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Ninety Years Since the Spanish Civil War: Experiences, Memories, Concepts (1936–2026)

Conference, Swiss Social Archives, Zurich, 19–20 November 2026

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On 17 July 2026, the ninetieth anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) will be commemorated. On that day in 1936, a group of high-ranking generals launched a military uprising against the democratically elected government of the Second Spanish Republic. The coup failed to secure immediate control, as large segments of the population resisted and joined military and militia units in defense of the Republic. What began as a putsch quickly escalated into a protracted and brutal civil war.

The military rebellion provoked widespread international outrage and generated an unprecedented wave of solidarity, particularly among politically organized workers and intellectuals. Tens of thousands of volunteers travelled to Spain to defend the Republic.

Among them were approximately 800 Swiss citizens. After the dissolution of the International Brigades in the autumn of 1938 and, even more so, following the foreseeable victory of General Franco in early 1939, most surviving volunteers returned to Switzerland. There they faced prosecution, imprisonment, and the loss of civil rights. At the same time, Switzerland was one of the first democracies to officially recognize Franco's regime in February 1939, even before the official end of the war. In the years that followed, Switzerland maintained close political and economic relations with the Franco regime.

To this day, the Swiss volunteers who fought against fascism and for democracy occupy an ambivalent place in national memory. For decades, their commitment was marginalized rather than publicly acknowledged. Only in 2009 were they formally rehabilitated. Meanwhile, the Spanish Civil War has often been interpreted as a military and ideological testing ground for Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany in preparation for the Second World War. Yet this perspective risks overshadowing other dimensions of the conflict, including its transnational entanglements, its cultural representations, and its long-term political and social repercussions.

This conference seeks to foster scholarly exchange on recent research concerning the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath. At the same time, it aims to engage a broader public and to stimulate critical discussion about the conflict's enduring historical and political significance.

The conference will take place on 19 and 20 November 2026 at the Swiss Social Archives in Zurich. The keynote lecture will be held by Diego Gaspar Celaya.

We invite scholars from history and related disciplines to submit proposals that address innovative perspectives on the Spanish Civil War. Please indicate which of the thematic areas listed below your contribution would engage with. Abstracts and a short CV (each no longer than one page) should be submitted by 24 April 2026 to franziska.zaugg@unifr.ch and moises.prieto@hu-berlin.de.

Possible topics include but are not limited to:

- Conceptual (re)considerations: “Spanish Civil War” versus “Guerre d’Espagne”
- Conservative entanglements and networks of support or aid
- The war as a training ground for fascist and anti-fascist forces prior to the Second World War
- Politics, public debate, taboos, and commemoration in post-war Switzerland
- Politics, public debate, taboos, and commemoration in post-war Europe and beyond
- The war in the arts and popular culture