the campus, issued an order in May 1937 reminding the 40th Brigade, garrisoned in our trench, that it was compulsory to “recover all spent shell casings and once collected they had to be returned to the officer in charge of ammunitions” (Quintero et al. forthcoming). While the number of shell casings was scarce (31), fired bullets in and around the trench were numerous (151), the majority being Spanish 7 mm cartridges and German 7.92 mm: weapons issued to Franco’s army (see below). The distribution of bullets shows a concentration immediately behind the main shelter (apparently due to a burst of machine gun fire; Figure 2). Shrapnel, in turn, concentrated on a covered way behind the trench. The quantity of fired bullets and shell fragments proved that, despite being a stabilized front, the University of Madrid was far from quiet.

Evidence from the trench revealed an army in rags: instead of elements of military uniform, civilian items were found, especially boots and shoes. In one of the shelters was a small hearth dug in the sandy ground edged with pebbles, on which a tin of grease had been used as an improvised stove (Figure 4). The university fortifications were muddy and dirty: mattress springs, keyholes from drawers and door hinges showed that soldiers had tried to make themselves more comfortable with mattresses—which also provided good protection against shrapnel—and furniture from the bombed city. These must have given the trenches the appearance of a shanty town. An official document complained of the excessive ‘domesticity’ of some positions, which rendered them indefensible (Quintero et al. forthcoming). Malaria, scabies and other diseases were rife in this insalubrious environment. Odd combinations of artefacts remind us that not all objects are ideologically indicative (Figure 5).

The example of Nationalist lines was located the small village of Abánades, in the Guadalajara front, which witnessed an important battle in 1937—another thwarted attempt by the Nationalists to take Madrid. After the war, the region remained remote and rural as before, but was now flooded with war debris. We excavated here an isolated stronghold of the Nationalist Army, constructed in concrete and steel (González-Ruibal 2011). Its location, on top of a hill, was typical of strategic practice in Morocco: an indication that Franco’s army was waging war in Spain in the manner of a colonial conflict.
Around a hundred tin cans were recovered, of which 21% were of corned beef (Figure 6). All pieces of dress and equipment were army issue. We found remains from several military boots, belts and straps. Ammunition was plentiful. Differences with the Republican trench of the University of Madrid could not be greater: we discovered many shell casings, but no incoming bullets, a fact that proves that the Nationalist soldiers were firing more than they were fired at - and were not recycling. There were only two types of cartridges: 7 mm, of the kind shot by the Spanish Mauser and Hotchkiss machine-gun (78%), and 7.92 mm for the German Mauser and Maxim machine-gun (22%). Markings show that over half of the cartridges (51%) were produced between 1936 and 1938: only one cartridge was surplus from the First World War.

Evidence from daily life in the trench is manifold: several paw-prints of a dog behind a track of military boots show that the garrison had a faithful pet in 1938. A cheap alloy earring found inside one of the shelters is perhaps a lost memento from a girlfriend or wife. A complete coffee set, including a coffee grinder was found inside a covered trench. As in the university trenches, we found parts of drawers and other furniture. Inside the covered trench, we found a complete Italian M-1915/16 helmet and, inside the shelters, a flare casing and motorcycle goggles also Italian. In the village, one of the neighbours still kept an Italian mess tin with the name of the owner—“Armando Stellani”. These finds reflect the presence of Mussolini’s troops, who were known to have taken Abánades during the Battle of Guadalajara in February 1937, and exchanged part of their military equipment for Spanish clothes and handicrafts. Although there is a widespread popular idea that soldiers were uninterested in politics (Seidman 2002), we were able to document 20 graffiti in three sites in Abánades. Of these, 10 have political messages (8 Nationalist, 2 Republican). They show that many participants in the conflict were indeed politically committed (Figure 7).

The comparison between the Nationalist and Republican fortifications offered an eloquent contrast: while the former were well built in steel and concrete, the latter were basically rough stone walls resembling local housing. This asymmetry was also clear in the materials that we recovered in our excavations; the plentiful supply of corned beef in the Nationalist trench as compared with the shanty town of the Republican lines in the university.

There was also a contrast between the post-war embellishment of the university campus
(above) and the aftermath in the Guadalajara district. Engaging the present inhabitants of Abánades in our research showed that the war and its relict landscape were not regarded in a wholly negative light. This was partly due to their inheritance of war debris. While many Spaniards were suffering extreme poverty, local occupants here profited from the sale of unexploded ordnance, cartridges, and steel beams. They systematically reused war materials: anti-tank mines proved to be good containers for making soap and ammunition boxes useful for storing tools. Bombs and grenades still decorate many homes and people remember looking for them when they were children as an adventure game. Moshenska (2008) has suggested that collecting war debris is a way of children’s coping with conflict. For most children and teenagers, military rubbish in the postwar period also evoked epic stories, which resonated with tales of the ‘National Crusade’ taught at the school—a time in which their tiny village had played an important role in history. At Abánades, unlike the University of Madrid, the memory of the conflict was not erased: war ruins made the experience of landscape pleasurable for later generations.

Theatre of re-education

The postwar period was a less pleasurable experience for those who were defeated. Half a million Republican soldiers were interned in concentration camps (Rodrigo 2005). Of these, 90,000 died of starvation, disease or torture. The new regime established over a hundred concentration camps, forced labour camps, prisons and detention centres. The dictatorship worked out a programme aimed at transforming Republicans into law-abiding citizens of the New Spain (Gómez Bravo 2009). This included different levels of punishment, all of which were permeated with religious ideology.

Most concentration camps reused extant buildings, such as schools, bullrings and factories. One of the few created from new was the concentration camp of Castuera situated on the main railwayline in a remote and desolate area of Extremadura. Constructed in April 1939 and dismantled one year later, we studied its remains in 2010 (González-Ruibal et al. 2011). Around 15,000 people passed through this camp and an unknown number died there (López Rodríguez 2006). The plan of the camp was contained in official records, and in the drawing of an inmate, to which we have now added an archaeological plan (Figure 8).
two rows of barracks either side of a rectangular parade ground, dominated at one end by a large cross, the concrete foundations of which still survive. In the summer of 2011, archaeologists recovered 18 corpses in a mass grave, interpreted as execution victims, and archaeological investigations have revealed other aspects of the camp’s grim history.

Ditches were dug to delimit the camp, but seemed to have been largely symbolic: in some places they were only 20 cm deep. The latrines were located in a conspicuous place, visible from everywhere in the camp and the surrounding area (Figure 8, no 1, north east of the barracks). These took the form of a simple irregular ditch dug through the hard shale, 30-50cm deep and c 2m wide (Figure 9). According to the orders issued by the concentration camp service, latrine ditches should be two metres deep and one metre wide (López Rodríguez 2006: 189); the wide shallow form they actually took would have made them totally unhygienic, spreading an awful smell through the camp and increasing the chances of disease in an undernourished population.

The most abundant item found in the latrines and perimeter ditches was the tin can: 90% of which were of either tuna or sardines. There were many potsherds, a lid from a tin pot and several military mess tins, which show the military character of these institutions. Evidence for medicines was plentiful: 22 ampoules, two bottles of peroxide, a tube of antiseptic cream, and many fragments of medicine bottles, some of them for intestinal diseases.

Few things in the camp identify the inmates as individual persons, even in the latrines, which are considered to be a good place to find elements of resistance (Myers 2008: 242). Ink bottles symbolise the link between the camp and the outer world. Prisoners were allowed to write letters, which were subjected to strict censorship. In one of the letters that have survived, a prisoner asked his wife, days before being executed, to send him a ball and some novels, to alleviate boredom (López Rodríguez 2006: 227).

To pass the time the inmates played dominos with pieces made of tile or bone. Making things helped prisoners maintain their psychological integrity and, in this way, maintain an element of resistance against the dehumanizing strategies of the camp. There were two interesting testimonies of these subtle acts of resistance: one is a finely carved piece of tin, of the kind used to cover the prisoners’ barracks. The piece has the name of the barrack, and the quality
and style of lettering shows that the person who made it was perhaps acquainted with printing. A show of skill is also evident in the carefully paved entrance to a prisoners’ barrack block (Figure 10). Unlike other entrances and streets, all of which were paved with stones, this one shows the desire of making something aesthetically pleasant. Different kinds of stones were chosen and assembled to obtain a carpet-like effect. The person must have been a mason.

The archaeological investigation endorses surviving accounts from a type of place notorious for its inhuman repression. The daily diet was confined to a single tin of sardines shared by two or more prisoners, combined with a piece of bread and a watery soup. Only 18 tiny fragments of bones have been identified, confirming that the inmates had virtually no access to meat—as opposed to internment camps of other nations (cf. Demuth 2009: 175). If the number of those who starved to death was not greater, this was due to the fact that many received food from relatives (in clay and tin pots as the ones we found). Lack of family could equal a death sentence.

Testimonies collected from former camp inmates describe the latrines as an instrument of “moral destruction” (Lafuente 2002: 148) as well as infection. The abundance of medicines is seemingly at odds with a population of mostly young adult people who should be the least affected by illness: but it was precisely the condition of imprisonment that favoured contagion. When prisoners were treated like animals, showing a skill by doing specialized work was a way of counteracting the prevailing ideology. Historians have studied similar tactics of resistance, but they have invariably focused on artists and intellectuals (Agramunt 2005).

The plaza with its cross is redolent of parades and the relentless process of re-education. Unlike in other fascisms, (Catholic) religion here played an important role in “healing the Reds”. In modern times, in a reversal of its original role, the foundations of the cross have become a focus of leftist tribute, where inmates’ relatives and members of civic associations gather to commemorate the victims of Francoism.

A country rebuilt by slaves

Lying behind the contemporary landscape of Spain, with its roads, railways, airports and dams, is a decade of forced labour. Thousands of political prisoners redeemed part of their
prison terms by working on public and private infrastructure, an anonymous effort that has passed almost unnoticed (Lafuente 2002). Since 2006, archaeologists have been investigating a forced labour camp in Bustarviejo, near Madrid (Falquina et al. 2010), where between 1944 and 1952 hundreds of political prisoners laboured in the construction of a tunnel and railway bridge in a mountainous area. The site where the workers lived has survived untouched, with its barracks, staff houses, stalls, quarries and the railway itself, now abandoned (Figure 11). The main building had a filthy communal latrine and large communal bedrooms where the inmates had to sleep crammed on the floor. However, in general the situation was not as harsh as in the concentration camps: after all, this was the last step in the process of rehabilitating the prisoners.

One of the most interesting results has to do with a story that has virtually disappeared from collective memory and from the history books. This concerns the women and children who shared the fate of the vanquished Republican men by following them to their places of imprisonment and lived on the outskirts of the labour camps. While the presence of families was known and is mentioned by some (e.g. Lafuente 2002: 127-128), no research has been conducted on their life conditions. These aspects were eloquently manifested in the archaeological remains of Bustarviejo camp. An entire village was recorded, consisting of huts made by the inmates and their relatives. The huts were tiny, usually 4-5 m²—like prison cells (Figure 12). They were built with stone debris from the quarries and had low roofs made with brush. Roofs, walls and floors were reinforced with mortar. The inmates no doubt obtained the cement from the camp authorities, but the quantity was so small that they had to add a large amount of sand. The huts had no windows: all light came from a small door. They had a hearth inside for warmth and for cooking. Beds and benches were made in stone as well, and they were originally covered with straw or brush. In the cold winters of the Madrid sierra, living in these shacks must have been a terrible experience.

The camp had no barbed wire and all four sentry boxes face outwards, that is, they were devised to detect an external attack by guerrilla fighters, not to control the prisoners. The similar layout and size of the huts suggest some control or consent by authority. Having the relatives close to the inmates was advantageous to the regime for several reasons: they were supported by the prisoners, who received some money for their extra work at the camp and
for each relative they had to feed; prisoners thus worked more hours to earn money for their families. Relatives also helped to reinsert prisoners into the social life of the New State—where the Catholic family had an outstanding role to play—while at the same time being stigmatized and punished themselves. Finally, they provided free surveillance. There were escapes from labour camps, but most of the time by young, single persons. Who would have fled leaving wife and children behind? This was a most effective deterrent.

In the 2010 field season, we excavated the house of the lieutenant in charge of the camp garrison (Figure 11). The house was considerably better than that of the inmates: it had an area of 15 m², a tiled roof and a floor of polished concrete, and the walls were painted and had windows. At the same time, the building shows the extent to which the war had worsened the living conditions of most Spaniards, both of victors and vanquished. The lieutenants’ house was little better than a shack, without water, electricity or toilet, and in all likelihood cold and damp. According to our informants, he committed suicide.

Bustarviejo camp was closed in 1952. Its inmates were finally released, but they were subjected to constant surveillance by the police and their own neighbours (Gómez Bravo 2009). The world they found outside prison was very different from that of 1936. It was a nation physically and morally in ruins, where all hopes of democracy and progress had vanished. The built environment had changed: Nationalist memorials and buildings emerged everywhere. Razed villages and neighbourhoods had been reconstructed in a rigid modernist style, fashionable among dictatorships: a bleak, alienating architecture. Many of these were built by political prisoners. Streets and towns had been named after Franco and his generals. Every corner of the country and every element of material culture—from tin cans to churches—were marked with symbols of the fascist party: the same yoke and arrows that an anonymous soldier once scribbled in a pillbox, when the fate of the war was still uncertain.

**Conclusions**

Archaeology can make three important contributions to the understanding of civil war and dictatorship in Spain. In the first place, it can deconstruct familiar geographies that have been produced through processes of symbolic violence. Archaeology exposes the trauma that lies underneath the foundations of contemporary landscapes, the stories that have been
silenced—such as the defence of the University of Madrid during the war, or forgotten—such as the experiences of women and children in labour camps. Secondly, archaeology is well positioned to modify the version of history that presents the Republic and the Civil War as a single phase (1931-1939) concluded by Franco’s peace. Archaeological research shows that the period 1936-1950 was part of the same traumatic episode of material change—resulting in a tortured landscape of trenches, bunkers, mass graves and prisons. Thirdly, archaeology can collaborate in producing a social history of the war, so far less developed than the political and military. As for the First World War (e.g. Robertshaw and Kenyon 2008), archaeological remains reveal aspects of daily, intimate lives in the trenches in a poignant way. Archaeology rescues microhistories that are revealing of the nature of the war on both sides. Material culture, however, also tells about macrohistory: under archaeological scrutiny, the landscapes and activities of the Spanish Civil War look much more similar to those of the First World War than the Second, despite the historiographical tenet that the conflict was the prelude of the second global conflagration. The armies of Spain look almost preindustrial, with their vernacular stone pillboxes and makeshift uniforms. Archaeology shows that the threads of history are always multiple and interweaved. This may not change grand historical narratives, but it can allow us to see and understand them differently.

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References


Figure 1. The entrance to the university campus reconstructed in Spanish fascist and neo-traditional style after the war (1940-1965).

Figure 2. Map of the excavated trench and shelters, with indication of machine-gun fire.
Figure 3. Ammunition from the Republican trench: 1-4 Soviet Mosin Nagant; 5. French Lebel; 6-7. Italian Vetterli Vitali.

Figure 4. A man’s shoe and the context of the find: inside a dug-out, near an improvised hearth.
Figure 5. Unlikely partners in the Republican trench: a medal of Saint Anthony, a red star from a Republican uniform and a coin of the 19th century King Alphonse XII who restored the monarchy following the First Spanish Republic.

Figure 6. Eating in the trench: 1: condensed milk; 2: sardines; 3: tuna; 4: corned beef.
Figure 7. Marking the landscape: a Nationalist graffiti in the fortifications of La Nava. It reads ‘Hail Spain!’ and it has the symbol of the Spanish fascist party (Falange): A yoke and a bundle of arrows.

Figure 8. Three visions of the same site: 1. archaeological map; 2. prisoner’s drawing from memory; 3. Official map.
Figure 9. Profiles of the latrines, showing their irregular shape and short depth, and test pit in one of the ditches, which was backfilled with rubbish (including mess tins).

Figure 10. Remaining human in Castuera: a carefully paved entrance to a barrack; hand-made domino pieces; ink-bottles for writing home.
Figure 11. Excavations at the lieutenant’s house in Bustarviejo, with the prisoners’ barracks behind.

Figure 12. Huts of the inmates’ relatives in Bustarviejo.