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HISTORY

Paul Preston's "J'accuse" to Santiago Carrillo

British historian's biography of Spanish Communist leader pulls few punches, comparing him to Stalin

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Carrillo (standing) with Republican commander Enrique Lister (left) and "La Pasionaria" (right) in Toulouse in 1945. / ENRIQUE LÍSTER ARCHIVE (EFE)

Many things have been written about Santiago Carrillo: some positive, and others negative. A new biography of the Communist leader by Paul Preston will be firmly filed under the latter. And given that Preston is not a crafty former party member or a revisionist, but one of the greatest specialists in 20th-century Spanish history, his devastating and

controversial portrait of the main leader of the anti-Franco opposition will bring out a few rashes.

El zorro rojo: La vida de Santiago Carrillo (Or, The red fox: the life of Santiago Carrillo, published in Spain by Debate) was begun after Carrillo's death but much of the material had been in Preston's hands for decades. Following his doctoral thesis, the historian began to look into the Nationalists' opponents. The Spanish Communist Party (PCE) was the backbone of that movement which, despite its brave attempts, was unable to stop the Nationalist advance. "The Transition developed in another way; it did not come from the fight against Franco, which is the history of a failure," opines Preston in his London home.

After Carrillo's death last September, several publishing houses asked Preston for a biography. "I has it mostly written and began to edit it in a coherent form and what resulted what not what I had expected," he says. The finished product is demystifying and corrosive. "It was clear that Carrillo possessed certain qualities in abundance: work ethic, energy and patience, skill in his writing and oratory, intelligence and guile. Unfortunately, it it was equally clear that honesty and loyalty did not figure among them," says Preston, who compares Carrillo to Franco in his zeal for cruelty and rewriting his past.

Carrillo was born in Gijón, Asturias in 1915 and experienced so much history it was as though he had several lives. He was born into a family of numerous children and an atmosphere of fondness and hard work. His father, Wenceslao, was a Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) leader and a close friend of Francisco Largo Caballero, later to become prime minister in the Second Spanish Republic from September 1936 to May 1937. Santiago was a precocious politician: "If this government, in thrall to the right, does not change, it will be these youngsters who will

assault power, which is imposing its class dictatorship," Carrillo told 80,000 listeners in a 1934 party meeting in his position as General Secretary of the Socialist Youth at the age of 19.

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His position on the National Revolutionary Committee would land Carrillo in jail for 17 months after the failed socialist-anarchist uprising in Asturias in October 1934, which was caused by the election of deputies from the Spanish Confederation of the Autonomous Right into the national government. After he was released he traveled to Russia. He was awestruck: "He had the

sensation that the PSOE was a party of the past," says Preston. On his return the Spanish Civil War broke out. Carrillo formally joined the PCE at the same time as the Paracuellos massacres were being carried out. It was this incident that would follow him like a ghost for the rest of his life, largely, according to Preston, because he never offered a sincere explanation.

Between 2,000 and 2,500 prisoners with Nationalist sympathies — although the real figure remains obscure and some estimates go as high as 4,000 or more — were executed in November and December 1936 during the early stages of the battle for Madrid in an attempt to eliminate suspected Fifth Columnists. Preston gives a balanced account between those who absolve and exclusively blame Carrillo, which he previously touched upon in *The Spanish Holocaust*. "The authorization, organization and materialization of events involved many people. However, Carrillo's position as Public Order councilor in the Defense Council of Madrid and his previous post as secretary

general of the PCE meant that entire responsibility for the massacre was laid at his door. This is absurd, but it does not mean that he had no responsibility at all," the historian writes.

In February 1939, with the Republican cause lost, Carrillo crossed into France. In Paris he received news of the coup against PCE Prime Minister Juan Negrín, led by Segismundo Casado, the commander of the Republican Army of the Center, Julián Besteiro, a leader of the PSOE's rightist faction, and General José Miaja, previously a bastion of the defense of Madrid. The idea was to form a National Defense Council and seek terms with Franco's Nationalists. What was worse, Carrillo was informed that his father supported the move. Carrillo broke off relations and did not see him again until two decades later.

"It can be interpreted that he put the party first or that he put himself first. The common theme is always egoism and ambition," says Preston. Exile brought out the worst in Carrillo. "That was where I found more disagreeable

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surprises. He found triumphalist conclusions that squandered the heroics of many party members and, on the other hand, his interrogation techniques were worthy of the KGB," says Preston, who opined that Carrillo "was recruited" in Moscow in 1936. The historian cites maneuvering, lies and purges for Carrillo's rise to the top of the PCE. Party officials said later that assassinations following the failed invasion of the Val d'Aran by PCE leader Jesús Monzón and his guerrilla army, which had fought the Nazis in France, were "ordered directly by Carrillo and [PCE leader Dolores Ibárruri] 'La Pasionaria'."

Writing in his memoirs, Carrillo said: "In those days there was no need to give orders; those that went against the party and were living in Spain were treated as a threat. I have already explained that the nature of the fight left no room for shades of gray." However, Preston states that purges within the PCE were more to win over the Kremlin than part of the fight against the dictatorship. Until Stalin's death in 1953, the PCE aped the worst aspects of Stalinism, to the extent that the name of Preston's book in other languages is "The last Stalinist."

The Carrillo of the Transition is different though. "He did pragmatic things in order to keep the PCE at the table, but these diluted the enthusiasm of the masses. His leadership style was always authoritarian," says Preston. A style that led to his expulsion from the PCE in 1985.

The only moment of greatness that Preston does not refute is the February 23, 1981 attempted coup d'état, when Carrillo, acting Minister of Defense Manuel Gutiérrez Mellado and outgoing Prime Minister Adolfo Suárez stood firm when 200 Civil Guard officers, led by Antonio Tejero, stormed Congress during the election of Leopoldo Calvo Sotelo as the new prime minister. The coup plotters fired shots into the ceiling of the chamber, scattering deputies on the floor in terror. Carrillo sat placidly in his seat and lit a cigarette. Doubtless he thought he was a dead man and could not countenance the leader of the PCE dying like a coward.