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Victims in History Textbooks in Spain: From Francoism to Terrorism

Abstract

This article analyses the historical representation of the victims of Francoism and terrorism in Secondary Education textbooks in Spain. Drawing on a documentary corpus composed of textbooks from the fourth year of ESO and the senior year of high school, as well as recent studies on democratic memory and history education, the study identifies recurrent patterns in the treatment of repression, political violence and victimisation. The findings reveal persistent narrative superficiality, limited analytical complexity and the absence of a clear conceptual framework regarding victims, terrorism or dictatorial repression. The article also examines the role of teachers in constructing a critical and reparative understanding of the past and proposes lines for improvement to address democratic memory in schools through a plurality of sources, testimonies and experiences.

Keywords: Democratic memory, victims, Francoism, terrorism, textbooks

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To cite this article: Colomer, J.C. (2026), Victims in History Textbooks in Spain: From Francoism to Terrorism, *Revista Internacional de Estudios sobre Terrorismo*, issue 16:7-19.

Received

12/12/2025

Accepted

12/30/2025

1. Introduction¹

The representation of victims in History textbooks in Spain constitutes a subject of growing interest within the field of Social Sciences Didactics and the construction of a plural democratic memory (Fuertes & Ibáñez, 2019). In this regard, research conducted over the past two decades converges in highlighting the centrality of the school textbook as the dominant pedagogical tool in the teaching–learning processes of History and memory, both because of its hegemonic presence in classrooms and its role in legitimizing particular narratives of the recent past. In this way, the textbook not only organizes content and didactic sequences, but also selects, prioritizes, and hierarchizes historical episodes, actors, and processes, thereby shaping social understanding of traumatic past events (Mancha, 2019; Pingel, 2010).

Against this backdrop, current debates regarding the rise of far-right discourses among European youth, new narratives that deny or trivialize Francoism, and the growing loss of historical memory among Spanish adolescents place this object of study within an urgent, civic horizon. Recent studies reveal ideological reconfigurations among European youth, including new sympathies toward authoritarian regimes and anti-liberal discourses, as well as increasing credibility granted to digital content of low epistemic reliability (Mudde, 2019; Stanley, 2025; Traverso, 2022). These trends directly affect schools as spaces of democratic socialization and reinforce the need to critically analyze curricular materials that participate in this construction.

Based on this premise, the present article² aims to analyze the treatment of victims in textbooks used in the 4th year of ESO (Compulsory Secondary Education) and the senior year of high school (Upper Secondary Education), focusing specifically on two areas: Francoist repression and terrorism. Both topics constitute central dimensions for understanding political violence in contemporary Spain and, simultaneously, represent significant didactic challenges for students' historical education (Fuertes & Banderas, 2024; Fuertes & Ibáñez, 2019). The analysis presented relies on a systematic review of textual and iconographic content across various textbooks, drawing on examples of manuals in use in 2016 and 2023 from publishers such as ECIR, Anaya, SM, and Vicens Vives, among others. The corpus allows for the identification of different levels of victim presence in textbooks – absence, superficial mention, moderate development, central development – and contributes to characterizing the depth and rigor with which political violence is addressed in the school curriculum.

Ultimately, this work seeks to contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding the teaching of recent History, the construction of democratic citizenship, and the role of education as a space for symbolic repair, plural memory, and the recognition of victims.

1 The author wishes to thank Professor Ander Delgado Cendagortagarza for his ideas and suggestions in the preparation of this text.

2 This work is part of the research project “INCLUCOM: Curricular models and historical-geographical competences of teachers for the construction of inclusive identities” (PID2021-122519OB-I00), funded by the Ministry of Science, Innovation and Universities.

2. The Textbook as a Cultural Object

The school textbook constitutes a complex pedagogical tool that, beyond its apparent instrumental neutrality, articulates a clear discourse about the past. Various authors have pointed out that the textbook is simultaneously a cultural product, an object of epistemic authority, and a methodological guide for teachers. This polyvalent dimension makes it a privileged agent of cultural transmission whose influence extends beyond the strictly educational sphere (Foster, 2011; Valls, 2007).

In the specialized literature, several attributes have been identified that characterize this complex nature of the textbook: its status as a cultural product; its appearance as an omniscient and legitimized source; its routine use in teaching practice; its constructed nature, subject to editorial mediation; and its durability beyond curricular changes. These attributes demonstrate that the textbook is a living device, updated and subjected to editorial selection processes responding to both pedagogical and commercial criteria. Its continuity over time also ensures the persistence of certain historical approaches – such as historicism – even when academic historiography has evolved in different directions (Valls, 2007). In this sense, teaching recent History through textbooks involves mobilizing – consciously or unconsciously – narratives that may consolidate or challenge prevailing social discourses on the dictatorship, violence, or victims.

As highlighted by ANELE (National Association of Publishers of Books and Educational Materials, 2024), current data underscore the economic and social magnitude of the textbook as a cultural industry. Annual sector reports show that in the 2023–2024 school year more than ten thousand new textbook titles were published, nearly three million copies were sold for Compulsory Secondary Education, and the ratio of textbooks per student for this stage stands at approximately five books per learner. This must be added to the gradual expansion of digital textbooks, whose growth has been sustained over the past decade (ANELE, 2024).

This volume of production and circulation implies that the historical narratives present in textbooks have massive penetration among the student population (Fuertes & Ibáñez, 2019). Consequently, any analysis of the teaching of Francoism or terrorism must consider that the textbook continues to be – in practice – the principal channel of access to formal historical knowledge for millions of students.

The textbook itself is also a cultural artifact reflecting political sensitivities, historiographical currents, and institutional pressures. As educational research has shown, textbooks incorporate explicit editorial decisions: content selection, sequencing, types of images used, degree of discursive complexity, and underlying ideological orientation (Bel, 2017; Martínez-Bonafé, 2008).

The final outcome, therefore, is not a neutral representation of History, but a school-mediated translation of the past, susceptible to omissions, silences, and neutralizations. This explains why critical didactics of the textbook emphasize its analysis as a cultural discourse rather than merely as a didactic tool (Van Alphen & Carretero, 2015).

3. Current Democratic and Educational Context

As previously noted, in contemporary European society there is growing concern over the rise of discourses that, from various ideological positions, tend to reinterpret the authoritarian past under lenses of normalization, relativization, or even nostalgia. In different European countries, and particularly visibly in Spain, this phenomenon is linked to the persistence of narratives that minimize the impact of Francoist repression or establish misleading comparisons between the violence exercised by the dictatorship and other historical episodes, thereby obscuring the systematic nature of political punishment (Banderas & Fuertes, 2021).

For example, Fuertes and Ibáñez (2019) note that the ECIR textbook for senior year of high school education LOGSE (García et al., 2003) reproduces a formulation characteristic of this interpretive bias. In it, Francoist repression is largely confined to the early years of the regime and explained as the result of the early prominence of the Falange, linked to the influence of European Nazism and Fascism. In fact, repression is not part of the introductory section dedicated to “The Foundations of the New Regime” but is mentioned very briefly in a short paragraph included in the subheading “The Blue Period (1939–1945)”, itself integrated into the chapter on “Francoism during the Second World War”.

This minimization may relate to recent research that has warned about the increase in uncritical attitudes toward the authoritarian past among European youth, particularly in contexts of political polarization and the spread of anti-democratic discourses (Stanley, 2025). Sociological studies show that an increasing portion of youth grants credibility to content disseminated through digital platforms at the expense of traditional reference media, a phenomenon particularly pronounced among ideologically conservative or far-right-leaning sectors (Keating & Melis, 2019; Mudde, 2019). This shift from verified sources to poorly verified channels generates fertile ground for historical distortion and the advancement of narratives that trivialize twentieth-century authoritarianisms, a trend that textbooks do not neutralize (Traverso, 2022).

These contemporary tendencies have a direct impact on the school space, where the teaching of recent History faces a constant tension between the academic construction of knowledge and the symbolic pressure of the media environment. In this informational climate, teachers are compelled to counter external discourses that often compete with the interpretive frameworks proposed by the media, curricula, and textbooks.

It is therefore unsurprising that the weakness in building democratic memory among young people is a recurring element in socio-educational studies and diagnoses. Various investigations indicate limited knowledge among secondary students regarding key episodes of political violence, both in relation to Francoism and terrorism in contemporary Spain (Banderas & Fuertes, 2021). This deficit is evident in surveys revealing significant ignorance of recent events, such as the murder of Miguel Ángel Blanco, as well as a limited understanding of the historical contexts in which political violence occurred.

This deficiency is not only due to generational distance from the events but also to the insufficient incorporation of democratic memory as an explicit curricular axis in compulsory education. The specialized literature emphasizes that History textbooks offer ambiguous or incomplete definitions of concepts such as victim, political violence, or terrorism, hindering students' construction of a solid interpretive framework (Delgado, in press).

Teaching political violence requires teachers to articulate a dual approach: one historical – rigorous, documented, and contextualized – and one ethical – focused on human rights, the dignity of victims, and symbolic repair. Nonetheless, recent research highlights the difficulties teachers face in addressing the dictatorship with a coherent and well-founded perspective, due to a lack of specific training, the absence of a public culture of democratic memory, and the influence of family backgrounds that shape perceptions of the past (Banderas & Fuertes, 2021).

Teachers therefore occupy an essential role as mediators between historiographical narrative, curricular content, and students' emotional experiences. Their work involves not only constructing knowledge but also guiding critical reflection processes that enable young people to understand the complexity of the traumatic past and its echoes in contemporary society.

4. Analysis of the Treatment of Francoism in School Textbooks

The analysis of school textbooks conducted in recent research allows for the identification of a first category: the absence or trivialization of Francoist repression and its victims. This tendency manifests both in the direct omission of relevant events and in the presentation of violent episodes in a distant, neutralized, or anecdotal manner. The literature has indicated that, in numerous contemporary Spanish textbooks, repression is presented through narrative formulas lacking historical meaning – for example, the use of neutral verbs such as *died* instead of *was murdered* or *was executed* – which dilutes the identification of agents and repressive contexts (Fuertes & Ibáñez, 2019). Similar examples have been detected in textbooks from various publishers, where political repression is reduced to tangential mentions, replaced by diplomatic, economic, or institutional perspectives that relegate structural violence to marginal notes within the historical narrative (Mancha, 2017).

The page dedicated to explaining the consolidation of the Francoist regime in the *Historia de España* textbook by the publisher EDITEX for senior year of high school LOMLOE is particularly significant due to the silences and framing it proposes (Blanco & González, 2023). First, the complete absence of explicit references to repression as a structural element in the regime's consolidation is striking, replaced instead by a narrative focused almost exclusively on diplomatic and foreign policy factors. Within this framework, the inclusion of a photograph of U.S. President Joe Biden linked to the NATO summit introduces a contemporary visual anchor that reinforces a reading of continuity and international normalization of Spain, but without historically contextualizing the significance of Atlantic alliances or their relation to the Francoist dictatorship. The image, presented in a decontextualized manner, functions more as a legitimizing resource than as an object of historical analysis, shifting attention toward external recognition of the regime and diluting the internal – coercive and repressive – mechanisms that made its stability possible. This approach thus contributes to a partial interpretation of the process, in which the consolidation of Francoism appears detached from the political and social violence that underpinned it for decades.

A second category corresponds to textbooks that include references to Francoism and repression, but from a synthetic and low-analytical-density perspective. In these cases, victims are mentioned without historiographical contextualization or precise explanation of repressive mechanisms. The analyzed page of the *Historia de España* textbook by ANAYA for senior year of high school (García de Cortázar et al., 2016), produced under the LOMCE framework, is illustrative of this treatment. It combines brief textual explanations with supporting documents – a photograph of refugees, a quantitative box on executions, and a testimony of a prisoner – which, while diversifying the sources used, are not integrated into a problematized historiographical narrative or a structural interpretation of Francoist violence.

Victims of repression are mentioned generically and, in many cases, reduced to figures or decontextualized individual accounts. No precise explanation is offered regarding repressive mechanisms, their systematic, legal, and institutional character, or their political function in consolidating the dictatorship. Key concepts such as military justice, purges, social control, or the role of regime institutions are only briefly outlined, making it difficult to understand repression as a planned and sustained policy over time. Likewise, the use of personal testimonies serves primarily an illustrative or empathetic function, without orienting students toward guided critical analysis that would allow them to relate sources to the historical context or to current historiographical debates. This type of treatment, frequent in studies of Spanish school textbooks, leads to fragmented and insufficient knowledge of Francoism and the systematic persecution carried out by the dictatorship. As Fuertes and Banderas (2024) note, the absence of historiographical contextualization and didactic problematization limits the development of historical thinking and reduces the formative potential of studying recent history through a democratic lens.

However, some textbooks offer a more complete and complex treatment, incorporating statistics, primary sources, and testimonies that allow victims to be placed at the center of the historical narrative. The inclusion of quantitative data on executions, imprisonments, or exile, combined with photographs or relevant documents, facilitates a deeper understanding of the repressive system and its social impact. These textbooks tend to reflect updated historiographical perspectives and a more critical approach toward the dictatorship.

In this way, research in History didactics highlights the need to incorporate strategies that counteract the marginalization of victims in school narratives. Among these are the use of personal accounts and primary sources, reparative memory activities and diverse approaches, and the linking of recent History with democratic citizenship. These proposals connect with the didactic tradition advocating source-based learning, historical empathy, and the development of civic memory (Barton & Levstik, 2004) and have been implemented in materials such as the publication *Women and Francoist Repression: A Guide for Their Study in Valencia*, published by the Universitat de València in 2017, among other examples.

5. Terrorism Victims in School Textbooks

Terrorism constitutes a historical phenomenon of enormous relevance for understanding the political, social, and cultural evolution of contemporary Spain. However, its presence in school textbooks remains secondary and fragmented. Although the phenomenon appears in the content of 4th-year ESO and senior year of high school, it receives limited treatment, focusing on superficial descriptions of events and organizations, without a conceptual development comparable to that dedicated to other historical processes. Various studies have noted that, in most materials, terrorism is framed as merely one component of the transition from Francoism to democracy, without acquiring analytical or didactic autonomy (García, 2024).

The analysis conducted by Delgado in textbooks used in the Basque Country confirms this trend: terrorism appears as “one more factor to consider in understanding the transition from Francoism to current democracy”, but without a specific or in-depth study (Delgado, in press). This minimal characterization has direct implications for the way students construct their understanding of recent history, particularly in contexts where political violence has had prolonged and far-reaching impact.

A closer look at the content reveals that textbooks frequently reproduce a linear and decontextualized narrative. They tend to list the main organizations (ETA, GRAPO, FRAP, Terra Lliure), provide victim data, and mention the disbandment or disappearance of these groups, without problematizing the internal logic of the violence, its sociopolitical roots, or its traumatic effects. This is the case of the treatment by EDITEX for senior year of high school, where ETA is described in an encyclopedic information box, focusing on its definition, basic chronology, and victim count,

without a specific or contextualized study of its role in the political transition process (Blanco & González, 2023). Terrorism is thus incorporated into the historical narrative as just another element of the political landscape, rather than as a phenomenon requiring its own explanation in historical, social, and political terms.

This minimal characterization of terrorism directly affects students' construction of recent historical understanding. By failing to address political violence as a complex and prolonged phenomenon, and by not analyzing its social, political, and ethical consequences, textbooks encourage a fragmented and superficial view of historical processes. This limitation is particularly significant in contexts where political violence has had profound and sustained effects, as it hinders the development of critical historical understanding and democratic education grounded in recognition of conflict, memory, and victims. In this regard, the treatment of terrorism in the Vicens Vives textbook for 4th-year ESO is characterized by the clearly secondary and subordinated presence of terrorism within the political-institutional narrative of the period. The phenomenon appears integrated into broader sections on the recent political evolution of Spain – such as elections, governmental reforms, or democratic consolidation – without constituting a specific or differentiated object of analysis. This marginal placement reinforces the notion of terrorism as merely a contextual element, rather than a complex historical process with its own dynamics (Gatell et al., 2023).

References to terrorism, particularly ETA, are articulated through brief, informational, and descriptive mentions, focusing on milestones such as the end of violence or its relation to specific political moments. Detailed explanations of causes, internal evolution, social impact, or consequences in terms of rights, memory, and victims are not provided. Consequently, the phenomenon is reduced to a chronological and factual framework, without problematization that would allow students to understand its prolongation over time or its influence on political and social life.

From a didactic perspective, this strategy reinforces a narrative and accumulative approach, in which content is presented as a succession of relevant political events, relegating political violence to a secondary level. The few references to terrorism are rarely accompanied by specific activities, source analyses, or critical reflection exercises, limiting the possibilities for developing a profound historical understanding of recent events. Students thus receive a simplified view, in which the disappearance of violence is almost automatically associated with democratic progress, without exploring tensions, social debates, or contested memories.

This simplification contributes to a perception of terrorism as an inevitable and almost mechanical phenomenon, reinforcing a historical narrative that renders invisible the plurality of social experiences, and especially that of victims, which is barely addressed (García, 2024).

In this vein, Delgado's study indicates that the information provided by textbooks is, for the most part, "excessively synthetic and basic", focusing on the most prominent aspects – the origin of

ETA, the Carrero Blanco assassination, overall figures, the end of the organization – while excluding fundamental dimensions, such as youth radicalization processes, the evolution of social perception of violence, or changes in civic mobilization. Furthermore, the chronology covered is concentrated in the 1970s and 1980s, relegating subsequent transformations as well as the trajectory of public policies, social delegitimization strategies, and the role of victims and civil associations (Delgado, in press).

A particularly problematic aspect is the unequal attention given to different forms of terrorism. Although several groups are mentioned, most space is devoted to ETA, while far-right, international, or state-motivated violence receives only marginal references, without historiographical development or contextualization (García, 2024). This asymmetry limits a comprehensive understanding of terrorism as a complex, multicausal, and plural phenomenon.

Similarly, the presence of victims is reduced to peripheral elements: brief boxes, isolated photographs, or supplementary notes (García, 2024). These marginal notes prevent their integration as a constitutive part of the school historical narrative, hindering students' incorporation of the human and moral dimension of violence. Delgado's research confirms this iconographic and testimonial insufficiency, highlighting the scarce presence of images of victims and their stories, with the consequent loss of pedagogical opportunities for empathy and ethical reflection.

In the didactic domain, these textbooks reproduce a transmissive model based on low-cognitive-demand tasks: data searches, summaries, identification of explicit information, or the creation of timelines. Only exceptionally are primary source analyses, historical problem formulation, or activities requiring interpretation and critical judgment incorporated (García, 2024).

Delgado thus notes that most activities related to political violence merely require reproducing information from the text, without encouraging the formulation of arguments or problematization of the phenomena studied. This lack of cognitive complexity contrasts with the deeply ethical, emotional, and political nature of terrorism, which would require activities integrating reflection, reasoned debate, and contextual analysis.

In some cases, textbooks pose open-ended questions on the legitimacy of violence or evaluation of the conflict, but without providing ethical criteria or conceptual frameworks to guide students. This may generate responses based on intuitive opinions, family positions, or contextual influences rather than on democratic principles or respect for human rights.

A relevant exception is the *Eki* educational project, published by Elkar and the Federación de Ikastolas, which proposes a more comprehensive approach, with activities analyzing testimonies, studying human rights violations, and structured debates that allow for a deeper and more nuanced approach. Other noteworthy examples are those developed by the Centro Memorial de Víctimas, which proposed various units aimed at 1st- and 4th-year ESO students, as well as 1st- and senior

year of high school. These units adopt an approach similar to the conventional textbook format, combining conceptual exposition on terrorism with activities focused on reading victims' testimonies and complementary research tasks using digital resources.

Finally, another notable example is that proposed by SM for 4th-year ESO (De la Mata & Mesegar, 2023), developed in accordance with the LOMLOE curricular framework. It constitutes a particularly significant case of didactic renewal in the treatment of historical change and continuity. Under the heading "Work as a Historian", the proposal shifts the focus from mere content transmission toward the explicit development of historical thinking procedures, particularly visual source analysis and interpretation of change in historical processes.

The activity is structured around two compared images of the same urban space following an ETA terrorist attack, inviting students to analyze the difficulties of historical change based on concrete evidence. This approach represents a significant advance over the more descriptive approaches common in earlier textbooks, as it requires contextualization, comparison, hypothesis formulation, and reflection on the persistence of certain social structures in the face of political disruption. Historical change is presented not as a linear or automatic process, but as a complex phenomenon conditioned by multiple factors.

From a didactic perspective, the proposal directly aligns with the principles of LOMLOE, prioritizing competency-based work, historical literacy, and the use of primary sources that require in-depth engagement with the terrorist phenomenon as a basis for knowledge construction. Unlike other textbooks where images serve merely illustrative purposes, in this case, photographs become the central axis of the activity, acquiring interpretive and problematizing value. Students are engaged as active participants in learning, in line with the construction of complex historical knowledge.

However, although the activity is methodologically innovative, its explanatory potential largely depends on teacher mediation. As García (2024) notes, the implementation of this material relies on the decisions of teachers and school management teams, who must decide whether to incorporate it or continue with the content provided by textbooks. This circumstance generates a complex and difficult-to-resolve scenario until substantial changes are made in the History curriculum that grant greater emphasis to the study of victims within the Transition and the process of democratic consolidation.

The limited treatment of terrorism in school textbooks not only restricts historical learning but also conditions students' democratic education. The lack of contextualization, the scarce presence of victims, and the absence of ethical reflection contribute to a superficial understanding of recent history. This situation is particularly concerning in communities such as the Basque Country, where studies have shown "moderate or poor" knowledge among youth regarding the most significant terrorist events, their perpetrators, victims, and social and institutional responses (Delgado, in press).

6. Conclusions

The joint analysis of the treatment of victims of Francoism and terrorism in textbooks allows the identification of common patterns that respond to an educational logic that could be termed continuist across different educational laws. Textbooks operate through an implicit balance between the need to address traumatic pasts and the concern to avoid latent conflicts with resonance in the public sphere.

In the most superficial cases, political violence appears as a secondary element, diluted within political or economic perspectives, reinforcing the idea that victims occupy a marginal place in the historical narrative. The representation of Francoist repression, for example, often appears devoid of context or softened through formulations that minimize the structural violence of the regime, still reflecting certain social resistances surrounding historical memory. A similar pattern occurs with terrorism, which is addressed in an extremely synthetic and descriptive manner, frequently reduced to figures or lists of acronyms, sidelining victims' experiences and the socio-political complexity of the phenomenon.

These limitations are compounded by the fact that many classroom activities related to both topics remain anchored in a memoristic approach, focused on content reproduction, with minimal use of primary sources or personal and civic reflection by students. In this scenario, the role of the teacher becomes decisive: it is through their didactic mediation that a more critical perspective can be offered, social empathy promoted, and victims placed at the center of historical learning.

In light of these shortcomings, it is necessary to advance toward the teaching of terrorism that transcends the descriptive logic and contributes to the construction of democratic memory grounded in human rights. This involves integrating personal testimonies, analyzing rights violations, fostering historical thinking, and promoting critical reflection on the causes, effects, and responsibilities associated with the use of violence.

A comprehensive educational approach must incorporate the complexity of the phenomenon, the voices of victims, the diversity of actors involved, and societal evolution in response to violence. Only in this way can students be equipped with the necessary tools to understand their recent past and actively participate in building a civic culture based on coexistence, plurality, and the rejection of all forms of political violence.

All of this points to the need to advance toward a genuine didactics of democratic memory in the ongoing professional development of teachers, granting victims a central place in the school narrative, constructed from plurality, critical analysis, and a clear commitment to repair and human rights.

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