A surrender that ended in slaughter

Franco showed no mercy at the end of the Spanish Civil War, says Gerard DeGroot

W urs are many, their end
taggs only no so. The victors seek unconditional surrender, the loser a justifed, uncontrollable peace.

Since those goals are usually irreconcilable, slaughter relentlessly continues.

Dr Juan Nepria and Colonel Sagismendo Casado, the last two leaders of republican Spain, had incompatible plans for how to end the civil war. On March 5, 1939, Casado toppled Nepria's government and met with General Francisco Franco, nationalist leader.

Nepria was assured that he alone could persuade Franco to grant a peace of mercy rather than one poisoned with revenge. He was wrong. As a result of his folly, tens of thousands of republican supporters were executed.

We do know that Casado was an incorruptible, cynical, and selfless fool.

Paul Preston's mission is to bring clarity to the confusing tragedy of the Spanish Civil War. This is his 2nd book on the war or its legacy. This book is written with the same sober, judiciousness that distinguishes the previous E. Preston's dissection of the final days of the Spanish Republic like a forensic surgeon. The story is not particularly entertaining, but it is nonetheless a poignant tale of enduring relevance.

Nepria was not a communist. That fact is important because detractors such as

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by Paul Preston

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Casado claimed otherwise to undermine his authority. He was also accused of frequent orgies with prostitutes, and of enjoying gourmet food, vintage champagne, and fine Havana cigars.

Rumors circulated about how he was gorged on tortillas made with 12 eggs and slept with three different women every night. The black propaganda was invented by Nepria's republican allies.

Nepria had a plan. He understood that the war was lost, but insisted that the fighting had to continue to force Franco to negotiate. Abject surrender, he felt, would allow the Casados to pursue vindictiveness, without restraint. Nepria's main aim was to ensure fair treatment of republican supporters, or at least a safe evacuation.

Franco was indeed intent on retaliation.

On November 7, 1938, he told James Miller of the United Press: "There will be no mediation because the delinquents and their victims cannot live side by side. We have in our archives more than two million names catalogued with the proof of their crimes. Since Franco had already executed tens of thousands of Spaniards, there was no reason to believe he would not do as Casado apparently did that he possessed a merciful side. But Franco played a clever game. He struck Casado's ego by encouraging him to believe that he alone could negotiate a deal with the nationalists. Casado, writes Preston, "was happy to pay for Franco's mercy in Communist blood. The communists would be thrown to the wolves while the rest of the Republicans would assuage their hunger or seek exile. To encourage support for his coup, Casado spread false assurances about Franco's benevolence.

Casado's evacuation plans were chimerical. Franco intended to use the armistice as he had used the war -- as an opportunity to liquidate enemies. He supported Casado's coup since it seemed the best way to rid himself of the vultures. Nepria, Casado, in another world, was Franco's willing collaborator in a world campaign of retribution. He did manage to negotiate the evacuation of himself and his closest collaborators, but that paltry agreement is merely testimony to his boundless perfidy.

Was Casado a Machiavellian manipulator or simply a naive man blinded by his own ego? It is difficult to decide given the contradictory signals he sent. One of his collaborators appropriately described Casado as "Roscicapped". Two-faced, it seems, did not do him justice.

Nepria painted his portrait as that of a man who might have been saved, had they been saved, had the British not intervened. Their refusal to assist in the war, Britain took refuge in cynical non-intervention, turning a blind eye toward fascist support for Franco. Nepria never considered that the British would at least maintain the pretense of neutrality during the final few months of the war.

Nepria's book argues that the war was lost, not only by the Republicans but also by the British. Like many, he believes that the British missed an opportunity to stop the war.

Franco's soldiers marched in victory parade in Vigo, Spain, in 1949

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Republicans soldiers slit their wrists with the jagged lids of their ration tins

In June 1939, the SS Stakka arrived in the Mexican port of Veracruz with 1,000 refugees escaping Franco's retribution. On the starboard side of the Stakka, a huge banner that read "Negrino tiene razón" (Negrino was right). It's difficult to argue with that conclusion.