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## Fascinating portrait of the man who fought Franco

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Spain, they say, is a country shadowed by religious sufferance and death. A thorny asceticism pervades the work of Goya, with its religious flagellants and hooded Inquisitors; General Franco (no less disconcerting) kept St Teresa's mummified hand by his desk in the name of Catholic nationhood. Since Franco died in 1975, however, the slide from the sacred to the secular in Spain has been swift.

Santiago Carrillo, the leader of the Spanish Communist Party (Partido Comunista de España), played a small but well-publicised part in restoring democracy to Spain. He had blood on his hands, though. A neo-Stalinist, it was Carrillo who most likely signed the death warrant for an estimated 2,500 Francoist prisoners held in the village of Paracuellos between November and December 1936. Was he alone responsible? Nearly 80 years on, says Paul Preston, the Spanish Civil War continues to be a murky battlefield littered with unresolved political conundrums, rivalries and score-settling.

In the received wisdom, anyone who was openly anti-Fascist in 1930s Europe was assumed to be anti-Catholic and in favour of the leftist Spanish Republic. Yet that was not always so. Graham Greene was a Catholic - and a leftist. Who's side was he on? Preston's biography of Carrillo, *The Last Stalinist*, is alert to these complexities. Carrillo was a hate figure for Spain's far right, yet he shared with Franco "a dedication to the constant rewriting and improving of his own life story".

From the start, the truth about the Falangist-Republican conflict was doctored by interested parties. The American journalist Martha Gellhorn neglected to report on Republican atrocities (which she knew about) because she did not want to undermine Carrillo and the leftist cause. George Orwell, in choosing to tell the truth about the depredations in *Homage to Catalonia*, looked more intently at the moral state of man, according to Preston.

Carrillo, who was born in 1915 to a working-class family in northern Spain, adopted an Orwellian "newspeak" when dilating on the need for Stalinist ruthlessness in the face of Franco. "In politics, repentance does not exist," he said: you are either right or wrong. In 1939, while living in exile in France at the civil war's end, Carrillo denounced his own father for alleged Francoist sympathies. His finest moment, says Preston, came on 23 February 1981, when he publicly stood up to 180 Civil Guards in Spain during a military coup.

In taking a scalpel to his morally questionable subject, Preston sheds light on the Francoist past, with all its deficiencies and horrors. *The Last Stalinist* will appeal to devotees of 20th-century Spanish history.

Order for £24 (free p&p) from the Independent Bookshop: 08430 600 030