

# The Guardian



## A People Betrayed by Paul Preston review – a magisterial study of Spain's turbulent past

From Primo de Rivera to General Franco ... a lively account of corruption, political incompetence and social division in modern Spain

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**P**aul Preston is Britain's foremost historian of contemporary Spain. *A People Betrayed* is a magisterial study of its turbulent past, seen through the optic of those apparently ineradicable twins: corruption and political incompetence. Preston's central argument is that these phenomena undermined the possibility of political and social cohesion in Spain when the country emerged into the 20th century as an urbanising and industrialising society.

While corruption and political incompetence were, and are, prevalent in Spain, they are scarcely unique to it. Yet there has been a pronounced tendency among British authors to write with condescension about Spain's "troubles". Preston himself has never done so, and has never engaged in the mythologising of "untroubled" Britain that accompanies it. The fact that he wrote *A People Betrayed* in the shadow of Brexit, with its home-grown pathology of lies, corruption and eye-popping incompetence, means there is much in his acute analysis of another country's ills to illuminate our own present malaise.

The book's dual valency – past and present – is a helpful bonus, though not a surprising one. For the corruption Preston investigates in Spain, especially its tentacular embeddedness, comes with the territory of modern states and societies. Their ever greater complexity creates new opportunities for dishonesty and manipulation, notably now at the opaque interface between government and private and corporate interest. Reading Preston on the state as milch cow for the privileged in 19th- and early 20th-century Spain has a depressing present-day ring to it. (Even though for some decades we have lived with the neoliberal paradox that rightwingers are happy to milk the state but now do so while lambasting it as “expensive”, restrictive and a bad thing all round.)



General Franco's supporters on the 44th anniversary of the dictator's death in November 1975, in Madrid last year.  
Photograph: Pablo Blázquez Domínguez/Getty Images

In Spain, the milch cow state was challenged to some extent in the 1930s, as Preston relates, by a new political project of social levelling. Some republican leaders had begun to think in terms of an inclusive nation and of politics as a form of public service. These ideas were defeated when the republic lost the war of 1936-39 – fought against Franco, and against the interventions of Hitler and Mussolini.

The war was triggered by a military coup against republican reforms, and was largely bankrolled by the Mallorcan smuggler and speculator Juan March, then one of the richest men in the world. His image as no-holds-barred, can-do, “made in Spain”, is stripped down by Preston's observation that he wasn't so much the epitome of Spanish super-hombre, as just one more robber baron, an epitome of capitalism *tout court*. He had earlier been implicated in the assassination of a business rival who'd also been his wife's lover. After intimidating journalists and investigating magistrates, March finally had the case shelved, in consummate oligarch fashion, via the unbeatable combination of money and high political connections.

Franco's military victory produced nearly four decades of a personal dictatorship (1939-75), which Preston rightly assesses as the most corrupt, violent and unequal era in modern Spanish history. Francoism, underpinned by the military and proclaiming its mission as “saving the nation”, ended up serving the interests of a very small sector of society while violently reinforcing social and political hierarchies and expanding state nepotism. Around Franco (who amassed a vast personal fortune) revolved generals, Falangists, “national Catholics” and his own family, all enriching themselves – the family members via notorious property speculation. His sister Pilar, who presented herself as a widow rendered penniless by her honesty, in fact made a fortune in illegal property deals, all based on elaborate swindles and massive subornment, and all dependent on her connections. Franco's rule solidified Spain's historic divide between the people and the governing political class, not least because, in the end, his support in the poor rural heartlands was the source in the 1960s of migrants for Spain's expanding industrial centres. All of this Franco achieved on the basis of a military victory

underwritten by Hitler; the Nazis' ferocious dream of irreversible hierarchy lived on in Francoism.



Members of a republican women's battalion in Madrid during the Spanish civil war. Photograph: ANL/REX/Shutterstock

Elsewhere in western Europe the scale of human destruction involved in the overthrow of the Third Reich made it hard for the opponents of social democracy to argue against states becoming more socially inclusive. Those opponents did not disappear: instead they focused their critiques on the easier target of “totalitarianism”, while also going to ground to await a more propitious moment. That moment is now fully upon us, and has taken the form of an ideologically driven, and violent “austerity”. Aside from assuring the personal enrichment of the “well-placed”, this austerity seems otherwise to be imposing the restoration of pre-1914 forms of politics, social hierarchy and patronage. In the UK we face something reminiscent of the earlier Spanish model, described in terms both colourful and bleak by Preston, in which the state enacts sectarian policies that cause very large sectors of the population to look on it as alien and illegitimate.

But if corruption and enduring forms of nepotistic state practice and social behaviour have never by themselves made Spain, or Franco, “different” then something about its powerful military once did. In July 1936, longstanding mistrust between army and civil society led ultra-conservative sectors within the officer corps, angry at civilian politicians they blamed for the end of empire, to “colonise” Spain itself, thus triggering the civil war. Preston points to the many ways in which the military itself had long been corrupt, before this reached new levels under Francoism. Since Spain’s transition to democracy in the late 70s the army has been transformed. But the severe limits on how much change was possible also mean that corruption and nepotism remain embedded in the Spanish state and society, just as much of Francoism does.

The history recounted in *A People Betrayed* is a long one, but it races along in riveting fashion, replete with eye-catching and often blackly humorous anecdotes – especially for the Franco period and after, involving politicians, bankers, policemen and the royal family. Preston’s narrative combines his gift for cogent, summarising clarity and for telling detail – that the traffic in monopolies included one for rat extermination will stick in many readers’ minds. So too will his account of the ongoing and celebrated Gürtel case. As a stratospheric example of crony capitalism, Gürtel has it all – extensive bribery, traffic in public posts, embezzlement, money laundering and tax evasion, involving top conservative party politicians (from the Partido Popular) as well as moguls, fixers, consultants and city councillors. Gürtel’s unravelling also exposes levels of acquisitiveness bordering on the psychotic

Preston’s most original chapter is on the Primo de Rivera military dictatorship of the 1920s (the rat extermination scam era). De Rivera had a taste for making off-the-wall public

pronouncements – a tweeting Trump of his times. Franco learned much from him, especially about kleptocracy laced with patriotic spin: both dictators siphoned off coerced “national” subscriptions to their personal coffers, and De Rivera even funded a new house for himself by ordering deductions to be taken from people’s pay. It was under De Rivera too, as this admirable book makes clear, that the key ideas of national Catholicism were honed, which later underpinned Franco’s fascist state. Preston has written an admirable book – a lively, comprehensive history of modern Spain, but also, at barely one remove, a compelling essay on contemporary corruption, which is especially worthy of attention today, as we confront an emergency that underlines what states are really for.

. *A People Betrayed is published by William Collins.*

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