

Tragic Prelude To The Long Night Of Fascism In Spain

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**The Last Days Of The
Spanish Republic
by Paul Preston
(Harper Collins, £25)**

LAST week saw the 80th anniversary of the outbreak of the Spanish civil war and this outstanding book, recording and analysing a period of the conflict often neglected by historians and commentators, couldn't be more timely.

Paul Preston's narrative centres on three of the republic's main actors in 1939 — Prime Minister Negrin, the self-serving anti-communist military leader Casado and the arrogant Socialist Party leader Besteiro.

In March 1939 Casado launched a coup against the elected government, supported by Socialist Party politicians and anarchist-led army divisions, rebel forces who were successful in overcoming the remnants of the Popular Republican Army.

In the bitter fighting in Madrid, Casado prepared the ground for what turned out to be an inglorious surrender to Franco-led fascist forces, with only the Madrid communists standing by the republican government.

In the first 48 hours the communists held their own but Casado was able to call on reserve forces led by the anarchist lieutenant Colonel Mera. Faced with overwhelmingly superior forces the communists surrendered.

Casado and Besteiro had convinced themselves that by defeating communist militants they would impress Franco with their support for anti-communism and thereby be able to negotiate favourable peace terms.

Later in the month Franco's army marched unopposed into Madrid. Mayhem broke out, with thousands imprisoned and widespread executions.

Casado and his co-conspirators had not only betrayed the republic. In a few weeks they had rendered worthless the sacrifices of the thousands who had died in three years of fighting fascism.

Preston reminds us that it is important to understand that Casado's coup was successful because of the war-weariness of the Spanish people and the cowardly leadership of the Western democracies.

After initial advances, the Popular Army retreated back over the Ebro in September 1938 and that was followed by a massive offensive into Catalonia by Franco's army, heavily backed by Italian tanks and German bombers.

By February 1939 the Popular Army was forced back into the central south zone and, at this stage, the republic still commanded a third of Spanish territory and had over 500,000 men under arms.

In the preceding 18 months Negrin had worked on the diplomatic front to press a mediated peace settlement on Franco.

Munich ended this possibility but it remained a feasible strategy to hold out in the hope that the Western powers would soon be dragged into an anti-Hitler war.

Negrin, who knew that the alternative was horrendous reprisals, was proved right. World war broke out five months later.

Preston shows how anarchist leaders played a leading role in Casado's junta and provides strong evidence that the CNT, the anarchist trade union federation, was infested by fifth columnists.

And he debunks some rose-tinted views of the anarchist collectivisation initiatives, which may have been "exhilarating to participants and George Orwell [but] the great collectivist experiments were an obstacle to the creation of a war machine."

The author clearly establishes the link between Franco's revolt and Casado's insurrection. Both renegades justified their treachery in order, they said, to rescue the country from a communist takeover. This was a travesty of the truth.

Anti-communism also bedevilled efforts to unite the anti-fascist movement and it was anti-communism, and the fear of spreading Soviet influence, which was used as a pretext by the British ruling class to justify its refusal to support a democratic government against a military

the withdrawal of the International Brigades in 1938.

Not so. As Helen Graham states in her authoritative work on the Spanish republic at war at the end of August 1938, Stalin in fact accepted Negrin's proposal to withdraw the International Brigades.

Review by Tom Sibley

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