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The Spanish Holocaust: Reframing the Civil War

June 13, 2012

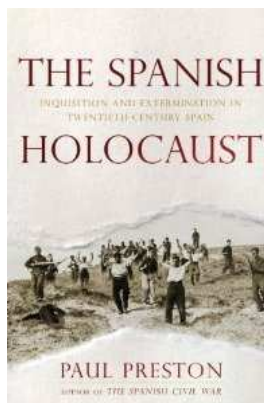
 By [Sebastiaan Faber](#)


Victims the Nationalist massacre at Badajoz.

Paul Preston. *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. New York: Norton, 720 pp. [\(Buy at Powells and support ALBA.\)](#)

Names matter. How we label events from the past does not just reflect how we view those events, but actively shapes our understanding of them. One could go so far as to say that historical events don't actually exist as events until they are labeled. We now know the messy decade of civil and military violence that held Mexico in its grip from 1910 to 1920 as *the Mexican Revolution*, for example, and refer to the forty years' worth of intricate military, diplomatic, political, and cultural world history

between 1948 and 1989 simply as *the Cold War*. Labels, to be sure, are indispensable; they help organize the unmanageable chaos that makes up actual history. But names are never gratuitous: they always frame how we *think* of the past as well. This is especially crucial when it comes to categorizing armed conflict, which calls for the identification of victims and attackers, the innocent and guilty. Consider the difference in this respect between "The War between the States," "The War of Northern Aggression," "The War of Secession," and "The American Civil War." While it is generally the winners who get to determine how wars enter the history books, the perspective of the losers is not erased, and often survives in competing labels. Finally, of course, the names we give to historical events are themselves subject to change. (It took a second global conflict for *la Grande Guerre* to become the First World War.) Often, name changes respond to changed power relations, political interests, or sensibilities—and are likely to cause disputes.



For the conflict that broke out in Spain in the summer of 1936 as the result of a failed military coup, the term "civil war" stuck early on, in Spain and the rest of the world. This was in part because its prospect had already been invoked for several years as a threat hovering over the increasingly polarized country. But once the fighting began, the "civil war" label faced fierce competition. On the Left, some preferred to call the conflict The Spanish Revolution, or, denying the Nazi-aided Nationalists their Spanishness, a War of Independence. The Nationalists, meanwhile, rhetorically dressed up their illegitimate coup as an *alzamiento* or "rising," and referred to the war as a holy struggle, a *crusada*. Until the 1960s, these were the terms officially used in Francoist textbooks, monuments, and government documents. (One multivolume account of the war was titled *History of the Spanish Crusade*.) As Herbert Southworth was first to show, the regime's late adoption of the term "civil war" was part of a deliberate policy change that attempted to bridge the gap between official Francoist historiography and that of the democratic West.

But the switch was only possible because, by then, Franco's regime

had been strengthened by economic growth and international recognition and it felt less need to compensate rhetorically for the obvious illegitimacy of its origins.

Names matter, indeed. Paul Preston's choice of *The Spanish Holocaust*, his latest and most ambitious account of the massive violence unleashed in the wake of the 1936 coup, is as polemical as it is well-pondered. It reflects a conscious attempt on Preston's part to *reframe* how we think about the war in Spain and its long, bloody aftermath. Referring to the hundreds of thousands of Spanish deaths as a *holocaust* has three immediate implications. First, it underscores the massive scale of civilian suffering. Second, it directly links Spain's Nationalists to the Nazi regime, stressing that Franco's reign of terror, like that of Hitler and Goebbels, was carefully planned and systematically executed. Third, it calls attention to the motivations behind the violence in Spain. Preston presents convincing evidence that the massive killings perpetrated by Nationalist forces were not just driven by political differences of opinion, but also by an immense amount of cropped-up hatred and disgust filtered through notions of racial inferiority. The military Nationalist leadership saw Spain's workers and peasants not just as dangerous subversives or fellow citizens gone astray, but actually as subhuman, mentally and morally deranged creatures whose physical extermination was necessary for the good of the country.

This last point is one of the most important contributions to Spanish Civil War historiography of Preston's monumental study. If the Spanish Civil War is still generally considered to have been a class conflict,

About ALBA

The Abraham Lincoln Brigade Archives (ALBA) is an educational non-profit dedicated to promoting social activism and the defense of human rights. ALBA's work is inspired by the American volunteers of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who fought fascism in the Spanish Civil War (1936-39). [Learn more at our website or sign up to receive email updates from ALBA.](#) You may support ALBA through a tax-deductible gift through our [secure donation site](#).

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Blog

Carlos Blanco: Critical thinker from the margins

December 20, 2013



Along with thousands others, Carlos Blanco left Spain defeated but managed to preserve what is most admirable of the Spanish Republican values at the core of his identity, and to return them to the world through his actions.

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Happy birthday, Del!

December 19, 2013



One of the two last reported living veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade, Delmer Berg, is turning 98 tomorrow, Friday December 20. We invited you to send your birthday greetings earlier this week and have been completely overwhelmed by the response. The package to Del has gone out; below is a small sampling of your good...

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Newsweek covers Civil War graves

December 19, 2013



Mike Elkin, [writing for Newsweek](#), tackles Spain's lingering legacy of violence committed during the Spanish Civil War and the Franco dictatorship.

[Read more »](#)

A Civil War heritage trail in Spain

December 4, 2013



Alasdair Fotheringham, writing for *The Independent*, explores a curiously uninformative official heritage trail--the first of its kind established by a governmental entity--commemorating a Spanish Civil War battlefield outside of Madrid.

[Read more »](#)

Preston reframes it as in part an ethnic one. He establishes clear links between the political ideas of the rebel military leaders (in particular their cockamamie belief in the existence of a global Jewish-Bolshevik-Masonic conspiracy), their decades' worth of experience as officers in the ruthlessly repressive Spanish colonial army in North Africa (whose populations were routinely subjected to acts of unspeakable cruelty that included torture, mutilation, and rape), and their treatment of their fellow citizens during the Civil War. "The leaders of the rebellion," Preston writes, "... regarded the Spanish proletariat in the same way as they did the Moroccan, as an inferior race that had to be subjugated by sudden, uncompromising violence." The overarching purpose, however, was fundamentally economic and political: to insure that the interests of the establishment—the Church, the landowning class, and the Army—"would never again be challenged as they had been from 1931 to 1936 by the democratic reforms of the Second Republic." Since these reforms included the establishment of workers' and women's rights, secular public education, literacy campaigns, and land reform, it is no exaggeration to say that the coup aimed to stop modernity itself in its tracks. The supporters of the Nationalists had reached the conclusion that the defense of their interests required "the eradication of the 'thinking' of progressive liberal and left-wing elements"; or, in General Emilio Mola's words, to "eliminate without scruples or hesitation all who do not think as we do."

The Spanish Holocaust draws on Preston's vast research, as well as scores of recent historical studies, to establish the most accurate possible estimates of numbers of Spanish victims—statistics that, ever since the outbreak of the war, have been notoriously subject to manipulation and distortion. Almost 200,000 men and women were murdered extra-judicially behind the lines. Another 200,000 men fell at the front. Around 20,000 Republicans were executed by the Franco regime in the postwar years. Thousands more died as bombing victims, refugees, and inmates of prisons and concentration camps. And none of these statistics take into account the immense suffering endured by the survivors.

These numbers are important and shocking. But the value of Preston's book is the rich historical context he provides for them. The first four chapters cover the five Republican years (1931-36) to explain the gradual but deliberate build-up of hatred and political tensions. The bulk of the book, organized in eight central chapters, deals with the violence during the war. The long final chapter narrates the "continuation of the war by other means" during Franco's almost forty-year dictatorship, built on the conviction that only harsh punishment for the defeated, not reconciliation, could be the basis of a "healthy" and "true" post-war Spain. For decades, the country lived in the grips of a perverted justice system that branded loyalty to the Republican government as treason, and largely relied on denunciations from ordinary citizens.



Paul Preston in 2009. Photo Colin McPherson, colinmcpherson.photoshelter.com

A brief epilogue ponders the long aftermath of violence in political, psychological, and cultural terms. The regime's "powerfully sustained attempt to brainwash its population" in the years following the war, Preston writes, "inflicted a great long-term damage on Spanish society": "To this day, its powerful residual effects hamper the ability of mainstream contemporary society to look upon its recent violent past in an open and honest way that could facilitate the necessary social and political closure." This is not only due to the fact that the memories of suffering on the Republican side were not allowed into the public sphere. The "near-hysterical reaction" of some sectors of today's Spain to the recovery of historical memory, the exhumation of unmarked graves, and the investigation of past crimes also "derives from the fact that there were...many historical memories among the victors and their descendants that had to be repressed by the need to safeguard a false memory"—including the haunting memories and feelings of guilt among those who had committed atrocities. This is what Preston's colleague Helen Graham has referred to as Francoism's "lasting toxicity."

Preston covers the violence on both sides of the war. One of the sections that has received most attention in Spain is his analysis of the infamous execution of almost 2,500 right-wing prisoners at Paracuellos del Jarama (the responsibility of which Preston places at the feet of, among others, the young Communist leader Santiago Carrillo). But Preston makes clear that, on the whole, the killing on the Republican side was quantitatively and qualitatively very different from that on the Nationalist side. Here three points merit emphasis. First, that the "repression by the rebels was about three times greater than that which took place in the Republican zone." Second, that the violence on the Republican side was essentially *reactive* to that on the Nationalist side. ("It is difficult to see," Preston writes, "how the violence in the Republican zone could have happened without the military coup which effectively removed all of the restraints of civilized society.") And third that, while the killings by the Nationalists were not only condoned or actively planned by the rebel military authorities, those in the Republican zone happened outside the control, and against the will, of the government, which put a stop to them as soon as it could. Violence in Republican-controlled territory was partly driven by notions among the "extreme Left, particularly in the anarchist movement," about the need for elimination of the class enemy and "purification by fire" as first steps toward a new, more just society. (For Preston, "the outburst of revolutionary fervor and an orgy of killing" in some of the areas in which the coup failed, "would demonstrate once more that Spain's harshly repressive society had produced a brutalized underclass.")

As Graham wrote in *The Independent*, this book, years in the making, happens to appear at an opportune and complicated moment. The movement for the "Recovery of Historical Memory," which over the past dozen years has exhumed hundreds of mass graves and emphatically defended the rights of the victims of the Franco regime, now faces one of its greatest challenges. The trials that resulted in the **disbarment of Judge Baltasar Garzón**, who attempted to seek truth and reparation through Spain's criminal justice system, allowed for unprecedented scenes: victims of Francoism telling their stories of suffering to Spain's highest court. But the Court's sentence closed off all possibility of a judicial satisfaction to the victims' demands.

Next Wednesday: Goodbye Barcelona!

December 4, 2013

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ALBA PROUDLY PRESENTS: A screening of the passionate musical *Goodbye Barcelona* In 1936, as fascism sweeps across Europe, one

country reaches out in its hour of need...and tens of thousands of ordinary people make an extraordinary decision to help. More than 42,000 travel to Spain from all over the world, risking their lives for the freedom of...

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U.N. Urges Spain to Tell Truth about Franco's Enforced Disappearances

November 22, 2013

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On November 6, the Spanish delegation to the United Nations said that it would not review the 1977 law which gave amnesty for political crimes committed during the civil war and General Francisco Franco's dictatorship.

According to Baltasar Garzon, at least 152,000 civilians living in territory controlled by Franco's Nationalist forces disappeared between...

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ALBA Human Rights Film Festival: Impugning Impunity, Nov. 22-24

November 18, 2013

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This weekend! *Impugning Impunity: A Human Rights Documentary Film Series* with eight powerful and inspiring films exploring issues of

governmental abuse, historical memory, civil rights an racial inequality.

[Read more »](#)

Experts discuss NSA surveillance

November 17, 2013

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On Nov. 14, 2013, McNally Amphitheatre at Fordham Law School was jam packed with people.

The title of the event was "They're watching us: So what? Assessing the dangers of the new surveillance powers" featuring a distinguished panel: **Glenn Greenwald** (Journalist), **James Bamford** (Author and NSA expert), **Ariel Dorfman** (Novelist, Playwright and Human Rights...)

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Ireland's stolen children

November 9, 2013

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Our friend Manus O'Riordan sends along the following: PHILOMENA, SEAN ROSS ABBEY and ANNETTE v HILDEGARDE

Michael A. Hess had been Deputy Chief Counsel of the US Republican National Committee under President Reagan and had risen to Chief Counsel under President Bush Senior by the time of his death in 1995. So, what...

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IB anniversary events in Spain next weekend

November 4, 2013

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Our compañeros at the Association of Friends of the International Brigades (AABI) write with an announcement: On Saturday

Preston's *Holocaust*, too, opens up the public sphere to individual stories of suffering. The many hundreds of horrifying stories that make up the bulk of this book serve as illustrations to the larger picture, to be sure; but they also recognize and honor their protagonists, who all appear with their full names, as citizens entitled to our attention and a place in Spain's historical memory. As Graham [writes](#), "Preston's study is history as a public good, a substitute for the truth and reconciliation process that has not taken place in Spain."

Meanwhile, the reception of this book in Spain has been predictably uneven. Preston, after all, tells truths that many are not interested in hearing, and he does so in great detail, with scholarly rigor (the notes run 120 pages), and in an accessible, efficient prose. This leaves little recourse to those flatly opposed to the revelation of some of the darkest pages of Spain's recent past. The journalist Jorge Reverte, [writing in the center-left newspaper *El País*](#), dismissed the book as "a hyperbolic and unbalanced narration," claiming that Preston's sympathy for the Republican side determined his partisan assessment of the crimes he describes. In fact, Reverte unwittingly proved one of Preston's key points: The persistence in Spain and elsewhere of myths about the war and Francoism, which allows the public to identify the notions of "objectivity" and "balance" with a "neutral" condemnation of both sides as equally violent and therefore equally reprehensible and equally guilty. "To this day," Preston writes, "General Franco and his regime enjoy a relatively good press," thanks to "a series of persistent myths about the benefits of his rule," including the false notions that he saved Spain from Communism or engineered its later economic boom. "Recognizing that the initial massive violence was generated by the military rebels themselves," Helen Graham [echoes](#) Preston, "remains the biggest taboo of all in democratic Spain's public sphere." (The whole notion that scholars like Preston, Graham, Angel Viñas or Julián Casanova should be labeled as "pro-Republican historians" is quite curious: Should we also be referring to, say, Richard Evans or Martin Gilbert as "pro-Allied historians" of the Second World War?)

Preston admits in his preface and acknowledgments that writing this book was one of the most difficult tasks he has faced as a scholar—not only because of the scale of its aspirations, but because of the book's depressing, painful subject matter. Like most of us non-Spaniards who dedicate our lives to understanding the Iberian Peninsula, Preston is driven as much by a thirst for knowledge as by affection and respect for his subject. Forcing himself to research and describe the appalling cruelties that Spaniards were capable of inflicting on each other must have been grueling. Gerald Brenan, another staunch British Hispanophile, famously wrote his seminal *Spanish Labyrinth* (1943) as a form of therapy, a way to deal with the anxiety caused by the endless flow of distressing news from Spain. After seeing the results of the rebels' rage in the hospital of Toledo, the UP correspondent Webb Miller told Jay Allen that "he came close to going off his rocker." One can imagine that the same is true for Preston. But it was worth it: He has produced an indispensable, important book.

Sebastiaan Faber teaches at Oberlin College and is Chair of the Board of ALBA.



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5 Responses to “The Spanish Holocaust: Reframing the Civil War”

[MICHAEL CLARJEN-ARCONADA](#) on July 31, 2012 at 3:01 pm

Thank you Sebastian Faber for a great review of the very significant contribution by Paul Preston: The Spanish Holocaust. As a Spaniard born in Madrid 1955, I can testify to the important discernments, clarifications, and thoroughness of research made by Paul Preston in order to achieve a thorough understanding of the Spanish Civil War (SCW) and the Spanish Holocaust; a term that makes justice to what transpired, and as a consequence will remain as a matter of record. As Graham mentions (The Independent), Preston's historical study is necessary for the truth and genuine reconciliation process that has not taken place in Spain.

The recent "Recovery of Historical Memory" process leading to the trials that resulted in the disbarment of Judge Baltasar Garzón (who attempted to seek truth and reparation through Spain's criminal justice system), may continue on its own accord with the help of Paul Preston's contribution as text-book / manual for authentic reconciliation to evolve in Spain.

Thank you Paul Preston for your determination to elucidate the truth in this monumental drama that constitutes the Spanish Civil War and its extension: The Spanish Holocaust. The book is a must read for every Spaniard, and every World-citizen who wants to learn from the lessons History has to offer; as to avoid and prevent from happening again the calamities we human beings are capable of inflicting on each other ...

Kovaliov on August 7, 2012 at 2:34 pm

This just adds to the tons of useless paper written by anglos about a land they've never been able to colonize. For instance, they cannot understand why Spanish is the first language (before English) of the Americas. As a Spaniard (with Spanish surnames) it makes me sad that there's another book of mythology selling as science. This Preston person proves that the "black legend", sadly, has not died, and until it does, it will be impossible to understand any of this. Prove that this is pseudo-history is the very title: "holocaust" means "complete or whole burning". There were gas chambers in the German concentration camps and bodies were burnt after execution. There was only burning of churches, which, by the way started earlier than Franco's uprising, but not much more burning in the rest of the war. My point is, the author uses the label "holocaust" with very sneaky purposes. Furthermore, the so called Spanish inquisition was abolished in 1834. The use of the word "inquisition" is, at best, political propaganda and, in any case, a relic of the "black legend". There is also a clear racist statement about the brutal nature of the Spaniard. It is not even concealed. This

November 9 AABI will perform the annual celebration in honor of the International Brigades to mark the 77th anniversary of his arrival in Madrid to assist in its defense. The main event will be the unveiling of a plaque to...

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Volunteer Database



ALBA's project to provide a [complete list](#) of the more than 2,800 individuals who left from U.S. territory to fight with the Spanish Republic

leads me to a very simple conclusion. This book is not about how the rich brutalize the poor in Spain, but how the English are superior to the Spanish because the latter are a brutal species and are fundamentally incapable of creating a civilized and democratic society. I don't care for Franco, I don't care for many things that Spanish society has produced, but I certainly don't care for patronizing English historians preaching and description of that ugly other called, in their language, the Spaniard.

Geraldine Nichols on August 21, 2012 at 6:15 pm

Thanks for your thorough and sensitive review of an important book. My only quibble is calling El País "center-left". Ojalá lo fuera todavía, but the times have changed and so has that newspaper.

Margarita (Puerto Rico) on September 26, 2012 at 9:52 pm

Thanks for the review, and thanks Preston for his serious research of the Spanish War Against Fascism. You do not have to applaud anything written about this theme, either by a Spaniard or a foreigner, but "Mr. Kovaliov" please do care for Franco: he is still alive and doing well, as your comments demonstrate, and many more I've heard during recent trips to Spain. Francoists still control the country -schools, lands, government and minds-, and non-Francoist are still as afraid as in 1939. "The Black Legend" (not all a lie) was a way for the British to cover-up their own crimes in the 16-19th centuries; "the Spanish Holocaust" is real, unfortunately.

protestfolk on May 27, 2013 at 8:41 pm

Didn't Abraham Lincoln Brigade Volunteer and historian Arthur H. Landis previously already reveal what happened in Spain during the 1930s in his 1972 book, "Spain: The Unfinished Revolution"?

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