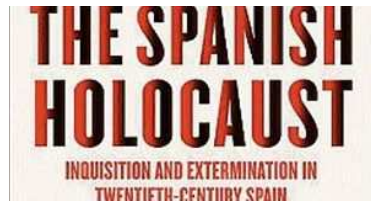


Tour de force is a challenge to silence of Spain's bloody unresolved past

Saturday, July 21, 2012

The Spanish Holocaust Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain



By Neil Robinson

Paul Preston
Harper Press, £19.50;
Kindle, £14.99
Review: Neil Robinson

The word 'holocaust' leaps out from the title of this book.

We are used to calling the crimes of Nazi Germany 'The Holocaust', but applying it to the Spanish civil war looks strange, even perverse.

Spain's civil war was not an ethnic conflict, the death toll was nowhere near that caused by the Nazis, and there has been no universal acceptance in Spain of the evils of Franco regime.

Paul Preston, the leading English-language historian of modern Spain, is well aware of the dangers of referring to the non-battlefield deaths of the Spanish Civil War as a holocaust.

Preston explains using the term because it captures the savagery of the killings, particularly those committed by Franco's rebel forces. There is also a link between Nazi crimes and those of Franco's forces in that they shared similar views of their victims. Both thought of their victims as sub-human. Both thought that their enemies were a part of some deep plot that linked Jews, Soviet communists, Masons and assorted foreign enemies. But Franco's supposed 'Jewish-Bolshevik-Masonic' enemies were mostly Spanish peasants and workers who protested their poverty, as well as liberals and anyone on the left.

This mindset easily justified carnage since Spain was wracked by violence even before war. Spain was undergoing traumatic social change and the right feared this and the urban world then being created as Spain painfully changed from an agricultural society.

Aristocratic owners of vast estates suppressed the peasantry, starving them into submission by denying them access to land and work and conniving at the murder of their leaders. The Catholic Church hierarchy defended their landowning privileges as fiercely and as violently as the laity. This laid the ground for a fierce anti-clericalism.

The army and the Civil Guard were firmly on the right. Officers who had served in Spain's North African colonies had been brutalised by the wars of extermination they had fought. The Africanistas saw no difference between rebel Moroccan tribesmen and Spanish workers. Both were traitors to their idea of Spain. Again, there is a parallel here with Nazi Germany. The German army learned about racial extermination when suppressing the Herero and Nama peoples in today's Namibia.

Franco's rebel forces were not content with military victory over Republican loyalists and left militias. The army and fascist militias terrorised territory they conquered to shock the Spanish people into submission. Anyone perceived to be an enemy was murdered; violence, imprisonment, looting and rape crushed civil society.

Franco prolonged the war to apply terror more thoroughly to areas his rebels conquered. Like the Spanish Inquisition Franco aimed at purification of Spain by burning what he regarded as corrupted elements.

It is clear from Preston's account that the Spanish left did not have the wherewithal to launch the revolution that Franco and the right feared.

What passed for a Spanish revolution was caused by Franco's coup. The coup destroyed the authority of the forces of law and order, which sided for the most part with Franco's usurpation of power.



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The left arrested and executed their enemies, sometimes with great cruelty, but were often restrained by moderate politicians in the Republican alliance. The death toll from Republican violence was large, but far, far lower than the figures put about by Franco and his apologists.

Franco's rebels were subject to no such restraints. Only in Madrid, under siege and fearful of the massacre promised by the rebels, did Republican violence outmatch that of Franco's rebels. In all Franco's forces killed about 150,000 people to the Republic's 50,000. Many more died as they fled when the Republic fell, or perished later from disease and neglect in refugee camps in France.

Do the horrors that Preston records amount to a holocaust?

If savage butchery and dehumanising the enemy is the measure of a holocaust then there have been lots of them. Most cases of civil war and ethnic bloodshed would be 'holocausts' by these standards and the word would lose its power.

Preston is too canny a historian not to know that there is a danger in stretching the idea of holocaust too far. So why does he apply it to Spain?

The reason is to put the suffering of ordinary people back at the heart of Spanish history. Calling that suffering a holocaust raises it to another level to try to make it undeniable.

Political criminality, human rights abuses, even genocide can be questioned, or explained as something else.

A holocaust cannot be put aside. If you deny a holocaust you put yourself outside of civilised discourse because you deny something fundamentally evil and beyond forgiveness.

Franco's Spain was assiduous in hiding its crimes. Securing democracy after Franco's death involved forgetting the past so as not to provoke a backlash from the right against the fledgling democratic state. Political crimes committed under Franco were amnestied in 1977. Baltasar Garzón, the Spanish magistrate who has pioneered the prosecution of international human rights abuses using Spanish law, was recently tried for investigating the Franco regime and vilified by parts of Spanish society that want to cover up the Franco terror.

Spain is still in denial about a bloody part of its past. Preston's tour de force history is a challenge to this silence. Anyone who wants to deny that Franco was at the heart of a holocaust now has to confront Preston's forensic record of murder, rape and pillage and give mass death some other name. In doing so they will show something about themselves and their character that silence about the past lets them hide.

* Neil Robinson teaches politics at the University of Limerick.

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