The Archaeology of the Spanish Civil War
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Introduction
My project investigates how the violence of the Spanish Civil War—one of the earliest examples of a total war—inscribed itself onto the material world, the landscapes and objects within which life is lived. In total war contexts, violence is not only experienced by combatants; rather, as political scientist Anthony Burke has recently argued, “war and existence are intertwined” for all people living through a total war. Using this assertion as the center point around which my analysis rotates, I seek to demonstrate how the meaning of materials and places changes as a result of violence.

Site and Background
The Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) began as a military coup with General Francisco Franco’s Nationalist troops wresting control of Spain from a democratically elected Republican communist government. Belchite, located in Aragon 28 miles from Zaragoza, saw intense fighting in 1936-37. The Abraham Lincoln Brigade, a group of American volunteers, supported the Republican troops who fought to hold off Nationalist advances. Soldiers and civilians withstood several sieges before the town fell to Franco.

Belchite was completely destroyed by the struggle. After the war, Franco built a new town of Belchite directly next to the old one, and declared that the ruins of Old Belchite would stand forever as a monument to the power of his “New Spain”.

Objects Transformed
Numerous sources, like the quote from Alah Bessie, an American journalist and volunteer brigadier to the right, noted the large amounts of cologne bottles the Spanish soldiers carried with them on the Aragon front. In fact, during survey at Mediana, an area approx. 10 miles from Belchite where fighting occurred on and off throughout 1937, we did find a large number of cologne bottles—clearly identifiable by their brilliant purple glass. While often understood by most historians to represent, at worst, the vanity of the soldier, even in the trenches on the front lines, feels incapable of facing the enemy.

“We were near the front line now, near enough to smell the characteristic smell of war—in my experience a smell of excrement and decaying food.”
—George Orwell

There is a higher density of cologne bottle glass at the front lines, as opposed to in communication trenches or areas further away from the heaviest fighting. The map at left indicates the mere 25 meters that separated the Francoist and Republican trenches in August of 1937, a month of intense heat and even more intense fighting on the desert plains of Aragon.

To Orwell’s statement we might add that, besides decaying food and excrement, the trenches also would have smelled of death. Fighting was so intense on the front lines at Mediana that the bodies of dead soldiers were left to rot outside the trenches. In such an environment, having large amounts of cologne to mask the awful smells of war would have made it slightly more comfortable for the soldiers living and fighting here. A “cosmetic product” becomes a tool of warfare.

New Uses for Old Places
Our main excavation site was next to the Seminario Menor (the Minor Seminary) of Old Belchite. A centuries-old religious structure, the Seminario was located less than a mile from and within sight of Belchite, at the base of a low hill crisscrossed by Francoist trenches.

Our team uncovered latrines in the yard of the Seminario, initially thought to be associated with a temporary POW camp known to have been located there following the war. Instead, the excavation of the latrines, a survey of the ruined Seminario, and the survey and excavations of the trenches on the hill just above speak to a different use. Nationalists, not Republican prisoners, left the most significant material traces.

Making Things Public
Drawing attention to the material aspects of violence is not just research archaeology—it’s highly political. Archaeological data is necessary because the Spanish government still tightly controls access to its Civil War archives and neutral information about the war is difficult to access for the general public. With an estimated 500,000 soldiers killed during or after the war and 100,000+ civilians “disappeared”, the war was a mass traumatic event. Yet open discussion of this historical violence is still largely taboo—there have been no Truth and Reconciliation committees, no formal reckoning of the war and years of fascism. As excavatory practice, archaeology contributes to a democratization of memory by bringing to light materials and places related to the violence of the Spanish Civil War that have otherwise been obscured or officially “forgotten”.

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The large number of personal artifacts—inkwells, combs, toothpaste tubes—and the relatively low amount of ammunitions suggests that these latrines were part of a more permanent military installation constructed during the war. Graffiti inside the ruined Seminario, along with the nature of the objects recovered, demonstrates that this was a Francoist base. This religious structure was transformed from a placid theological seminary into a tactical base from which the Fascists assaulted the town and citizens of Belchite.

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