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The Spanish holocaust

British historian Paul Preston's new book makes an invaluable contribution to our understanding of the Spanish Civil War, and the systematic policy of rape, murder and repression that was carried out by Franco's forces

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Clemency was not a word that Captain Manuel Díaz Criado understood. During his four months in charge of security in the Andalusian capital of Seville following the capture of the city in July 1936 by the forces of General Francisco Franco, he launched a reign of terror, rounding up anybody suspected of Republican sympathies, and subjecting them to summary execution. He is credited with ordering the deaths of at least 10,000 men and women. Even those who supported Franco were shocked by his brutality. "He would organize orgies where the most unimaginable acts of sadism would take place, and then send men and women off to be shot," wrote the civil governor later, adding: "He was a degenerate, and took advantage of his position to sate his thirst for blood, to enrich himself, and to satisfy his sexual appetites."

At the same time, several hundred kilometers to the northeast in the small town of Caspe, in the Aragonese capital of Zaragoza, Pascual Fresquet Llopis, a member of the Iberian Anarchist Federation (FAI), was proud of the reputation that his unit, named the Death Brigade, had earned, and had played no small part in its grim activities. He led operations to rid Aragón, Teruel and Tarragona of anybody suspected of Francoist sympathies. The unit traveled in a 35-seater bus daubed with a skull and crossbones, and its members wore the macabre symbol on their berets. By October 1936, when the CNT anarchist labor union finally brought him under control, his unit had killed more than 300 people - or, as Fresquet Llopis saw it, had handed out revolutionary justice.

Díaz Criado and Fresquet Llopis were just two of the many psychopaths who took advantage of the chaos unleashed by the Civil War between 1936 and 1939 to vent their murderous instincts. Of the half a million deaths in the Civil War, around 200,000 were civilians, all murdered far from the battlefields. Until recently, most Spaniards accepted the "both sides committed atrocities" version of events.

But while terrible acts were indeed committed by both sides, there is now a huge body of evidence that Franco's forces were responsible for a far greater number of civilian deaths. Around 50,000 supporters and suspected sympathizers of the nationalist cause were murdered in Republican-held areas, while three times that number were put to death in Franco-controlled zones. 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, 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 re-establish control, Franco's forces implemented a systematic policy of terror that continued throughout - and lasted long after - the conflict. 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.

British historian Paul Preston's new book, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination during the Civil War and After* (or, *El holocausto español. Odio y exterminio en la Guerra Civil y después*), came out in Spanish in January, and will be published in English on May 5. It provides a definitive account of the murders and massacres of civilians that took place during and after the Spanish Civil War, which remains a sensitive and controversial topic three-quarters of a century after it began.

Preston's account of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War reveals how fragile the mantle is that covers modern societies, and reminds us of the powerful urge within humanity to commit genocide. "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 says.

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 it recounts ensured that it was 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.

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, died needlessly. 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 toward reconciliation, which doesn't mean forgetting, but understanding."

Preston believes that a historian's job is part detective and partly to sympathize with the people he or she is writing about. He says that his wife, Gabrielle, often found him in tears when she came home from work, after he had spent a day recreating the events lived through by men and women such as Doctor Temprano or Amparo Barayón, whose lives were shattered by the war.

Following the occupation of Mérida, in Extremadura, by Franco's forces, a Civil Guard Captain by the name of Manuel Gómez Cantos was tasked with rounding up and eliminating Republican sympathizers. "Every day, for a month, Gómez Cantos would walk through the city with Doctor Temprano, a liberal who had supported the Republic, and take note of those who greeted him. In this way he was able to identify his friends and then arrest them, after which he then personally killed the doctor," says Preston. Gómez Cantos went on to earn a reputation for his ruthless pursuit of guerrillas in Extremadura, eventually shooting two of his own men for cowardice. He was expelled from the paramilitary unit and sentenced to prison, although his term was commuted. He died in 1977.

Amparo Barayón was the wife of novelist Ramón J. Sender, already a successful writer and journalist when the war broke out. A member of the Communist Party, he immediately enlisted to fight in the Republican ranks. Believing they would be safe there, Barayón and the couple's six-month-old daughter sought refuge in the northern province of Zamora in the summer of 1936. She was arrested in late August, and imprisoned with her baby after she protested the death of her brother. She was physically and mentally abused, and the day before she was murdered by Franco's forces, her daughter was taken away and put into a Catholic Church-run orphanage.

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.

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 preach 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 instill 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 labor 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 Carillo, the 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 Carillo's deputy.

"To say that Carillo 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. "Carillo was fully implicated [in the decision to kill prisoners]," says Preston. Carillo said in his autobiography that he ordered prisoners to be evacuated from Madrid and that the convoy carrying them was hijacked.

One group in Spanish society that was systematically punished in Republican areas was the clergy. "Wearing a cassock was sufficient to find yourself in front of a firing squad by the side of a road," writes José Luis Ledesma in *Violencia roja y azul* (or, Red and blue violence), his study of Civil War crime. Around 6,800 clergy were murdered, while churches, convents, and monasteries were routinely burned down or wrecked. In *Homage to Catalonia*, his account of

his time fighting in Spain, George Orwell describes how churches were looted throughout Spain, and that nobody had any doubts as to the Catholic Church's support for Franco. He says that during his six months in Spain, he only saw two churches that had not been damaged. Priests were routinely tortured and murdered. US historian Stanley G. Payne puts the scale of the anti-clericalist killing into context by comparing it to the excesses of the French Revolution, noting that three times the number of priests were killed in Spain than during the worst period of the Jacobins.

"The Catholic Church, which helped set off the revolution, was seen as part of the status quo," writes Spanish contemporary historian Julián Casanova. Preston dedicates considerable space to describing how, during the first period of the Second Republic, there was a crackdown on a Catholic Church that historically had always allied itself with the landed gentry and had always opposed modernization. The aim was to deprive the Catholic Church of any role in politics or education. This meant that priests were thrown out of schools and colleges, and secular principles were imposed. Encouraged by the central government's initiatives, many regional and local authorities decided to impose taxes on the Church, and even fined people for wearing crucifixes.

But following the elections of November 1933, a right-wing government was elected, which sought to overturn many of the more radical measures introduced by the previous administration, as well as brutally quashing a miner's uprising in Asturias. The Catholic Church lent its support to these measures, a decision that many priests paid for with their lives when war broke out.

The Vatican has beatified around one thousand members of the Catholic Church who were killed during the Civil War as martyrs. It has shown itself less willing to ask forgiveness of the victims of those priests who decided not to obey the first commandment, and who took up arms. Preston says that in some areas, such as Navarre, there were not enough priests to say mass, because so many had gone off to fight for Franco. And many of those who remained delivered sermons praising Franco's forces, such as Aniceto de Castro, the canon of Salamanca Cathedral, who is on record as saying: "When it is known that dying or killing is done while carrying out God's will, then the hand doesn't tremble when pulling the trigger of a rifle or pistol, and nor does the heart tremble when facing death."

Writer and thinker Miguel de Unamuno, who had initially supported the uprising, soon realized the terrible forces that had been unleashed. "Some are shot because they are thought to be masons; I do not know what a mason is, and I suspect that neither do the brutes doing the shooting. The fact is that there is nothing worse than the matrimony of the dementedness of the barracks with that of the sacristy," he wrote in 1936.

Reading Preston's book one is reminded of the words of Arthur Koestler in *Dialogue with Death*, written in 1937, 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."