

INK OF FREEDOM: the power of writing in challenging dictatorships

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COUNTRY: Spain

I. Executive summary

- **Study objective:**

The main objective of this research is to analyze diverse images of the historical memory of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), the Franco regime (1939-1975) and the process of democratic transition (1975-1982) in Spain, with a focus on the voices, experiences and personal memories expressed through different qualitative sources.

The study will employ a methodology based on semi-structured interviews, intergenerational discussion groups and the analysis of letters, diaries and personal documents of the period. Through these sources, we will seek to understand both individual accounts and collective discourses that shape public memory, as well as the mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of memory, silence or trauma.

The main objectives include:

- Identify predominant, divergent and silenced narratives about the conflict, dictatorship and transition.
- To explore generational, class and territorial differences in the construction of historical memory, with special attention to regions such as the Valencian Community.
- To analyze the role of institutional oblivion, family memory and cultural resistance in the reconstruction of the recent past.

This research is part of a broader European context of growing concern for the memory of the totalitarianisms of the 20th century, driven by institutions such as the European Commission, which considers historical memory a key tool for strengthening democracy, peace and cohesion among the peoples of Europe. Through programs such as Europe for Citizens, the EU encourages initiatives that contribute to preserving the memory of the crimes of fascism, Nazism, Stalinism and other dictatorships on the continent, promoting intergenerational dialogue, critical thinking and civic engagement.

This research aims, therefore, to contribute both to the academic and social debate in Spain, as well as to the broader effort of the European Union to build a plural, inclusive and democratic memory, capable of confronting the past without denying or simplifying it, and to serve as a basis for a more informed, active and committed citizenship with human rights.

- **Methodology employed:**

To explore the dynamics of historical memory about the Civil War, Franco's regime and the democratic transition in Spain, qualitative methods were used to access subjective experiences, intergenerational discourses and memory transmission practices. The selected techniques were particularly useful to address phenomena marked by silence, trauma or reinterpretation of the past.

- **Semi-structured interviews:** Ten individual interviews were conducted with older adults, facilitated by young people. This method combined a basic structure of questions with the flexibility to explore emerging themes, giving voice to personal accounts and allowing the detailed reconstruction of experiences. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and codified through thematic analysis.
- **Moderated focus groups:** An intergenerational focus group was organized in the Valencian Community to observe how memories are negotiated and constructed in a social setting. Through this session, collective narratives, points of friction between generations and forms of (dis)agreement about the past were analyzed. This experience also allowed us to observe how the current political and media context influences shared memory.
- **Historical analysis of letters and personal documents:** A textual and contextual analysis of more than 100 letters, memoirs and personal correspondence from the 1930s to the 1980s was carried out. This documentary corpus made it possible to trace the emotions, political visions and daily experiences during the conflict, Franco's repression and the transition. The sources were treated from both a historiographical and a hermeneutical perspective, exploring how personal discourse was constructed in times of censorship and repression.

Taken together, these methods will allow us to cross the microhistory of personal experience with the broader narratives of collective memory, offering a rich and complex look at the construction of memory in contemporary Spain.

II. Introduction

Background and justification:

Historical memory has become a fundamental tool for understanding the social and political processes that have shaped the course of a country. In Spain, the legacy of the Civil War (1936–1939) and the subsequent Francoist dictatorship (1939–1975) remains a sensitive and often controversial issue. For decades, many of the victims of the conflict and Francoist repression were silenced and excluded from official narratives. The recovery of historical memory seeks not only to provide justice for these individuals but also to contribute to the consolidation of a mature democracy.

Historical memory is not simply an act of remembrance, but a political, social, and ethical commitment to restoring the dignity of those who were unjustly repressed. In Spain, Francoist repression led to imprisonment, torture, exile, and the execution of thousands of people, many of whom still lie in unidentified mass graves. The silence imposed during the regime, and in part maintained during the Transition to democracy, prevented these stories from coming to light. The demand for truth, justice, and reparation has driven relatives, associations, and public institutions to claim the right to memory—not as a way to reopen wounds, but as a necessary path toward reconciliation based on knowledge and recognition.

One of the main driving forces behind this process has been the academic community. Researchers and experts have played a crucial role in recovering and interpreting the past. Scholars such as Julián Casanova, with works like *The Spanish Civil War: A History in Perspective* (2011), and Paul Preston, with his influential *The Spanish Holocaust* (2011), have shed light on political violence and systematic repression during the war and dictatorship. Likewise, the work of Santos Juliá, especially *Transition. History of a Spanish Policy (1937–2017)*, helps explain how the political narrative of the postwar period was built and how silence was negotiated during the democratic transition.

In addition to academia, various organizations and foundations have worked tirelessly to recover historical memory. Notable among them is the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH), founded in 2000, which has led efforts to exhume mass graves and identify victims. Other groups such as the Francisco Largo Caballero Foundation, the Jesús Pereda Foundation, and Memoria y Libertad have also been instrumental in promoting research, public awareness, support for families, and educational outreach. These initiatives have not only helped clarify historical facts but also raised social awareness about the need to acknowledge the plurality of memories.

The Spanish state, albeit unevenly, has gradually assumed more responsibility. The passing of the Historical Memory Law in 2007, and its expansion through the Democratic Memory Law in 2022, represent significant progress. Among other measures, the latter law includes the creation of an official victims' registry, the recontextualization of memory sites, the inclusion of Francoist repression in educational curricula, and the transformation of the Valley of Cuelgamuros into a democratic memory site.

National commemorations also play a key symbolic role. October 31st has been designated as the National Day of Remembrance and Tribute to all Victims of the Military Coup, the War, and the Dictatorship, officially established in 2022. Additionally, December 10th, Human Rights Day, is used by many regional governments to hold events related to historical memory. These commemorations aim not only to honor victims but also to foster a culture of human rights and civic responsibility.

Despite these developments, historical memory remains at the center of national debate. Some sectors view these policies as a way of "reopening old wounds," while others argue that there can be no true reconciliation without truth and justice. This political polarization is reflected in public discourse and in the use of history as a political tool. Despite legislative progress, the resistance of certain groups to acknowledging Francoist crimes reveals that memory remains a contested space.

In this context, the role of memory in fostering civic participation, especially among young people, becomes essential. Understanding the recent past allows younger generations to appreciate hard-won rights, understand the value of democracy, and develop critical thinking in the face of hate speech or authoritarian tendencies. Memory education is not only about retrospective justice—it is a transformative force for the future. Teaching memory means teaching democracy.

Historical memory in Spain should not be understood as a mere recovery of forgotten events, but as a commitment to truth, justice, and democracy. Only by acknowledging the suffering of victims and critically examining the past can society move forward toward greater inclusivity and historical awareness. To this end, it is essential to approach this period from multiple perspectives and sources, avoiding simplifications and embracing the complexity of historical events. Ultimately, remembering is not about being anchored in the past, but about understanding it as part of the present to build a more just and democratic future—with an informed, active, and engaged citizenry committed to defending human rights and democratic memory.

- **Research objectives:**

- Analyze the historical narratives collected through interviews, focus groups, and letters.
- Identify patterns, convergences, and divergences in the construction of memory.
- Relate the historical data to the current situation and its societal repercussions.

III. Theoretical framework and historical context

A. Historical context analyzed

Brief summary of the period:

The 20th century in Spain is marked by a deep rupture that divided the country into two opposing camps and left scars that still shape its collective memory today: the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) and the subsequent establishment of a dictatorship lasting nearly forty years under the leadership of General Francisco Franco. This period radically transformed the political, social, and cultural landscape of the country, while laying the foundations for a democratic process that would come after the dictator's death.

From Republic to Conflict: tensions and political fracture (1931–1936)

The Second Spanish Republic, proclaimed in 1931, sought to modernize the country through progressive reforms in education, religion, land ownership, and civil rights. However, these reforms sparked intense social polarization. Conservative elites, the Church, and the military fiercely opposed them, while leftist sectors demanded even deeper changes. Tensions exploded in episodes like the Asturias Revolution of 1934. Within this context, the victory of the Popular Front in the February 1936 elections was perceived by reactionary sectors as an existential threat, culminating in the military coup d'état on July 17, 1936.

The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939): armed fracture, resistance, and symbols of struggle

The outbreak of the Civil War on July 17, 1936, with the military coup led by Francisco Franco, Emilio Mola, José Sanjurjo and other high-ranking army officers, marked the beginning of a devastating conflict that would last almost three years and cause deep wounds in Spanish society. The uprising was not immediately successful throughout the country, resulting in a divided map: zones under Republican control (mainly in the east, north and center-south) and zones under the domination of the rebels (or “Nationalists”) in the northwest, south and later in much of the industrial north.

The Republican side brought together a coalition of left-wing forces: Republicans, socialists (PSOE), communists (PCE), anarchists (CNT-FAI) and other regionalist and trade union forces. Against them, the rebel side had the support of monarchists, Carlists, Falangists, and later, a forced unification in the Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las JONS (Traditionalist Spanish Falange and of the JONS). Franco quickly emerged as undisputed leader after the death of Sanjurjo and Mola.

Internationally, the Republic received limited support from the Soviet Union and the International Brigades, composed of more than 35,000 anti-fascist volunteers from all over the world. On the other hand, the rebels had the decisive military backing of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, which sent planes, tanks, troops and military advisors.

Among the most significant clashes, the following stand out:

- The Battle of Madrid (November 1936 - March 1937): the popular resistance and that of the International Brigades prevented the rebels from taking the capital. The slogan “No pasarán!” became a symbol of the anti-fascist struggle.
- The Battle of Jarama (February 1937) and the Battle of Guadalajara (March 1937): both in the central zone, were attempts by the rebels to encircle Madrid. The second was an important defeat for the Italian troops on Franco's side.
- The Battle of Brunete (July 1937) and the Battle of Belchite (August-September 1937): Republican offensives intended to relieve the pressure on the north and stop the Nationalist advance. Although bloody, they did not succeed in reversing the balance of forces.
- Franco's offensive in the north (1937): it led to the fall of republican towns such as Bilbao, Santander and Gijón. In this context, the bombing of Guernica (April 26), perpetrated by the German Condor Legion, became a symbol of the horror of modern warfare thanks to the work of Pablo Picasso.
- The Battle of the Ebro (July-November 1938): the longest and bloodiest of the conflict. It was the last great attempt of the Republican Army to reverse the military situation. Although it showed a great capacity for resistance, the final victory went to Franco's army.
- The fall of Catalonia (January-February 1939): after Franco's troops entered Barcelona, thousands of people crossed the Pyrenees into exile, in a mass exodus known as “The Retreat”.
- The entry into Madrid and the end of the war (April 1, 1939): Franco officially declared the end of the conflict and “victory”.

Leading figures of the conflict:

- Francisco Franco: head of the national side and future dictator. He became “Generalísimo” in 1936 and unified all nationalist forces under his leadership.
- Manuel Azaña: President of the Republic during most of the conflict, symbol of Republican legality.
- Largo Caballero and Juan Negrín: presidents of the Republican Council of Ministers. Negrín was key in sustaining the resistance until the end.
- Dolores Ibárruri, “La Pasionaria”: communist deputy, emblem of the resistance with phrases such as “No pasarán!” and iconic figure of the anti-fascist struggle.
- Buenaventura Durruti: prominent anarchist leader, died in 1936 at the Madrid front.
- Enrique Lister and Vicente Rojo: military commanders of the Republican side with a relevant role in the defensive strategies.

The Valencian Community played a crucial role in the Republican rearguard and in the administration of the conflict. When Madrid became a combat city, the Government of

the Republic moved to Valencia in November 1936, making the city the political and administrative capital of the Republic until its transfer to Barcelona in 1937.

Valencia was an important center of supply, culture and resistance. Ministries, foreign embassies and Republican radio stations were installed there. It also hosted the Non-Intervention Committee, with international observers. At the social and cultural level, there was a popular effervescence with agricultural and industrial collectivizations, controlled by unions such as the CNT and the UGT.

In the military field, the front of Teruel, very close to the region, was strategic. The Battle of Teruel (December 1937 - February 1938), although outside its geographical limits, involved thousands of Valencian soldiers and directly affected its rear.

The region also suffered systematic bombings, especially the city of Valencia, a frequent target of the Italian air force from Mallorca. One of the most atrocious was the bombing of the Central Market of Alicante, on May 25, 1938, where nearly 300 people died, mostly civilians.

Francoism (1939–1975): authoritarianism, repression, and control

Following the Francoist victory, Spain entered a period of personalist dictatorship under Francisco Franco, who referred to himself as "Caudillo by the grace of God." Repression of opposition was immediate and brutal: summary executions, imprisonment, forced labor, and exile were commonplace. It is estimated that over 100,000 people were killed or disappeared during the postwar period.

The regime eliminated all democratic freedoms: political parties, trade unions, free press, and associations were banned. Franco imposed a national-Catholic ideology, integrating the Church as a pillar of the regime. Education was controlled by religious institutions, and strict censorship was enforced across all cultural fields.

Internationally, Spain remained isolated in the early years, but the Cold War allowed its strategic reintegration into the Western bloc. From the 1960s onward, a relative economic and social opening took place, known as the "developmentalism" era, driven by Opus Dei technocrats, who modernized the economy while keeping authoritarian structures intact.

Democratic Transition and (nonexistent) transitional justice (1975–1982)

Franco's death in 1975 paved the way for a complex and delicate democratic transition, initially led by King Juan Carlos I and political figures like Adolfo Suárez, appointed Prime Minister in 1976. Key laws were passed, such as the Political Reform Act (1976), political parties like the Communist Party (PCE) were legalized, and democratic elections were held in 1977. In 1978, the current Spanish Constitution was approved, establishing a parliamentary system and a social and democratic rule of law.

However, Spain did not undergo a true transitional justice process. The so-called "pact of forgetting" was, in fact, a silent agreement among elites to avoid confrontation. The

1977 Amnesty Law freed political prisoners but also prevented prosecution of crimes committed under Franco. This gap has sparked ongoing debates about memory, truth, justice, and reparation.

In recent decades, Spain has experienced a revival of interest in its historical memory. The adoption of the Historical Memory Law (2007) and the subsequent Democratic Memory Law (2022) aimed to settle the debt with the victims of Francoism and restore their dignity. These laws promoted the exhumation of mass graves, the removal of Francoist symbols, and reparations for those persecuted.

The academic world has played a crucial role in this process, with research by scholars such as Paul Preston ("The Spanish Holocaust"), Helen Graham, Santos Juliá, and Julián Casanova, who have thoroughly documented the causes, development, and consequences of the conflict.

At the same time, memorial organizations like the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory (ARMH), the Foro por la Memoria, or the Jesús Pereda Foundation have driven efforts involving mass graves, archives, oral testimonies, and human rights education. There are also national commemorations, such as the Day of Remembrance for the Victims of the Military Coup and Dictatorship (October 31).

The memory debate continues to polarize Spanish politics. While some demand more truth, justice, and reparation, others believe revisiting the past may reopen old wounds. Nonetheless, reclaiming memory has proven crucial to promoting a critical citizenry aware of its history and committed to defending democratic values, especially among younger generations. Educational initiatives, documentaries, graphic novels, and school projects have helped bring these debates closer to youth, connecting them with their historical identity.

The historical journey from the Second Republic to democratic consolidation reveals a complex story marked by violence, imposed silence, and resistance. Understanding this past is not just an academic or legal exercise but an act of collective responsibility. Only through a shared and plural memory can a truly inclusive democracy be built, one that integrates silenced voices and fosters civic engagement in future generations.

B. Current situation in relation to the context

- **Current state:**

Today, the memory of the Civil War and Francoism remains a sensitive and polarizing issue in Spanish society, deeply marked by the silences of the past and the unresolved debates of the present. Although the country has made significant progress in democratic consolidation since the Transition, the way in which this historical period is remembered - or forgotten - generates social, political and cultural tensions that highlight persistent fractures around identity, justice and the representation of history.

Since the approval of the Law of Historical Memory in 2007 and, more recently, the Law of Democratic Memory in 2022, Spain has experienced a revitalization of institutional and citizen interest in recovering the silenced accounts of the victims of Franco's repression. These laws have promoted the exhumation of mass graves, the removal of Francoist symbols, the creation of places of memory, access to archives and the recognition of repressed persons. However, they have also been the object of controversy and rejection by certain political sectors that consider them “revanchist” or divisive measures.

In this context, historical memory has become a terrain of political dispute, where both the left and the right use the past as a tool for ideological legitimization or as a weapon of confrontation. Some progressive parties defend the need for “truth, justice and reparation”, while conservative or far-right parties criticize what they call “selective memory”, appealing to a supposed equidistance between victims of both sides or proposing revisionist versions of the conflict. This instrumental use of memory not only generates polarization, but also hinders the establishment of a plural and inclusive narrative that allows for a more solid coexistence.

At the social level, the perception of the past varies according to generation, territory and education received. While many older people are still marked by fear or inherited silence, new generations show a growing interest in learning the facts through documentaries, graphic novels, digital archives or educational projects. However, a great deal of misinformation and trivialization of the period also persists, fed by simplifying political discourses and the lack of a more critical and transversal historical education in the educational system.

In the Valencian Community, historical memory has gained strength in the last two decades thanks to the impulse of memorial associations, historians, city councils and social groups. The exhumation of mass graves in Paterna -one of the places with the highest number of executions after the war- has been particularly significant, as well as the creation of commemorative spaces such as the Civil Cemetery of Valencia, the Barracks of the Aforados in the cemetery of Alicante, or municipal initiatives to mark areas of repression.

The Valencian Government, in different stages led by progressive forces, has developed active memory policies, including registers of victims, educational programs and funds for documentary recovery. However, changes in political orientation at the regional level have also meant setbacks or blockages in these initiatives. In contexts of conservative governments or with a strong presence of parties that deny or relativize democratic memory, some commemorations have been cancelled, archives have been left without a budget or attempts have been made to reverse symbolic projects.

The Valencian Community thus reflects the contradictory pulse of the country: on the one hand, a growing commitment of civil society to rescue democratic memory; on the other, the fragility of these advances in the face of political instrumentalization, disinformation and the lack of a broad social consensus.

The legacy of the Civil War and Franco's regime is still present in the Spanish imaginary, not as a closed chapter, but as a field of living dispute. The tensions between forgetting and remembering, between justice and reconciliation, cross institutions, discourses and collective emotions. As long as we do not build a shared memory that embraces the diversity of experiences without turning them into partisan weapons, the past will continue to weigh on the present. On this path, education, culture, research and citizen action remain key to transforming memory into a tool for democratic coexistence.

IV. Methodology

A. Research design

- **Approach:**

The present study is part of a qualitative approach, focused on the deep understanding of the experiences, meanings and emotions linked to the historical memory of the Civil War, Franco's regime and the democratic transition in Spain. This type of approach is particularly suitable for exploring subjective processes, personal narratives and complex social dynamics that cannot be reduced to quantifiable variables. In addition, a qualitative mixed methods perspective is integrated, combining different techniques of data collection and analysis with the aim of enriching and triangulating the findings.

Individual interviews were conducted with people who directly or indirectly experienced the events under investigation and with young people interested in rescuing memory. A focus group (10 participants) was organized with groups of different generations to gather shared perceptions, divergences and intergenerational debates on the memory of the conflict. The study also included analysis of letters and personal writings from the period, from family archives, documentary collections and public or private collections (Centro Documental de la Memoria Histórica, Archivo Municipal de Cheste, Private and personal archives). These materials allowed us to approach the daily experiences and the silenced voices of the conflict from a historical and human point of view.

Treatment procedure and analysis

1. All interviews and focus groups were recorded (with prior informed consent) and transcribed verbatim. This step has made it possible to preserve the richness of the oral language, the emotional nuances and the expressive forms characteristic of each participant.
2. The letters and personal documents were scanned and catalogued in a structured digital archive, respecting the ethical conditions of use and provenance.
3. The transcripts have been analyzed using narrative analysis techniques, paying attention to the biographical accounts, discursive plots, metaphors, silences and identity positioning of the participants. This approach allows us to understand how individual and collective memories are constructed through language.
4. Recurrent themes, emerging categories and discursive patterns have been identified in both oral testimonies and written texts. This coding has been carried out using qualitative analysis software, which facilitates the systematic organization and comparison of the data.
5. The combined use of different techniques and sources (oral testimonies, collective discussions, historical letters) has allowed a methodological triangulation, increasing the validity and interpretative richness of the study. This strategy has made it possible to offer a more complete and nuanced vision

of the phenomenon under investigation, integrating intimate memories, collective discourses and historical documents.

B. Selection criteria and ethical procedures

- **Participant selection:**

The selection of the different profiles participating in the research responded to strategic and ethical criteria that sought to represent generational, territorial, experiential and perspective diversity regarding the historical memory of the Civil War, Franco's regime and the democratic transition in Spain. The methodological design contemplated the participation of older adults as witnesses or bearers of memory, young people as active interviewers, and intergenerational focus groups as spaces for collective dialogue. The recruitment of participants was carried out through the network of collaborating organizations and stakeholders linked to the Esplai Social Association linked to the rescue of historical memory, human rights, education and social action.

The interviewees were selected under the following criteria:

Advanced age (over 65 years old), with the aim of including voices that had directly lived through the last years of Francoism or that had first-hand oral memory of the war and post-war period (relatives of victims, returned exiles, political activists, people who lived in rural and urban areas, as well as subjects with no known political affiliation), with residence in different geographical contexts, with special attention to the Valencian Community, in order to reflect local and territorial memories.

The interviewers were young people, students or members of youth associations, previously trained in qualitative interview techniques and in respectful approaches to working with sensitive memories. Their participation responded to several purposes: to encourage intergenerational dialogue as a way to activate the transmission of memory between those who lived through the events and current generations, to promote youth participation in democratic processes and the reconstruction of collective memory, and to introduce a fresh, empathetic and unprejudiced view that would facilitate active listening and human bonding.

The focus group included both older adults and young people, where the selection criteria included:

- Diverse experiences in relation to historical memory (active interest, lack of knowledge, critical positions, family experiences).
- Representation of different social, educational and political profiles, in order to enrich the contrast of opinions.
- Gender balance and attention to territorial representation.

This space was designed as a safe place for conversation where generational exchange allowed not only to gather opinions, but also to generate critical awareness, empathy and active participation.

The identification and selection of participants was carried out thanks to the collaboration with a network of memorial organizations, cultural centers, associations for the elderly, youth platforms, historical archives and educational entities. These organizations acted as facilitators of contact, endorsing the seriousness of the research and generating confidence in potential participants. In many cases, they also provided prior knowledge of the local context, helping to identify relevant or representative cases.

- **Ethical considerations:**

Due to the sensitive nature of the topics addressed -such as the Civil War, Franco's repression, exile or the experiences lived during the dictatorship-, this research incorporated a rigorous ethical approach that guaranteed the respect and protection of the participants, as well as a responsible use of the information collected.

1. **Informed consent:** Before participating in interviews or focus groups, all participants were informed in a clear, understandable, and accessible manner about the objectives of the study, the intended use of the data, the risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw at any time without having to justify their decision. An informed consent document was provided, which they signed voluntarily, also explaining whether or not they authorized the use of recordings, verbatim quotations, or the dissemination of fragments of their testimonies. In the case of historical materials (letters, diaries or other personal documents), permission was sought from immediate family members or legal custodians of the archive, especially in the case of unpublished or unpublished materials.

2. **Anonymity and confidentiality:** To protect the identity of interviewees or focus group participants, the principle of strict anonymity was applied through the use of pseudonyms or alphanumeric codes. All personal data have been dissociated from the narrative content, and any details that could allow indirect identification (specific places, positions, relationships, etc.) have been treated with caution or modified after consultation. All information was stored on protected digital media and only the research team had access to the original data.

3. **Ethical treatment of personal testimonies and sensitive materials:** Special care has been taken with emotions, traumatic memories or situations of vulnerability that may emerge during the process. Interviews were conducted in safe environments, adapted to the pace of each person, and emotional support was offered when necessary. No participant was pressured to recount painful experiences, and silence was respected as a form of resistance or protection.

In the case of letters and personal documents, they were approached from a historical and ethical perspective, without decontextualizing their content or manipulating them to reinforce a specific narrative. Respect for the dignity of individuals and the plurality of memories was always prioritized.

4. **Compliance with regulations:** The research complied with current ethical and legal regulations, including the Organic Law on Data Protection (LOPD) and European



regulations (RGPD), as well as with the established ethical principles that govern the organization.

V. Data analysis

A. Interview analysis

The collected testimonies reveal a plural, nuanced, and heterogeneous memory, offering insight into the multiple ways the recent past was lived and perceived.

Memories of the Civil War

Many participants, who were children or adolescents at the time, recalled the conflict through family stories. Several shared experiences related to imprisoned or executed relatives. Others mentioned episodes of insecurity in rural areas, such as robberies by those who fled after the war. There were also references to the economic aftermath of the conflict and the exile of family members, some of whom fought in World War II or spent decades in prison. One narrative described a grandfather, a professional Republican soldier, who was imprisoned after participating in resistance missions in Europe.

Silence, fear, and life outside politics

A recurring theme in the interviews was the narrative of lives lived outside politics. Many expressed that they existed in environments where politics were never discussed and there was no party affiliation: *"We knew nothing about politics, nor were we affiliated with any political group, communism or anything like that. It simply didn't exist within the family."* These accounts were often accompanied by a sense of resignation: *"I just lived with what there was, and since I never got involved in politics, I never had any problems."* Nonetheless, some voices described a later awareness of the authoritarian context: *"But as you grow older, you realize that there were no elections of any kind, meaning there was no freedom of expression either. We didn't really know what was going on because there was only one version of information."*

Censorship and controlled information

The regime's information monopoly and the isolation experienced by the population were described as key mechanisms of control. One interviewee explained: *"One of the hallmarks of a dictatorship is that people don't know what's happening. And in fact, we didn't know what was happening because there was no television, no access to anything."*

Economic conditions and daily life

Many participants remembered their childhood and youth marked by scarcity. After the Civil War and during the early years of the regime, hardship was common. Food rationing cards were frequently mentioned as a key survival tool: *"Families were given ration cards for oil, pasta, and other essentials, just to survive."* Housing and public services were often precarious and of poor quality.

Military Service ("La Mili")

Several interviewees recalled their mandatory military service as a defining moment of youth. One shared his experience in Lanzarote, where he attended school until being discharged: *"At 14, I was taken to the military service. In Lanzarote, I went to school until I was discharged."*

Religion, education, and morality

The influence of religion, particularly the Catholic Church, was noted in everyday and educational life. Many had attended religious schools, and faith was present in the family environment, though not necessarily tied to the regime: *"My mother was quite religious, so while she wasn't close to the regime, she had no issues with it."*

Participants described the repressive nature of the Civil Guard as a reflection of a justice system without safeguards: *"They would take you to the station, and there it was all more repressive—more than now. That was the kind of political situation we had."*

Family memory as a narrative source

The majority of interviewees shared second-hand stories about family members who had been imprisoned or executed. *"I remember they said at home that my mother's brother, my uncle, had been part of the last drafts of the war. My great-uncle was a Republican and had been in prison."* These family legacies play a significant emotional and historical role.

Memory, polarization, and current political climate

Some interviewees expressed concern about today's political polarization and the rise of extremist rhetoric: *"There's a lot of resentment now. Politics is very divided. Some ultra movements even long for Franco's time and oppose democracy."* There was also frustration about political inefficiency: *"Policies that are good for everyone shouldn't belong to any one party—they should be for all."*

Historical justice and reparation

There was general support for the recovery of remains from mass graves, but with a spirit of reconciliation, not revenge: *"Francoists had 40 years to recover and honor their dead. Now it's time for the families of the repressed to do the same, with dignity."*

Legacy and message for future generations

Many participants emphasized the importance of transmitting democratic values and freedom: *"Let them live freely, not as repressed as our parents were. Let them have their own thoughts and ways of doing things."*

The interviews show that the dictatorship and the transition left complex marks on Spanish society. The lived experiences go beyond politicized narratives and include memories of everyday life, emotion, and silence. Recovering these voices is essential to building a plural memory that enriches democratic processes and fosters

intergenerational dialogue. In today's polarized political climate, the legacy of those who lived without freedom takes on renewed importance as both a warning and a guide for protecting democracy and coexistence.

B. Focus group analysis

Using a qualitative approach, the discussion addressed themes related to political repression, the evolution of democratic freedoms, labor rights, and the construction of historical memory. The dynamic allowed for the identification of personal perceptions, lived experiences, and emotions tied to a period in Spanish history that continues to generate social and political debate.

A central theme that emerged from the conversation was the pervasive fear and self-censorship present in everyday life. Participants recounted how surveillance, repression, and silence were constant. Testimonies from those who lived through the conflict as children or inherited the trauma from their families (such as the "Quinta del Biberón"¹) revealed the generational dimension of this legacy: *"There was a fear that prevented us from speaking; we were always told 'say nothing' or 'My father was part of the Quinta del Biberón and had to go to war at 17.'"*

Participants compared the lack of freedoms during the dictatorship with the current democratic context. Although they acknowledged significant progress, they also noted areas that still require improvement. Repression during the regime manifested in restrictions on movement, ideological control, and punishment for dissent: *"You couldn't go out with whoever you wanted or study what you liked without consequences" or "There were clandestine meetings where you risked your life just for having a different opinion."*

Testimonies highlighted the absence of true labor rights and the regime's control over unions. Participants described precarious work conditions and the lack of protections for workers during the dictatorship: *"There were no real unions, only those controlled by the regime, which did not defend workers" and "My father worked in a foundry, and when the company closed, there was no compensation or support."*

A common concern was the lack of education regarding the Second Republic, the Civil War, and the dictatorship in today's school curriculum. Participants emphasized the need to teach this history accurately to help younger generations understand their country's past and strengthen democratic values: *"At school, they didn't teach us anything about the Republic or the dictatorship" and "Today, many young people don't know what the Civil War was or how it impacted democracy."*

The group also discussed current perceptions of political ideologies such as communism and fascism. Some participants reflected on how these concepts have been distorted or politicized in recent times: *"Communism is often associated with something negative today, but its origin was the fight for equality" and "The Falange had total control over people's lives during the dictatorship."*

¹ The "leva del Biberón" (also known as "quinta del Biberón") was the name given to the conscription of 1938 and 1939 in all the territory still controlled by Republican Spain during the last years of the Spanish Civil War.

The focus group gathered valuable testimonies on the long-lasting impact of Francoism on personal and collective lives. Participants shared experiences of repression and fear, but also of resistance and awareness. There was a general consensus on the need to remember, teach, and discuss this period openly to prevent the repetition of similar abuses in the future.

The session highlighted key themes such as repression, the evolution of civil rights, education, and the ongoing relevance of historical memory in democratic life.

Recommendations:

- Strengthen historical memory education in schools to ensure that younger generations understand the legacy of the dictatorship and the transition to democracy.
- Promote intergenerational dialogue, facilitating encounters between youth and older generations to pass on personal experiences and lessons learned.
- Develop active memory policies, including public testimonies, documentation, and commemorative events.
- Critically examine current freedoms, encouraging citizens to reflect on democratic progress and the risks of regression.

C. Letters analysis

The analysis of a significant corpus of letters written between the 1930s and the early years of democracy in Spain offers access to a deeply human and emotional dimension of recent history. These personal, official, and family letters reveal not only historical facts but also the emotions, tensions, and contradictions experienced by those who lived through the war, the Franco dictatorship, and the slow process of democratic transition.

During the Spanish Civil War, many letters reflect the chaos, violence, and misinformation of the time. Among them are combat appeals written by Republican fighters, often with an epic, mobilizing, and sometimes desperate tone, calling for the defense of freedom against the Francoist advance. Also prominent are denunciations of Francoist supporters, sent by neighbors or militia members, documenting accusations of collaboration, looting, or war crimes. These letters reveal how violence was often intertwined with local grievances and personal revenge.

Letters from the Francoist period reflect a climate of fear, surveillance, and control. A significant portion of the corpus consists of letters from neighbors to authorities, denouncing "suspicious" behavior of others, illustrating a society steeped in mistrust and the regime's pervasive control. These denunciations are often written in a tone of false politeness, framed as acts of civic duty or defense of national values.

Another common type is the plea letter—addressed to civil governors, military officials, or even Franco's wife—where families request clemency for political prisoners or the commutation of death sentences. These letters are respectful and pleading, often portraying the accused as hardworking, apolitical, or deeply religious in an attempt to align with the regime's values.

Also found are letters seeking information about Spaniards deported abroad, especially addressed to consulates or religious institutions. Many refer to individuals interned in Nazi concentration camps, requesting updates or reporting their deaths. These communications, mostly official, reflect the extended suffering of Spanish citizens beyond national borders.

Another significant group includes personal letters from political exiles, in which families communicate the death of loved ones to relatives in Spain. These letters are often emotionally restrained but filled with longing, resignation, and the hope of reunion.

Other letters from this period document requests for information about disappeared relatives and attempts to reconstruct family memory silenced during the dictatorship. Often written by children or grandchildren of victims, these letters mark the beginning of a movement to recover historical memory from the private sphere.

This epistolary collection serves as a powerful source for studying historical memory in Spain. The letters not only record events but capture emotions, hopes, and strategies of resistance or adaptation. Their analysis helps us understand how individuals experienced and described the effects of war, repression, and the path to democracy—from the intimacy of pen and paper. Taken together, they offer an emotional and everyday history of 20th-century Spain, woven from silences, resistances, and small truths often absent from official histories.

D. Integration and triangulation of data

General perspective and discursive tone

- **Individual interviews:** These present a more reflective and intimate tone. Being conducted on a personal basis, they allow for a more nuanced expression of daily experiences. Family stories, personal experiences during military service, life under censorship, economic restrictions, and a less politicized view of politics are predominant. Many interviewees described themselves as having lived “outside of politics,” highlighting a desire for stability over partisan alignment.
- **Focus group:** Although it also gathers personal experiences, the tone is more collective and critical. Interaction among participants generates contrasts of opinion, encouraging more explicit assessments of the Francoist regime and the current political situation. There is a shared concern over political polarization and the deterioration of institutional respect. A clear defense of democratic values appears, along with a critical view of how Francoism is trivialized by some sectors.
- **Letters:** These reflect language shaped by their historical context. Letters from the Francoist period and the Civil War present a restrained, formal, and even fearful tone, especially those requesting clemency or making accusations. Personal letters, on the other hand, convey affection, pain, or hope.

Common Themes

a) Repression and fear

- **Interviews:** Fear of speaking, censorship, surveillance, and lack of freedom appear as recurring themes, although described from an everyday, non-heroic perspective.
- **Focus group:** Fear and repression are discussed more openly and critically, referring to social control, absence of liberties, and ideological oppression.
- **Letters:** Repression is clearly evident in both denunciations and pleas for mercy. The language used is cautious and reflects fear of being identified or misinterpreted by the authorities.

b) Historical memory and education

- **Interviews and focus group:** Both point to the lack of education about the Civil War and Francoism in the school system. Participants emphasize the importance of passing on these memories to younger generations—not for revenge, but for historical understanding.

c) Living conditions

- **Interviews:** These describe rationing cards, poor housing conditions, multi-employment, the influence of religion, and military service as major life experiences.
- **Focus group:** These aspects are mentioned in relation to the lack of labor rights and the absence of free unions. Participants focus more on comparisons with the present.
- **Letters:** Living conditions appear indirectly, especially in ration cards, family updates, and complaints about rural hardship and abuse.

Views on politics and democracy

- **Interviews:** Some interviewees identify as apolitical or indifferent, while others acknowledged later in life the absence of freedoms. There is a shared desire for future generations to live freely, though without strong political leanings.
- **Focus group:** A clear defense of democracy is present, along with criticism of the political use of memory. Participants express discomfort with current political polarization and the rise of ultra-conservative discourse.
- **Letters:** Letters from the Francoist era rarely criticize the regime openly due to fear. More recent ones express dissatisfaction with military practices or the neglect of Republican victims.

Generational and emotional diversity

- **Interviews and family letters:** These reflect a direct emotional connection with historical events. Firsthand or secondhand experiences evoke empathy, resignation, or sorrow.
- **Focus group:** This method brings in an intergenerational dimension to the reflection on memory, with older adults sharing experiences with younger participants. This highlights both tensions and bridges between generations.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

The three instruments used in this research—interviews, focus groups, and letters—provide not only complementary but also mutually enriching perspectives on Spain's recent past. Each method uncovers different layers of memory and experience, offering a multifaceted understanding of the social and emotional impact of the Civil War, Francoism, and the transition to democracy.

- Interviews allow for the intimate reconstruction of personal narratives, giving voice to individuals who often lived under the radar of historical documentation. These testimonies reveal how ordinary people navigated censorship, repression, economic hardship, and family life under authoritarianism. They also highlight the role of personal detachment from political affiliation, the importance of intergenerational silence, and the later emergence of reflection and critical awareness, particularly with age.
- Focus groups create a space for collective dialogue and the interplay of memory across generations. The group dynamic encourages participants to reflect, compare, and contrast their experiences, often prompting memories that might not surface in isolated interviews. These sessions make visible the tensions between past and present, particularly the growing concern with political polarization, the resurgence of authoritarian nostalgia, and the contested role of historical memory in contemporary Spain. Focus groups thus become sites of active memory construction, where remembrance intersects with current democratic challenges.
- Letters, both official and personal, offer a contemporary window into the thoughts, fears, and aspirations of individuals living through key historical moments. Their language, shaped by context, reveals the constraints of expression, the strategies of survival, and the emotional burden carried by families separated by war, exile, or repression. These documents are especially valuable for understanding how the Francoist regime sought to control communication, and how individuals either complied, resisted, or navigated the system. Later letters from the transitional period, by contrast, reflect hope, mobilization, and a desire for change, making the shift from silence to voice tangible.

Taken together, these sources help construct a rich, polyphonic memory of Francoism, encompassing silenced traumas, fragmented truths, survival strategies, and evolving identities. They reveal how the legacy of the dictatorship has been variously lived, denied, remembered, politicized, and transmitted over time, with interpretations shaped by age, social background, ideology, and regional context.

By combining these qualitative approaches, the research not only enhances our understanding of historical memory in Spain, but also illustrates the complex ways memory functions in societies marked by authoritarian pasts. This triangulation between personal story, collective debate, and historical document underscores the importance of integrating lived experience into historical analysis and of fostering intergenerational dialogue as a tool for democratic resilience.

Recommendations for artists interested in creating public performances on the memory of the Spanish civil war, Francoism, and the Transition

1. Research thoroughly and sensitively

Before creating a piece, it is essential to conduct in-depth research and, if possible, connect with real testimonies, letters, family archives, and oral sources. Artistic works gain depth when they are grounded in knowledge and respect for lived experiences.

2. Avoid trivializing suffering

Performances on these topics should steer clear of sensationalism or superficial portrayals of pain. The suffering endured during the dictatorship, exile, censorship, or repression deserves an ethical and symbolically powerful, yet responsible, treatment.

3. Encourage intergenerational dialogue

Creating performative spaces that connect youth with older generations can open channels of listening, understanding, and shared memory. Art can act as a bridge between those who lived through history and those who know little about it.

4. Use public space with political awareness

Choosing meaningful sites (squares, monuments, former barracks, cemeteries, train stations) and re-signifying them through artistic action can be highly impactful. However, it is important to understand the local context and be prepared for possible social or institutional tensions.

5. Incorporate personal letters and archives as poetic and documentary materials

Family letters, denunciations, pleas for clemency, stories of military service or fragments of everyday lives can become powerful artistic material, bringing truth and emotional resonance to the work.

Recommendations for the preservation and dissemination of historical memory

1. Digitize and preserve personal and community archives

Many letters, photographs, and oral testimonies remain stored in homes or associations without proper cataloging. It is urgent to launch participatory digitization processes that ensure preservation and public access.

2. Promote decentralized museum and performative spaces

Memory should not be confined to major state museums. Local centers, neighborhood venues, and independent circuits can host archives, exhibitions, theatrical works, or urban interventions about democratic memory.

3. Encourage youth-led memory projects

Fostering engagement of younger generations with history through artistic, educational, or digital communication projects is key to preventing forgetfulness from overtaking remembrance.

4. Ensure institutional support without political appropriation

Memory policies must protect the right to truth, justice, and reparation,

without falling into partisan appropriation. Memory is a common good, not a political weapon.

Recommendations for future research

1. **Broaden the thematic focus beyond the political**

Investigating how people experienced military service, religion, everyday economics, family life, sexuality, or education during the dictatorship and the transition can provide new insights into Francoism through daily life.

2. **Utilize heterogeneous sources and unconventional materials**

Letters, diaries, songs, private photographs, symbolic objects, or contemporary performances can be valuable sources for historical and cultural analysis.

3. **Incorporate participatory and intergenerational methodologies**

Studies involving memory bearers (family members, neighbors, activists) as co-researchers contribute to a more democratic, plural, and living historiography.

4. **Encourage dialogue between disciplines**

The intersection of history, art, anthropology, cultural studies, and digital archiving can generate new ways of narrating the past that are accessible, critical, and transformative.

5. **Document and evaluate the impact of artistic interventions**

It is recommended to record and analyze how performances, exhibitions, and public artworks influence social perceptions of memory, what reactions they provoke, and what debates they spark, both locally and in the media.

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IX. Annexes

- **Supplementary Documentation:**
 - Interview and focus group scripts.
 - Examples of letters and transcriptions.