

The  
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20th-century Spain

# Betrayal and atonement

**A truly ruthless man**

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**The Last Stalinist:  
The Life of Santiago  
Carrillo.** By Paul  
Preston. *William  
Collins; 432 pages;  
£30. To be published  
in America in January  
(pre-order from  
[Amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)*



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BY THE time he died in 2012 at the age of 97, Santiago Carrillo had long since become a pillar of his country's political establishment and something of a national treasure. This unexpected coda to an implausibly long life, spent mainly as a Stalinist apparatchik, was wholly due to his statesmanship during the brief but vital period between 1976 and 1981 when Spain emerged from the 36-year dictatorship of General Franco and became a modern European democracy.

Carrillo, who had led the Spanish Communist Party with an iron grip since the mid-1950s, realised that to be a relevant actor in the transition he would have to ditch many of the policies he had cherished. Out went a lifetime's slavish subjection to Moscow in favour of moderate, social-democratic "Eurocommunism".

Out, too, went his dream of overthrowing the dictatorship through a general strike. In its place came a closed-door negotiation in which he accepted the monarchy and a social contract in return for legalisation of his party (which he did not deign to consult about all this). He purred when Adolfo Suárez, the former Francoist who as prime minister was the architect of the transition, told him during a smoke-filled tête-à-tête: "In this country, there are only two real politicians, you and me."

But it was Felipe González's Socialists who were the beneficiaries of Carrillo's moderation, winning office in 1982. In a deeper sense, so was Spain. In one of the few false notes in this fluent, authoritative biography, Paul Preston suggests that the Communist Party's fade into irrelevance in the 1980s was because of Carrillo's concessions. One might retort that, with Franco gone, the party had little more to offer Spanish democracy. The bulk of the book tacitly argues this, by painstakingly chronicling the ruthless ambition and serial betrayals and lies that form the dominant thread in Carrillo's political career.

As the precocious head of the Socialist Youth, Carrillo was one of the main agents of the irresponsible ultra-leftism that weakened the fledgling Spanish republic in the 1930s and contributed to the civil war of 1936-39. He betrayed his father, a Socialist trade unionist, and his political mentor, Francisco Largo Caballero, the party's leader, by merging its youth movement with that of the Communists, whom he had secretly joined. With Franco's army besieging Madrid, in November 1936 Carrillo, at just 21, was appointed as councillor for public order. His first act was to organise the cold-blooded execution of more than 2,000 imprisoned army officers, suspected of being "fifth-columnists". This was the worst single atrocity perpetrated by the Republican side during the war (and would be held against him by the right during the transition). Mr Preston convincingly rebuts Carrillo's later denials of responsibility.

Even more shocking was Carrillo's ruthlessness towards his comrades during his comfortable exile in Paris between 1944 and 1976. Suspicion is normal in clandestine organisations. But Carrillo exploited this for his personal aggrandisement. In Mr Preston's account, he ordered his private squad of Moscow-trained assassins to liquidate heroic resistance fighters and underground party organisers, whom he saw as a threat to his own ever-more-powerful position in the party. In the 1960s he engineered the expulsion and subsequent personal hounding of Fernando Claudín and Jorge Semprún, two Politbureau members whose "error" was to adopt what became Eurocommunism a decade before he chose it himself.

Mr Preston, a veteran historian of 20th-century Spain, has also written biographies of Franco and King Juan Carlos. His sympathies are firmly with the left. Yet his portrayal of Carrillo is a reminder that democracy and freedom might not have survived in Spain had the Republican side, and not Franco, won the civil war. Readers may wonder why he waited until Carrillo's death to publish this devastating account. Nevertheless, it is both sobering and welcome.

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