



Books

Another worthy war

Spanish Civil War expert Paul Preston examines in detail the efforts of foreign reporters in the conflict. By *Rodge Glass*

The big read

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

Paul Preston

Constable £20

Paul Preston is one of the world's most experienced writers of 20th-century Spanish history, a fluent Catalan and Spanish speaker respected throughout Europe. He has written a series of books on the Spanish Civil War, including *The Triumph of Democracy in Spain* (1986); *Franco: A Biography* (1993); and most recently *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge* (2006). What marks out his work is not just an understanding of the period and a stickler's passion for those vital inconvenient details, but also an ability to choose an angle from which to make old history seem new.

The Spanish Civil War is forgotten by some Western historians and sidelined by others as an unimportant, complicated prelude to the seemingly more easily understandable Second World War (Nazis bad, Allies good). But as Preston shows, that is a gross misrepresentation of both conflicts.

The Spanish Civil War was the first place where fascism fought democracy in Europe and the British, French and Americans simply hid, hoping it would quietly go away. Crucially, Roosevelt and

Preston doesn't deify the correspondents, but is passionate in his praise of them when it is deserved

Chamberlain pursued a policy of non-intervention while Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy actively backed the Fascists in Spain. The idea was rubbish at the time, but it has since been proved that Guernica was razed to the ground by German aeroplanes, not Spanish ones.

Roosevelt admitted his massive mistake over "non-intervention" once the Second World War broke out though Chamberlain, the eternal procrastinator, never showed any regret. This important book shows the consequences of their decisions.

We Saw Spain Die documents the lives and writings of the best foreign war correspondents living and working in Spain during this period, following how they got there, what they reported, how it was received. It also tackles the effect on each personally, being caught up in this battle that fascinated so many from outside.

Well-known novelists such as Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos and George Orwell spent time in Spain during the war and are part of this story – there are interesting parallels drawn between their



war experiences and later writings, and it is interesting to see how each is portrayed. (Hemingway appears as a talented brute who loved the war and poured his experiences into his masterpiece *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, while Orwell emerged from the experience believing in human nature more, not less, and used his experiences in his *Homage to Catalonia* and 1984.)

But like the great political figures of the time, these writers only appear on the fringes of this story. They may be the most famous characters in it, but are not the most important.

The meat of this book concerns itself with a team of international journalists who may be unknown to those outside a small community of specialists, but who

made a significant contribution to knowledge: Mikhail Koltsov, Jay Allen, Louis Fischer, George Steer and Henry Buckley all get a chapter each, dedicated to investigating their life and work.

Preston does not deify any of these correspondents and is unafraid to criticise them, but he is passionate in his praise when it is deserved. He specialises in focusing intensely on one person's story, drawing out truths which exist in not only the personal tale but also the wider political situation too. In a sober, authoritative way he shows that like any other society a war zone is populated by philanderers, liars, opportunists and thieves, but also by good men and women prepared to commit the sin of objectivity in their writings, no matter the cost. Even if objectivity meant taking sides.

Nearly all the writers explored here became emotionally attached to the Spanish Republic, which was at the time fight-

ing off the Franco-led Fascist rebels who later took over Spain. Some of these reporters were criticised, and some killed, for sympathising with the Republic, seen by many outside governments as "Reds" financed by Moscow. Russia certainly took an active interest in the Spanish situation, but nowhere near as much as portrayed by the other side.

And it wasn't just the governments that these correspondents had to fight. Often

their own editors were reluctant to tell readers what was really going on in Madrid and Valencia.

Newspaper excerpts from this period show just how ignorant some were, how editors refused or doctored their own writers' reports, and how sympathetic they were to the Fascists – Preston's compelling evidence reflects particularly badly on the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, though French and American publications also have much to answer for.

In a key early example, Preston describes the battles of Louis Delapree, who wrote in exasperation to his paper

Paris-Soir a few days before his death in December 1936, "You have not published half my articles ... You have made me work for the wastepaper basket." He finished off his message with barely disguised fury: "I am sending nothing more. It is not worth the trouble. The massacre of 100 Spanish children is less interesting than a sigh from Mrs Simpson." This referred to the British Royal abdication scandal going on at the time, which was less vulgar and more profitable to report on than the war.

This censorship prevented readers outside Spain from knowing just how soon these events would impact on them directly, and also stopped them from being able to understand what it really felt like to be in it. Not only is there a description of the general political situation in the reports of Steer and Martha Gellhorn, but also of what it felt like to hunker down in a burnt-out hotel room, listening to the sounds of screams and gunfire. They wrote vividly about that in their reports, though not everyone wanted to print it.

As Cedric Salter's *Daily Mail* editor told him in July 1936: "Newspapers are mostly read at breakfast, and there is nothing better calculated to put a man off his second egg and rasher of bacon than reading a story forcing him to realise that not so very far away there are people dying for a handful of potatoes. If one newspaper puts him off his breakfast he

takes pains to buy another one. That we naturally wish to avoid." This is a polite way of saying money is more important than human life.

There are some weaknesses in the way this book is presented. It darts back and forwards in time repeatedly and confusingly. Also, the cast of politicians, journalists, writers and soldiers is so huge that very few will be able to remember key names. And, perhaps because Preston has known so much about the Spanish Civil War for so long, he occasionally forgets to mention simple things. For example, he never goes to the trouble of explaining who General Franco is. He dives right into the middle of the action, assuming that his readers know as much as he does. But the main characters here are handled with just the right amount of detail and colour to bring them excitingly off the page.

We Saw Spain Die does not look like a welcoming book from the outside. Perhaps in form and tone, even in weight, it may not appear to be for the general reader. But it should be. Herbert Matthews believed "a journalist who writes truthfully what he sees and knows on a given day is writing for posterity. The scepticisms and criticisms that I met in some quarters during the Spanish conflict made me feel at times that I was working more for the historical record than for the daily reader."

Those who followed this attitude of pursuit of truth for posterity in 1930s Spain may have suffered for it at the time, but we now benefit from their work. Which, as Paul Preston shows us 70 years later, is still worth reading. ■





International correspondents had difficulty getting their copy about the atrocities of Franco's fascists past right-wing newspaper editors, particularly those at the Daily Mail