

reading groups

Remembering this bloodbath

William Chislett on *The Spanish Holocaust* by Paul Preston

THIS book illuminates, among other things, one of the least-known periods of Spain's turbulent 20th-century history — the repressive aftermath of the country's Civil War in 1936-39, after the victory of General Franco. It is not one that will appeal to the faint-hearted. Yet it is an engrossing read.

The provocative title, which raised eyebrows when the book was published in Spain in 2011, is questionable. There were plenty of horrifying incidents on both the Nationalist and Republican sides, which recall Goya's shocking series of prints, *The Disasters of War*, but these criminal and vindictive actions pale in comparison with the magnitude of the Nazi Holocaust.

Nevertheless, Paul Preston, an emeritus professor at the London School of Economics and a leading historian of 20th-century Spain, contends that no other word aptly conveys the scale of the tragedy comprising the Civil War, its aftermath, and the Franco dictatorship. This is, in part, because of the anti-Semitic discourse on Franco's side: Republicans had to be exterminated, as they were instruments of a "Jewish-Bolshevik-Masonic" conspiracy.

Professor Preston puts the number of those who were killed in battle during the three-year war at 200,000, after Nationalist military rebels rose against the democratically elected Republican government in 1936. A further 150,000



Terror: in a picture from the book, the "death brigade" led by Pascual Fresquet (centre, left), who hunted down Fascists in north-eastern Spain in 1936

hide his loathing of the rebels and sympathy with the Left, argues, with impressive detail, that the much greater repression in the Nationalist zones was largely planned and institutionalised, while that in the Republican areas was mainly spontaneous, and in response to the threat from the much better armed and trained Francoist forces.

One of the worst atrocities on the Nationalist side was the massacre, soon after the war started, of more than 1000 prisoners, mainly civilians, herded into the bull ring in Badajoz.

On the Republican side, Professor Preston deals in greater detail than anyone before with the part played by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, in the Civil War, particularly in the mass execution at

were killed by the Nationalists after various flimsy legal processes (20,000 of them after the Civil War ended in 1939), and an additional 50,000 in the Republican-held areas. Thousands more died of disease and hunger after the war, in prisons and concentration camps.

Victims in the Republican zone were documented by the state investigation known as the *Causa General*, set up in 1940, but the atrocities committed on the other side did not really come light until after Franco died in 1975, in a flood of books, and, more recently,

exhumations of mass graves around the country.

There was no Truth and Reconciliation Commission after Franco's death along the lines of Chile or South Africa. Post-Franco politicians of all colours tacitly agreed to avoid a reckoning, in order to smooth the transition to democracy under the so-called *Pacto de Olvido* (the Pact of Forgetting). In the past decade, however, various groups, often led by the relatives of Republican victims, have unearthed the past — often literally.

Professor Preston, who does not

Paracuellos of hundreds of imprisoned civilian and military supporters of Franco.

The Spanish communist leader Santiago Carrillo, councillor for public order in Madrid at the time, always claimed that he personally had nothing to do with organising the killings. Professor Preston believes otherwise, citing his working relationship with Josif Grigulevich, a sinister undercover NKVD agent, and later the godfather of one of Carrillo's sons. The NKVD was also involved in the assassination of the Catalan Trotskyist leader Andreu Nin.

One of the main victims of the Civil War was the Roman Catholic Church, as a result of intense anti-clerical violence against an institution that supported the status quo. The Church blessed Franco's uprising, and called it a crusade, reducing the conflict to a black-and-white struggle between good and evil.

Thirteen bishops, and 6832 priests, nuns, monks, and other religious figures were murdered in the Civil War, compared with about 900 clerics during the French Revolution. Historians have called this the largest clerical bloodletting in the history of the Christian Church.

The consequences of Spain's fratricidal conflict still reverberate bitterly today. This book will help readers to understand why.

William Chislett is the author of *Spain: What everyone needs to know* (OUP, 2013).

The Spanish Holocaust is published by Harper Press at £10.99 (CT Bookshop £9.90); 978-0-00-638695-7.

THE SPANISH HOLOCAUST
— SOME QUESTIONS

SUNDAY TIMES HISTORY BOOK OF THE YEAR
PAUL PRESTON
THE SPANISH HOLOCAUST