

Process of Extermination

In Paul Preston's history of the Spanish Civil War, the atrocities under Franco mirror those in Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

BY ADAM HOCHSCHILD

IN "Homage to Catalonia," his memoir of the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell remarks that Francisco Franco's military uprising against Spain's elected government "was an attempt not so much to impose fascism as to restore feudalism." Paul Preston's magisterial account of the bloodshed of that era bears this

THE SPANISH HOLOCAUST
Inquisition and Extermination
in Twentieth-Century Spain.
By Paul Preston.
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out. Fascism may belong to the 20th century, but Franco's grab for power evokes earlier times: the parading soldiers who flourished enemy ears and noses on their bayonets, the mass public executions carried out in bullrings or with band music and onlookers dancing in the victims' blood. One of Franco's top aides talked of democratically chosen politicians as "cloven-hoofed beasts," and anything that smacked of modernity — Rotary Clubs, Montessori schools — seemed to draw the regime's violent wrath. Echoing the Inquisition, Franco ordered particularly despised foes put to death with the garrote, in which the executioner tightens an iron collar around a person's neck.

There's also something medieval in the fierce class divisions of 1930s Spain, with its great *latifundistas*, whose estates were worked by landless peasants so hungry they stole acorns from pigs' troughs. Preston describes the "near racist" loathing Franco's officials had for the lower classes; one contemptuously referred to unionized farmworkers as being like "Rif tribesmen." Indeed, Franco's leading commanders were mostly, like him, *Africanistas*, veterans of Spain's bloody colonial wars in North Africa. As a young man, the generalissimo himself led troops on a raid that brought back the severed heads of 12 Moroccan tribesmen.

With Hitler and Mussolini supplying arms to Franco, and the Soviet Union to the embattled Spanish Republic, the death toll of the 1936-39 war was enormous. Some 200,000 soldiers died in battle, and a further large but unknown number of civilians were killed by Franco's bombing of Spanish cities and of vast columns of refugees in flight. But Preston's subject is something else: the approximately 200,000 men and women deliberately executed during the war, the 20,000 support-

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Miners captured by General Franco's forces in 1936, before their execution in Seville.

ers of the Republic shot after it ended, and the additional tens of thousands of civilians and refugees who died in concentration camps and prisons.

An eminent and prolific British historian of modern Spain, Preston says this was "an extremely painful book to write." It is also, unlike several of his other works, a difficult book to read. The newcomer to Spanish history will nowhere learn the difference between the Assault Guard and the Civil Guard, or between a Carlist and an integrist. Chapters roll on for 40 or 50 pages without a break. A blizzard of names of thousands of perpetrators and the towns where they carried out their tortures and killings overwhelms the reader. "The Spanish Holocaust" is not really a narrative but a comprehensive prosecutor's brief. With its immense documentation — 120 pages of endnotes to both published and unpublished material in at least five languages, including corrections of errors in these sources — it is bound to be an essential reference for anything written on the subject for years to come.

In quashing democracy and timid agricultural reform, and in restoring the traditional hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, the army, big landowners and an authoritarian state, the Spanish version of fascism was very much a fundamentalist movement. And like so many political and religious fundamentalisms, it had a particular ferocity toward women. Franco's troops practiced gang rape to frighten newly captured towns into submission, and until media-savvy superiors silenced them, his officers even boasted about this

to American and British correspondents. Tens of thousands of women had their heads shaved and were force-fed castor oil (a powerful laxative), then jeered as they were paraded through the streets soiling themselves. Many had their breasts branded with the Falangist symbol of yoke and arrows. In Toledo, a United Press correspondent reported, Franco's soldiers shot more than 20 pregnant women from a maternity hospital. Much larger all-female groups were executed elsewhere. Troops marched through one town waving rifles adorned with the underwear

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of women they had raped and murdered. "It is necessary to spread terror," one of Franco's senior generals declared. "We have to create the impression of mastery, eliminating without scruples or hesitation all those who do not think as we do."

Although Preston's sympathies are clearly with the doomed Republic, to his credit he is equally thorough in exposing the killings committed under that government. Many supporters of the Republic had their own version of class hatred, murdering large numbers of captured army officers, other right-wingers and, most notoriously, nearly 7,000 members of the Catholic clergy and religious orders, who

were seen as accomplices of the reactionary landowners. Among hundreds of other atrocities on the Republican side, Preston details the evasions of the longtime Communist Party leader Santiago Carrillo regarding his involvement in the massacre of more than 2,200 rightist prisoners in Madrid; the operations of some Soviet "advisers" who, supposedly on hand to aid the Republican Army, devoted themselves to hunting down anti-Stalinists on the Spanish left; and the harshly sadistic prisons operated by the Republic's military intelligence service. Of the 200,000 estimated civilian wartime executions, more than 49,000 took place in Republican territory — a much smaller toll than that taken by the fascists, but still enormous.

There were crucial differences, however. Most, though by no means all, Republican killings were by mob violence, not deliberate policy, in the first six months of the war, as popular outrage welled up after air raids and news of fascist atrocities. But — sometimes effectively, sometimes not, and often at great personal risk — certain Republican officials managed to restrain and sometimes even prosecute killers of civilians. Unlike the tightly controlled press in Franco's territory, some newspapers condemned the killings. And the Republican government saved many lives by evacuating from the country more than 10,000 businessmen, priests and other right-wingers thought to be at particular risk. Nothing similar happened on the Falangist side.

Franco's rule became less murderous in later times, but in the early years he ranks morally with Hitler and Stalin. In such a regime, I always wonder, were there any decent people who tried to stop the slaughter? Yes, it turns out. Preston gives one brief but haunting example. Father Fernando Huidobro Polanco was a 34-year-old Jesuit who enthusiastically volunteered as a chaplain for Franco's troops. But he was dismayed to see them routinely shooting all their prisoners. He sent protests to high-level army officers and finally wrote to Franco himself that "many are dying who do not deserve such a fate and who could mend their ways." To Franco's adjutant, he protested in despair that "we are falling back into barbarism. . . . I do not want the new regime to be born with blood on its hands." He was wounded but then returned to the front, ever more vocal. In 1937, he was killed in battle, supposedly by shrapnel from one of the Republic's Soviet artillery shells. Ten years later the Jesuits began the lengthy process to have him canonized as a saint. But in the course of the investigation, it came out that he'd been shot in the back by a soldier from his own unit, "tired perhaps of the preaching of his chaplain," Preston writes. "When it was discovered that Huidobro had been killed by the Francoists and not by the Reds, the Vatican shelved his case." □