

MICHAEL JACOBS
INTO THE REBEL ZONE

WE SAW SPAIN DIE: FOREIGN
CORRESPONDENTS IN THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR

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By Paul Preston
(Constable 436pp £20)

POPULAR INTEREST IN the Spanish Civil War remains as strong as ever, and has been given a recent boost in Britain by such works of mass-market fiction as C J Sansom's *Winter in Madrid* and Victoria Hislop's *The Return*. In Spain the subject has acquired a new relevance and urgency through the introduction of the Law of Historical Memory, which has led to the continuing exhumation of mass graves, and the enforced exposure of hidden scandals and atrocities.

Personal testimonies of the war continue to provide the historian with endless material; and Paul Preston has now drawn upon these to produce a pioneering investigation of those foreign correspondents who did so much to influence world opinion at the time. The wealth of detail supplied is overwhelming. But Preston sweeps the reader along with the lucidity of his prose, his passionate commitment to the subject, and, above all, his concern to rescue the reputations of those unjustly neglected and courageous figures who worked alongside far more famous names such as Hemingway, Dos Passos, Kim Philby and Martha Gellhorn.

War correspondents today are often thought of as danger-loving individuals driven more by personal ambition than by genuine concern for others. Though *We Saw Spain Die* has its fair share of adrenalin-fuelled egoists, the overall picture it gives of the journalists is admirably subtle and rounded. Their working and living conditions are fulsomely illustrated in the book's first half, which, after showing how the correspondents fared under the besieged Republicans, first in Madrid and then in Valencia and Barcelona, goes on to describe their forays into the Rebel Zone. Our sympathy for their profession is considerably raised as we are made aware of the dangers and difficulties they faced.

These obstacles were especially great in dealings with the Nationalists. Whereas the Republican press officers and censors proved to be courteous intellectuals, their counterparts on the Rebel side were brutal thugs quite prepared to expel, imprison or even execute journalists for such faults as referring to them as 'Rebels'. Permission to travel freely within Rebel-occupied territory was granted



only to journalists from Fascist Italy or Nazi Germany, or to well-known right-wing sympathisers (the duplicitous Philby managed to pass himself off as one until almost

losing his cover after going to a bullfight in Cordoba). And journalists of all political persuasions were prevented from entering Toledo for the two days of bloodshed that followed the Rebel recapture of the town.

Censorship from both sides could sometimes be averted by sending reports coded in heavy slang, or by posting them from across the French border. However, even when the articles got through relatively unscathed, there was no certainty that they would be published in their original form or indeed at all. Conservative advertisers and members of the Catholic hierarchy regularly intervened so as to make sure that the Republicans were not depicted in too favourable a light. There were also cases of newspaper editors not wishing to lose readers through publishing gruesomely graphic accounts. More depressing still was the fate of the articles submitted to *Paris-Soir* by its war correspondent Louis Delaprée: these were rejected in favour of gossip about Edward VIII's abdication. In what was to be his last written



Sefton Delmer: shifty

comment before being fatally wounded, Delaprée made the sarcastic comment, no less pertinent today, that the 'massacre of a hundred Spanish children is less interesting than a sigh from Mrs Simpson'.

Apart from its superb use of quotation, Preston's book gains from the author's novelistic eye, as evident, for instance, in his vivid and minute description of Madrid's Hotel Florida, where parties went on all night in attempts to forget the sounds of shelling and shooting, and where journalists rubbed shoulders with spies, arms dealers, drunken young aviators and what Hemingway called 'whores de combat'. Inevitably, as Preston shows, the bringing together of so many disparate personalities under the most precarious circumstances resulted in countless jealousies, professional conflicts and sexual tensions, all of which come to seem in the end like a mirror of the labyrinthine complexities of the Civil War.

The book is replete with memorable sketches of people, from the comfort-loving and politically shifty Sefton Delmer (a friend of the notorious Rebel censor Gonzalo Aguilera, whom he knew as 'dear Aggy'), to the cowardly, alcoholic and sexually frustrated Basil Murray, who died after contracting pneumonia from close proximity to a female ape. But the journalists who are singled out for

individual treatment in the book's second half are that handful of heroic figures whose lives had a resonance well beyond the confines of their profession.

Two of the more complex and charismatic of these figures were the *Pravda* correspondent Mikhail Koltsov and the American-born son of Russian immigrants Louis Fischer. The former, a model for one of the characters in Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, was sinisterly rumoured to be Stalin's eyes and ears in Madrid; but, as Preston grippingly and movingly relates, he ended up as a victim of Stalin's purges. Fischer, meanwhile, was famed for his influential contacts, and was even able to speak in person to the cowed Republican prime minister Largo Caballero about the latter's failings as a leader. But the journalists who did most to raise outside awareness of what was taking place in Spain were the Englishman George Steer and the American Jay Allen, who risked their lives writing eyewitness accounts of, respectively, the bombing of Guernica and the Rebel massacres at Badajoz. The work of Steer was later considered to be as important as Picasso's painting of Guernica in keeping alive the controversy surrounding that tragic event.

The lives of most of the foreign correspondents who reported on the Civil War were ultimately tainted by the disillusion conveyed in the excellent title of Preston's book (which, in its Spanish edition, was ridiculously changed to the bland *Idealists Under Fire*). It was not just Spain that they saw die, but also their ideals and hopes: the faith of many of them in Communism was challenged by developments in Russia, while the defeat of Republican Spain destroyed their belief that good would win against evil, and that the Western powers would intervene to ensure this. The book's poignant last words are those of the American author Josephine Herbst, who is quoted describing her tearful reaction on seeing, in 1966, the powerful documentary *To Die in Madrid*. 'Nothing so vital,' she reflected on her war years in Madrid, 'either in my personal life or in the life of the world, has ever come again.' It is a measure of Paul Preston's achievement as both a historian and a writer that we can fully appreciate her loss.

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