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Paul Preston

on studying the
Spanish Civil war
and understanding
Spain today



Meet the
last survivor



Is this
Gerda Taro?

At the IBMT
lecture day





INTERVIEW

Paul Preston is recognised as the world's foremost historian of the Spanish Civil War. His prolific output of books, stretching back over four decades, has played an important role in raising and reshaping public perceptions of the war and 20th century Spain. In this exclusive interview for the IBMT, he talks at length about his personal commitment to unearthing and explaining what happened before, during and after the civil war and why those events still cast such a shadow over modern Spain.

Born in Liverpool in 1946, Paul Preston is Professor of Spanish History at the London School of Economics, where he is the director of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies. He is also the Founding Chair of the IBMT, having chaired the initial meetings in 2000 that brought together International Brigade veterans, families, friends and historians to create the International Brigade Memorial Trust.

His latest book is 'The Last Days of the Spanish Republic' (2017). Among others are 'The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain' (2012), 'We Saw Spain Die: Foreign Correspondents in the Spanish Civil War' (2008), 'The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge' (2006), 'Doves of War: Four Women of Spain' (2002), '¡Comrades! Portraits from the Spanish Civil War' (1999), 'A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War' (1996) and 'The Coming of the Spanish Civil War: Reform, Reaction and Revolution in the Second Republic 1931-1936' (1978). He is also the author of two major biographies 'Juan Carlos: A People's King' (2004) and 'Franco: A Biography' (1993).

Paul Preston is interviewed here by **Jim Jump**. The interview took place at the LSE on 8 March 2018.

MAKING HISTORY

You've never shied away from taking a partisan view of the Spanish Civil War and make no secret of your support for the Spanish Republic. Has that fundamental view changed at all over more than 40 years of scholarship?

First of all I would dispute that thinking the Spanish Republic was in the right and the Francoists were in the wrong is partisan. No-one, for example, would dream of accusing anyone of being partisan for writing in a way that was critical of Hitler. Yet, amazingly, to be critical of Franco can still invite accusations of bias. The reasons are obvious. They are about the way his reputation was enhanced during the Cold War. This meant he always enjoyed a good press, obviously in Spain, but also in Britain. But there is nothing much that has altered my view of Franco over all those years.

In terms of the origins of the war, I can see more clearly now that the Republican politicians made mistakes. That was to be expected. They came into power facing horrendous problems, with no experience whatsoever.

As for the internal politics of the Republic, there are all kinds of nuances that have shifted on my part. The idea that the POUM [Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista] were hard-done-by victims doesn't last very long the more you read. While I'm deeply aware of the way that the POUM were smeared, I'm also aware that they did things that could very easily be construed as sabotage: pulling troops back from the front and so on. Last week I had an amazing three hours with a young Spaniard who is doing research on the Fifth Column of Franco supporters in the Republican zone, and the information he has on links between the POUM and the Fifth Column is just hair-raising. I'm looking forward to his PhD.

I've also become much more critical of the anarchists and specifically of the *chequistas* who carried out extra-judicial executions, torture

and imprisonment. They did immense damage to the Republic in terms of its possibility of securing foreign aid. Obviously the anarchists' view that they should be allowed to make their revolution is nuts. Short of being able to say to Franco: 'Can you just hold on for another five to six years until we've made the revolution and then we will go back to war?', it was just utterly unrealistic; ditto for the POUM.

As far as certain individuals are concerned, if you take my book 'Comrades', which has portraits of various people, the person who comes out best is the socialist Indalecio Prieto. But now I've arrived at a different conclusion. Prieto was wonderful for the Republic until he got the hump for being excluded from the

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government in April 1938 when Prime Minister Juan Negrín took the not unreasonable view that he could not have a defeatist as his Minister of War. Prieto never forgave Negrín and accused him of being a puppet of the communists and so on. I've come to see that what Prieto was doing was preparing for a future following a Franco victory when you were never going to be able to survive in exile if you were known to be pro-communist.

It didn't take me very long to reach the conclusion that Negrín's predecessor, Largo

Caballero, was a total disaster, that he was an appallingly bad war leader. By contrast, over time my admiration for Juan Negrín has just grown and grown.

So, within the Republic, my views are now much more nuanced, much more critical, especially regarding the atrocities, even though these crimes are often unfairly pinned on the Republican authorities. No, they took place within the Republican zone where law and order had broken down. The idea that they were countenanced let alone encouraged by the Republican authorities is absolute nonsense.

Overall, looking at both sides in the war, I'm also much more ready to see good and bad on both sides. Not everyone on the Republican side was an angel; nor was everyone on the Francoist side a villain.

What about the International Brigades? When they came back from Spain they were denigrated and regarded with great suspicion. Now they're generally admired. Do you think historians like yourself have had any role in that transformation?

I would take no credit for any of that. I think that Richard Baxell is the person who should be taking credit or Angela Jackson, Linda Palfreeman and other people who have done hard research. I have to say also that I'm amazed and full of admiration for what the IBMT has achieved.

My 'Concise History of the Spanish Civil War' is dedicated to the International Brigades and that goes back to my friendship with people like Bill Alexander and Dave Marshall. I knew lots of them and had a wide-eyed, fan-like admiration for them. I always thought the whole idea of the International Brigades and their sacrifices and so on were just amazing, and of course I've tried to express that in my books.

There's still an awful lack of understanding of the Brigades as well. I'm thinking of people who want to say: 'They're just like the foreign jihadis.' Rubbish like that, along with some of the American research about the 'Comintern Army', has to be combated.

I'm not a military historian, but the Brigades seem to have been used like shock troops that could be easily sacrificed, in much the same way as the Francoists used the Moors. As the war went on it became more difficult to rotate troops. But the International Brigades were harder done by than almost any other unit – taken out after a month in the field, told they'd have a week off and then two hours later they're back, that kind of thing. It makes me wonder what exactly was the attitude of the

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general staff of the Republic to them. I can't get a clear view of that, though they were clearly seen as dependable and politically committed.

What drew you to becoming a historian and to take a special interest in Spain and 20th century history?

I think it goes back to the fact that I was born in 1946 in Liverpool, which had been a target during the Blitz. The surrounding areas had been badly bombed, including the house that I was brought up in by my grandparents. Luckily no one was killed – it just so happened to be one night when they were all in an-air raid shelter. Growing up in the late 40s, the Blitz and the Second World War were on everybody's lips. As kids our games would be British versus Germans and would all be running up and down the street being Spitfires and Messerschmitts. When I was about 10 or 11, I began making Airfix airplane model kits. I got really hooked on the Second World War and started to read quite serious books about it.

Then I was lucky enough to get a scholarship to Oxford. Being a scum of the earth working-class Scouser in Oxford wasn't

'With the Spanish Civil War you don't have to choose. You get everything: Stalinism, Trotskyism, fascism, communism, Hitler, Mussolini. It's fabulous – and here I am nearly 50 years on and I still think that.'

very common in those days and it was actually a horrible experience. There are lots of wonderful things about Oxford. It's a lovely place to be, and the libraries are mind-boggling. You could go to lectures by some pretty amazing people – Isaiah Berlin was absolutely fantastic. But the teaching overall was diabolical. Also, there was hardly any contemporary history taught. There was enormous stress on Anglo-Saxon, medieval and British history and very little 20th century or European history. The nearest to what I wanted to do, which would have been the origins of the Second World War, was the origins of the First World War.

So how did you begin studying the Spanish Civil War?

After Oxford I did an MA at Reading University. It comprised two options. I did left-wing literature of the interwar period and the Spanish Civil War. The left-wing literature part was a doddle for me, because it was basically about books that I had been devouring for years. I was manically obsessed with the likes of John Steinbeck and his contemporaries.

The Spanish Civil War was taught by Hugh Thomas, who in 1961 had written 'The Spanish Civil War'. I'd read a couple of books, but didn't really understand anything. Thomas was, in his way, a brilliant teacher. He didn't really give a hoot, but was eccentric and amusing and there were only four of us on the course. It was a great experience, not least because of all the people Thomas knew and brought into the classes to talk to us.

Thomas encouraged us especially to read the left-wing books. We were pushed into answering the basic question on the left – war or revolution? The book that had the biggest impact on me was Gerald Brenan's 'The Spanish Labyrinth', which I still think is a fabulous book. Subsequent research has questioned much of it, but it remains amazingly perceptive. Thomas' book too has many qualities. There are things in it that I would dispute. But every time I take it off the shelf I'm always tickled by the way he writes – it's very colourful – and I still think, despite the fact that much of it is from an English middle-class perspective, that it's a great book.

There was never any question about which side to be on, the Spanish Republic versus Franco – it was obvious who were the goodies and the baddies. That was not a question, even for Thomas. But there was an issue about whether the goodies were the anarchists and the Trotskyists and the baddies were the communists. That was the standard view at the time. So I read Gaston Leval and a whole pile of stuff on anarchists, collectivism, quite a lot on the POUM and so on. 'The Grand Camouflage' by Burnett Bolloten was a big influence.

Is this when you realised that studying the Spanish Civil War might become your life's work?

There came a point, probably after about a term at Reading when I thought, this is great. I'd spent ages in Oxford thinking what the hell to do next, what to choose. But with the Spanish Civil War you don't have to choose. You get everything: Stalinism, Trotskyism, fascism, communism, Hitler, Mussolini. It's fabulous – and here I am nearly 50 years on and I still think that.

At Reading I also realised that I had to learn Spanish and I set about doing it in the daftest



▲ Paul Preston (second from left) in Madrid in 1978 with Felipe González (right), leader of the PSOE socialist party and the future prime minister of Spain.

way possible, which was to read a book that I had to read, an unspeakable book, by Santiago Galindo, very pro-Franco. I read it with a dictionary and of course learnt a lot of Spanish along the way; not how to pronounce it, but I combined that with going out drinking with Colombian students in the bar and bit by bit I began to speak a few words. Then in 1969, I think it was the Easter holidays, I went to Spain for the first time, to a village called Arroyo de la Miel. By then I was hooked. My friends would go into Torremolinos for a rave, and I would go into the local village. In those days it was rare for a foreigner to learn Spanish, so a crowd would gather, and I would be trying to order things and saying 'tengo sed' [I'm thirsty] and I'd go back to the bar the next day for a coffee and by then I could say 'tengo hambre' [I'm hungry].

I decided I wanted to do a PhD and I went back to Oxford, supposedly to be supervised by Raymond Carr. I had read Carr's 'Spain 1808–1939', which I found very hard going and even now find pretty knotty. But he was in America most of the time. Carr let me down in many ways. I had this awful contretemps with him because I wanted to work on the direct origins of the civil war. I saw him before he went off and he told me: 'No, you can't do that.' He always got his students to study what he was interested in, and at the time he wanted someone to work on the Primo de Rivera dictatorship, which I started. I went Madrid and began doing research, but I never got the hang of it. Funnily enough it's a topic that I'm now writing about,



▲ Paul Preston (seventh from left) on 28 October 2000 at the meeting in London, which he chaired, at which it was agreed to create the International Brigade Memorial Trust. Pictured with him are several International Brigade veterans, along with family members, historians and representatives of the Marx Memorial Library, where the meeting was held.



▲ With Santiago Carrillo (centre), leader of the PCE Spanish Communist Party, and Nicolás Belmonte.

but there is a lot of material available now that wasn't then. I decided that what I wanted to write about were the right-wing conspirators, the people behind the conspiracy that led to the civil war. I did some quite useful work on them and then Carr came back and, in a very insensitive manner, says: 'You can't do that, find something else.' So I began looking at a group called the *mauristas*, the followers of Antonio Maura, who were key to the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. But I couldn't find my way around the archives. Then in 1971 there came a point, away from Carr, when I thought, to hell with this, I'm going to do what I want to do and started to study the Second Republic and that became my thesis and my first book.

By now I was way behind in my PhD and my grant had run out. I was having to earn a living in Madrid, but absolutely loving it. I was doing all kinds of things. I was a film extra in 'Nicholas and Alexandra' and taught American students. In 1973 Hugh Thomas went on sabbatical and I had two years as a temporary lecturer at Reading as his replacement. Then in 1975 I was lucky enough to get a lectureship at Queen Mary College, University of London, on condition that I finished my PhD within a year. It was published as 'The Coming of the Spanish Civil War' in 1978 and got a rave review by Carr in The Observer, which, I don't know, might even have been an apology of sorts.

'Homage to Catalonia', which takes the side of 'revolution' over 'war', as you put it, and paints the Spanish Civil War as a conflict between two unappealing extremes who between them crush a noble people's revolution. Do you think Orwell's views, which tend to remove the Spanish Civil War from the context of the wider world war against fascism, are a factor in why the war in Spain is so rarely or poorly taught in schools?

I don't think that is much to do with Orwell. The dominant figures in the historiography of the interwar period tend to be either British, American or German scholars and there is this notion that what's important is a line that goes from London to Paris with a bit of a dip to Rome and then to Berlin and Moscow. Spain doesn't even come into it. That is partly because these people aren't specialists. Just to cope with the hard detail of British foreign policy, German foreign policy, French, Italian, Russian foreign policy is a monumental task. Yet the Spanish Civil War is effectively the first battle in the Second World War, and appalling mistakes were made in British foreign policy at the time. As I put it in 'A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War', the British ruling classes put their class prejudices ahead of their strategic interests. It was Churchill who went from class prejudice to strategic interests. He kept changing his mind and ended up, from having been a fervent Franco supporter, to being a supporter of the Republic.

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▲ Addressing the IBMT's annual commemoration on London's Southbank in 2016.

One of the books you must have read early on in your studies is George Orwell's

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That failure on the part of the ruling classes might explain something about how British historians see the war in Spain. But for the most part they're not really that interested.

You need to be a historian of Spain to start seeing it and particularly to be a historian of the international dimension of the Spanish Civil War. For instance, the conventional wisdom is that the Germans and Italians intervened in Spain because of ideological solidarity and in order to try out weaponry. I don't think that's true. What they were doing is seeing how far they could challenge British and French hegemony and change the international balance of power. This comes out at a meeting early in the war between Franco, Göring and Mussolini, when Göring effectively says to Mussolini: 'Come on, we've got to hurry up. There is no way the British and French are going to carry on

'My main argument against the film, as well as with Orwell's book, is that, if you knew nothing about the Spanish war, you would come away from the film thinking the Republic was somehow defeated by Stalin and not by Franco, Hitler, Mussolini and the British establishment.'

letting us do this.' With leading figures on the left in Spain's transition to democracy: Above (second from left) in 1978 with Felipe González (right), leader of the PSOE socialist party and future prime minister.

You've recently published couple of very strong critiques of 'Homage to Catalonia'. What's the reason for this?

One of my constant beefs is that people read one book, usually 'Homage to Catalonia', and think they have the right to pontificate about the Spanish Civil War. Yet Orwell is only in Spain for six months. The idea that he's totally honest isn't sustained by a detailed reading of his book. He says himself that his Spanish was appalling and

his Catalan was non-existent, yet he relates in detail conversations that he could only have had in Catalan.

What he actually witnessed and describes, the excrement in the trenches, the rusty cans, the lack of food, the wasted bread, the mud in your boots, all of that is brilliant, absolutely superb reporting. What it was actually like to be on the streets of Barcelona during the May Days is also great.

The political interpretation, however, is utterly inappropriate in many ways. Orwell leaves Spain in June 1937 and his book is published the following year. In it he's saying things which are taken by readers to explain why the Republic loses the war nearly two years after Orwell left Spain. That's simply not valid.

What I've discovered recently is that in 1940 Orwell, as a journalist, is introduced to Juan Negrín, who is in exile in London, and they have a long series of conversations. But Orwell doesn't mention his links with the POUM. He keeps that quiet and years later when Negrín finds out he is shocked. Negrín is a very reasonable person, but he ends up saying that, if Orwell had been honest with him, their relations might have been different. However, in 1943 Orwell writes this long article, 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War', which is actually very good – and very different to his book. It clearly reflects his conversations with Negrín.

Another discovery I've made is a letter in December 1938 from Orwell to Frank Jellinek, an Austrian sociologist who had been in Spain. Orwell confesses that most of what he wrote in 'Homage to Catalonia' about the POUM he didn't believe. He thought they were wrong at the time and he thinks they are wrong now, but he felt he had to write what he did in the spirit of fair play.

After the Second World War, Orwell becomes very anti-communist and he writes 'Animal Farm' and '1984'. He also corrects 'Homage to Catalonia', but surprisingly, given what he has learnt from Negrín and what he really thinks about the POUM, he only makes relatively small changes. One of my conclusions is that, even though Orwell knows he was wrong about many things in 'Homage to Catalonia', he doesn't make the necessary corrections because those things he wrote in 1938 have by now aligned themselves with what his anti-communist readers are thinking during the Cold War.

Do you regard the film 'Land and Freedom' in much the same way as Orwell's memoir?

If you know nothing about the Spanish Civil War, the Ken Loach film is a great movie. I can remember seeing it in Spain when it first came out in 1995 in a cinema full of Spaniards who

were weeping with emotion. They don't tend to do this in England, but the audience stood up at the end and clapped for about 10 minutes. There are some wonderful scenes in the film, for instance when Loach gets real village small-holders to pretend what it would be like at the time and to act out the issues of land reform; that is absolutely brilliant cinema. The film captures something very important and the framing of it is stunning, with at the start the old man, who is this hero of humanity, dying in Thatcherite Britain and then at the end the Spanish earth being tossed on his coffin.

But there are things that I'm not so sure about: the American who shows up in jackboots is shocking, even though I accept there were some International Brigaders used as internal police in the Republic's army; also, the depiction of the POUM volunteers as a group of really groovy, beautiful people. I wrote once, and this made some people upset, that this is Cliff Richard's 'We're all going on a summer holiday' meets the Spanish Civil War. But my main argument against the film, as well as with Orwell's book, is that, if you knew nothing about the Spanish war, you would come away from the film thinking the Republic was somehow defeated by Stalin and not by Franco, Hitler, Mussolini and the British establishment.

The Spanish Civil War continues to cast a long shadow over Spain and Spanish society. Other countries suffered comparable collapse in the 20th century and all seem to have recovered better than Spain. Is there a connection here with the civil war? What is it about the Spanish experience that is so different?

That's a really easy question to answer. In Germany, Italy, Japan and other countries the fascist or the extreme rightist experience is brought to an end by external defeat. In countries like France, once the occupation had come to an end, they could go back to the sort of democracy they had had before. In Germany there is a very serious government-sponsored process of de-Nazification, overseen by the occupying powers. The same is true of Italy and Japan.

That doesn't happen in Spain. Franco literally gets away with murder during and after the Second World War because the eyes of the world are on other things. Franco's links with the Axis are quietly forgotten. During the Cold War, when it's believed that Western Europe is at any minute about to be invaded by the Soviet Union, Franco becomes a better bet than wanting the Republic back. After all, the Republicans are allegedly the puppets of Moscow. This is done even though there is a degree of distaste on the

part of much of the British establishment, and of course the Labour Party doesn't cover itself with glory vis-a-vis Franco, because Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary goes along with the establishment line.

Franco has, from 1937 in those areas where he's already in charge and from 1939 in all of Spain, total control of essentially a terrorist regime. There is a huge investment in terror, a viciously repressive state apparatus and total control of the education system and the media. Until his death there is a great national brain-washing.

He dies in 1975 and there's a very complex process until elections in June 1977. In those 18 months, and even indeed for a long time after, no-one wants to rock the boat. There is fear of another civil war or another dictatorship. The left goes easy and doesn't push for historical memory and recognition of what went on under Franco. The October 1977 Amnesty Law prevents any judicial proceedings against the perpetrators. There is also the fact that over those 40 years of dictatorship there are nearly three generations of people who've been taught that Franco was a wonderful man, that he saved Spain from the bloodthirsty hordes of Moscow. That doesn't go away when Franco dies; nor does it go away when there are democratic elections that bring in a very conservative and limited democracy. The transition is a miracle under the circumstances, but the new democracy and the early governments are made up of Francoists. They're not going to start a process of counter brain-washing; that never happens. To this day there are many Spaniards brought up thinking Franco was a good thing, that the Republic was responsible for the civil war and so on.

In the mid 1970s there were still many people who remembered the war. The women whose husbands, fathers, brothers and sons died in the war or were murdered are not going to say anything because they have lived in terror. Their children have been brought up in silence and they are told: 'Whatever you do, don't mention that we were Republicans,' or 'Don't speak Catalan in school.'

What might be a bit more difficult to explain is why this has gone on for so long. I can remember being asked in the late 1980s by a Spanish journalist how long the hatred would continue and I said confidently that it was all a matter of time and that time would heal everything. It has taken a hell of a lot longer. Perhaps it's not as burning an issue as it was when the Law of Historical Memory, for all its huge limitations, was passed in 2007. But I think part of that is because of the economic crisis that followed. It's not really until the end of the 20th

century when the grandchildren start asking questions and you get the movement for the recovery of historical memory and the push to find where the bodies of Franco's victims are buried. But there are problems. People are dying out. DNA testing costs a fortune, as do the excavations, and the new law makes no provision for any of that. Many municipalities are opposed to it and say that in any case they can't afford it.

'To this day there are many Spaniards brought up thinking Franco was a good thing, that the Republic was responsible for the civil war and so on.'

With the economic crisis and massive unemployment, people have more immediate problems.

You've always been a defender of the transition, saying just now that it was a miracle under the circumstances. But do you think that the *pacto del olvido* (pact of forgetting) and other shortcomings you've just alluded to have anything to do with some of Spain's current problems – the constitutional crisis centred on Catalonia, the political corruption scandals and the ongoing memory wars?

The way those three issues intertwine is very complicated. For instance, there are people on the left who would be fervent advocates of exposing more of the crimes of Franco, but who are equally strong supporters of Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy for his hard line over Catalonia. That's not about the Spanish Civil War. Why is that? First of all there is a historic anti-Catalanism which has been stoked up by the government and the extreme right over the past 10 years. Some of the things you hear people saying in this regard are truly appalling. The generating of anti-Catalan sentiment is partly about masking corruption, but it's a two-way street, because there has also been massive corruption in Catalonia.

Where does the corruption come from? That's one of the things I'm struggling with at the moment. Corruption in Spanish politics goes back centuries. There is a notion, which used to be the case in Britain – but is less so all the time – that you go into public service for the public

good. But you've only got to read the novels of Pérez Galdós to see that in Spain there is a huge tradition of corruption, that you go into public service for private gain. It's one of the ways in which you can survive.

The corruption under Franco was rampant and actually a lot of recent research has shown how Franco was personally involved. If you'd asked me about this when I was writing my biography of him I would have said: 'Well, overall, Franco wasn't corrupt,' although I would have added: 'He didn't need to steal, because he thought it was all his anyway.' But now we know he was stealing as well.

There were also mistakes made by the post-Franco democratic regime. There are specific legal issues, such as the law that allows the status of land to be changed and the powers that local mayors have been given to do that – which can lead to backhanders.

Given what you've just said, and what we saw with the independence referendum in Catalonia last October and the very heavy-handed response from Madrid, do you think Spain can be regarded as a mature democracy?

I don't think it's easy to make comparisons. Just think about the antics of politicians in this country over Brexit. Don't get me wrong – I am absolutely appalled by the things that have gone on in Spain, but I am absolutely appalled too by the things that are going on here. I always used to say when talking to Spaniards that the difference between Spain and Britain was that we have this concept of being able to agree to disagree. That simply does not exist in Spain. Spaniards are Manichean: those who are not with me are against me. But that's true here now because of Brexit. I am an absolutely fervent remainer, but I could also rant and rave for some time about the faults of the European Union, which is a fat bureaucracy that doesn't listen to people, and that's part of the problem.

I'm writing a book at the moment, which is supposedly a history of Spain from 1874 to the present day. I don't want simply to do a resumé of everything I've written, so, after much thought, I've come up with what I see as the three themes of Spanish history during that period. They are corruption, the incompetence of the political class, and the consequential breakdown in social cohesion. The title is 'A People Betrayed'. I'm not half way through, but sometimes I feel I'm writing an editorial for The Guardian. It's exactly what we're living through here.

Just to go back to your question, if we start trying to compare Spain with other democracies within the European Union, then what about

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Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary or Poland? Spain has monumental problems, but name me a country that hasn't.

Finally, given that the Spanish Civil War saw the agonising defeat of the goodies, the Spanish Republic, terrible repression and four decades of brutal dictatorship, has there been any emotional cost to you personally from your scholarship? Has it affected your view of humanity, or can you detach yourself from all of the horrors that you've studied?

That's a really good question. It's certainly the case, for instance, to think of an extreme case, when I was writing 'The Spanish Holocaust', Gabrielle, my wife, on numerous occasions would come home and I would literally be weeping. I mean that book is horrific. How the hell can people do such things? I don't know

'I still get very angry. I'm absolutely fierce on the mistakes of British foreign policy...'

how I wrote it. I do not know how people can read it. I only put stuff in the book that I could prove, as it were, but I had many people writing to me at the time.

To take one example, a woman wrote to me and she said: 'When I was three, the Falangists came and they threw us all out of the house and then they put my parents and my older brother back and they set fire to the house and left me on the street to watch.' Can you imagine?

When 'The Spanish Holocaust' was shortlisted for the Samuel Johnson Prize and the papers were talking about which book was likely to win, the other book along with mine that was

considered one of the favourites was one by Steven Pinker, arguing that humanity is just getting nicer and nicer and I'm thinking: 'How could you possibly think that?'

I still get very angry. I'm absolutely fierce on the mistakes of British foreign policy and I learnt a lot while writing 'The Last Days of the Spanish Republic'. One of the things that I really can't get over is that any general book on the Spanish Civil War sees General Casado, who led the coup against Negrín at the end of war, as a good thing because he supposedly heroically stopped the communists from taking over. That's nonsense. The invariably cited source for this is Casado's memoirs, which are completely made up – just like the fake books of Walter Krivitsky and Alexander Orlov. As I tried to show, Casado's motivation was much more selfish. He was hoping to be able to stay in Spain, to keep his rank, keep his pension and so on. At the end of the war what happens is the anarchists, who are part of Casado's junta, do absolutely nothing to facilitate evacuations and save lives. But Casado and his friends all get away to England, including the anarchist *chequistas* who were responsible for murdering hundreds if not thousands of people in Madrid. The British government lets them in, though they didn't want Negrín, an internationally respected physiologist, a man who speaks eight languages, who is as cultured as it is possible to imagine. I've found documents from Foreign Secretary Lord Halifax basically saying: 'We don't want that hooligan Negrín here,' yet they allowed in these killers and set them up. One even gets a restaurant in Regent Street. It just leaves you frothing at the mouth with indignation.

So, has all this had an emotional impact? It's probably driven me into reading detective stories and watching sit-coms on TV. After the horrors of my work I don't have much emotional room for anything but light entertainment, so that's an impact. I've also learnt a lot about politics and about relationships, but as a historian your career should teach you about life.

