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 compromises and deceits perpetrated by men ostensibly of the left. Never in modern history were the odds stacked so unevenly in favour of totalitarianism.

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

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.

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

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