Exhuming the Past: Forensic Archaeology and Historical Justice in the Context of the Spanish Civil War

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Abstract

Conflict is an undeniable reality of human history. The long-term impacts of twentieth-century armed conflicts on historical and contemporary societies remain underexplored. Forensic archaeology and anthropology have the potential to provide a distinctive perspective on the past.

Rather than presenting a forensic case study in the conventional applied sense, this article offers a theoretical and contextual analysis of the role of forensic archaeology and anthropology in historical reckoning and justice processes, grounded in the context of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939). This article uses the Spanish Civil War as an example of a country dealing with the consequences of armed conflict. Initially developed as part of criminal investigations, forensic anthropology and forensic archaeology have evolved into vital instruments for humanitarian efforts, uncovering previously obscured narratives, including the identification and return of the remains of conflict victims. By analysing the remains from the exhumation of mass graves from the Spanish Civil War, this research emphasises how forensic investigations address both legal and human rights imperatives, offering evidence for judicial proceedings while also providing closure for victims' families. Adopting an 'archaeology of the contemporary' lens facilitates the investigation of the roles of forensic archaeology and anthropology. The findings reinforce these roles in historical reckoning and contemporary justice initiatives, while underlining the enduring challenges of confronting the legacies of armed conflict.

Keywords: osteology, forensic archaeology, Spanish Civil War, forensic justice, bioarchaeology

Introduction

The excavation and examination of human remains serve as both a reflection on past injustices and as a tangible response to them. Yet the adequacy of such responses is still in question, as current global events indicate that societies continue to grapple with lessons from history. Conflict has been a cross-cultural constant throughout history, shaping societies, altering political landscapes and leaving lasting scars on collective memory. The twentieth century was characterised by numerous

armed conflicts that redefined warfare, justice and concepts of historical accountability. Existing literature on conflict has focused on the immediate consequences of warfare, including destruction, displacement and fatalities (Gates *et al.*, 2012; Leaning and Guha-Sapir, 2013; Daw, 2022; Williamson and Murphy, 2025). However, research on the long-term effects of warfare remains limited, particularly within forensic anthropology and archaeology. This article contributes to conflict studies by examining the enduring consequences of conflict from the perspective of these disciplines, which have become integral in uncovering obscured narratives and the realities of war.

Forensic archaeology developed as an approach to examine human skeletal remains from the past, combining forensic methods for skeletal analysis with archaeology's reconstruction of graves, habitation sites and their contexts. The methods utilised in these investigations have the potential to contribute to both legal proceedings and socio-political narratives. This research further emphasises their role in investigating human rights violations and in reconstructing evidence-based narratives of past events. The Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), a conflict that resulted in widespread judicial and extrajudicial executions, provides a compelling example for understanding the intersection of political violence, historical memory and contemporary reckoning in attempts to return victims' skeletal remains to family members (Araguete-Toribio, 2015; Ferrándiz, 2019; Primorac *et al.*, 2024).

Exhumation and return of remains serve purposes beyond forensic and humanitarian objectives, supporting the confronting of the past and engagement with questions of restorative justice. The socio-political ramifications of these efforts are examined here, particularly in their ongoing impact on Spain's political landscape. The analysis underlying the following interpretations is based on a literature review and direct experience of the Spanish political landscape and its approach to these exhumations and reburials, gained during the primary data collection phase of my doctoral research. Using a multidisciplinary approach, this research contributes to broader discussions of how contemporary society engages with troubling aspects of the past and how forensic disciplines can shape this historical understanding. Ultimately, it advocates for an integration of forensic approaches into historical reckoning, one that has the potential to

bridge the empirical rigour of forensic science with the imperatives of truth, justice and the preservation of memory.

The Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War began in July 1936 and was marked by instability. The roots of this conflict stretch back to Spain's perceived decline during the sixteenth century, a trajectory marked by stagnation and failed attempts at modernisation (Clifford, 2020, p. 31). By the twentieth century, these issues had coalesced into a nation deeply fractured along class, political and regional lines. Electoral manipulation and gerrymandering ensured that power stayed between the two right, dominant monarchist parties, Renovación Española and Comunión Tradicionalista. Political tensions, coupled with the economic downturn that followed the First World War (1914–1918), led to widespread worker protests and public outcry against the government. The monarchy-backed 1923 coup d'état sought to alleviate these growing tensions and led to the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera (1870–1930) (Thomas, 2003, p. 23; Clifford, 2020, p. 32). Rivera's authoritarian regime lasted until 1930, when economic difficulties and a lack of popular support led to his resignation. The collapse of Rivera's regime left the monarchy exposed to heightened criticism. In a desperate attempt to regain legitimacy, King Alfonso XIII (1886–1941) called for municipal elections on 12 April 1931 (Beevor, 2006; Clifford, 2020).

The Left (Republicans)[1] won, establishing the coalition of the Second Spanish Republic, resulting in the exile of King Alfonso XIII. The Second Spanish Republic held power until 1933, when its coalition broke down following the exit of the Socialist Party (Clifford, 2020, p. 33). This withdrawal weakened the Republic and paved the way for the Right to regain a majority in the Cortes Generales by 1933. Tensions reached an all-time high following the subsequent Right-wing control of the government. Elections were held in February 1936, which saw the Leftist Popular Front coalition return to power, with the primary goal of reforming religion, the state and the military (See Table 1 for a timeline of governments and key

1 In the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939), the Republican "Left" refers to the coalition including included socialists, communists, anarchists, liberal republicans and regional autonomists who defended the Second Spanish Republic. They favoured a secular government, social and land reforms, workers rights' and separation of church, military and state.

events, including accompanying notes) (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 431).

Year(s)	Government/Event	Political Alignment	Note
1930	Dictatorship of Dámaso Berenguer	Right (monarchist)	Attempt to regain control after Rivera's forced resignation.
April 1931	Second Spanish Republic established	Left (liberal)	Municipal election results in the fall of the monarchy.
April 1931–1933	First Government of the Republic	Left (Republican, Socialists)	Progressive reforms in education, military expenditure and land distribution. Met with conservative backlash.
November 1933	Victory of the Confederación Española de Derechas Autónomas	Right	Right-wing government regains control of Cortes, set out to undo all reforms of previous government.
February 1936	Victory of the Popular Front, Second Spanish Republic	Left (Republicans, Socialists, Communists)	Left-wing parties regain power following municipal elections, immediately begins reforming.
July 1936	Right's Coup d'états	Right vs Left	General Franco and others lead a rebellion against the Spanish government.

Table 1: Displaying the Change of Power in the Spanish Government from 1930 to 1936, at the Outbreak of the Civil War

Immediately following this, the Right (Nationalists)[2] began planning a coup d'état scheduled for July 1936 (Thomas, 2003; Beevor, 2006; Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008; Ruiz, 2018; Clifford, 2020). Despite their careful planning, the Right–Nationalists encountered unexpected resistance, and the coup left the country divided, resulting in the Spanish Civil War. The Spanish Civil War has been referred to as a "wearing down war" due to its attritional nature over the course of three years (Clifford, 2020, pp. 28–29). Some researchers suggest that, due to its ideological and military dynamics, the conflict served as a "curtain raiser" or a "dress rehearsal" for the Second World War (1939–1945) and a precursor to a larger, global conflict (Bowers, 1956, pp. vi, 58). Alexander Clifford (2020, p. 27) cautions against making such comparisons, suggesting that the Spanish Civil War had unique characteristics and should not be viewed merely as a precursor to the Second World War. Stanley G. Payne offers a nuanced perspective, describing the conflict as:

> typical neither of World War I nor of World War II, but rather represented a kind of transition war halfway between the two and exhibited certain characteristics of each. (Payne, 2008, p. 7)

The Spanish Civil War ended in April 1939. The Republic's downfall highlighted the Nationalists' superior resources and organisation, in contrast to the Republican cause's internal fractures and external neglect. The end of the conflict did not bring peace or stability to Spain. Instead, it was followed by the dictatorship of the Nationalist General Francisco Franco (1892–1975), remnants of which lasted until his death and whose impact was felt across Spain for many years afterwards (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 431; Clifford, 2020, p. 99). Franco's victory inaugurated an era characterised by severe repression. Political dissidents faced imprisonment, execution or exile. Spain's social structure was profoundly fragmented, with animosities enduring between the supporters of the Republic and those who sided with the Nationalists. Coupled with economic hardship, the Spanish Civil War and its subsequent dictatorship

2 The Nationalist "Right", led by General Francisco Franco, united conservative forces such as monarchists, fascists, traditionalists, the clergy and military. They favoured authoritarian rule, Catholic values, preservation of traditional social hierarchies and political unity.

led to widespread social unrest. For years, Spain endured isolation and stagnation as Franco's regime pursued a policy of autarky, emphasising economic self-sufficiency. It was not until the 1950s that Spain began to reintegrate into the global community and witness gradual economic progress.

Violence was perpetrated by both sides during the war, and it is difficult to determine in many cases who initiated specific acts (Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 11). Estimates of casualties from the Spanish Civil War and the early years of Franco's dictatorship vary across sources (Clifford, 2020, p. 39). Howson (1998, p. 98) reports over 238,000 total deaths during the Civil War. While Beevor (2006, p. 97) estimates 38,000 Nationalists' deaths occurred, Clodfelter (2017, p. 100) counters this by suggesting that Nationalists' deaths are closer to 90,000. Additionally, Thomas (2003, p. 901) reports that there were around 110,000 Republican deaths, while Beevor (2006, p. 105) claims that the number is closer to 200,000. In terms of individuals who were executed under Franco's rule, Casanova (2002, p. 8) estimates a conservative range of 70,000 to 100,000 individuals. The large number of people deemed 'missing', and the number of extrajudicial executions,[3] make it nearly impossible to accurately calculate casualty figures.

The Nationalists killed by Republicans were exhumed, named and commemorated during the early years of Franco's dictatorship; the same cannot be said for the Republicans who were killed during the conflict. To ensure a smooth transition of democracy after Franco's death, successive Spanish governments promoted a policy of "forced amnesia" to avoid the resurgence of conflict and to defuse tensions (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 429).

The 'pact of silence' that followed Franco's dictatorship suppressed public discourse on the Civil War and its aftermath (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 432; Araguete-Toribio, 2015; Ferrándiz, 2019; Parra *et al.*, 2022; Hanson and Fenn, 2024; Primorac *et al.*, 2024). This policy aimed

[3] Extrajudicial executions refer to executions which were not legally authorised by the governing body at the time of the executions (Oxford Dictionary, 2026). Two forms of extrajudicial executions were common during the Spanish Civil War, the first were large-scale massacres, and the second referred to as "strolls" or *sacas/paseos*, where individuals, either prisoners or civilians, were marked for execution, driven to a remote location and killed (Espinosa, 2003; Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 8).

to maintain social stability by avoiding contentious historical narratives. Historically, similar patterns of enforced silence or erasure of traumatic events often result in the neglect and forgetting of victims (Flood, 2002; Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008). In the Spanish context, this imposed forgetting is 'visible' in the lack of public memorials and the limited efforts to exhume, identify and return the remains of executed Republicans.

Despite attempts to suppress collective memory of the conflict, initiatives in Spain emerged to confront its violent past and 'recover' the memory of the Civil War. After decades of ignoring its political history, a public outcry in the early 2000s led to the exhumation and return of remains to family members. These renewed demands for truth highlight the crucial role that forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology play in confronting the legacies of conflict, while offering some consolation through recovery and remembrance.

Legislative measures, such as the Law of Political Amnesty (Law 46/1977), the Democratic Memory Law (2022) and Ministry decrees issued between 2008 and 2011 represent attempts to address the legacy of the Francoist regime by granting amnesty to political prisoners and protecting individuals involved in repressive actions (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008; Escudero, 2014; Kolon, 2021). However, these laws also obstruct legal accountability for crimes committed during the dictatorship. It was not until the Law of Historical Memory (Law 52/2007) that the Spanish government formally acknowledged the illegitimacy of the justice system set out by the Francoist government and took steps to facilitate the exhumation of mass graves and recognise victims. Despite this legislative progress, the law has faced significant opposition and has been criticised for failing to go far enough in delivering justice through legal proceedings and reconciliation.

The Role of Forensic Archaeology and Forensic Anthropology

The efforts of forensic anthropologists and forensic archaeologists are integral to criminal and humanitarian investigations, as both disciplines systematically interpret physical evidence found on bones to establish modes or manners of death. The human body serves as a cross-cultural constant throughout all societies (Joyce, 2005; Sofaer, 2006; Boric and

Robb, 2008), and the ability to accurately read and interpret evidence from skeletal tissue is an essential skill in criminal, humanitarian and archaeological investigations.

Initially developing as two distinct but complementary disciplines, forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology share a concern for the recovery and examination of human remains. This work is designed to aid criminal investigations while expanding into historical and humanitarian inquiries, as discussed here. Forensic archaeology is concerned with the study of human remains within archaeological and historical contexts, integrating biological data to provide insights into societal and cultural contexts. (Blau and Ubelaker, 2016; Rogers, 2016). Forensic archaeologists employ established archaeological practices, including stratigraphic excavation, spatial analysis, documentation of burial contexts and the incorporation of theoretical models. These approaches ensure that all evidence, including skeletal remains and associated artefacts, are preserved and interpreted within the original context while placing the individual and their autonomy at the centre of the investigation (Bartel, 1982).

Forensic anthropology applies the same methodologies in contemporary or medicolegal contexts, supporting the work of coroners, law enforcement and judicial proceedings (Snow, 1973, p. 4; Kerley, 1978, p. 160; Stewart, 1979, p. ix; Reichs, 1986, p. xv; Ubelaker, 2006, p. 4; Cattaneo, 2007, p. 185). Forensic anthropologists, while implementing similar methods, focus on analysing human bones to determine biological profiles (age-at-death, sex, stature), trauma patterns and manner of death. This interdisciplinary approach enables archaeology to directly contribute to the location, identification and contextualisation of victims recovered (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008) and is particularly valuable in relation to mass graves. Together, these fields complement one another, offering an innovative perspective on the examination and analysis of human remains.

Both disciplines employ systematic excavation and forensic analysis to locate, recover and analyse human remains. They adhere to systematic excavation approaches used by archaeologists, while simultaneously integrating scientific and forensic examinations characteristic of anthropology, providing evidence that informs legal proceedings and broader societal discussions, as these “buried bones [are] the silent witnesses of […] atrocities” (Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 9). The practical

significance of these methods is particularly evident when applied to historical conflicts. In cases of political violence, forensic teams employ advanced techniques, such as DNA analysis, to confirm the identity of victims. The process involves locating and excavating burial sites, recording evidence and analysing skeletal trauma to distinguish between battlefield injuries and execution-related trauma. In the context of the Spanish Civil War, forensic methods, such as DNA, have been central to the identification of individuals in mass graves, thereby aiding in the return of victims' remains to their families (Araguete-Toribio, 2015; Ferrándiz, 2019; Primorac *et al.*, 2024).

More generally, a primary aim of forensic investigations is to use the recovered evidence to initiate and support potential criminal or civil actions against those responsible. In the case of the Spanish Civil War, the initial focus is on identifying and returning victims' remains to family members, as civil proceedings are rarely pursued due to the Amnesty Law (1977) 46, Democratic Memory Law (2022), and Ministry decrees issued between 2008 and 2011 (Escudero, 2014; Kolon, 2021).

Though forensic archaeology and forensic anthropology serve humanitarian purposes, archaeologists remain reluctant to address the relevance of archaeology to discussions of modern warfare (Hamilakis, 2003; Eiselt, 2009; Al Quntar, 2013). Archaeology, in a traditional sense, leaves contemporary issues to historians and focuses on the distant human past (Buchli and Lucas, 2001). However, a shift in the 1970s, with the adoption of the scientific techniques of New Archaeology and the emphasis on human autonomy in post-processualism, has led archaeologists to explore contemporary issues and no longer be defined by a specific period. By adopting the archaeology of the contemporary, combining the analytical principles of processualism with the focus on human agency in post-processualism, archaeologists can reconstruct memory and meaning while prioritising the human experience.

Forensic Archaeology, Forensic Anthropology and the Spanish Civil War

Forensic archaeology and anthropology have been instrumental in understanding the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. The systematic analysis of human remains and related evidence has provided insights into the

circumstances of death, the methods of execution, as well as allowing for the identification of victims, providing answers to the surviving members and contributing to historical knowledge (Herrasti, Márquez-Grant and Etxeberria, 2021; Rios, *et al.*, 2014).

For instance, the examination of those executed for their political beliefs reveals specific or common traumatic lesions directly linked to execution methods, shifting the discourse from theoretical debate to evidence-based discussions (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008). Such investigations involve a thorough exploration of the site, excavation and systematic in situ recording of the remains, along with exhumation and lab analysis. Analysts examine skeletal trauma in a studied data which can indicate the circumstances surrounding the deaths of individuals and can aid in the determination of whether executions were sanctioned or circumvented the judicial system in place at the time (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008, p. 437). Additionally, physical trauma is analysed to distinguish between battlefield injuries and execution-related wounds, considering demographic factors such as age, sex and socio-economic status. In determining the circumstances of the executions, the way a grave was created, whether hand-dug or machine-dug, is crucial, as is the forensic evidence of violence present, such as bullets or casings. The context in which the remains of individuals are positioned within the grave can indicate a systematic method of execution, up to the fact that the execution itself was rushed and disorganised. Together with the creation of the grave itself being that of machine dug suggestive of a timely and organised execution to that of a disorganised shallow, hand-dug grave, makes the archaeological aspects of these investigations invaluable.

The *Asociación para la Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica* (ARMH), founded in 2000, has played a key role as the first organisation involved in the exhumation of Spanish Civil War mass graves and advocating for the rights of families to recover and bury their loved ones with dignity. Forensic archaeologists and anthropologists must navigate a complex ethical landscape, balancing scientific objectivity with the emotional and political sensitivities surrounding mass grave excavations while adhering to the region's ethical standards. Key ethical principles include obtaining informed consent from families, respecting cultural and religious burial practices, and maintaining transparency in the investigative

process. The involvement of organisations like the ARMH in Spain ensures that exhumations prioritise the needs and wishes of affected communities. Furthermore, forensic practitioners must remain vigilant against misusing their findings for political agendas and uphold the dignity of the deceased in all aspects of their work. While not a new topic in the discussion of ethics in anthropology or archaeology, this point remains critically important to highlight.

Forensic archaeology and anthropology play a crucial role in addressing the legacy of the Spanish Civil War. Their methodologies ensure the scientific documentation and interpretation of human remains. They provide evidence to confront forced silence and denial while placing the individual and their living relatives at the centre of these investigations. The evolution of these fields—from criminal investigations to humanitarian applications—underscores their profound societal impact in promoting justice and truth. As scientific analysis of skeletal remains progresses, it expands our capacity to uncover hidden narratives and honour the dignity of those who suffered injustice. In carrying out these investigations, the forensic methods of these disciplines serve a dual purpose: they provide material evidence that could support judicial proceedings, even if current legal barriers prevent prosecutions, and they have the potential to offer psychological closure to family members. Despite these benefits, questions remain about whether such efforts are sufficient to achieve broader societal reconciliation.

Forensic Science, Historical Reckoning, and the Broader Implications for Transnational Justice

The Spanish Civil War and its legacy have left deep scars on Spanish society that continue to reverberate today. Among the most significant contemporary issues are the exhumation of mass graves and the forensic examination of those killed during the conflict and under the Francoist regime. The exhumation and examination of remains have sparked intense debates over historical memory, transitional justice and the implications of confronting past human rights violations. It must be understood that a divide can occur in this kind of forensic work, where the material evidence required by both the court and family members in the search for each person's own truth (Buchli and Lucas, 2001, p. 124).

For many, such investigations represent long-overdue recognition of past crimes and a necessary step toward redressing historical injustices. Exhumations provide families with the opportunity for mourning and can offer psychological support by affirming the deceased's identity and returning personal belongings recovered during the excavation. However, revisiting these buried histories can destabilise the fragile consensus underpinning post-Franco democracy, reflecting the challenge faced by post-conflict societies, such as Argentina, Chile and Rwanda, in confronting historical violence in societies where competing past narratives remain unresolved. In the Spanish context, critics have argued that exhumations constitute a form of "second killing" and an "erasure of genocide", essentially retraumatising communities by disturbing victims at their place of rest following a traumatic event that was most likely an execution (Ferrándiz, 2006, p. 9). Others claim that the focus on forensic investigation is driven by profit and media attention, reducing the complex legacy of the Civil War to bones and DNA (Ferrándiz, 2006). Several organisations, i.e. the Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory and State Federation of Forums for Memory advocate for above-ground memorialisation, such as monuments or public archives, as a way to preserve historical memory and honour victims without disturbing the graves.

Practical obstacles also hinder excavation, identification and memorialisation. Authority over burial sites can be fragmented. Municipal cemeteries fall under local administration, while provincial authorities govern archaeological and historical sites. This legal ambiguity has stalled many exhumations, as no single authority assumes complete jurisdiction (Gassiot Ballbé and Steadman, 2008; Escudero, 2014; Kolon, 2021). The political and legal environment further complicates forensic work. Although the Law of Historical Memory marked progress, it did not fully repeal the 1977 Amnesty Law, meaning that those responsible for Francoist crimes remain shielded from prosecution. Additionally, the lack of financial and logistical support for exhumations limits the scope of these efforts, leaving many families without access to justice or closure.

The challenge of reckoning with their histories of violence is not unique to Spain; it recurs across post-conflict settings worldwide. However, the Spanish experience with forensic investigation offers valuable insights for

other societies grappling with the legacy of mass violence. Such work is crucial for uncovering evidence, facilitating legal accountability, acknowledging and redressing historical wrongs and addressing human rights violations. The body serves as tangible proof, allowing us to assert injustice and define collective identity. As Victor Buchli and Gavin Lucas note, the murder or execution of an individual:

> always leaves its trace, if only in the gap left by its absence, an absence as physical as any presence. (Buchli and Lucas, 2001, p. 122)

Human remains provide concrete evidence of violence, facilitate victim identification and offer survivors a measure of closure.

However, forensic science alone cannot resolve the deeply rooted political and social divisions that such investigations inevitably reveal. In societies emerging from conflict or authoritarian rule, efforts to uncover past atrocities often face resistance from those committed to maintaining dominant historical narratives. This dynamic highlights the delicate balance necessary to pursue truth and justice while promoting social cohesion. One important lesson is that forensic work, while vital for uncovering the truth and ensuring legal accountability, cannot fully address the psychological and moral scope of historical reckoning. Achieving justice also requires public acknowledgement, collective memory and recognition of victim's experiences.

Material culture is particularly relevant in the study of human remains, as it is used to restore and maintain memory while serving as physical evidence. Buchli and Lucas (2001, p. 79) report that, under a Freudian model, all memories can be preserved, and the act of forgetting can be initiated through repression, distortion and condensation—all actions closely related to acts of violence and conflict. From the perspective that remembering is constant, forgetting becomes pathological and requires investigation (Lucas, 1997). Several researchers argue that material culture is an aspect of remembering; therefore, our minds tend to forget without it (Forty, 1999, p. 2; Legendre, 2001, p. 80). Discussing forgetfulness, memory and the search for truth is therefore crucial for understanding human remains.

The role of material culture in the act of remembering becomes relevant to this research through the presence of memorials of mass graves, specifically through the narratives it portrays and the names of the victims. The presence or absence of memorials conveys a message and preserves a memory of the events (Legendre, 2001, p. 80). This, in turn, adds a sense of responsibility to those charged with preserving memory, as the deterioration of monuments and memorials directly contributes to humanity's forgetfulness (de Certeau, 1984, p. 87). The act of forgetfulness itself is rife with tension; it is not usually what is being memorialised that is the issue, but what is not. What is removed, not there, left out of the narrative for future generations (Legendre, 2001, p. 80).

Conclusions

Integrating forensic methodologies into historical investigations represents a crucial advancement in the study of past conflicts. By analysing osteological trauma and exhuming mass graves, these disciplines provide tangible, empirical evidence that enhances our understanding of the human cost of warfare while also reinforcing the material realities of political violence and repression. The Spanish Civil War exemplifies the critical necessity and value of forensic investigations in confronting historical injustices. The graves associated with this period, which had long been concealed by political censorship and societal silence, have emerged as sites of forensic and historical inquiry over the last two and a half decades. Forensic science offers an empirical counterpoint to historical revisionism, underscoring the material realities of political violence and its lasting effects on national identity and collective memory. Beyond the Spanish Civil War, forensic archaeology and anthropology are pivotal in addressing the legacies of conflict worldwide, such as those that occurred in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina (Primorac *et al.*, 2024), Uganda (Kim, Elgerud and Tuller, 2020), and Peru (Parra *et al.*, 2022), among others. Organisations such as the ARMH continue to spearhead efforts in victim identification and repatriation, resisting historical amnesia and fostering closure for affected families. Through these efforts, forensic science uncovers historical truths and restores dignity to those who suffered injustice.

The exhumation of mass graves is, however, not without its challenges. While forensic investigations provide essential evidence for legal accountability and reconciliation, they also expose deep societal divisions. Spain's experience shows that true reconciliation requires more than uncovering physical evidence; it demands a comprehensive, holistic engagement with the past that acknowledges the pain of victims while fostering dialogue across ideological divides. Despite the progress made in uncovering historical injustices, the persistence of modern conflicts raises pressing questions about humanity's capacity to learn from history. Can forensic investigations and historical reckonings effectively deter future atrocities, or do they merely function as retrospective acknowledgements of past violence? This ongoing struggle underscores the complexities of translating historical lessons into actionable strategies for preventing future human rights violations. Forensic investigations must be complemented by broader societal efforts to confront history in ways that foster healing and prevent future atrocities. The study of osteological trauma from past conflicts is not merely an academic exercise; it is a call to acknowledge and address the enduring consequences of violence.

Ultimately, this research affirms that forensic archaeology and anthropology are indispensable in pursuing historical justice. By providing irrefutable evidence of past atrocities, these disciplines challenge revisionist narratives and reinforce the material realities of political violence. The Spanish Civil War underscores the significance of such investigations in addressing historical silences and fostering a more comprehensive understanding of the past. Yet the persistence of modern conflicts reminds us that forensic science's work is far from over. The past, particularly the conflicts central to this study, has indelibly shaped contemporary societies and continues to impact individuals directly and indirectly. By embracing an integrated approach that bridges forensic science, historical analysis, and humanitarian efforts, we move closer to a more nuanced and just understanding of the past. This research serves as a reminder that while history may repeat itself, our capacity to learn, adapt and strive for justice remains an enduring possibility.

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