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A People Betrayed: A History of Corruption, Political Incompetence and Social Division in Modern Spain 1874-2018 by Paul Preston review

A British historian berates the elites who have cheated and abused Spain for 150 years

[Dominic Sandbrook](#)

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It was almost half past six on the evening of February 23, 1981. In Madrid, Spain's Congress of Deputies was voting to install a new prime minister. Then, in full view of the television cameras, something extraordinary happened. A commotion broke out at the back of the hall; the cameras cut to a moustachioed man in military uniform, waving a pistol. More men with sub-machineguns burst into the chamber. Somebody shouted: "Nobody move!" Shots rang out and the deputies scrambled under their desks.

Today, the failed coup of February 1981 looks more like a comic-opera aberration than a genuine threat to democracy. But it might have turned out very differently. While Lieutenant-Colonel Antonio Tejero was seizing the Congress of Deputies, tanks were rolling through Valencia. Just five years after the death of the tyrannical General Franco, many army officers were itching to strangle Spain's new freedoms at birth. Only when King Juan Carlos made a live television address to condemn the coup was it certain that the revolt would fail.

It is odd to think that even as Spain's armed forces were launching a rebellion against the principle of democracy, hundreds of thousands of British families were looking forward to their summer holiday on the Costa del Sol. Today, outsiders still tend to associate Spain with golden sands, gothic churches and gorgeous food rather than civil strife, ideological hatred and rampant corruption.



General Franco: astonishingly stupid
ALAMY

Yet, as the historian Paul Preston points out, the failed revolt of 1981 was the rule, not the exception. In the previous two centuries Spain had seen more than 25 coups, as well as countless incidents of terrorism, repression, mass rape and mass murder. Between 1936 and 1939, the Spanish Civil War killed perhaps half a million people, while under the victorious Franco tens of thousands were executed and a further million thrown into prisons or labour camps. Many Spaniards are understandably irritated by the enduring “Black Legend” of a land of “fanaticism, cruelty and uncontrolled emotion”, epitomised by the opera Carmen and the travel books of writers such as Gerald Brenan. But as Preston’s tremendously rich and learned new history shows, the legend only endures because it has more than a grain of truth.

Based at the London School of Economics, Preston is one of Britain’s finest historians, as well as a major public intellectual in Spain itself. His book *The Spanish Holocaust* (2012) provoked an intense debate about the legacy of the civil war, and this book — massively researched, occasionally dense but powerful, persuasive and utterly fascinating — is also likely to stir controversy.

The basic argument is simple. For the past 150 years, Preston says, the Spanish people have been systematically misled, cheated, fleeced and abused by their political masters, with the army and the Catholic Church particularly culpable. Partly because Spain remained a vastly unequal agrarian economy for so long, which meant it was slow to develop an urban middle class, its politicians never learnt the virtues of compromise. Time and again they reached for repression when moderation was the wiser option. Even in 2017, when the Catalans held an illegal independence referendum, Madrid’s response was to send in baton-wielding police and issue arrest warrants for the secession leaders, who are still unable to return home for fear of imprisonment.

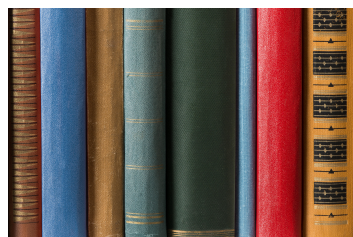
For anyone with fond memories of Spanish holidays, Preston’s book makes for harrowing reading. Although it appears to be a straightforward highly political history, somebody is assassinated, tortured, maimed or imprisoned on almost every

other page. And many of his characters seem more like escapees from some chamber of horrors than traditional parliamentary politicians.

One recurring figure, for example, is the Radical demagogue Alejandro Lerroux, who came to prominence in 1906 after urging his followers to “enter and sack the decadent and miserable civilisation of this unhappy country, destroy its temples, finish off its gods, lift the veil of the novice nuns and raise them up to the status of mothers to make the species more virile”. By the time Lerroux became prime minister in 1933, he was outstandingly corrupt, flogging offices, monopolies and licences with breathtaking shamelessness. He fell from office only after getting involved in a scheme to install crooked roulette wheels in Spain’s casinos, which seems an insane thing for a prime minister to do.

But few of Preston’s other characters were much better. The dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera, who ruled Spain in the 1920s, told the king that he had learnt to govern “in the casino in Jerez” and, like some Hispanic Donald Trump, inserted a passage in his semi-official autobiography about his prowess as a “great lover”.

And General Franco, who claimed to be restoring clean government after years of republican chaos, emerges as a mind-bogglingly cruel and corrupt figure. In just three years after the end of the civil war, he stole property worth some €388 million today. His wife Carmen was so greedy that provincial jewellers locked their doors when they heard she was visiting their city, and stores in Madrid and Barcelona reportedly set up “unofficial insurance syndicates to indemnify themselves against her visits”.



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Yet despite his ruthless cunning, Franco was astonishingly stupid. Among his wilder fantasies were a tunnel under the Strait of Gibraltar and a canal from the Bay of Biscay to the Mediterranean — and this at a time when Spain was so poor

that thousands were starving. Bizarrely, he seriously believed that any international criticism was inspired by the Freemasons. When the Attlee government criticised him in 1945, for example, he explained to his cabinet that “there were 15 million Freemasons in England who all voted Labour”.

Although Franco’s era now looks like ancient history, his shadow remains. For as Preston points out, Spanish politics today is haunted by memories of the civil war. Only last October, enormous controversy surrounded the removal of Franco’s remains from the vast Valle de los Caidos, a Fascist monument built by thousands of prisoners of war. When the dictator’s body was reburied in Madrid, the man his family asked to say mass was an Andalusian priest called Ramon Tejero. He just happened to be the son of Antonio Tejero, the man waving his pistol in the parliamentary chamber in 1981. Poor Spain: a country doomed to remember its history.

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