

Ed McNally (History) – Spain, August 2017

In late August I spent two weeks in Spain and Catalonia, visiting Granada, Córdoba, Seville and Barcelona. First and foremost, the trip enabled me to build upon my Spanish language skills developed initially last year during Easter Term. I was able to practice basic tasks such as navigating the public transport system and reading the displays in museums.

Spending several days in Barcelona in particular provided the opportunity to explore further my historical interests in the Spanish Civil War. Whereas one can easily find much public memorialisation and engagement with the past in other European countries which fell under fascist rule at various points in the twentieth century, widespread silence abounds in Spain. Though the country has come far from the ‘Pact of Forgetting’ established as part of the transition to democracy in 1975, the absence of any meaningful state recognition or remembrance of the grave crimes of the past century is staggering, with no dedicated museum or exhibition.

I discovered in Barcelona that in the absence of such official historical recognition, residents—not uncommonly descendants of those who suffered under Franco’s tyranny— have taken it upon themselves to preserve the memory of the victims.

I took part in a half-day walking tour run by British-Irish residents of Barcelona which focuses on the traces of the civil war in the city. Especially interesting were the signs of the struggle hidden around the city, which was marked in the 1930s by both Stalinism and Fascism. Scarcely noticed on La Rambla, the city’s tourist epicentre, is a plaque commemorating Andreu Nin, leader of the Trotskyist POUM executed by the Moscow-aligned Communist Party in 1937. Etched on the side of a church as you enter the Gothic Quarter, and similarly inconspicuous, are the words *Plaça de Miliciá Desconegut* (Square of the Unknown Militant). The marking dates from 1937, commemorating those who went to fight in the Battle of Madrid against fascist forces, but was covered up by Francoist forces and only found again in 2004 when the church walls were cleaned.

Most striking of all was a square which had been bombed in 1936 by Mussolini’s airforce, wrecking many of the buildings and killing tens of orphan children sheltering in the church. This bombing was an early instance of a ‘double-tap’ strike, commonly seen in Syria today, where civilians are first targeted, and then first responders. After fascist victory in 1939, Franco rapidly rebuilt the square, transplanting Gothic facades from elsewhere in the quarter to cover the ruined buildings, importing a fast-growing tree from Brazil, and propagating a lie that the shrapnel damage evident on the Church-front was in fact derived from anti-clerical Republican violence. Many Catalans who took the tour had inherited uncritically Franco’s propagandistic recreation of the square and its past, bringing home the importance both of thinking about history of urban spatial configurations, and, more centrally, of practicing public history where the state fails, or actively frustrates, efforts to keep crucial political memories alive.