

Unflinching portrait of a civil war: review of The End Of The Spanish Republic by Paul Preston

12:11am Sunday 6th March 2016

By Brian Morton

The End Of The Spanish Republic

by Paul Preston

William Collins, £25

GEORGE Orwell was Don Quixote in reverse. Armed with nothing but a doleful face and a typewriter, he nailed the three big windmills of the 20th century: the supposed benevolence of imperialism; the impossibility of negotiating with fascism; and, as he saw most clearly in Spain, the seductive nonsense of Stalinism's promise to deliver a bright, shiny future in which everyone claimed an equal stake. The further proof of Orwell's superior realism was that he so easily nailed the romantic notion of Spain as a sunlit jousting field where right and wrong (or right and left, if you preferred) fought it out among olive groves. Orwell quickly saw that war – whether at Thermopylae, Flodden, Verdun or outside Barcelona – was not glorious but was simply sick futility acted out by men with lice on their testicles. The image doesn't go away.

The problem with seeing the Spanish Civil War as a romantic clash between right and left is that too many lefts were involved and too many ignoble compromises and deceptions perpetrated by men ostensibly of the left. Never in modern history were the odds stacked so unevenly in favour of totalitarianism. Paul Preston took up the mantle of Orwell – and Orwell's chastened version of Quixote – nearly 40 years ago. He is our most distinguished student of modern Spanish politics and of the conflict that, more than any other, set a stamp on the later 20th century. In this very detailed book – though it's by no means for specialists only – he takes on that most difficult of historical subjects: how a war ends. In the case of Spain, it ended as it had begun, with a coup. The end of the Spanish Republic is essentially about three men, or four if the chunky figure of Francisco Franco is allowed to hulk in the background, waiting for his moment in history. The others are a fairly sorry bunch, too. Dr Juan Negrín was prime minister of the Republic. His Trece Puntos (or "13 points", somewhat modelled on Woodrow Wilson's 14) seemed to offer Spain the possibility of peace with honour and without undue recrimination or revenge, but they were brushed aside by Franco. Ranged against him was the unlovely figure of Colonel Segismondo Casado, as thoroughgoing a cynic as you'll find in recent history. His particular fantasy, which he manipulated rather than believed, was that Negrín's government was merely the back door to a communist takeover across the peninsula, which would, of course have meant that Europe was squeezed between two Bolshevik blocs, with the portals to the Atlantic controlled by the Comintern.

Allied to Casado in the coup of March 1939 was the right-wing Julian Besteiro, who'd refused to leave Madrid when the war began, but who'd been sent to London by President Manuel Azaña for the coronation of George VI, in the hope of securing official British support for the Republic. Besteiro is one of those figures who seem to move through history wearing blinkers, allowing themselves to be seduced by more persuasive men. He and Casado were joined in the coup by General José Miaja, who helped to round up Madrid's communists.

Whether or not the Spanish Civil War was a "brothers' war" according to the old romanticised model, it was deeply divisive and profoundly complex in its personnel. It did, however, share the characteristic of almost all civil wars, in that the winners were bent not just on defeating but on exterminating the losers. Everyone in this period was making lists. With each town captured or fallen, another card index was added to the tally, and it was Franco who was falling heir to a vast archive of names, all of them to be hunted down, "tried" and executed. One of the most shocking aspects of the story Preston tells concerns Franco's warcraft, which prioritised destruction over simple strategic victory. In the tally of 20th-century dictators and fascists, he has never stood as high – or low – as Hitler or Stalin, and never as mindfully bloodthirsty as a Pol Pot, but Franco's prosecution of the last stages of the war was uniquely ugly, and perhaps all the more so for being played out in a landscape that recalled El Cid and Cervantes, but also Goya's blackly horrific Los Desastres De La Guerra.

Negrín found himself in the position of having to fight on only because he knew what the price of capitulation was. He himself was not called on to die in battle. He remained as prime minister of the Spanish Republic in exile from 1939 to 1945, pretty much ignored in a Europe that had treated his country as a dry-run for war, and died in 1956. Miaja escaped on a British ship to Mexico and died there in 1958. Besteiro was captured by Franco's forces after Madrid fell at the end of March 1939. He was imprisoned first of all in a Trappist monastery, which seemed like an appropriate place for him, but died a year later in an overcrowded jail in Carmona, a Moorish oubliette of a town. Casado got away to Venezuela but returned to Spain in 1961.

Preston tells a complex story, with its interlocking cast of anarchists and communists, loyalists, republicans and rebels, regional factions, meddling outsiders, with great plainness. It might be easier to follow the narrative if you've already read his – or Anthony Beevor's – general history of the Spanish Civil War, but this is a free-standing book and a remarkable one. Its focal length is short and it shows the venality of politics in unflinching, Goya-like close-up.

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