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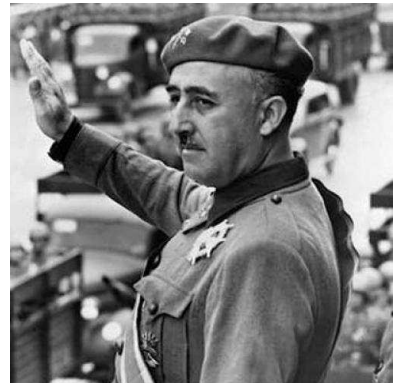
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The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain

By Paul Preston

(W.W. Norton, 700 pp., \$35)



The young Jesuit was an idealist. A slim and bespectacled student of philosophy, Father Fernando Huidobro Polanco dreamed of the redemption of Spain from the evils of its secular, redistributive Republic. A supporter of the military coup by nationalist generals in July 1936, he discounted stories of mass murder of Spanish civilians by the rebels. But knowing that war tries the conscience, he nevertheless wanted to offer pastoral care to the rebel soldiers. When he arrived on the battlefield as a Roman Catholic chaplain that September, he was confronted by two surprising realities. First, many of the soldiers fighting under the banner of Spanish nationalism against the Republic were Muslims, mercenaries from Spanish Morocco. Second, Christian soldiers were little interested in the application of ethics to their deeds. Father Fernando quickly realized that he had been wrong about the honorable behavior of the rebels. The war that he

saw, as he courageously wrote to the rebel commander General Francisco Franco, was “without prisoners or wounded,” because they were murdered by nationalist soldiers, along with civilians seen as supporters of the Republic. In April 1937, as Paul Preston records in this breathtaking history, Father Fernando was shot in the back by his own men.

This is but one of the two hundred thousand or so murders of the Spanish Civil War, many of which Preston records at this or greater level of detail. His book is macro-history by way of micro-history, assembling local stories into an overwhelming panorama of a tortured Spain. Reading this study is like running your palms along the walls of the Toledo Cathedral on a dark night, slowly acquiring painful impressions until a sense of dark structure emerges. You have the sense, though Preston never quite raises the issue directly, that something must have been amiss in the Roman Catholic Church. Somewhere beneath his account of sins by Roman Catholics against Roman Catholics, underground like the remains of a mosque beneath an Iberian cathedral, is a further history of colonized Muslims.

What Preston knows about the years of civil war, 1936-1939, is astounding, bespeaking his own formidable record as a historian of twentieth-century Spain, but also the work of Spanish historians who are restoring knowledge of a period that had been protected by a double taboo. After Franco’s victory and the destruction of the Republic in 1939, his dictatorship taught its own self-justifying history for two generations; and after his death in 1975 and the general amnesty of 1977, a consensus prevailed in newly democratic Spain that it was best to delay a historical reckoning until democracy seemed solidly rooted. But that moment finally arrived, and Preston’s work is a powerful intervention in a Spanish discussion. Its significance transcends the events it brings to light, and suggests some basic re-evaluations of recent European history (if not the one suggested by its title).

PRESTON BEGINS by showing us just what class war, that bogey of American political rhetoric, actually looks like. The lesson of interwar Europe is that there is no political magic in the untamed marketplace. From Poland’s Galicia in the east to Spain’s Galicia in the west, conditions of radical

inequality conspired with weak state institutions to turn the energy of capitalism against democracy by generating support for the far Left and the far Right, especially during the Great Depression. In what were still predominantly agrarian societies, only land reform might have taught peasant majorities that they had something to gain from voting and paying taxes. Without it, peasants would support anarchists or communists who promised them relief from the state's apparently senseless demands, while landholders consolidated their economic power in an antidemocratic reaction. In Spain, the rich sought and found ideologies to mask their interests and champions to protect them. In the 1920s, the dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera reassured the owners of estates by condemning reformers as alien to the nation. In his view, anyone who supported any sort of change in the countryside was a communist, and communists were not proper Spaniards.

Under Primo de Rivera, Spanish landholders gained a secure sense of their position in the world, Spanish priests maintained their place as caretakers of the rural status quo, and Spanish officers experienced "vertiginous" promotions during the colonial wars, across the Mediterranean, against Moroccan rebels. To an extent that can only seem shocking, but is impressively documented by Preston, all three groups learned to see challenges to the inequitable and authoritarian status quo of the 1920s as a matter of racial penetration by an alien Judeo-Masonic-Bolshevik conspiracy. Such conspiracy theories were put forth with the greatest extravagance by Spanish fascists (one organization was founded by Rivera's children), but they seem to have acquired the status of common sense within much of the Right.

And so the Republic itself, when it was re-established in 1931, was bound to provoke determined and articulate resistance. Its new constitution propagated a secular state, which angered the priesthood and the conservatives. The first government purged the officer corps, demoting many officers who had been promoted for their deeds in Morocco. But more infuriating still, it concerned itself with the fate of the peasantry, rather than leaving them under the authority of local notables.

In 1933, the Spanish Right returned to power, despite losing the popular vote, thanks to a quirk in the electoral law. This was just in time to roll back redistributive policies during the worst of the Great Depression. The great landholders of the Spanish south reinstated what Preston calls “semi-feudal” relations, radicalizing not only peasants but also the young generation of socialists and liberals. When miners went on strike in the Asturias region in October 1934, the right-wing government called in the army. Franco presented the striking Spanish miners as a kind of foreign enemy inspired by Moscow, and his troops punished them as they had rebellious Moroccan tribesmen. The working-class districts of cities were bombed and shelled, just as Moroccan villages had been. This was a foretaste, Preston plausibly suggests, of how Franco’s African Army would behave during the civil war. The months following the suppression of the miners’ strike saw first drought and then deluge, ruining the harvests and immiserating the Spanish countryside. “The scale of hunger in rural Spain in 1936,” writes Preston, “is almost unimaginable today.” It is unimaginable in part because we cannot imagine hunger at all, let alone the constant threat of food shortages that once made fertile soil central to local, national, and international politics. Preston works hard to help us grasp the perspective of hungry peasants prevented from tilling fields held in reserve for polo ponies or fighting bulls.

IN FEBRUARY 1936, the Left and center won a majority in parliament, and over the next months a group of generals responded by plotting a military coup against the Republic. The coup was less a tight conspiracy than a plot for a broad insurrection. The leader of the main right-wing party, CEDA, was aware of the plans to destroy the Republic, and did everything in his power to aid them by disrupting the work of parliament. Meanwhile, fascists provoked violence in the streets to create the impression that a strong hand was needed. The new government formed after the February 1936 elections was provocative to the Right by its very existence, but it was too timid for the radical Left. It declined to move against the conspirators when apprised of their identities, and socialists refused to join the government to form what would have been a stronger coalition. Peasants took the formation of a new government as a signal that they could begin to plow fallow land that did not

belong to them. Workers went on strike in the hope of better wage agreements. Anarchists hoped to push the unrest forward to a full revolution. They refused all cooperation with the Republic, which they, like the Right, saw as illegitimate. Anarchists figure as the proximate political idiots of this history, indirectly aiding the Right by making the Republic seem weak and untenable.

A republic, Preston's introductory chapters remind us, can be overturned by class war from the Right. Franco's goal, and that of the rebellion of 1936 generally, was "to ensure that establishment interests could never again be challenged as they had been from 1931 to 1936 by the democratic reforms of the Second Republic." But most Spaniards probably approved those policies, and the going was not smooth for the nationalist rebels. Local officers did not always join the coup; some provinces defended themselves; the big cities wanted the Republic. But Franco sought a long war, which he understood as a chance for the "redemption" of Spanish society through the blood of the Spaniards he regarded as enemies. A longer campaign created the possibility of physically eliminating the groups seen as the bastions of the Republic.

Since there were precious few Jews, Masons, or Bolsheviks in Spain, the notion of their conspiracy was an infinitely flexible one, applied simply to everyone who had supported the legal political order of the Republic. They were to be eliminated according to a "prior plan of systematic mass murder." Preston calls this an "investment in terror": mass killing was not only a way to win a civil war, but also to prepare for the dictatorship to follow. Franco's idea of a "redemption" of the population through blood had a particular application to women, as Preston carefully chronicles. In the natural order of things, women were subordinate. Young peasant women were supposed to be content with prostituting themselves, quite literally, to inheritors of landed wealth. Women who were free to decide for themselves about their sexual life became, as the Right saw matters, politically perverted supporters of the Republic. Thus "redemption" for them meant rape before murder, a double assertion of power.

Franco and his allies also railed on about the "Africanization" of public life. They equated the Republic's attempts to aid the peasantry with the barbarism they believed they were fighting in Africa, and presented Spanish

peasants as racial inferiors comparable to Moroccan tribesmen. This revival of the second specter haunting Spanish nationality, the inferior Moor along with the conspiring Jew, carried with it an eerie irony. Franco's African Army itself brought the practices of colonialism to Spanish shores. Officers and men boasted that they treated conquered Spanish towns like they treated Moroccan ones. They killed the wounded and the prisoners and the local elites for the same reasons they had in Africa, so as not to leave any possibility for resistance in the rear, and to intimidate the surrounding countryside.

During the civil war of 1936 to 1939, the Spanish Foreign Legion and the Regulares, fighting for the nationalist side, mutilated corpses, massacred prisoners, and raped working-class women. The Foreign Legion, despite the name, was composed mainly of Spaniards, with a few Cubans and other Latin Americans. The Regulares, again despite the name, were Muslim troops recruited in Morocco, and promised pillage in Spain. Preston is as restrained as he can be in the presentation of the regular gang rape of Spanish women by Muslim mercenaries under the command of Spanish nationalists. This was part and parcel of Franco's policy.

IT IS HARD TO overstate Preston's close familiarity with the individual atrocities he documents, one after the other. Early-morning executions in Pamplona attracted large crowds, and with them sellers of hot chocolate. Expectant mothers in the maternity ward in Toledo were taken away and shot. The progressive mayor of Uncastillo was humiliated, tortured, and executed; his corpse was dismembered by an ax. A Republican pilot who crash-landed was murdered, his body cut into pieces, the pieces placed in a box, and the box dropped by parachute over Madrid with a threatening note. Landowners who joined the rebellion also joined in its violence. Their sons would force peasants to dig their own graves before shooting them, laughingly referring to this as "land reform." Some young señoritos hunted for peasants on their polo ponies. One landowner killed ten peasants for every fighting bull of his that the local population had taken and eaten.

The historical challenge that this book presents for the Roman Catholic Church is considerable. Although some priests sought to prevent violence or shelter those who were under threat, more seemed to have supported the rebellion, and even joined its fighting columns. Some adopted fascist salutes and took direct part in the killing. One priest shot a man who was seeking shelter in a confessional.

Preston is concerned to show that violence from the Right was on a greater scale than violence from the Left during the Spanish Civil War. Contemporary accounts of atrocities came from Madrid, the Republican capital, where reporters and ambassadors could observe and criticize the actions of the Republic but not those of the rebels—with certain exceptions, such as that airdropped corpse. Preston reminds us that prevailing opinion in the British establishment (Churchill was a good example) held at the time that right-wing killings were relatively insignificant. But with the help of massive documentation recently published by Spanish historians, Preston shows that roughly 150,000 Spaniards were murdered on territories controlled by the rebel nationalists, compared with about 50,000 in the Republican zones.

He is also concerned to demonstrate a few differences in the intentions and motivations. The Republic was a state, concerned with the rule of law. After the disruption of law caused by the coup, all of the left-wing parties—socialists, communists, Trotskyites, anarchists—created their own checas (a Soviet term), hit squads to eliminate internal enemies. But the government itself supported the people's tribunals that replaced the murder units. As the war proceeded, ever fewer people were murdered by the Republican side. The greatest single massacre by the Republican side was of some two thousand prisoners in Madrid as Franco's forces were approaching the city. This was a terrible atrocity, but it points up a basic difference: Franco's forces did not usually even take prisoners. The socialist politician Indalecio Prieto gave an eloquent speech in August 1936 urging defenders of the Republic not to murder their enemies, despite the practices of the nationalist rebels: "Do not imitate them! Do not imitate them! Be better than them in your moral conduct!" Though he was not always heeded, he was

right to ask in exile if anyone on the other side had issued a similar call for mercy.

The most violent political force in the Republican zone were the anarchists, who fought against Franco but also opposed the Republic. Beyond the reach of the government, and bountifully armed, they were all but impossible to control. They ran the most murderous of the checas, including one squad that decorated their murder van with skulls and their uniforms with death's heads. They burned corpses to avoid investigation and identification; they burned churches and convents on principle. They saw civil strife as the prelude to a revolution that would overpower not just the Right but all those who upheld the state, including the socialists and the communists. They tried to collectivize agriculture, sometimes forcing peasants who had just gained land from landlords to cede it to a collective farm. They and the Spanish communists killed each other in significant numbers, over real differences in doctrine and practice. The anarchists wanted immediate and radical transformation; the communists wanted stability to build a government that would attend to the desires of Moscow. The anarchists, quite correctly, believed that Spanish communism was a front for the interests of Soviet foreign policy. The communists, quite correctly, believed that the anarchists' carefree recruitment policies allowed many traitors access to the institutions of the Republic.

Whereas the anarchists had much local support in Spain, the communists relied on a powerful foreign backer, the Soviet Union. (The intensity of Soviet interest in Spain is one subject of *Terror und Traum*, Karl Schlögel's wonderful history of Moscow in these years.) When the Spanish state did achieve a measure of stability during the civil war, it was thanks to the Soviet aid that began to arrive in autumn 1936. But support came at a price: the endorsement of the Soviet interpretation of the conflict, and the concomitant repression of those Spaniards whom the Soviets defined as enemies.

THE EUROPEAN politics of intervention in Spain is a subject that Preston does not touch in this study: with respect to the Soviet case, and more generally, he expects the reader to know the broad course of the war, and the reasons and motives of the extra-Spanish powers that took part. Thus we read that Franco's men were airlifted by German and Italian planes, or

supported by Portugal near the border; but we are never told why these neighbors behaved as they did.

Preston places the violence of the Spanish Civil War at the center of modern Spanish history. This is all right and proper, although the uninitiated reader may have trouble following the sequence of events from the paucity of references to broader events and trends, especially the contest between fascism and anti-fascism that defined European politics between 1934 and 1939. The rise of Mussolini to power in Italy had brought fascism as a new form of modern politics, the rise of Hitler in Germany a new threat that Stalin slowly understood and sought to counter. The Soviet Union began in 1934 to try to re-organize left-wing parties throughout Europe into Popular Fronts, ordering communists to cooperate with socialists rather than attacking them as “social fascists,” which had until then been the party line. The Soviet position between 1934 and 1939 was not revolutionary but defensive, an attempt to encircle Nazi Germany with left-wing republics friendly to the Soviet Union.

Preston is right to resist any reduction of the Spanish Civil War to a proxy battle between the forces of fascism and anti-fascism, but without some sense of this international competition for the loyalties of Europeans, even the local details can sometimes seem obscure. As Preston has described in his other books, Italian fascists and German Nazis did help Franco in considerable measure, and Stalin’s perception of the fascist threat has much to do with the fact and the nature of Soviet intervention. (Here a guide is Stanley G. Payne’s *The Spanish Civil War, the Soviet Union, and Communism*.) Preston knows all of this as well as anyone. One suspects that his intention here is to emphasize the extent of Spanish responsibility for atrocities within Spain.

From the Soviet perspective, Spain was but one theater of a world struggle between the overmastering forces of imperialism and the embattled Soviet state, the homeland of socialism. The imperialists, as Stalin’s men were arguing in the Moscow show trials as the Spanish Civil War began, were represented inside the Soviet Union by supporters of Stalin’s onetime rival Trotsky, who by this time was in exile in Mexico. Naturally, not everyone in the international Left around the world identified with Stalin’s peculiarly personalistic reading of the global class struggle. In Spain, the labor union

POUM (the object of sympathy in Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*) identified with Trotsky rather than with Stalin, and criticized the Soviet show trials.

For this reason, when the Soviet NKVD began to make itself known in Spain in the autumn of 1936, its targets were not the nationalists and fascists, who were the military enemy, nor the bourgeois liberals and socialists, whose job it was to hold up a Popular Front government that would be friendly to the Soviet Union. The crucial enemies, as the Stalinists saw matters, were dissenting communists: Trotskyists and the POUM. Deft in tactics if shortsighted in strategy, the Soviets eliminated their closest enemies on the Left. The NKVD in Spain, as Preston skillfully recounts, forged a document to "prove" that the leader of the POUM, Andrés Nin, was a Gestapo agent. NKVD men managed to retrieve Nin from Spanish custody and execute him. Soviet advisers in Madrid exploited the chaos that anarchists brought behind the lines as a pretext to suppress the POUM.

The Soviets would never have achieved the influence they did in Spain without Franco's coup, which left the Republic desperate for help. After Franco's victory in early 1939, and for the next three decades of his dictatorship, Franco would systematically exaggerate the extent of Soviet influence, and ignore the obvious fact that his own actions had made Spain the plaything of foreign interests. It is to Preston's great credit that he resists the polarizing logic of the politics of the era of fascism and anti-fascism. He is not a partisan of anything, except a clear record of mass murder, regardless of the perpetrators and their goals. He certainly does not seek to minimize Soviet violence, or violence perpetrated by the Left in general. He attends to it with the same level of painstaking detail as he does to the atrocities of the Right. When he concludes that the one was substantially worse than the other, this is a careful judgment by a careful historian.

THE HISTORY invites reconsiderations of the European twentieth century. It is hard to overlook the resemblance between the German terrorbombing of Guernica in 1937 and the German terror-bombing of Polish cities, beginning with Weillun in 1939. The three basic purposes of Franco's political terrorism are identical to those of the Germans during the invasion of

Poland, which followed the end of the Spanish Civil War by less than six months: the murder of elites who might resist, the intimidation of a population expected to be hostile, and the preparation for a dictatorship to come. For that matter, Franco's pacification was also similar to the methods the Soviets used when they invaded Poland in 1939. By this time Stalin had reversed course again, accepting an invitation from Hitler to destroy Poland together. That Franco, Hitler, and Stalin all undertook quite similar policies designed to destroy physically an entire political elite in 1939 suggests not only the cruelty of the late 1930s, but also a broader trend in twentieth-century European history.

All three regimes, for all their significant ideological differences, were examples of the arrival of neocolonial practices to Europe itself. The Soviets self-colonized (Stalin's expression) by collectivizing agriculture in order to build industry; the Germans wanted to colonize eastern Europe to build an agrarian paradise for the Aryan masters; Franco brought colonial troops from Africa in order to restore a traditional agrarian order and oppress an orientalized peasantry. All three of these approaches were ideological alternatives to land reform under democratic conditions, which by and large had failed; all three were economic responses to the Great Depression, which seemed to signal the end of capitalism as such; and all three were political schemes of agrarian domination in a Europe where maritime expansion and thus traditional colonialism no longer seemed possible. In other words, if one brings the history of self-colonizing violence in western Europe (Spain) together with that of central Europe (Germany) and eastern Europe (the USSR), a new model for the twentieth century presents itself. The major theme of European history shifts from colonization to self-colonization by the 1930s. Then, after the disaster of World War II (western Europe) or the demise of communism (eastern Europe), it shifts again from self-colonization to integration—where integration means, precisely, the abandonment of colonial practices both within and without Europe.

These are my musings about the shape of the European century suggested by the profound achievement of this book. It might have been advisable for Preston to attempt to integrate his spectacular account into his own larger interpretation of European history rather than obtusely appropriate the term

“Holocaust.” After all the wearying work involved in assembling such an exhaustive history of atrocity, one can understand why Preston would want an arresting title. And of course he is quite right to point to certain similarities between the Spanish and the Jewish experiences. Franco was an anti-Semite who had civilians murdered. Franco’s Spanish allies made much of supposed differences in blood between themselves and their opponents. Spanish refugees from Franco often found themselves in German camps. But all of this together does not a Holocaust make.

The point is not that the Nazi extermination of European Jews can never and in no way be usefully compared to other crimes. The point is that the word “Holocaust” means precisely that, and not something else, and we have to preserve the terms to have a chance of understanding the history. Germany implemented other policies of mass murder besides the Holocaust; we should and do give them other names. Other states, too, implemented policies of mass murder; we can and should give them other names. If Spaniards carried out mass murder in the late 1930s, as Preston has convincingly shown, we should try understand the event (and it is hard to imagine a better guide than Preston), and then we should find an appropriate term for it. This term is not “Holocaust,” simply because “Holocaust” means something else. This is a book, in other words, that must not be judged by its cover. The title was a profound mistake, but the history is superb.

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