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The Spanish holocaust

British historian Paul Preston's latest book, 'The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination during the Civil War and After', makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the Spanish Civil War, and the systematic policy of rape, murder and repression carried out by Franco's forces.

By [Nick Lyne](#)

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Preston's latest book provides an unflinching account of violence during and after the Civil War.

Even to this day, when asked about the slaughter and repression carried about by General Francisco Franco during the Spanish Civil War and in the years that followed, the standard reply from many Spaniards is that atrocities were committed on both sides. But in this relentlessly harrowing read, [British historian Paul Preston](#) provides, page after page, factual, documentary accounts of the systematic policy introduced by Franco early on in the war to rid the country of the red menace and to install a reign of terror among the few that might still contemplate resistance. This was accomplished through disappearances, and in many cases, the murders of entire families, along with theft of young children from widows whose husbands had died fighting for the Republican cause.

Not that Preston ignores the crimes committed by Republicans. Around 50,000 supporters and suspected sympathisers of the nationalist cause were murdered in Republican-held areas — and most of them have been accounted for. But three times that number were put to death in zones controlled by Franco's forces. This figure excludes the unknown numbers killed in the bombing campaigns against Republican cities such as Madrid, Barcelona, and Valencia. Nor does it include the many thousands of refugees who died in bombing attacks as they fled Francoist advances, nor the tens of thousands of refugees and prisoners who later died from disease and malnutrition.

Similarly, as Preston shows, while the vast majority of the war crimes in Republican strongholds were committed in the first five months of the war, until the government was able to reestablish control, Franco's forces implemented a systematic policy of terror that continued throughout, and long after the war. Franco believed that it was necessary to break the spirit of the civilian population by liquidating any potential threat or opposition, however slight. The

Republican authorities faced the challenge of reining in anarchists, communists, and other extremists who wanted to settle old scores, and who took advantage of the power vacuum created by Franco's uprising to do so.

Preston makes no bones about his choice of words. "A holocaust is the slaughter of a people. I would say that the suffering and the pain of the Spanish people justifies the title of the book," he writes.

Preston says the book proved to be his toughest challenge to date, both because of the vast scale of the subject matter and because of its harrowing nature. "The gratuitous cruelty made it an extremely difficult book to write," says Preston, who is professor of modern Spanish history at the London School of Economics, and is regarded as the world's foremost historian of modern Spain.

The process of counting the victims of Francoist violence could only begin after the dictator's death in 1975 and is still incomplete. Preston says that when he was studying in Madrid in the 1960s, he would bribe attendants at the National Library to allow him to read newspapers from the pre-war Second Republic. The pact of silence imposed during the Franco era continued for decades after the dictator's death, he says, making it difficult for historians to access archives, a problem exacerbated by the fact that Spain still has no freedom of information act.

Understanding, not forgetting

Preston has been working on *The Spanish Holocaust* since 2003, and says that he has only been able to access much of the information thanks to an informal network of contacts built up over the decades. He says the experience of writing the book was an emotional one at times. "The majority of those who died, wherever it was, didn't need to have died. I hadn't realized until this book about the repression in areas where there was no resistance. There is a gratuitous cruelty that resulted in a huge emotional cost. My only hope is that the book will help towards reconciliation, which doesn't mean forgetting, but understanding."

When the war ended, there was no respite for the vanquished. They were not allowed to bury their dead, many of whom had been thrown into roadside graves on the edge of villages and towns. In the weeks following Franco's victory, around 20,000 Republicans were shot, among them [Lluís Companys](#), the former head of the Catalan regional government. He had saved thousands of lives, among them many clergy, from the fury of the anarchists and communists, issuing passports that allowed them to escape abroad. After his death, the Franco administration expropriated the Companys family's assets. For Franco, the sons, daughters, wives, and husbands of the guilty were also guilty. Preston writes of women in Burgos being shot "as representatives" of their husbands who had fled.

Rape as a policy

Execution by firing squad for women captured by Franco's forces would typically come after they had been raped. Preston says that this is another aspect that differentiates the two sides in the Civil War: sexual aggression was relatively rare in the Republican-held zones, while in the nationalist-controlled areas, rape was actively encouraged by the high command. "Legionaries and regular soldiers have shown the red cowards what it means to be a real man. And they have shown the reds' women as well. This is totally justified because these communists and anarchists predicate free love. They will now know the difference between real men and the queers of the militia. They won't get away, however much they bawl," said General Gonzalo [Queipo de Llano](#) in one of his many inflammatory radio broadcasts during the war.

"The huge difference between the two zones," says Preston, "is that one of the fundamental

principles of the Second Republic was respect for women and women's rights. In the rebel-held areas, systematic rape by the columns of Moroccan troops was part of the plan to impose terror." After the capture of any town or village, troops were given two hours during which they could loot and rape. Preston describes the scene witnessed by US journalist [John T. Whitaker](#), who accompanied the rebel forces, in the village of Navalcarnero, close to Madrid. Two young women, barely in their twenties, one of whom was accused of belonging to a labour union, were brought before General Mohammed Ben Mizzian, the highest-ranking Moroccan officer in Franco's army. After interrogating them, he then handed them over to some 40 Moroccan soldiers barracked in a school. When Whitaker protested, he was told by Mizzian, "Don't worry, they won't survive more than four hours."

Whitaker witnessed several such episodes: the murder of 200 wounded soldiers in a Toledo hospital, or the slaughter that took place in the bullring in Badajoz in August 1936. Preston recounts General Juan Yagüe's now infamous reply to Whitaker's question as to whether it was true he had killed 4,000 men, women and children during his occupation of the city: "Of course I did. Do you think that I was going to take 4,000 reds with me when my column was advancing against the clock? Or should I have left them there so that they could make Badajoz a red capital?"

The most infamous war crime committed in a Republican-held area took place at Paracuellos, a small town just north of Madrid, when some 2,000 suspected Franco sympathizers were murdered between November and December 1936. [Santiago Carrillo](#), now a 96-year-old former leader of the Communist Party and a key figure in the transition to democracy after Franco's death, was in charge of public order in the war-time administration of Madrid. He has always denied any involvement in the killings. Many of the execution orders were signed by Carrillo's deputy.

"To say that Carrillo had nothing to do with the killings is as absurd as saying that he was solely responsible," says Preston. His book covers in detail the execution of selected prisoners by the Republican authorities as Franco's forces closed in on Madrid. "Carrillo was fully implicated" in the decision to kill prisoners, says Preston. Carrillo said in his autobiography that he ordered prisoners to be evacuated from Madrid and that the convoy carrying them was hijacked.

A war of tragedies

Reading Preston's book one is reminded of the words of Arthur Koestler in *Dialogue with Death*, written in 1937, and in which he recounts his experiences during the war. He was captured by Franco's forces and accused of spying, escaping narrowly: "Other wars consist of a succession of battles, this is a succession of tragedies."

And as Preston points out, that succession of tragedies has cast a shadow across three quarters of a century: "I hope the book will show the extent of the suffering unleashed upon their own fellow citizens by the arrogance and brutality of the officers who rose up on 18 July 1936. They provoked war, a war that was unnecessary and whose consequences still reverberate in Spain today."

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