

## War Literature and Collective Memory: The Other's Perspective in Anthropology

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*Collective memory has long been a central concern in disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, and psychology. Since Maurice Halbwachs first proposed the concept of collective memory, the boundaries of this research field have continually expanded. Its theories have been cross-culturally tested and increasingly integrated across disciplines. Among them, the intersection of literature and anthropology has garnered particular attention. This article explores the construction of collective memory within war literature. Focusing on the role of historical memory, it examines how memory shapes culture and identity through the lens of anthropology. Using war narratives as a point of entry, the study highlights the constructive nature of memory and its sociocultural implications for identity formation.*

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Maurice Halbwachs, the pioneering scholar of collective memory, argued that collective social behavior serves as the origin, vehicle, and framework for both individual and collective memory. All memory, he asserted, is socially constructed and functions to generate emotional cohesion, shape identity, and integrate social groups. Collective memory possesses a dual subjective-objective nature; statues, monuments, and gardens become carriers of memory, symbolically imbued and spiritually shared by the group (Halbwachs 2002). Oral histories, memoirs, documentary literature, and visual media are therefore essential for ensuring the continuity and integrity of collective memory. As Halbwachs noted: "Memory must be fixed through the writing of a connected narrative in order to preserve its continuity and establish a collective consciousness" (Halbwachs 2001: 86). War literature, through acts of writing and narration, thus preserves and solidifies traumatic experiences of war, becoming one of the most significant forms of historical memory in human culture. Since collective memory is not a mere record of past events but a process of identity construction and cultural reproduction, war literature likewise functions as a medium through which collective consensus and cultural transmission are forged.

The Spanish Civil War served as a major source of inspiration for numerous Western writers. These literary works document not only the brutality and complexity of war but also reflect ideological clashes that spurred innovation in literary forms and techniques, such as documentary writing, symbolism, and multi-perspective narration. They explore how war shapes identity and history, and how writing becomes a crucial means of processing trauma and healing divisions. Among these, George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* stands out as a canonical text. As a British writer and war correspondent, Orwell took part in the Spanish Civil War and chronicled his experience from the standpoint of an "outsider". This dual role—participant and observer—renders his memoir a particularly valuable case for understanding the interplay between memory and identity. Not only does the work offer a vivid personal account of war, but its

transnational perspective and self-reflective awareness of otherness make it a compelling example of how collective memory can be reconfigured through the internalization of external viewpoints.

*Homage to Catalonia* is based on Orwell's direct participation in the Spanish Civil War. He arrived in Barcelona in late December 1936 and completed the book some seven months later. Through detailed descriptions of militia life and his own reflections on war, Orwell illustrates how individual memory absorbs and is shaped by collective narratives. The book can broadly be divided into two parts: life at the front and life in the rear. These two spheres form a counterpoint to each other—on one hand, they reveal the fragmented social landscape during wartime; on the other, they reflect Orwell's evolving attitude towards the conflict itself. Notably, Orwell does not remain a detached foreign observer; he actively participates in the war effort. This positioning generates cognitive dissonance in his recollections, where he simultaneously assumes the identity of an "insider" through comradeship and shared struggle, and that of an "outsider" through his critical detachment. His memories are thus infused with both identification and critique.

On the frontlines, Orwell adopts a sharply critical tone, describing the war as "a bloody pantomime", a phrase reportedly used by many in the British expatriate community. He vividly portrays the inefficiency of military operations, the lack of discipline, and the severe shortage of supplies. "At the time", he writes, "it seemed to me that this might be the most futile period of my life. I had joined the militia to fight fascism, but so far I had done almost no fighting. I was passively enduring the cold and sleeplessness, doing nothing worthy of the rations I was issued. Perhaps that is the fate of most soldiers in most wars" (Orwell 2000:87).

To Orwell, war often resembled farce: comrades accidentally injuring each other, units becoming lost on route to attacks, or catching fascist soldiers unawares. Though life at the front brought disillusionment, it still carried a sense of hope. In contrast, the street fighting in Barcelona utterly shattered Orwell's revolutionary ideals.

The memory of Barcelona is riddled with contradictions between personal recollection and official collective narratives. The dominant discourse, shaped by government-controlled media, vilified the militias while glorifying the People's Army. "The propaganda officers still kept stencilling 'We need the People's Army' on every wall", Orwell notes, "and the radio and the Communist newspapers, all controlled by the government, kept mocking the militias as undisciplined rabble. Meanwhile, the People's Army was always portrayed as the 'heroic force'. Listening to this, you would think volunteering was dishonorable, and only waiting to be conscripted was respectable" (Orwell 2000:95–96). Orwell, however, reveals the contradiction: "There was almost no mention that the militias were actually holding the front lines while the People's Army remained behind training" (Orwell 2000:96).

Orwell's memoir not only reflects his personal experience but also challenges the construction of official memory. By recording his individualized perspective in writing, he converts it into a form of "textual memory" with public relevance, offering an alternative narrative through which the Spanish Civil War can be understood.

In addition to battlefield recollections, Orwell also documents the emotional and social atmosphere created by the militias. The shared wartime experiences with Spanish fighters and other international volunteers deepened his sense of identification with the revolution as a form of collective memory. Orwell portrays the Spanish people in terms markedly different from the depictions circulating in British or other Western media. "A Spaniard's generosity", he observes, "expressed in the most straightforward way, could often feel almost embarrassing. Ask for a cigarette and he'd force the whole pack upon you. Such small gestures reflect a deeper emotional warmth, something I frequently encountered amid the hardship of war" (Orwell 2000:9).

Orwell's personal memory thus challenges the collective memory propagated by the media. Moreover, his account of life among the militias reveals the temporary realization of a genuinely egalitarian, proletarian society—an experience he claims could not be found elsewhere. "In theory", he writes, "we were all equal, and in practice we came close to that. I felt as if I were tasting socialism for the first time. The spirit dominating the atmosphere was unmistakably socialist. The usual habits of bourgeois life—snobbery, greed, fear of authority—had vanished. The rigid class divisions that pervade England had largely dissolved. Here, there were only peasants and ourselves, and no one wished to be anyone else's master" (Orwell 2000:88). This duality—where brutal warfare coexists with an almost utopian communal life—

adds emotional depth to Orwell's recollections. The collective experience among the militias served as a silver lining to the otherwise bleak wartime reality. It gave him something worth fighting for. He writes, "In the end, far from disillusioning me about socialism, this experience drew me more deeply into it. It inspired in me a powerful desire to see the emergence of a more realistic kind of socialism than had previously existed. This was, in part, because I was fortunate enough to become a part of the Spanish people. Given their natural grace and innate anarchism, I thought that if anyone could build the beginnings of a decent socialist society, they could" (Orwell 2000:89).

Aleida Assmann (2011) has stressed that the selectivity of memory is often driven by emotional intensity: individuals tend to retain those events or scenes charged with deep feeling. Orwell's criticism of the absurdity of war, coupled with his profound emotional attachment to the camaraderie and egalitarianism of the militias, became essential components of his memory. These sentiments shaped his narrative and made it more accessible to readers, evoking empathy and resonance. The dual focus on a utopian ideal and dystopian reality brings into sharp relief the tension embedded in his memory. While the experience of egalitarian living offered hope for socialism, the chaos and cruelty of war served as a stark reminder of the revolution's complexity.

In the process of identity construction, both anthropology and cultural studies have emphasized the contradictions and negotiations inherent in the condition of "otherness". Orwell's experience in Spain, as a foreign writer immersed in a revolutionary environment, offers a vivid illustration of such complexity. His outsider status brought with it memories shaped by different cultural references, which were then brought into contact—and sometimes into conflict—with Spanish history and experience. This encounter between divergent cultural frameworks provoked in Orwell a form of self-reflection, prompting a re-examination of his own identity—a process of transformation characteristic of cross-cultural identification.

Mikhail Epstein (2009) conceptualizes *interculturality* as a condition of difference not only from others, but also from one's former self. His view stands in contrast to multiculturalism, which prioritizes innate and essentialized difference as the primary driver of identity formation. Interculturality, by contrast, involves the transformation and enrichment of identity through the acquisition of traits that supplement what is absent in one's original cultural state. In Epstein's view, it liberates the individual from exclusive dependence on their native culture, allowing them to experience the freedom of self-expression across cultural boundaries.

From the perspective of cultural identity and memory, Barcelona functioned not only as the emotional epicenter of Orwell's identification with the Spanish Revolution, but also as a crucial cultural landscape in the construction of his personal memory. Through detailed observation of the city's symbolic elements, Orwell embedded his individual experience within a broader collective memory, thereby forming a distinctive understanding of the revolution.

Orwell's Barcelona is infused with a pronounced working-class ethos. The visual impact of this social environment, alongside the transformation of the city's physical space, deeply shaped his revolutionary memory. The flags, slogans, altered public spaces, and architectural changes symbolized more than political upheaval—they represented a fundamental restructuring of social order and collective values. "Every building of any size was in the hands of the working class", Orwell writes. "Every roof had a red flag, or the red-and-black flag of the Anarchists. Every wall was scrawled with the hammer and sickle and the initials of revolutionary parties. Nearly every church had been gutted and its images destroyed. Shops and cafés bore notices declaring they had been collectivized. Even the bootblacks' boxes were painted red and black" (Orwell 2000:2–3).

These visual and spatial markers fascinated Orwell and forged an emotional connection to the cultural content of the revolution. In such a setting, revolution was not merely a political act but a process of reshaping cultural atmosphere and collective identity. Orwell recalls: "To anyone who had been there from the beginning, the revolution may have seemed to be already over by December or January. But to someone like me, fresh from England, Barcelona appeared astonishing—and irresistible." (Orwell 2000:2)

This sense of *astonishment* and *irresistibility* reveals Orwell's emotional and symbolic alignment with the ideals of the workers' revolution, as well as a profound shift in his cultural positioning. Through Orwell's narrative lens, Barcelona becomes a symbolic space for revolutionary culture and a powerful icon within

his personal memory. That memory is not simply autobiographical. It is embedded in wider frameworks of cultural identity and historical recollection. In doing so, Orwell articulates a vision of the Spanish Revolution that is both idealized and optimistic, a reflection of the values he came to internalize during his time there. This form of cultural identification would go on to shape Orwell's broader political commitments, particularly his belief in socialism as a lived, emotionally resonant possibility.

From the perspective of transcultural identity, Orwell's growing identification with the Spanish anti-fascist struggle was sharpened through the contrast between the bravery of Spanish fighters and the apathy of foreign bystanders. As a foreigner, Orwell came to see himself as part of the Spanish cause. He first outlines the indifference of other European nations towards the Spanish Civil War: "What happened in Spain was not merely a civil war, but the beginning of a revolution. Yet outside Spain, antifascist media did everything to conceal this. The conflict was narrowly portrayed as a fight between fascism and democracy, and the revolutionary element was suppressed. In Britain, where the press was even more centralized, the public was easily misled. The Right called it a battle of Christian patriots against bloodthirsty Bolsheviks, while the Left described it as a moderate republic crushing a military coup. The core issue was skillfully hidden" (Orwell 2000:42). He concludes: "Outside Spain, almost no one knew a revolution had taken place. Inside Spain, no one doubted that it had." (Orwell 2000:43) By choosing to join the revolution, Orwell not only broke free from the memory frameworks of his own nation but entered the collective memory space of Spain.

Crucially, Orwell's testimony serves to legitimize the revolution through lived experience. His outsider identity gives his narrative a dual dimension: on the one hand, he seeks to embed himself within Spanish collective memory; on the other, he maintains a critical distance. This ambivalence lends his memoir a rare richness.

In memory studies, literary texts are increasingly seen as media for constructing and transmitting memory. This aligns with contemporary anthropological approaches to literature. One anthropologist has argued in her article "The Possibility of Literature as Fieldwork: A Case from Memory Studies", literature can serve as a legitimate site for anthropological inquiry into collective memory. Memory and literature are also deeply linked through affect, imagination, and identity, making literary texts particularly valuable in memory research (Liu 2020).

This paper takes literature as a form of fieldwork-based material, examining the entanglement of individual and collective memory and the shaping of identity. By observing the actions and subjectivities of memory-bearing individuals, it seeks to understand how collective memory is conditioned by cultural and social settings.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, individual and collective memory are interdependent. They exist within a *social framework* that structures all remembrance. "Our personal thoughts are situated within this framework", he writes, "and flow into memories that are, in fact, recollections shaped by the collective." (Halbwachs 2001:69)

Collective memory is not a neutral record of the past but a deliberate construction based on present needs—a product of time, space, society, and the individual. It operates within specific sociocultural contexts, gaining meaning only through concrete historical and spatial settings. Collective memory not only relies on individual narration, but also shapes personal self-understanding. Most importantly, it is the shared *framework of memory* that bridges both dimensions (Chen 2024).

In conclusion, George Orwell's participation in the Spanish Civil War as a cultural outsider enabled a unique convergence between individual memory and collective historical consciousness. Through his narration in *Homage to Catalonia*, he constructs a complex memory landscape that blends utopian ideals with critical distance. His memoir demonstrates how cultural identification can be forged across boundaries, and how memory is continually reshaped through both experience and representation. This study not only highlights the socialconstructiveness of memory but also affirms the anthropological value of literature as a site of memory formation and identity negotiation.

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