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A dark time in history finally comes to light

Mar 24th 2012 | From the print edition

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The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain.

By Paul Preston. *HarperPress*; 700 pages; £30. To be published in America in April by W.W. Norton; \$35. Buy from [Amazon.com](#), [Amazon.co.uk](#)

THE Spanish civil war and its repressive aftermath, following the victory of General Francisco Franco, was a particularly savage conflict. But it is far-fetched to describe it as a holocaust, as Paul Preston does in his latest book. His provocative title raised eyebrows when it was published in Spain last year, as the country's horrors still pale in comparison with the magnitude of the Nazi Holocaust. Mr Preston, an emeritus professor at the London School of Economics and leading historian of 20th-century Spain, contends that no other word aptly conveys the whole of the Spanish tragedy, which included a strain of anti-Semitism. Thankfully he exercises better judgment within the covers of this meticulous and well-argued book.



In need of a truth commission

Mr Preston puts the number of those who died in battle at 200,000, after Nationalist military rebels rose against the democratically elected Republican government in 1936. He counts an additional 150,000 murders by the right-wing Nationalists—plus 20,000 more after the civil war ended in 1939—and a further 50,000 killings in areas held by Republicans.

The book is largely based on secondary sources. Victims in the Republican zone were documented by the state investigation set up in 1940. But the sheer scale of the atrocities committed on the other side have come to light only recently, in a flood of books and exhumations of mass graves. A proper reckoning of the war had been avoided by the generation of politicians who followed Franco's death in 1975, to smooth the transition to democracy. Yet the past decade has seen various groups, often led by the relatives of Republican victims, unearthing the past—often literally.

In a recent trial in Madrid against Baltasar Garzón, Spain's most famous magistrate, relatives of slain victims aired their stories for the first time. Mr Garzón was charged with abusing his powers by calling an investigation into the deaths of 114,000 people under Franco's dictatorship, despite a 1977 amnesty law. He was ultimately absolved of this charge, but in another case last month the conservative judiciary barred Mr Garzón from the bench for 11 years, thus ending his career.

Mr Preston does not hide his loathing of the rebels and empathy for the left. He argues with impressive detail that the repression by the Nationalists was largely planned and institutionalised, whereas the Republicans' violence was more spontaneous and mainly in defence against the better armed and trained Francoist forces. Other scholars say that this view is too simplistic. The author is on new and firmer ground in his examination of the role played by the NKVD, the Soviet secret police, particularly in the massacre of hundreds of Franco supporters at Paracuellos in 1936. Santiago Carrillo, a communist

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leader at the time and the only war protagonist alive today, has always claimed he had nothing to do with the killings, and has never been charged. Yet Mr Preston argues otherwise, citing his ties with Josif Grigulevich, a sinister NKVD agent.

"The Spanish Holocaust" is a compelling chronicle of a grim time in history. It would be a pity if the book's dubious title discouraged a wider readership.

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