

WalesArtsReview



WalesArtsReview f

WalesArtsReview

Reviews

books ▼



Non-fiction

The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth Century Spain

by Paul Preston

700pp, Harper Collins, £30.00

Reviewer: Gary Raymond

Paul Preston, the world's leading modern Spanish historian, has returned once again to the defining point in that nation's contemporary evolution, its civil war of 1936-9, and has gone about setting the record straight on the very nature of the conflict. It is an anomaly that such a significant – not to mention close – war in European development remains one coloured with inaccuracies and revisionist bias. But by labelling the atrocities levelled before, during and after the war a 'holocaust' Preston is virulently altering the basic premise of the war – not so much the modern myth of left versus right, but now a cleansing of Shoah-esque intent if not proportion. Indeed, Preston is keen to establish from the off exactly how he set out the parameters and justification for the use of such an emotive word in the title. Here he is not trying to equate the Nazi genocide with the slaughters in Spain, a 'lesser, but none the less massive, suffering', but rather he is drawing 'parallels and resonances' between the nature of the two. He goes on to fulfil this task with all the skill and nuance we have come to expect from one of the most literarily talented historians working today.

Preston is not here to simply recount the atrocities of war. Even though no detail of the brutality is spared, he is not just attempting to darken the blackness. His project is concerned with examining the nature of the right in Spain, and therefore by association and microcosm, the nature of the right throughout Europe, still then in adolescence as a formulated political force. His chapters dedicated to the pre-civil war years draw a startling picture of the neuroses of those who would become the leading figures in the war and its brutality, skilfully painting the characters, his lens intensifying as if zoning in to one hand-to-hand encounter on a battlefield of unimaginable bloodshed. It is a novelist's skill, worthy of Tolstoy in places for the subtlety and expertise. Preston appreciates the significance of statistics – 200,000 summarily executed during the war, 20,000 after the Nationalists had claimed victory – but he gets them aired at the outset so as not to muddy the intensity of the human story that unfolds over the following five hundred pages. His dissection of the motivations of the army generals and the clerics who were the figureheads and tacticians of the slaughter is all the more convincing with the knowledge that the book was ten years in the research from a man who has dedicated his life to the study of Spain.

Preston has no qualms brushing aside the worrying fashion in recent years of historians to pass around the blame equally for the murderousness of the

revolution. He sets out in stark terms not only the figures but the nature of these murders. In a series of graphs separating Spain into its regions we can clearly see the weight of murder lies squarely – indefatigably, overwhelmingly – at the door of the religious right, the Catholic church and the conservative military. Preston goes on to convincingly argue the reasons for this. The murders committed by the left were largely reactionary, although no less brutal. The murders committed by the right were part of a systematic dissolution of a political and social left-wing class whom they believed to be both sub-human and the foot-soldiers of a global domination-plan of a Jewish-Bolshevik-Masonic conspiracy. This of course was all strategized from Moscow by the Elders of Zion. The Catholic church leaders, contradicting without recourse the official directives of Rome, set about instituting a brutal and indoctrinating campaign against the left that even ended up convincing huge numbers of Catholic moderates that the future of the church was under threat from child-killing Jewish-Bolshevik-Masons, and the only answer was the exterminate the entire 'race'.

Here it is worth noting that although the right painted the anti-church-and-state policies of the democratically elected socialist government as corrupt and apocalyptic, the leaders of the right came entirely from three schools of extreme societal privilege. The middle-classes, although unhappy by developments (being forced to pay labourers above starvation wage, for instance), were far from motivated to murder by government intervention in their inhumane treatment of the lower classes. It was the rich landowners, the uber-wealthy Catholic leaders and the abundant and comfortable officer class of the *Africanistas* who saw fit to stir up waves of anti-Semitism in a country with one of the lowest Jewish populations in Europe. All of the old doctrines of the anti-Semitic tradition were wheeled out. The word-of-mouth nonsense of the blood-libel reared its head, as did the preaching as fact the fiction of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. *The Protocols* was one of the most influential works of anti-Semitism in the early part of the 20th century, translated from the original Russian by Barcelona Jesuit Juan Tusquets Terrats in 1932, himself a descendant of Jewish banking money on his father's side and the extreme wealth of the Milas (Gaudi's patrons) on his mother's. His psychotic hatred for Jews and Freemasons eventually made him one of Franco's most valued advisors in government (especially in the fervour of governmental repression in the years after the surrender).

It is here worth noting the nature of the primary text for the odd case of the anti-Semitic fervour whipped up by the Catholic Church in the country that had real no Jewish community to speak of. *The Protocols* is a patchwork of some novels from Germany and France of the 1860s – works of fiction – but is mainly based upon Maurice Joly's 1864 political defence of liberalism, *Dialogue aux Enfers entre Montesquieu et Machiavel*, a work in which Jews do not appear once. *The Protocols* itself purports to be the minutes of 24 meetings between the mythical, shady, cynical Council of the Elders of Zion and sets out their strategy for the gradual global domination, achieved through networks of media ownership, banking investments, and Masonic agents. Although Philip Graves systematically disassembled any pretence of authenticity to the book in the Sunday Times in 1921, in 1923 Nazi racial theorist Alfred Rosenberg published a version titled *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and Jewish World Policy*, and by 1932 it was being brandished by the occupiers of Catholic pulpits across Spain.

In addition to the Catholic leaders, who correctly determined that the naïve movements in government to separate church and state as a threat to their extreme privilege, the landowners leant their considerable shoulders to the wheel, whirling up brutal militias across the countryside to quell labour uprisings and thus protect their vast fiscal interests. On top of this was the socialist policy to trim the fat that had been built up over the years around the military machine. Long arduous and bloodthirsty campaigns in Africa had not only seen the officer-class swell beyond logic, but had also seen the most experienced and well-trained soldiers in the country almost entirely dehumanised in some of the most unearthly barbarity of an era of unprecedented brutal conflict. From the ranks stepped forth General Emilio Mola and General Francisco Franco, both veterans of the wars in Morocco. It is in building convincing character portraits of these 'theorists of extermination' where Preston really impresses, referring to the anti-Semitic Catholic magazines to which Franco had subscribed for many years, and on Mola stating, 'his memoirs of Morocco, wallowing in crushed skulls and bloated intestines, suggest that he had been utterly brutalised by his African experiences'. (The reader thanks the historian for reading Mola's memoir so that we don't have to).

Mola went on to be Director General of Security – 'He took quickly to police work', Preston ominously informs us. It is interesting how, as much as comfort and wealth, it is *The Protocols* that binds the men who eventually join forces from different strata of Spain's right. Fascist leaders such as Redondo Ortega reprinted excerpts of *The Protocols*, as dished out by the Catholic Church, in their propaganda pamphlets which were in turn devoured by the military leaders.

Preston also delivers a concrete contextualisation of the so-called isolationist Spain during these times, documenting, for instance, the occasion when Tusquets attended in 1933, by invitation, a tour of the recently established Nazi concentration camp of Dachau. Tusquets commented later, 'They did it to show what we had to do in Spain'. The connection to Nazi Germany has been well-documented, not least with the unveiling of the truths of the Condor Regiment and the results as seen at Guernica. But it is interesting here to see just the extent of the support – more like collaboration – that the Rebels had from the Nazi establishment. A photograph of Himmler's visit to the psycho-technic *checa* in Barcelona is as comical as it is seedy.

The proximity suggested by the photograph carries a weighty message: that the connexion between the Nazis and Franco's regime was not so much one of exploitation or of avuncular support, but rather was one of a closely tied meeting of natures. In many ways the victory of Franco serves only as a taster for what might have been the fate of Europe as a whole had Hitler triumphed. The brutality and repression would have been certain. But recently novelist Robert Harris, author of the counter-factual bestseller *Fatherland*, recently suggested in a *Guardian* interview that had Hitler won the war it was likely his crimes against humanity would have been largely brushed over for the sake of global economic progress. If we do indeed take Franco as a dioramic example of this world-wide hypothetical then it seems more than just likely.

Franco himself, it seemed, was deemed imposing when he was in fact simple and vacuous. A famous Spanish philosopher who had some dealings with him was quoted as saying he had 'a graveyard for a brain.' He and his men were made of the same stuff as those most open minds of the Nazi Holocaust – we have the diaries of Himmler, the memoir of Hoess, for example. Men who killed

less like machines, more like bureaucrats, signing forms, buried in paperwork rather than corpses, solving problems of logistics that were in practice genocidal solutions. A most effecting anecdote comes toward the end of this most important of modern histories, when Preston quotes an Italian emissary who said of Franco after a meeting in 1939, 'That queer fish of Caudillo, sits there in his Ayete palace, in the midst of his Moorish Guard, surrounded by mountains of files of prisoners condemned to death. With his work schedule, he will see about three a day, because that fellow enjoys his siestas.' 'There is no evidence,' Preston goes on with characteristic dark wit, 'that Franco's sleep was ever interrupted by concern for his victims.'