



Belchite: a crime scene peopled by the dead and their ghosts

Stéphane Michonneau

► To cite this version:

Stéphane Michonneau. Belchite: a crime scene peopled by the dead and their ghosts. *Geographies of Perpetration. Re-signifying Cultural Narratives of Mass Violence*, Peter Lang, 2021, 978-3-631-81098-9. hal-04300844

HAL Id: hal-04300844

<https://hal.science/hal-04300844>

Submitted on 22 Nov 2023

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

Belchite: a crime scene peopled by the dead and their ghosts

Stéphane Michonneau

IRHiS, UMR 8529, Université de Lille-CNRS

Lying 40 kilometres south-east of Zaragoza, Belchite is a large village in the heart of an area lacking any of the greenery of the Ebro valley: once past the foothills bordering the valley, Belchite inhabits an arid, windswept limestone plateau traversed by narrow creeks. The visitor is struck by the grimness of this semi-arid countryside, further intensified by the devastation: for indeed, Belchite was the scene of a famous battle in the Spanish civil war, where in the summer of 1937 it was at the centre of a furiously-disputed front line. There are various ways in which the wave of violence that struck this village was exceptional: several years of combat leaving much of it in ruins; three waves of repression; the exodus and extreme destitution of its inhabitants; a slow reconstruction marked by the systematic use of forced labour; banishment and exile of many citizens, and economic emigration of others. But what most singles out this case are the visible marks that this violence left on the village—for the ruins were purposely preserved. Belchite is thus the first martyr-town in European history: it is the first of a long list of war ruins preserved after the Second World War, including Oradour-sur-Glane, the Frauenkirche in Dresden, Coventry Cathedral, the *Gedächtniskirche* in Berlin, and others¹.

This case illustrates the complex relationship between a multiple crime scene and the bodies inhabiting it. Firstly, despite the fact that civilians participated in the fighting alongside the soldiery, there were two distinct patterns of mourning notwithstanding the efforts of the Franco regime to confuse the two. Secondly, after the war the dictatorship imposed a dual remembrance regime which ignored its direct adversaries—Republican soldiers—but also the victims of fascist repression. The commemoration of francoist fighters—*Los Caídos*—contrasts with the oblivion of others. Thus the Franco authorities created frustration of two sorts—for the townspeople who strove to recover their dead and keep them out of the commemorative scenario imposed by the dictatorship; and for the families of Republicans, soldiers and civilians, who were unable to reclaim their "ill-interred" dead.

¹ Stéphane Michonneau: *Fue ayer. Belchite: un pueblo español frente a la cuestión del pasado*. Zaragoza: Prensa Universitaria de Zaragoza 2017.

To better understand the tangled web of greatly differing situations it is worth briefly recalling the course of events. The town first fell to the francoist rebels on 18 July 1936. A first wave of repression then engulfed those citizens considered to be on the left, producing an estimated 157 to 300 deaths. At that time the town was on the border of two warring territories: its 3600 inhabitants took refuge with a brigade of around 2000 men. Then a year later, in summer 1937, the Republican army launched a large-scale offensive in Aragon; and after a 14-day siege Belchite was taken by the forces of the legitimate government. At that point there ensued a second wave of repression against the town's 'defenders'. And finally, in spring 1938, Franco's army launched a counter-offensive leading to the definitive occupation of Belchite. The town was 'liberated' on 3 March 1938, followed by a third wave of repression never before experienced by the townspeople.

Suffice it to say for the moment that Belchite was the scene of two distinct kinds of mass violence—that of war and that of repression, whether inflicted by the republican or the francoist side. At first sight the topography of the terror imprinted in this crime scene is extremely complex. And finally, it is worth examining the particular case of the 'ill-interred', whose ghosts still haunt the ruins.

1. Complexity of a crime scene—the mass violence of war and repression.

Although on the ground it is hard to differentiate between the violence of war and the violence of repression, there is a useful analytical tool based on the means of mourning in either case. There is no way now to give an exact count of those who died in Belchite: the total of local citizens and soldiers serving in the town was probably around 2000, that is 20% of the total population. The numbers reported in republican and francoist sources do not coincide and need to be viewed with caution given the respective propaganda efforts².

As for those killed in combat, the siege followed by the town's recovery made it impossible to perform funeral rites. The corpses were gathered in large underground oil presses (*trujales*) which many houses in the town possessed. When these were becoming full, two mass graves were dug, one near the seminary, the other by a side-chapel of the parish church. Civilians

² According to Agencia España, *Partes de guerra*, 6 September 1937, the number of dead left by the rebels was 1500. The count now comes to 1700.

and members of the garrison were bundled together. When the Republicans took the town on 6 September 1937, the sanitary corps gathered the bodies and burned them, along with the dead animals and livestock³: this was recorded by the famous photographer Augustí Centelles (Fig. 1)⁴. The largest of the pyres seems to have been in the town's main square. In the Republican newsreel propaganda, one can also see soldiers holding handkerchiefs to their faces because of the stench (Fig. 2)⁵. The oil presses, however, were left untouched; the sanitary corps simply filled them with quicklime to accelerate decomposition and prevent the spread of epidemics. After the reoccupation of Belchite in 1938, the francoists accused the Republicans of deliberate desecration, following their line of propaganda which equated their enemies with irreligiousness.

Fig. 1 : Augustí Centelles, serie Belchite, Carp. 16, doc. 8, Sept. 1937. © Centro de Documentación de la Memoria Histórica de la Guerra Civil

Fig. 2 : *España al Día*, Comisariat de Propaganda de la Generalitat , 1937, (289) 20/27 (199b). © Filmoteca Española

The fate of the dead from the successive repressions varied: the fate of left-wing Belchite locals in the first wave is still not known. Many of them were taken to Zaragoza and killed in the provincial prisons. Other bodies were collected along thoroughfares, like the former Socialist mayor. In the case of the second wave in September 1937, numerous witnesses agree that the ‘defenders of Belchite’ were taken to an olive grove on the road to Codo and there murdered. In fact, there was a mass grave near a little shrine in Codo, which was opened in 1958: the bodies found there were moved to the shrine of Montserrat in Catalonia, as among them were numerous members of the Carlist and Catalan *Tercio* ‘Virgin of Montserrat’⁶. The third wave of repression that commenced in March 1938 produced two mass graves located within the cemetery perimeter, three kilometres outside the town. There may be as many as 350 bodies buried there. Be it noted that none of Belchite's mass graves has yet been exhumed.

³ *Acracia*, 8 September 1937. See also: "El asalto a Belchite", *El Sol*, 7 september 1937, p. 3.

⁴ Centro de Documentación de la Memoria Histórica de la Guerra Civil, Agustí Centelles, Sept. 1937, series Belchite, Carp. 16, doc. 8 and 44.

⁵ Filmoteca Española, *España al Día*, Comisariat de Propaganda de la Generalitat , 1937, (289) 20/27 (199b). This scene can be found in: *Éclair journal/Gaumont Actualités* , Rollo 22, (365) 77 (Mauve 4981).

⁶ Archivo Histórico Militar de Madrid, Cuartel del Generalísimo, Asuntos Generales, Rollo 1, Leg. 39, Carp. 40. 30.

Thus, a broad section of the population was victim to the violence—soldiers of sundry origins, *Falangistas* and local townspeople, men, women adults and children. However, the experience of Belchite is not representative of the war-driven violence perpetrated throughout the country during the Civil War—it is particular in that the violence was concentrated in a battlefield zone. On the other hand, the violence of repression was highly selective inasmuch as the victims were largely families reputed to be "red". For the latter, the memory of the repression remained and could only survive in intimate family circles. For the victors, this violence was out in the open. The differences between the two types of violence are striking: the manners of interment, the topography of the massacres and mass graves, and the manners of commemoration. While the violence of war touched civilians and soldiers alike, the repression fell only on civilians; the defeated Republican soldiers were held in concentration camps then executed in provincial prisons.

And yet the two forms of massacre did share one common aspect, namely the delocalisation of the dead; in other words, the survivors do not know exactly where their dead are buried. For instance, Francoist sources in the General Enquiry pursued in 1940 attested that 75% of the *Caídos* (people killed on the Francoist side) in Belchite were unidentified at that time⁷. And that is why the search for bodies became obsessive even before the war ended. The same phenomenon occurred around the battlefields of the First World War⁸. Families could not bear the absence of their lost ones' bodies. For exhumation, the families had to obtain a permit from the municipal or military authority, which the latter were incapable of furnishing. To get around this administrative stumbling-block, families sought witnesses to help locate burial sites and bodies. Based on living memory of the events, many families successfully carried out illegal exhumations to be able to inter the bodies in the cemetery, in individual or family tombs⁹. The municipal authority, unable to restrain these initiatives, confined itself to granting the families niches at a reduced price¹⁰. Indeed the enlargement of the municipal cemetery

⁷ Archivo Histórico Nacional (AHN), Fiscalía del Tribunal Supremo, Causa general, FC Causa General, 1423, Exp. 62, "Relación de personas residentes en este término municipal que durante la dominación roja fueron muertas violentamente o desaparecidas y se cree fueron asesinadas", undated. See also, in the same file, the "Declaraciones de testigo".

⁸ Archivo Municipal de Belchite (AMB), Correspondencia, 30 May 1938. See Stéphane Tison: *Comment sortir de la guerre? Deuil, mémoire et traumatisme (1870-1940)*. Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2011, p. 37.

⁹ For example: AHN, Fiscalía del Tribunal Supremo, Causa general, FC Causa General, 1423, Exp. 62, "Declaración de testigo de José Ramos Ortín, 10 December 1940.

¹⁰ AMB, Actas, 16 March 1940 and 30 December 1940.

was one of the first urgent measures undertaken by the new Francoist council, which is somewhat surprising given the extreme distress of the population in 1939.

2. The topography of terror in Belchite

The movement for transfer of the cadavers to the cemetery was an outcome of the privatisation of death, as witnessed today by many epitaphs in Belchite's cemetery (Fig. 3). Privatisation meant normalisation of war deaths by including them in traditional family funeral and burial rites. This phenomenon is so widespread that in Spain there is no national Civil War cemetery other than the ossuary of the Valle de los Caídos, to which we shall return later.

Fig. 3: Epitaphs in Belchite cemetery. © Personal collection.

If cemeteries were reserved for identified bodies, what of the mass graves? These contained heaps of bodies which were unidentified, and in most cases unidentifiable with the technological means of the time. As a result, the local council swiftly commandeered the largest oil press (*trujal*) in the town as a monument to the *Caídos*, even before a nationwide law was enacted for that purpose (Fig. 4)¹¹. In succeeding years this collective tomb became the principal venue for Francoist ceremonies. The ruined town, petrified in its state of destruction, was conceived in its entirety as an immense monument to commemorate the martyrdom of the Spanish nation.

Fig. 4 : Monument to the *Caídos*, Belchite. © Personal collection.

The many ceremonies that followed until the mid-1960s were marked by their emphasis on patriotic, memorialistic and religious themes. Up until 1940 the ceremonies combined tributes in the town and visits to the cemetery 3 km from the town centre, a sign of the emotiveness of the private memorial sites which could not be ignored in the public ceremonies. After 1940 there developed a spatial dissociation between the memorial sites—the cemetery for private mourning, the ruined town for public mourning. The tour of the ruins commenced at a huge wrought-iron cross raised at the centre of the town then proceeded from *trujal* to *trujal*,

¹¹ "Se ha cumplido la solemne promesa del Caudillo de edificar un nuevo Belchite", *El Heraldo de Aragón* , 18 July 1943.

always leaving the most imposing of them till last, now without a detour to the cemetery (Fig. 5). Attendance at the memorial ceremonies was further sustained by the fact that it was divorced from family deaths and centred on spaces where private rituals were meaningless. The Franco regime thus made a great deal out of the ruins, with successions of pilgrimages and processions of all sorts. Even before the war ended, the propaganda ministry's tourist office was contemplating the organisation of war tourism circuits, one of whose highlights was indeed Belchite.

Fig. 5: The cross of the *Caídos*, 30 May 1940, F-33-04250-00016-001© Archivo General de la Administracion,.

It is worth noting that the policy of the Franco regime was thus to keep the commemorative spaces separate. This division was founded on a kind of consensus that the dictatorship exploited: the duly identified dead were privately mourned, while the regime was free to use those lying in the *trujal* to make political capital out of their "sacrifice". Moreover, the right of the families was never put in doubt as soon as a corpse was duly identified. This differs very much from the treatment of the dead after the First World War.

This judgement is confirmed by a decree from Franco's Interior Ministry dated April 1940 laying down the general policy regarding the dead in Spain¹². Firstly, it confirmed the absolute priority of the families when the bodies were identified. They had then to be transferred to the cemetery. If the mass grave was a small one, the bodies were likewise transferred to the cemetery. And finally, if the grave was a large one, the local authority was obliged to enclose the site and consecrate it to avoid 'possible profanations' (presumably by 'wild' exhumations). The enclosed area was treated as a cemetery and came within the classic provisions defined in the 19th century. The owner of an enclosed site of this kind could not claim any compensation. In short, the State provided for a species of retroactive 'cemeterisation' of massacre sites, thus bringing them into the common domain.

In fact the Franco regime had great difficulty in imposing its views on the treatment of civil war dead. While there is no doubting the authoritarian nature of the new regime, it must be said that there were avenues of negotiation between the State and the families, most often benefiting the families. The sources further attest to the strong resistance of the families to the

¹² Orden del Ministerio de Gobernación, "Los sitios donde yacen enterradas víctimas de la revolución marxista serán cerrados y considerados tierra sagrada", *El Heraldo de Aragón*, 4 April 1940.

provisions of the law. Ultimately the regime was forced to admit a broad range of solutions to fit each case—priority for private burials; maintenance of anonymous mass graves; erection of memorial monuments without human remains (monuments to the Fallen); a gigantic ossuary in Valle de los Caídos; and fostering of a personality cult for José Antonio Primo de Rivera, founder of the Falange and raised to the status of a secular saint. The regime clearly had to continually negotiate the dividing line between private devotions and public ceremonies for the war dead. This tentativeness was undoubtedly a result of the tension between the force of individual burial rituals common to western societies from the end of the 19th century and the will of the State to found memorial sites around collective interments¹³.

The most curious aspect of the 1940 law is that while acknowledging the priority of private devotions, it presaged the temporary nature of these provisions; and so from 1940 on, Franco addressed the possibility of transferring bodies from mass graves to the national ossuary at Valle de los Caídos. In 1953 began the process of exhumation of 33 000 mortal remains and their transfer to this single ossuary. Here again there were numerous cases of family resistance¹⁴. Belchite escaped such exhumations inasmuch as the bodies from Codo were transferred to Catalonia.

During the 1960s the regime more or less abandoned its memorial demonstrations, whereafter private devotions finally prevailed. Then again, the regime imposed canons framing the approach to the dead in terms of suffering, martyrdom and sacrifice, in line with the religious climate of the time, but also following the strictures of national-catholicism. In Belchite, the town as a whole was no more than a community of suffering.

In Spain to date, almost 350 mass graves have been exhumed, out of some 2 600 listed by the Spanish Ministry of Justice. But Belchite's mass graves remain untouched¹⁵. Obviously the *trujales* no longer attract the ceremonies of yesteryear; rather it is at the graveyard that the mourning of the war-dead remains most alive. This tends to confirm our earlier conclusion,

¹³ Mireille Gueissaz: La rencontre avec les morts: un rite moderne d'initiation à la vie politique et civique? In Sophie Wahnich (dir.): *Fictions d'Europe. La guerre au musée*. Paris: Éd. des Archives contemporaines, 2002, p. 227-275. See also Mireille Gueissaz: La Grande Guerre et l'impossible inhumation individuelle des soldats français: les ratés d'une tradition nationale consensuelle. In: *Lien social et politiques*, 59, 2008, p. 75-89.

¹⁴ Francisco Ferrándiz: Guerras sin fin: guía para descifrar el Valle de los Caídos en la España contemporánea. In: *Política y Sociedad*, 3/48, 2011, p. 481-500.

¹⁵ According to the CSIC programme "Las políticas de la memoria", directed by Francisco Ferrándiz: <https://politicadelamemoria.org/prensa/>.

See also https://mapadefosas.mjjusticia.es/exovi_externo/CargarInformacion.htm

namely that the privatisation of mourning has continued to intensify, so that Spanish cemeteries have become intermediate places where traditional ties of community solidarity live among modern political rituals (Fig. 6).

Fig 6 : Map of mass graves in Belchite. © : SIPCA, Gobierno de Aragón.

Legend: Francoist common graves ; Republican common graves

3. The "ill-interred".

In Spain, the dead are not settled: while the *Caídos* were partly exhumed for transfer to the Valle de los Caídos until as late as 1983, exhumation of the Republican dead began in the early 1970s. This tendency has now seen immense growth. The identification of places where Republicans were massacred has become a central issue.

The policy of the Franco regime vis-à-vis the dead totally excluded Republicans, who were thus condemned to a *damnatio memoriae*. In 1941, the mayor of Belchite wrote cynically that as far as he knew there were no bodies of Republicans in the municipality, whether buried collectively or individually!¹⁶ Obviously no Republican family was in a position to claim anything whatsoever... The official denial is thus revealing.

The fact is that to date we have little information about the Republican dead¹⁷. According to the log of operations of the Republican Army, an estimated 150 Republican soldiers died in Belchite¹⁸. These were generally repatriated by the sanitary corps or else buried at the battlefield. At this time we are still largely ignorant of the locations of the Republican dead, except for the mass graves from the third wave of repression, which lie, as said, within the contours of the municipal cemetery.

¹⁶ AHN, Fiscalía del Tribunal Supremo, Causa general, FC Causa General, 1423, Exp. 62, Letter of 4 February 1941.

¹⁷ Soldiers on the rebel side were buried with a glass bottle containing details of their identity. See Queralt Solé i Barjau: *Inhumados en el Valle de los Caídos. Los primeros traslados desde la provincia de Madrid*. In *Hispania Nova*, 9, 2009, <http://hispanianova.rediris.es/9/articulos/9a009.pdf>.

See also AGMA, L8 R122 C100, n. 42. A decree of 22 January 1937 ordered that: "Burials of those killed in action shall be performed as far as possible between 24 and 48 h after decease, having taken all care to assure the occurrence of death. Burials shall be carried out in the closest cemetery to the place of death, if this is not too far from the battlefield or the site of the accident".

¹⁸ AGC, Salamanca, Fondos Incorporados, Caja 1438, Carp. 26, "Diario de Operaciones. Belchite, del 27-8-37 a 17-9-37.

For the vast majority of Republican families, then, the civil war ultimately became a war without corpses. Many in Belchite knew perfectly well that there were numerous Republican bodies in the neighbourhood, but none could lay claim to them to give them a proper burial. Nonetheless, families privately kept their memory alive and their pain remained. In 2011 for example, among the ruins of Belchite I discovered this epitaph:

Joan Saumell Casanovas
L'Espluga Francolí
19-4-1920
Belchite
19-4-1937

The coincidence of the birth date of Joan Saumell Casanovas and the presumed date of his death, both on 19 April, clearly indicates that the exact circumstances of his demise are not known. The family who left this memorial probably only knew one thing—when Joan died, he was 17 years old. The fact that an epitaph should have been written on a wall in the ruins 74 years after Joan's death bears witness to the vividness of memories in some Republican families. But there again, the fact of choosing a simple piece of wall shows that the delocalisation of death is a common experience.

In fact the lack of any exhumation in Belchite has had some unexpected consequences—the ruined town has become renowned for the manifestation of the 'ill-interred' through ghostly apparitions, known as psychophonies. Psychophonies are sound recordings of past voices from the civil war. The phenomenon emerged in 1986 when a popular Spanish TV presenter, Carlos Bogdanich, recorded by chance what he at once interpreted as ghost voices: "Help!", "We're all going to die!", "There's only one left alive!", "They haven't come back for nothing", etc. Bogdanich and the many others who followed also recorded sounds of explosions, gunshots, planes, etc. Most of these recordings were made at night in the town's parish church, the site of one of the mass graves.

In 2004, the Belchite psychophonies came to public notice thanks to a TV programme, Milenio 3, aired by the nationwide radio network SER. The same programme also reported a UFO landing. In 2011, another TV programme, Cuarto Milenio, devoted a special edition to Belchite: "Operation Belchite". The town ruins were scanned by micro-cameras attached to drones. Dogs trained for avalanche body searches were mobilised. Series of earlier psychophony recordings were played over and over. Today there are still several thousand websites devoted to the Belchite psychophonies. A group of amateur specialists was formed,

known as the Bélmez parapsychological research group.. In 2008, Óscar Parra de Carrizosa directed a fictional drama very much in the vein of the American TV series *X-Files*, *El Expediente Belchite* [Belchite Files]. Screened in 2013, the film tells the story of some young reporters whose work is disturbed by a series of paranormal events.

In Belchite, the only way the dead are raised is as ghosts. Psychophony producers adduce extraordinary faculties for establishing contact with the dead of Belchite. These modern visionaries claim to pass on messages from deceased persons the circumstances of whose demise are unknown. This relatively recent phenomenon needs to be contextualised within the long history of supernatural apparitions. In the 1940s, there were numerous reports of sightings of virgins around civil war remains¹⁹. The upsurge of phenomena of this kind is not surprising. Jay Winter described their principal features in the aftermath of the First World War²⁰. This British historian considered that apparitions should be understood as an eschatological ritual in the context of societies undergoing a process of secularisation, wherever the traditional rituals seem insufficient to make sense of mass deaths. These interesting conclusions are drawn from immediate post-war examples, but in the case of Belchite the ghosts began to appear 80 years after the events!

It might be argued that in post-war Spain the spiritual framework espoused by the catholic religion was sufficiently ingrained to allow a place for supernatural phenomena. The apparitions of the virgin are a case in point. Hence, the lagging secularisation of Spanish society at the time of the democratic transition could explain the equal backwardness of psychophonies in the 1980s. But even viewed like that, the latter are hard to explain. Two other considerations present themselves:

On the one hand, the post-modern interpretation of the Spanish civil war places the victims rather than the heroes at the heart of the conflict. The tendency to view the civil war as blind violence inflicted on *all* civilians no matter their leanings suggests that the population as a whole was a victim of the war and bore no responsibility. From this standpoint, the attention devoted to the victims of bombings, like that of Guernica, is particularly significant. The story of Belchite thenceforth entered the roll of places that suffered grievous catastrophies, from

¹⁹ Marlène Albert-Llorca: Les apparitions et leur histoire. In: *Archives de sciences sociales des religions*, 116, October-December 2001, p. 53-66.

²⁰ Jay Winter: *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning. The Great War in European Cultural History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Guernica to Sarajevo by way of the Blitz, Hiroshima or Nagasaki. In short, the story of Belchite has come to be reinterpreted in the light of a history not its own—that of fascist bombings of a Basque town, carpet bombing in the Second World War, nuclear bombing...

On the other hand, the psychophonies reveal that manners of relating to the dead have become increasingly intimate, a continuation of the privatisation we have described. The manner of expressing mourning is intimate here in the sense that the dead whisper in our ears. Psychophonies establish a personal relationship with the dead, as if we were able to speak with them and listen to their sorrows. Conversation with ghosts thus bears witness to a memory that is not only grievous and painful but also individual. Hence, the multiplication of paranormal manifestations may be seen as stemming from relegation of the war to the individual, private domain and the confinement of the events to the most intimate sphere. Spanish people never felt the civil war so close as when they came to believe that they could speak with their lost ones. All in all, the civil war dead are still very much present, if in a different way from the immediate post-war.

In his work on the Vietnam war the anthropologist Heonik Kwon has shown that dialoguing with ghosts builds up an affective tie that serves to return the dead to the land of the living, particularly those who were shut out of the public sphere in the wake of the tragedies of war²¹. In the Spanish case, the banishment of the Republican dead fuelled a sense collective guilt, absorbed by Republican families, vis-à-vis those who died far from the town and could never be repatriated; and vis-à-vis those who died in the town and could never be honoured. As in the myth of Antigone, the Republican dead were banished and no-one was ever able to lay claim to them. Interacting with their ghosts is a way of releasing this tension.

Conclusion

In Spain, family memories and the remembrance policies promoted by the dictatorship diverge: the social memories of the war retained by the families run counter to the remembrance policies of the Franco and then the democratic regime, so that there exists in Spain a typically dual structure of remembrance. The appearance of ghosts provokes a sudden

²¹ Heonik KWON: *Ghosts of War in Vietnam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, p. 159-161.

questioning of the way the dead are normally perceived and illustrates the variety of systems of mourning in society. However, the other side of the coin is when social memories take precedence over past political approaches: where the former prevail, memories of the war can only produce heterogeneity and difference. Out of the turmoil of the suffering, even if shared, there can be no common interpretation of the civil war. In this respect, between the democratic myth of reconciliation and the variegated discourse of victimisation spread among individuals and families there has developed a chasm that only the irrational belief in the 'return of the dead' seems capable of bridging. The appearance of entities who 'speak to us' persists wherever silence reigns.

Fig. 7: *Reconstrucción*, no 1, Apr. 1940. Cover.

Fig. 8: Jaime Cinca, Guillermo Allánegui Burriel, Ángel Archilla Navarro: *Belchite. La agonía de un pueblo*. Zaragoza: Gobierno de Aragón/ Departamento de Educación y Deporte, 2008, p. 120.

Finally, the story of Belchite could well be encapsulated in a comparison of two chronologically distant images. The first is from 1940. This is a photomontage on the cover of the journal *Reconstrucción* of April 1940 (Fig. 7)²². There we can see the shape of the bell-tower of Belchite's parish church destroyed by the war. But superimposed on that we can make out the outline of the tower before the war. The second tower appears there like a phantom of the lost town. The second image is from 2011: it is another photomontage made by the author of a book on the history of Belchite, Jaime Cinca (Fig. 8)²³. The work is a superimposition of two negatives: one black and white from the post-war, and one in colour taken in 2011 from the exact same viewpoint. The ruins today, in colour, seem to be overshadowed by the outlines of the elder houses, in black and white. The old town stands out as a phantasmagoric presence. These images, from opposite ends of the intervening time, speak of loss, but also of the enigmatic presence of an *intranquil* past in our present.

²² *Reconstrucción*, 1 April 1940, cover.

²³ Jaime Cinca, Guillermo Allánegui Burriel, Ángel Archilla Navarro: *Belchite. La agonía de un pueblo*. Zaragoza: Gobierno de Aragón/ Departamento de Educación y Deporte, 2008.