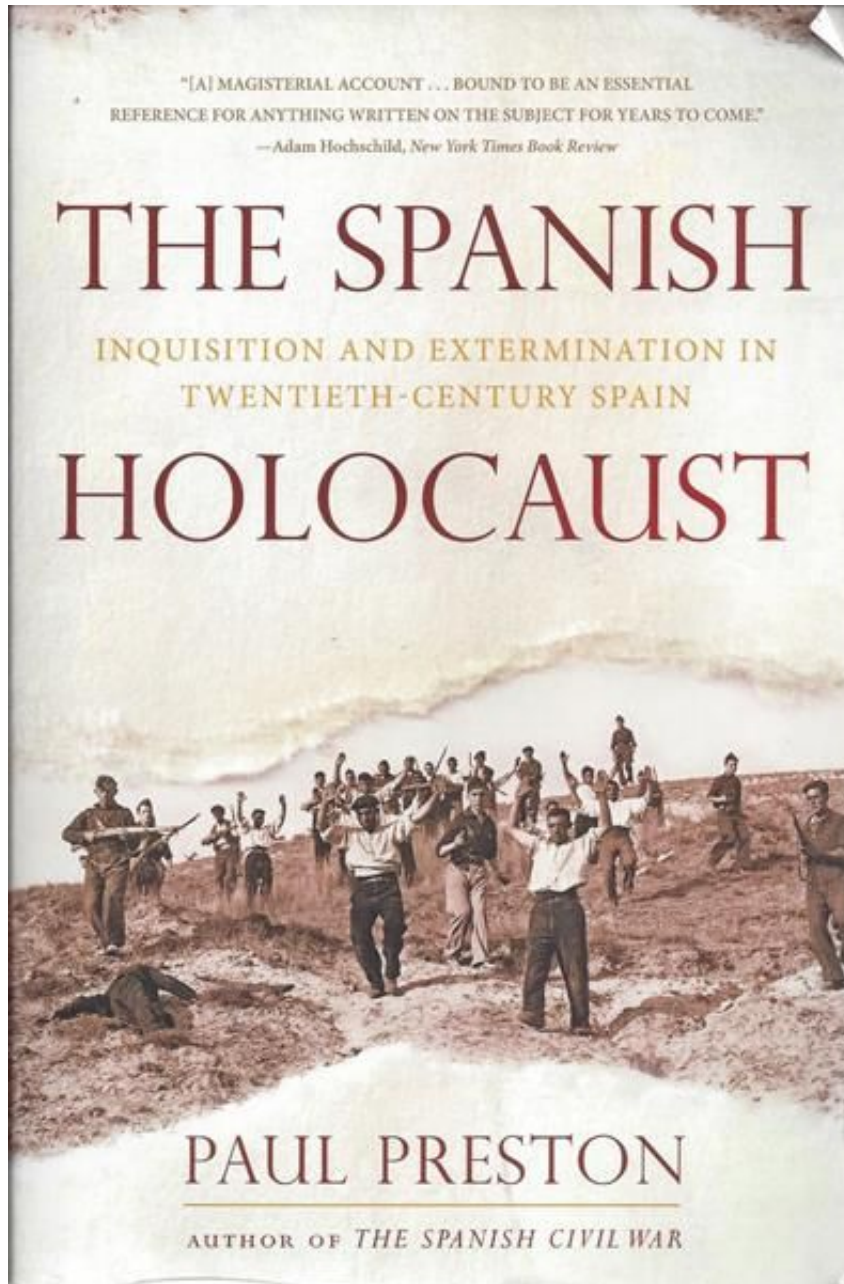


BOOK REVIEW: "The Spanish Holocaust" by Paul Preston



W.W. Norton & Co.

Paul Preston's 2012 book "The Spanish Holocaust" about the brutality of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39).



Category:

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BOOK REVIEW: *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* by Paul Preston (W.W. Norton) 2012

First of all, I would totally understand if the average reader was reluctant to subject themselves to more than 500 pages of grim horror, cruelty and death as is found in the detailed pages of Paul Preston's ([The Spanish Civil War](#), *Franco: A Biography*, etc.) scholarly tome *The Spanish Holocaust*, published in 2012.

And while scholarly and meticulously researched - with more historical names, figures, political parties and interests than one can count – the shocking reality is that the book lives up to its subtitle: **“Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain.”**

Preston, of Britain, is the key historian on the Spanish Civil War and has numerous titles to his credit as proof. The man lives and breathes the Spanish Civil War, a conflict often overlooked in favor of World War II, which it preceded. Both the triumphs and failures ... and the sheer savagery of Franco and his rebels are captured in detail on these pages.

A holocaust? Sad, but true. And the Fascists claimed all along to be fighting for a pure, unified Spain - a Spain with God on its side. A Spain where Catholic priests were among the most cruel of fighters, as you read one page after the other and shake your head at the utter madness of it all.

For most, Preston's research is an unenviable job as he unearths the documents about the many hundreds of thousands of Spaniards who were jailed, injured and killed during the three years of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), which was started by a band of fascist rebels in the Spanish military – led by Gen. Francisco Franco – and after their bloody war against the legally-elected Spanish Republic, led to Franco's role as iron-fisted dictator of Spain until his death in 1975.

Now, some might argue that Preston's use of the word “holocaust” in the title of his remarkable book is over the top. Certainly, fascist-friendly Spaniards today scoff at such a description. But to dismiss such a descriptor would be to dishonor the many dead who were the victims of Franco's completely calculated reign of terror.

Odious anti-Semitic and anti-Islamic conspiracy theories raged in the years prior to the military rebellion in July 1936.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion – considered by the ultra right-wing press as “a serious sociological study” - viewed Jews, primarily, along with Muslims, Freemasons and Communists and Anarchists as a serious threat and that it was “instigated by Moscow and international Jewry.” Jewish-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy theories fueled a lot of the fears – and the slaughter to come – amongst the bloodthirsty radical right wing and Fascist groups.

These ideas were embraced by Franco and various right-wing factions who opposed the Spanish Republic and its open democracy that was bringing reforms to a part of Europe often considered backward and agrarian as opposed to progressive and urbane.

Anarcho-syndicalist parties like the *Confederación Nacional del Trabajo* (CNT) and the *Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista* (POUM, with whom English author George Orwell [fought](#), alongside other volunteers in the [International Brigades](#) and America's [Abraham Lincoln Brigade](#)) were some of the leading anarchist and communist political parties in Spain at the time of the rebellion.

But history shows us that Soviet leader Joseph Stalin (whose nation contributed arms and support to the Spanish Republic) had interest in Spain remaining free of fascist influence, and oddly helped in the ultimate defeat of the Republic by eliminating parties like the Trotskyist POUM and its effective leader Andreu Nin whose capture and murder – likely at the hands of Stalinist agents near Madrid - effectively ended the role of the Left opposition in Spain as the war wound down and the Fascists claimed victory in the spring of '39.

What is interesting - and chilling - in reading Preston's book is how the events of those days echo today's American political climate. Fascist demagogues like Donald Trump demonize Muslims, Mexicans and the "other," just as Franco and the Fascists did in the late 1930's with Jews, union workers, Socialists, left-leaning women, intellectuals and noted Spanish poet and playwright Federico Garcia Lorca, murdered in the early days of the war, and who is noted in the beloved Clash song "[Spanish Bombs](#)."

The right was horrified that landless peasants were being given land. That women were throwing off their chains and becoming free. That the Church was being made to quiet church bells and not have a leading role in Spanish life, something the Church had had for centuries.

Franco and other Spanish rightists, Carlists and traditionalists were inspired by the power Germany's Hitler and Italy's Mussolini gained in a short amount of time, until they had full, totalitarian control. It comes as no surprise that Franco invited support from both Hitler and Mussolini during the war, outgunning the Republicans as the United States, Britain and other democracies stood by and did nothing. It was only the USSR and Mexico who offered help to the Spanish Republic. But it was too little, too late.

It was the growing power of the Spanish right that sealed the Republic's fate.

"The Spanish radical right began to see the working class as imbued with Jewish and Muslim treachery and barbarism," writes Preston. So as the war churned onward into 1937 and 1938, more and more innocent people were caught up in the barbarism inflicted on the Spanish people, a situation that has not been healed, as evidenced by efforts today of right-wing Spaniards who don't want the past dug up, because of just how inhumane thousands-upon-thousands of Spaniards were treated during the war and the years following.

In fact, in the immediate years after the war, as World War II raged in other parts of Europe, filthy, crowded prisons saw children torn away with their mothers' breast to be placed in orphanages overseen by the Roman Catholic Church, an institution which had strongly allied with the brutal fascists.

Major Antonio Vallejo Nagera – a man obsessed with "racial cleanliness" and a Nazi in everything but the word - was Franco's Mengele, whose model was the Spanish Inquisition.

Oh, and yes, Vallejo did have "German scientific advisers" on hand to oversee the proceedings, to help reinforce the notion that the "Reds" were "subhuman" and justifying their brutal treatment of their left-leaning adversaries.

"His subjects were captured members of the International Brigades in San Pedro de Cardena and fifty Republican women prisoners in Malaga, thirty of whom were awaiting execution. In the latter case, starting from the premise that they were degenerate and prone to Marxist criminality, he explained 'female revolutionary criminality' by reference to the animal nature of the female psyche and the 'marked sadistic nature' unleashed when political circumstance allowed females to 'satisfy their latent sexual appetites.'"

Surprising, coming from a sinister figure whose Fascist fellows were obsessed with raping and sexually humiliating women who were not supportive of the Spanish rebellion led by the Falangist and Franco's Fascist thugs. It seemed as no one escaped Franco's complete terror. And Franco was well-known for his disinterest in showing compassion at all.

The "reverberations" of the Spanish Civil War - and it did lead to a Spanish holocaust, as Preston makes all too clear - for the people and the freedom fighters. As for Franco, Preston writes: "There is no evidence that Franco's sleep was ever interrupted by concern for his victims. Indeed, his regime made considerable efforts to ensure the at the same tranquility was enjoyed by all of his collaborators." As a result, the Spanish people of today don't know much about what really happened 80 years ago this summer and in the following years.

But as more people dig up the past - as the [International Brigade Archeology Project](#) did until rightists put a stop to it in 2015 - the more they address

the past and learn from it. Hopefully Europe, the United States and others learn the lessons of the Spanish Civil War and work to avoid the curse of history repeating itself.



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