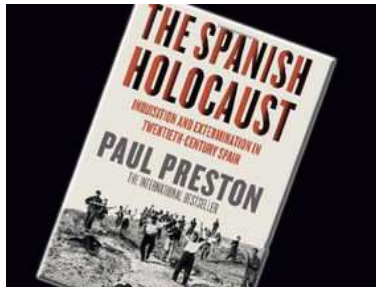


Review: The Spanish Holocaust by Paul Preston

IN 1974, when the song Y Viva España was in the UK singles chart for six months, General Franco had been Spain's head of state for almost 35 years.



Spanish Holocaust by Paul Preston []

One of the punishments meted out to Republican prisoners at the end of the Spanish Civil War was to be made to sing nationalist anthems for an hour after meals.

If any were insufficiently full-throated they had their heads shaved, were beaten, made to sing (with right arms outstretched in the fascist salute) for four or five hours and sometimes shot.

As the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) progressed there was systematic murder on both sides. In the Republican zone, anarchist death squads killed some 50,000, including members of rival Left-wing factions or those deemed to be Nationalist sympathisers, such as landowners, priests and nuns.

A far larger number, close to 200,000, were killed by the military rebels against the democratically elected Republican government.

The Francoists had cut their teeth in Spanish Morocco, where "the decapitation and mutilation of prisoners was common".

Spanish Holocaust provides a terrifying story

They treated the Spanish proletariat in the same way they had treated Moroccan natives, as a sub-human species.

For the most part the slaughter was carried out under the direction of officers and gentlemen, many of them devout Catholics with a virulent hatred of Jews and Freemasons as much as of communists or liberals.

Franco's "war effort was conceived ever more as an investment in terror which would facilitate the establishment of his dictatorship," explains Preston. "The post-war machinery of trials, executions, prisons and concentration camps consolidated that investment."

Although Spain remained neutral throughout the Second World War, Franco went to enormous lengths to extradite anyone who had fled to France in 1939 or even long before that. Those finding themselves in Occupied France were immediately sent home to face firing squads, or in the case of lesser figures, were deemed stateless and sent instead to Mauthausen-Gusen concentration camp in Germany, where the commandant told them in his

welcome speech that they would "leave by the crematorium chimney" (after being worked to death). Some of those finding themselves in Vichy survived, at least until Germany occupied the whole of France.

So-called "cleansing and punishment operations" were conducted under the cloak of martial law with the bodies buried in unmarked mass graves.

Judicial trials of Republicans were shams, lasting mere minutes, with little or no legal representation and with the accused not allowed to speak.

Simply coming from a town or village where Leftists had killed Rightists rendered you complicit, even if you could prove that you had been miles away by the time and many of those who had saved Rightists from execution were followed to the glass of their neck.

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NAZI advisers helped the Francoist regime reorganise its police forces. In 1940 more than 300,000 Republicans languished in prison, some of them sentenced to serve 30 years on the flimsiest of charges.

Many would starve to death or die of disease, thousands would be deployed as slave labourers on infrastructure projects or rented out to private companies.

Republican women were frequently raped in prison, their death sentences deferred until they had given birth and the children had been removed.

Indeed "the sequestration of the children of Republican prisoners, not just of those executed, became systematic", with 12,000 being taken to religious or state institutions where they were brainwashed.

In a sinister echo of Nazi psychiatry Colonel Antonio Vallejo Nágera was permitted to study Republican prisoners in order to identify "the red gene".

He advocated a "modernised Inquisition" and argued that children should be separated from their "red" mothers to preserve the health of the Spanish race.

In his epilogue Preston tells of several Francoists who years later repented of their crimes or committed suicide (in some cases both). Spain only woke from the nightmare in 1975 and is still dealing with decades of suppressed historical memory.

Anyone who supposes that Franco's regime was only mildly despotic and repressive should read this wonderful book about a horrible subject.

Verdict 5/5

Harper Press, £30