

Spanish Lies

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Delusional opportunist: Santiago Carrillo speaking in the Spanish Parliament in 1977 (photo: EPA/Alamy)

The name of Santiago Carrillo will not mean much, if anything, to visitors to Spain today but he played a significant role in restoring democracy to the country after the death of General Franco in 1975. As leader of the Spanish Communist Party (PCE), he returned to Spain after nearly 40 years in exile to throw the weight of the Communists behind the movement to re-establish democracy under the recently restored constitutional monarchy of King Juan Carlos. In doing so he surprised and disappointed many of his own party members who had imagined that their veteran leader would hold out for, at the very least, the restoration of the republic overthrown by Franco in 1936 or, in their dreams, the dictatorship of the proletariat which Carrillo himself had championed from afar so vociferously and hopelessly for so long.

Carrillo's part in helping to usher his country back into the European democratic fold made him an unlikely hero to many in Spain and beyond who had hitherto regarded the Communists as an immovable obstacle to such an eventuality. In truth, as Paul Preston makes clear in this exhaustive and admirable biography, it was the only decent thing Carrillo did in a long and eventful political life characterised by treachery, lies, opportunism, ruthlessness, self-delusion, and almost certainly mass murder.

Let's deal with the last allegation first. Carrillo was a shooting star of the Left in the years leading up to the Spanish Civil War. His father, Wenceslao, was a leading member of the Socialist Party, so Santiago, born in 1915, was steeped in revolutionary politics from an early age. He became a leader of the Socialists' youth wing and, veering ever leftwards in the turbulent atmosphere of mid-1930s Spain, was talent-spotted by the Kremlin, always on the lookout for likely promoters of revolution overseas. After the Popular Front electoral victory in February 1936, Carrillo, barely 21, travelled to Moscow to be wined, dined and feted by the Soviet Communist leadership,

and acquiring, says Preston, "a taste for vodka and caviar". His head turned, Carrillo returned to Spain to lead most of the Socialist youth wing into the arms of the Communist Party just before the Civil War erupted that summer.

With the besieging nationalists at the gates of Madrid, Carrillo was named Public Order Councillor for the city's newly-established defence junta on November 6. The prisons were full of recently arrested nationalists. The problem was what to do with them. The answer was the traditional Communist one. On November 7, the first batch of 800 was taken away in lorries which stopped near the village of Paracuellos, where the men were unloaded, lined up and shot by militiamen. These *sacas*, as the prison removals were called, went on until early December: the total number of Madrid prisoners murdered in this fashion during that period is estimated at 2,200-2,500. After reading Preston's meticulous dissection of events, there can be no doubt left that Carrillo was deeply involved in the murders and probably ordered them personally. He however denied any responsibility until his death aged 97 in 2012, but then he lied about almost everything throughout his life.

He had no compunction either about ordering the deaths of his comrades, never mind his enemies. While he was a key figure in the Communist leadership in exile in the 1940s and '50s, from his base in France he regularly ordered the "liquidation" by his hit squads of party members who crossed him, particularly some of those who bravely went back to Spain to fight Franco in clandestinity and found that the imminent workers' and peasants' uprising constantly and confidently predicted by Carrillo was a figment of his warped imagination.

This refusal to recognise the facts of life in Franco's Spain was the abiding theme of most of the PCE's leaders in exile. The reality was that Spain, having survived fearful hardships in Franco's first two decades in power, was modernising and prospering by the 1960s. But those Communists, notably Fernando Claudín and the writer Jorge Semprún, who recognised that new links needed to be forged with the emerging Spanish middle class, were simply thrown out of the party, in familiar Stalinist fashion. The irony was, as Preston deftly demonstrates, that Carrillo, who had become PCE secretary-general in 1959, cunningly adapted to Communism's shifting tides in the USSR in the post-Stalin era while maintaining a Stalin-like grip on his own party, denouncing and expelling a series of enemies, real and imagined, over the years. Years earlier, in the last tumultuous days of the Civil War, he had even disowned his own father in the most bitter terms for supporting the republican Colonel Segismundo Casado's anti-Communist coup. They were not reconciled for two decades.

In the equally tumultuous period after Franco's death, with hard-line Francoists known as "the bunker" digging in to resist democracy (they dreaded a Communist takeover) and all the political parties and groups jostling for position, Carrillo returned to Spain in secret (he still had no legal passport), wearing a wig and an expensive cashmere coat bought for him in Cannes. He lived clandestinely in Madrid for nearly a year before he emerged to an astonished public, a relic of a bygone age. He still had a part to play, but any dreams of Communist domination disappeared in 1977 when Spain's first free general election since 1936 gave the PCE only 9.2 per cent of the vote, though Carrillo was elected to parliament.

The moderate Left finally gained power in 1982 when Felipe González's Socialists (Carrillo's old party) won a landslide victory; the Communists garnered a pathetic 3.6 per cent. Carrillo's old adversary Jorge Semprún, incidentally, became Minister of Culture, in which role he was a great success. Carrillo, on the other hand, was on the

way out. He resigned as leader, choosing his own successor, Gerardo Iglesias, a nonentity from Asturias. But old habits die hard: Carrillo told him, "You will be the secretary, but I will make all the decisions." It made no difference: the party dissolved into warring factions shortly afterwards.

Paul Preston has no rival as historian of contemporary Spain and his latest book complements his biographies of Franco and King Juan Carlos. His verdict on Carrillo is emphatic: "The lies, the half-truths, the treachery, all demonstrate, along with the intelligence, the stamina and the daring that the key to Carrillo was ambition." It is Spain's great good fortune that Santiago Carrillo never achieved it.

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