

AMALIA PÉREZ-JUEZ GIL, JOSÉ LUIS GARCÍA RUIZ,  
PEDRO RODRÍGUEZ SIMÓN, JOSU ARAMBERRI

THE REMAINS OF THE ITALIAN PRESENCE  
IN LAS MERINDADES, BURGOS, DURING  
THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

INTRODUCTION

Between December 1936 and the first months of 1939, the Italian National Fascist Party sent around 75,000 men to Spain in support of the rebel faction<sup>1</sup>. This participation violated the Non-Intervention Pact signed by Italy itself in August 1936, and it was carried out with the acquiescence of Western democracies. Italian troops were sent, among other reasons, in response to the various political and ideological objectives of Mussolini's imperialist foreign policy plans in the Mediterranean<sup>2</sup>. Finally, the intervention followed the multiple contacts that had already been made during the Second Republic between Rome and groups related to the 1936 coup d'état<sup>3</sup>.

The army sent was called *Corpo Truppe Volontarie* (CTV) and was composed of "volunteers" and professional soldiers organized into ground, artillery, cavalry, and infantry units, many of whom had participated in the Abyssinian campaign<sup>4</sup>. CTV also had all the necessary quartermaster services, transmissions, health, engineering, military chaplains, and even a topo-cartographic section for the preparation of military maps<sup>5</sup>. Along with the land army, Mussolini sent more than 750 planes from the Italian Regia Aeronautica, known in Spain as *Aviación Legionaria*, and ships from the Regia Marina,

---

<sup>1</sup> J. Coverdale, *La intervención fascista en la Guerra Civil española*. Alianza Editorial, Madrid, 1979; I. Sanz, *El fracaso del éxito: Italia en la guerra de España*, "Espacio, Tiempo y Forma", Serie V. Historia Contemporánea 5 (1992), pp. 105-128. Cfr. <https://doi.org/10.5944/etfv.5.1992.2754> (visto il 21 febbraio 2023).

<sup>2</sup> R. De Felice, *Mussolini, il Duce. Lo Stato totalitario 1936-1940*, Einaudi, Torino, 1981; D. Vaquero, *Credero, obbedire, combattere: fascistas italiani en la Guerra Civil Española*, Mira Editores, Zaragoza, 2007.

<sup>3</sup> J.L. Alcofar, *CTV. Los legionarios italianos en la Guerra Civil Española*, Ed. Dopesa, Barcelona, 1972.

<sup>4</sup> J.L. García Ruiz, *La participación italiana en el Frente Norte*, Editorial Librucos, Torrelavega, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> L. Urteaga, F. Nadal, J.I. Muro, *La cartografía del Corpo di Truppe Volontarie, 1937-1939*, "Hispania", 62/1, (2002), n. 210, pp. 283-298.

for support by sea. The Italian intervention, the largest of all international aid, contributed to the development of the war and the final victory of the rebels<sup>6</sup>.

The first action of the CTV in Spain was the taking of Malaga in February 1937. The CTV had not yet been organized into divisions, but had about 10,000 men divided into nine operational battalions as well as powerful artillery. The advance of its columns equipped with automatic machine guns and flamethrowers turned out to be an easy walk in front of the abandoned Republican army of Malaga and only 74 deaths, 221 wounded and two disappeared were recorded<sup>7</sup>. Their second participation was in the Battle of Guadalajara in March 1937 where, by their own desire, they emerged as protagonists. His idea was to propose a *guerra celere* that would put them at the gates of Madrid in four days. They acted with four divisions, *Dio lo Vuole*, *Penne Nere*, *Fiamme Nere*, and *Littorio*, the latter made up entirely of professional soldiers, in addition to two flag groups. The sum of men provided by the *Milizia Volontaria Sicurezza Nazionale* (MVSN) numbered 35,222, but undoubtedly also had unquantified support personnel. This time, the casualties were greater: 415 dead, 1,969 wounded, and 164 missing<sup>8</sup>. In addition to tactical errors, such as not having adequate cartography or not having a weather forecast for air support, psychological errors were present; according to the person in charge, General Roatta, «One of the most serious defects of his troops was not hating the enemy<sup>9</sup>.» Decisions were made; apart from dismissing General Roatta, which resulted in around 3,700 soldiers being repatriated and another 3,000 being moved to the rearguard.<sup>10</sup>

The defeat in the battle of Guadalajara dealt a blow to the CTV and meant a reorganization of the troops. Following the Salas Larrazábal brothers «on March 22 [1937], after the failure of Guadalajara, Franco summoned Mola to Salamanca and finally gave in to the repeated requests of summoned General Mola to Salamanca and then requests of Mola, Kindelán and Vigón, and decided to forget about Madrid, where the grapes were green, to pour all their war effort into Vizcaya»<sup>11</sup>. The Italians were sent north to reinforce this front and the topo-cartographic section was installed in Vitoria in May 1937.

---

<sup>6</sup> J. Rodrigo, *La guerra fascista. Italia en la Guerra Civil española, 1936-1939*. Alianza Editorial. Madrid, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> L. Gelli, *Fuoco. Cronache legionarie della insurrezione antibolscevica di Spagna*. Tipografia Commerciale. Pistoia, 1940, p. 47.

<sup>8</sup> Gelli, *Fuoco*, cit., p. 61

<sup>9</sup> P. Corral, *Desertores. La Guerra Civil que nadie quiere contar*, Randon House Mondadori, Barcelona, 2007, p. 397.

<sup>10</sup> J.L. Alcofar, *CTV*, cit.

<sup>11</sup> R. Salas Larrazábal, *Historia general de la Guerra de España*. Ediciones Rialp, Madrid, 1986, p. 205.



Fig. 1 - The landscape of the Merindades region and one of the rocks with engravings made by members of the CTV.

#### ITALIANS IN THE NORTH FRONT

The CTV's participation in the Northern Front was delayed for various reasons. The international impact of the bombing of the civilian population of Durango (March 31, 1937) and Guernica (April 26, 1937), carried out by the German Condor Legion and the Italian Legionary Aviation, caused the three Italian divisions located in the Merindades to remain as spectators in the taking of Vizcaya. When Bilbao fell on June 19, 1937, the rebels' offensive strategy was to continue westward, through Cantabria and Asturias, but the Republic prepared some maneuvers to divert resources, the most important being the Battle of Brunete, Madrid, in July of 1937. The definitive offense of the rebel side in the north, known as the Battle of Santander, did not begin until August 13 in the west by the Navarra Brigades with air support from the Condor Legion, and on August 14 in the east by part of the CTV with the support of the Italian Legionary Aviation.

As previously mentioned, after the defeat in Guadalajara, the CTV arrived in the Merindades de Burgos with its honor wounded. It was organized into three divisions: *Fiamme Nere*, *Littorio* and *XXIII de Marzo*. The *Fiamme Nere* division traveled through the Madrid-Irún and Santander-Mediterraneo railway lines to Briviesca, Poza de la Sal, Oña, and Trespaderne in early May 1937. On an unspecified date, the *Littorio* division, made up of professional soldiers and equipped with means of self-transport, gradually positioned itself in the Montes de la Peña and Sierra Salvada, threatening the Valle de Mena and the areas of Álava, Arziniega, and Amurrio. The two groups of flags, which totaled around 1,800 men, were located east of the *Littorio* division, next to Berberana and towns towards Vitoria where the CTV General Staff was located.

Over the course of those months, the Italian soldiers, located in Las Merindades, dedicated themselves to the tasks of quartered troops: instruction, marches, battle order, practices, and various maneuvers. As reflected in the hundreds of photographs preserved in the Guglielmo Sandri Collection in Bolzano, Italy, soldiers impatiently or patiently waited on a relatively inactive front that offered volunteers plenty of free time. After a first period without intervention, the troops were moved towards the new objective: Santander. The *Littorio* division was located between different districts of Medina de Pomar and Merindad de Castilla la Vieja. The *Fiamme Nere* division took the most advanced positions against the Spanish Republican Army in Las Merindades of Sotoscueva and Valdeporres, plus some towns in the Valdebezana Valley.

In general, poor air cover and few artillery pieces made the front relatively stable in terms of ground advance. The army used hand bombs, rifles, and bayonets to combat the enemy. When the so-called Battle of Santander began on August 13 and 14, 1937, German and Italian aviation teams proved to be key factors. Until the Battle of Santander in August 1937, the Italians had not participated in any combat, or skirmish in this area and had only suffered six casualties: one in Castrobarro, one in Quintanilla de Pienza, one in Torme, one in Cigüenza and two in Villalaín<sup>12</sup>. The last two drowned in the Ebro River when they were going to fill the cistern with water, and it is possible that the rest were also due to various accidents and stray bullets.

The estimated death toll in the battle of Santander accounts for 30 officers and 456 soldiers<sup>13</sup>. In general, cemeteries were improvised where a significant number of Italian combatants fell. In towns where there were blood hospitals, in the cases of Villarcayo and Oña, wounded soldiers who died days later were buried.

## VESTIGES OF THE ITALIAN PRESENCE IN THE MERINDADES REGION

On a relatively stable front, the members of the CTV had time to leave their mark on the territory they occupied. As mentioned, in addition to the typical military constructions of a front, remains of engravings and graffiti are still in fairly good condition. They were made on stone, either in buildings of the localities or in rocks of the adjoining areas. We present below a sample of this legacy, with a representative selection of it. The methodology used for this study consists of the bibliographical emptying on the Italian intervention in the area (North Front), the systematic identification of all the material vestiges (graffiti and engravings), and their geolocation. This information has been entered into a database to draw conclusions such as the

---

<sup>12</sup> Vaquero, *Credere, obbedire, combattere*, cit.

<sup>13</sup> Gelli, *Fuoco*, cit., p. 115.



Fig. 2 - Region of Las Merindades, in Burgos, northern Spain, where the CTV gathered in the summer of 1937.

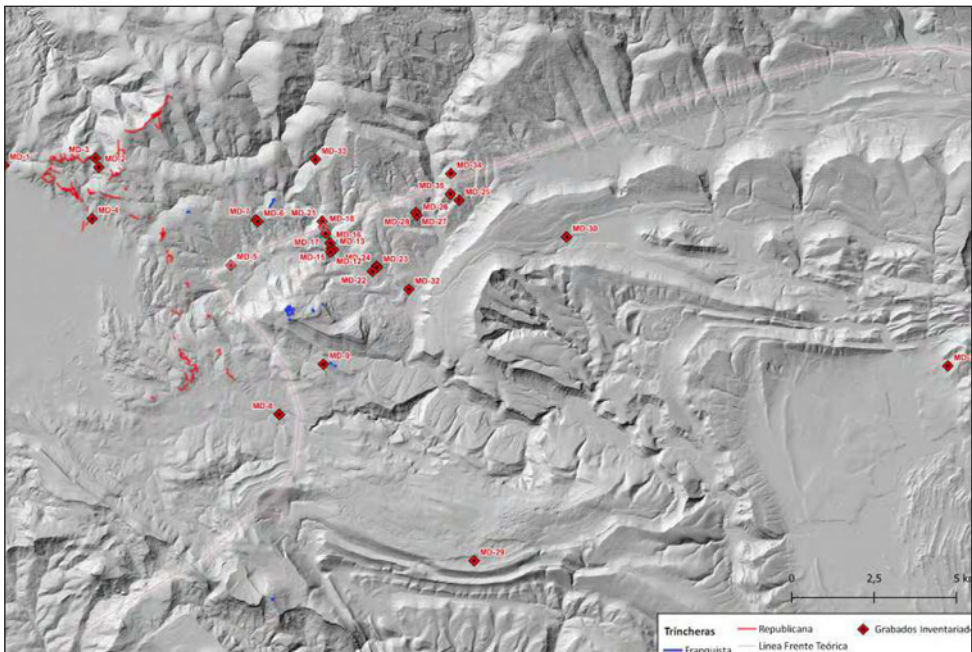


Fig. 3 - Location of places with graffiti or engravings made by the Italian soldiers that we have documented during 2022.



Fig. 4 - One of the engravings found during survey. As shown in the image, some of them are covered by vegetation and in process of deterioration.

location of the engravings as well as their relationship with the battle fronts, repeated messages and themes, and the possibility of identifying the authors. The fieldwork has been done through a sweep of the area and direct access to those where the vegetation or the property allowed it. This record has also been measured, described, and photographed. Finally, interviews have been carried out and conversations have been held with the residents of the area who still remember the Italian intervention and/or have heard about this intervention from their relatives. In this article we do not want to present all the data collected, but rather a selective sample of them, highlighting the urgent need to protect and preserve this important historical legacy. The involvement of both public institutions and citizen cooperation is vital to guarantee the safeguarding and preservation of fragile remains threatened with destruction for various reasons (construction, public works, or natural causes). Without knowledge of the remains, it is difficult to count on one or the other.

## ENGRAVINGS

The engravings can be found both on buildings in towns and on rocks in the surrounding battlefields. The majority of these engravings are located in the geographical area where the *Fiamme Nere* division was located two months prior to the Battle of Santander. They correspond to the northwestern half of the Merindad de Valdeporres town hall (about 60 km<sup>2</sup>). In the cases of Ahedo de las Pueblas, Robredo de las Pueblas, and Soncillo, their distances from the Republican trenches is barely two kilometers. Other engravings are in places of passage, that were necessary to control, or at high positions where surveillance was exercised. As for the nearby fields, in the mountains surrounding the aforementioned towns, symbols and phrases are much more monumental and of higher quality than those that appear on buildings. Surely, these engravings and graffiti were executed with greater creative freedom and more availability of time.

The sampling carried out reveals the repetition of a series of phrases and messages that reflect its ideological and propagandistic mission. An example of the most repeated sentences or words are: W IL DUCE, W ITALIA, DUCE A NOI, DUX, PNF, ANO XV, CARROCCIO, III BTT, and FIAMME NERE.

Apart from words, pictograms and images are rather common: Mussolini's head, fascist symbols, fasces, swastikas, yoke and arrows, or imperial eagles, among others. We have also documented initials and the whole names of the *legionari*, which we are researching in collaboration with the Museo Storico della Guerra del Rovereto.

The volunteers who participated in the CTV came from different backgrounds and enlisted for different reasons. Many did it for money, others for ideology, and others for *force majeure*. Half of their salary was given to them in pesetas for their expenses in Spain and the other half in lire to the person designated by them in Italy. Apart from their desire for monetary compensation, most of the soldiers upheld the fascist ideology and wanted to fight against communism<sup>14</sup>.

As mentioned, most of the graffiti, petroglyphs, and bas-reliefs exposed in the previous paragraphs, in addition to the Pyramid of the Italians, reflect this ideological motivation and carry a propagandistic and educational message. They also represent the cosmogony of the time, in which Italy was the imperialist power whose mission was to impose its messianic political system and extol the figure of the sole leader. Some of the repeated phrases are: ROMA CAPUT MUNDI, EUROPA SARA FASCISTA or FASCISTIZZADA, DIO LO VUOLE, and SE NON VINCERE NON SI TORNA. The motto of the CTV was clear: «Credere, obbedire, combattere» (motto of the *Littorio* division).

---

<sup>14</sup> E. Ludwig, *Conversaciones con Mussolini*, Editorial Juventud, Barcelona, 1979.



Fig. 5 - Examples of the engravings documented in 2022.

During the months of Italian presence in Las Merindades, the officers seized the best houses in the towns to stay at, while the troops did so placed tents of four in the meadows looking for soft soil. We know some of the members of the CTV from the memoirs they wrote sometime later. For example, the volunteer Alessandro Bonezzi<sup>15</sup>, after experiencing the failure of Guadalajara with the Flag Group, ended up in Fresno de Losa.

The volunteers rotated through lookout posts. The dagger and bayonet traces in the documented petroglyphs in some cases prove the same authorship, even if it was in different positions. In others, especially the bas-reliefs, the precision and quality of the

<sup>15</sup> A. Bonezzi. *Il diario del nonno fascista*, Robin, Torino, 2006.





Fig. 6 - Left: photograph from the Museo della Guerra Archive showing five members of the CTV engraving their names, along with fascist symbols, in the mountains of Las Merindades. Right: same rock found in 2022 and its state of preservation.

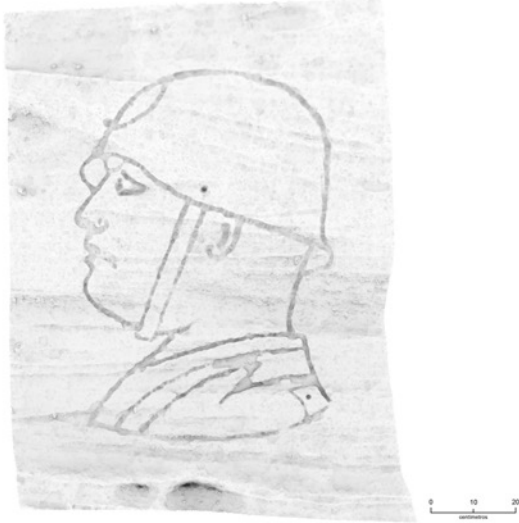
work can only be explained if they were made by professional stonemasons, which is not surprising given the heterogeneous origin of the volunteers.

PHOTOGRAPHS, LETTERS, AND DIARIES

The Merindades region has changed very little over the past 80 years. If anything, cultivated fields, buildings, and villages have been abandoned. The loss of population has also influenced the lack of maintenance of paths and roads. However, recognition of the places where the events took place is still possible. We have started a collaboration with different institutions and individuals that have provided many documents and photographs which have helped identify the locations of engravings and the movement of the soldiers of the CTV during the summer of 1937. Among these institutions, the Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra in Rovereto has the largest archive, with letters, photographs, and personal objects donated by the relatives of those who fought in Spain.

These documents have also allowed us to reconstruct the front during the summer of 1937: a relatively stable front, with hardly any offensives and with the CTV volunteers awaiting orders or the resolution of events beyond their control. Letters, photographs, and maps along with field surveys and archaeological excavations will allow us to know more about this crucial moment of the Spanish Civil War.

**MD-13. Dorante**



**MD-14. Dorante**

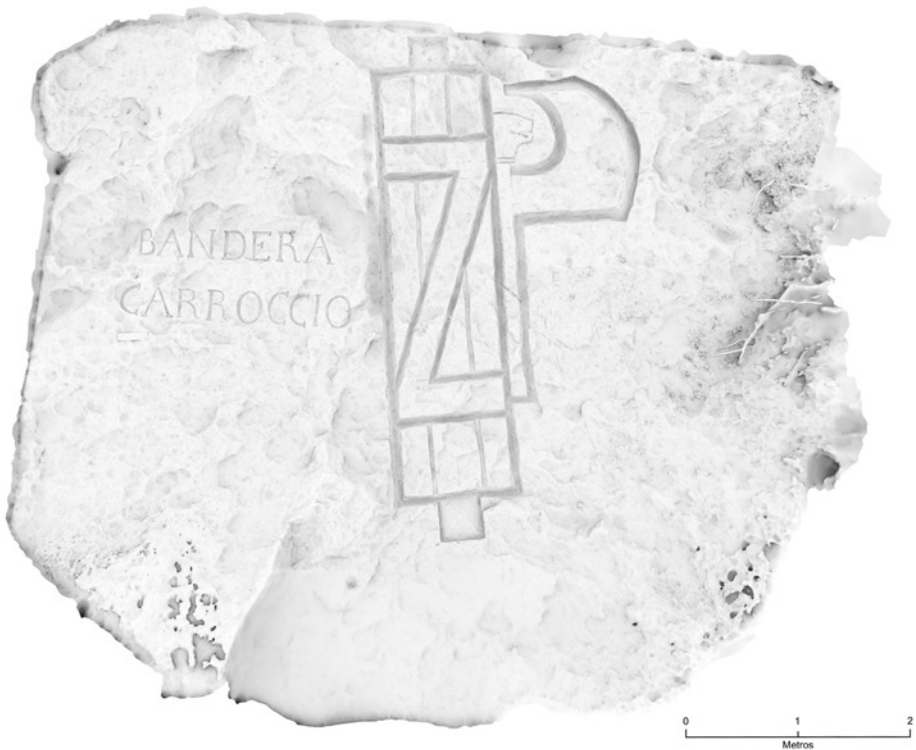


Fig. 7 - Photographs treated with a special filter to identify marks or traits not visible with a naked eye.

## MEMORIALS OF THE ITALIAN PRESENCE

The Italian presence in the area – and throughout the country – was used at the end of the war for propaganda purposes. Different memorials were built during the dictatorship to honor the nearly 4,000 Italians who lost their lives in Spain during the Civil War. The Franco regime took advantage of this circumstance to elevate them to the category of quasi-martyrs, acknowledging them with hero honors and building monuments dedicated to their memory. This is the case of the Ossuary Monument in the *Puerto del Escudo*, on the N-623 Burgos-Santander Road, popularly known as the Pyramid of the Italians.



Fig. 8 - Left: a member of the CTV in front of the Palacio de los Velasco in Rozas (Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra, Rovereto). The same building in 2022 showing the abandonment of many locations of the region.

The idea of building the pantheon came from a lieutenant of the Corps of Engineers, Attilio Radic, who, before the end of the war, proposed the idea of gathering the remains of the Italians in a tribute pantheon. The project was conceived in 1938, and construction began in the spring of 1939. Inside the pyramid, 360 columbariums were intended to house the exhumed remains of the components of the troops, while the basement was reserved for fallen officers. A cross was placed outside for each casualty. The monument was inaugurated on the same date as the second anniversary of the taking of Santander.

## THE CURRENT (UN)PROTECTION OF THE ITALIAN REMAINS FROM THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

The Italian intervention during the Civil War in Las Merindades has thus left a deep mark on the landscape, beyond the construction of trenches, forts, and other recognizable defensive elements. It is a large collection of engravings and graffiti that reflect, among others, the state of the front and the ideology of the CTV. Part of this heritage is still preserved, sometimes hidden in the bushes, and others in private dwellings where owners have kept them. Others have been destroyed for different reasons: construction of infrastructures, demolition of buildings, or intentional desire to erase memory. Public institutions have ignored this heritage, even though it is subject to protection through various state or regional laws. Lastly, it is a heritage that is not registered in the sources: none of the written texts and only some of the photographs of the time reflect this rich material legacy, which increases the risk of its destruction and oblivion.



Fig. 9 - Left: the so-called “Pyramid of the Italians” built by Mussolini at the end of the war. Right: the monument to the fascist general Sagardía, erected only a few kilometers away from the first one.

As of today, there is not an institutional comprehensive protection plan, and, above all, there is no project for the conservation of material culture. The preserved Italian presence in the area known to visitors is limited to the abandoned Pyramid of the Italians in the process of plundering and decay but still visited by the curious, schoolchildren, or tourists.

The Spanish Civil War continues to generate an enormous bibliography, with the introduction or discovery of new documentary sources: archives, graves, graphic mate-



Fig. 10 - The team doing fieldwork in the Spring of 2022.

rial, etc. Material culture also contributes to knowledge with the excavation of trenches, opening of graves, cataloging of bunkers and anti-aircraft shelters, and the increasing number of protection plans for battle fronts abandoned and looted for decades.

With this study, we want to sound the alarm and call for global awareness: institutional and citizen wide. The heritage of the Spanish Civil War is still in an alarming state of vulnerability. Local associations are making titanic efforts to preserve part of it. Research teams from different academic institutions work against the clock to inventory and study what they can. But without legal protection, control mechanisms, and the allocation of funds items, it is difficult to fully protect them. The heritage of the Civil War is a set of movable, immovable, landscape and intangible assets capable of shedding light on events, circumstances, and stories—individual and collective—that we still do not know well. And, although the Republican side is still much less known than the rebel side, the situation of disaffection, lack of conservation, and degradation effects, in general, and with the exception of some situations, affects the entire historical heritage of the Civil War.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This research project was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Spanish Secretaría de Memoria Democrática -2021-MD-209. We are grateful to Alicia Torija López, Josu Santamarina Otaola, and Aitziber González García, members of the

research team, and to all the volunteers and locals who collaborated in locating and researching the remains presented in this paper. Finally, thanks to Davide Zendri and the Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra team who provided enriching graphic and written sources to complete the work.

## ABSTRACT

Tra il luglio 1936 e l'agosto 1937, la regione settentrionale di Burgos, in Spagna, era divisa tra coloro che rimasero fedeli alla Repubblica spagnola e coloro che seguirono il colpo di stato fascista che portò alla guerra civile spagnola. Nella primavera del 1937 la popolazione di questa regione vide l'arrivo di truppe dall'estero, tra cui i soldati italiani del Corpo Truppe Volontarie. Il loro arrivo modificò il paesaggio con la costruzione di trincee, rifugi, piazzole per mitragliatrici e altre strutture militari offensive e difensive. Le truppe italiane realizzarono anche decine di incisioni e graffiti su edifici e rocce circostanti. Dopo la guerra, il paesaggio fu nuovamente modificato, questa volta con architetture propagandistiche come la "Piramide Ossario dei Caduti Italiani" o il monumento che il colonnello ribelle Sagardía dedicò ai suoi soldati della 62ª Divisione.

Questo saggio presenta il progetto 209-MD-2021, finanziato dalla *Secretaría de Estado de Memoria Democrática* spagnola, che si occupa della protezione dei resti della guerra civile spagnola lasciati dalle truppe italiane nel nord di Burgos. Il lavoro comporta la catalogazione di incisioni e graffiti, ma comprende anche obiettivi più ampi, che includono la conservazione e la risignificazione dei resti della Guerra Civile. Sono stati inoltre raccolti e analizzati documenti scritti e fotografici, in collaborazione con il Museo Storico Italiano della Guerra di Rovereto, Trento.