The Movement for the Recovery of Historical Memory (MRHM) is an informal cluster of associations, political parties, volunteers, historians, and publicists, among others that has sought to raise public awareness in Spain about the supposedly forgotten aspects of the Francoist repression. The MRHM has called for both legislation and action that will help to correct this neglect. One of the main tenets of this movement is that Spanish society, for a number of reasons, does not know or does not want to know about the terrible events wrought by the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship. One of MRHM’s projects gathering significant attention, especially outside Spain, is the detection, excavation, and identification of human remains from the Francoist repression. The case of the internationally renowned poet Federico García Lorca, executed in the summer of 1936 by the pro-Franco forces and buried somewhere not far from the city of Granada, is the most well-known case among these. While MRHM’s activities suggest a promising path of inquiry it must be added that, in general, the movement has neglected to analyze or has expressly refused to deal with the consequences of Republican (left-wing) repression during the war, and of the violent actions of the postwar anti-Francoist guerrillas (also called maquis).

The public impact of the MRHM has been growing since the late 1990s. While the economic recession that began to affect Spain in 2008 has dimmed its public presence, people have not forgotten the heated discussions of not long ago and the excavation of mass graves has not stopped. On the contrary, they continue at a steady pace. But as Spanish society deals with rising unemployment and economic hardship, a practice of “remembering” the past, and particularly the horrors of the Civil War and the Francoist dictatorship, seems to have greatly diminished in the public’s attention. To an extent, it seems as if the topic of historical memory is suffering from a certain social fatigue. This may then be an appropriate moment to reflect on the balance of MRHM’s activities in the past decade.

The main objective of this chapter is to situate the origins and evolution of the MRHM within a wider narrative, both intellectually and
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geographically. This narrative encompasses the European experience of dealing with the memory of Fascism in particular and with the legacy of political violence, the so-called European Civil War that ravaged the continent in the interwar period 1919–39. Too often, the Spanish case is seen out of the international context, “proving” that Spain today still is not normal. In reality, historical memory in Spain is just a local version, with very specific situations and cases, of an ongoing international revision of both the role of politics and history in society. This revision has created what we call a crisis in the postwar consensus on historical memory. With this broad perspective in mind, I will first explain the evolution of the concept of anti-Fascism in post-1945 Europe. The reason for this is that both the language and the reasoning of the MRHM are heavily indebted to this anti-Fascist tradition. The Italian case will be described because I believe that the evolution of that country’s historiography clearly indicate the venues and risks of trying to build a new historical memory. Second, I will identify the developments in and the connections between both recent Spanish history and historiography. Third, I will demonstrate how and why the MRHM emerged, as well as its achievements and shortcomings. Finally, this chapter will offer venues for a future debate by exploring questions such as the relationship between history and historical memory, ownership of the past, the purpose of remembering, and how we relate to both victims and perpetrators. The overall objective is to show the need to develop a new paradigm for historical analysis in the study of political violence based on humanistic, democratic, and universal values.

Anti-Fascism and Postwar European Identity

The inconvenient past of the anti-Fascist movement started in the mid-1970s. While this happened in many parts of Europe, developments in Italian historiography have been most significant in terms of its proximity and relevance to the Spanish case. The contrast between the Italian and the Spanish examples shows that in spite of different political circumstances the evolution of both their historiographies shares a common trend toward a more critical view of the Left’s own record. This includes an evolution toward a more humanistic and democratic approach, while it also coincides with a revival of old Right-wing clichés that have been trivialized by politicians and propagandists.

A critical approach to the Left’s historical record began in Italy rather suddenly. In a very complete 1975 survey article on the Italian anti-Fascist