

# Tragedy that will not go away

## The Spanish Holocaust: inquisition and extermination in twentieth-century Spain

Paul Preston

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Some Spaniards in recent years, with a helping hand from foreign allies like Paul Preston, have been quite literally digging up a past that others would prefer to leave well buried.

It was just over 12 years ago that relatives of the dead, aided by specialists in archaeological-forensic exhumation, dug up a mass grave of individuals killed during the Spanish Civil War. The process quickened in November 2007 when Spain's socialist Government approved a "historical memory" law, giving relatives greater access to previously classified files that helped them to pinpoint other unmarked graves of those who had been executed, mainly by Franco's forces. The law gave relatives the right to insist on a dignified burial of their loved ones. It also revisited a past that had been deliberately closed to examination by earlier legislation. After Franco's followers gave up power following the dictator's death in 1975, a deal had been struck to ensure an orderly transition to democracy: no one would be tried, pursued or even reminded of the abuses committed, a pact enshrined in the 1977 amnesty law.

The more recent "historical memory" law has been strongly criticised by supporters of Spain's current centre-right Partido Popular Government, which was elected last December. They accuse the Left of historical revisionism, motivated by a wish to dilute the republic's culpability and to shift all blame for the Spanish Civil War of 1936-39 squarely on to the shoulders of those who fought against the republic and then supported Franco's rule for more than three decades after he emerged victorious.

Supporters of the law see it as a preliminary if necessary stage in a process of restorative justice and a corrective to the distorted narrative that endured during the Franco years. This narrative had its most tasteless, if not grotesque, symbol in the giant



**Spanish women and children refugees made homeless by the civil war cross the border into France at Le Perthus, c. 1937.**  
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cenotaph built on the entire side of a mountain north of Madrid. Constructed using forced labour drawn from republican prisoners, it was given the neutral name of the Valle de Los Caidos ("Valley of the Fallen"). Some 30,000 Spaniards from both sides killed during the civil war were alleged to have been transferred here on completion of the site in 1959. However Franco, who always showed himself incapable of magnanimity, ensured that the enormous underground crypt and basilica remained dedicated to those who had fallen for "God and Spain", in other words – since his own official propaganda had it that republicans were anti-Christ and anti-Spain – only those who had fought on the nationalist side.

When Franco died, he was laid to rest, as he had requested, in this pharaonic mausoleum. The Valley of the Fallen was subsequently expropriated by Spain's fascist fringe for their annual commemoration of Franco's death. These days, such groups have had their access restricted, while the future of the site remains the subject of ongoing political debate, with Spaniards no closer to agreeing on a common narrative to their history.

As Paul Preston notes, Spain is still in the throes of a memory war, although a majority of Spaniards would probably vote to forget the Spanish Civil War altogether if they thought it would bring their economic regeneration any closer. More questionable is whether, having chosen to push Spaniards collectively back on to the psychoanalyst's couch, Preston retains sufficient objectivity to analyse fairly one of their darkest hours. As one would expect from Preston, one of the hardest-working academics I have ever come across, there is no shortage of horror, drawn from years of painstaking personal research, which has included trawling through innumerable eye-witness accounts and local histories. Many of these are shared here with a wider audience for the first time. Some of these accounts are politically biased, but for much of the time, despite the distortions, Preston tries to shed light on the events with diligence. I cannot think of a Spanish historian who has managed, as Preston has done, to give such a detailed account of the appalling abuse and loss of life committed

on both sides during the civil war and then by the nascent Francoist state.

However, Preston falls short of the balance in analysis that Hugh Thomas achieved in his groundbreaking *The Spanish Civil War*. Despite having far more limited access to documents, Thomas drew on some impeccable sources and managed to retain objectivity while similarly breaking through silence, taboo and

inhibitions, even while Franco was still alive. By contrast, one is struck by the loaded title of Preston's book. He is quite wrong to include the word "Holocaust". It is disingenuous of him to suggest that the word "holocaust" is best translated in its original Greek sense of wholesale destruction, while it is the Hebrew *Shoah* which means genocide. Holocaust does indeed mean "genocide", which come from "genus", i.e. people or race, and refers very specifically to Hitler's final solution for the Jews. The Spanish Civil War, as Preston so well documents, was a hideous bloodbath with terrible atrocities, the slaughter of innocents and non-combatants on both sides, and the targeting of specific groups such as trade unionists, priests and Religious, left-wingers, right-wingers and so on. But it was not genocide.

In looking at the causes of the civil war, Preston lays great emphasis on the anti-Semitic expression that cropped up in the writings of some of those who backed the military uprising against the Republic, while noting accurately that Hitler both armed and tried to influence Franco. Yet Preston refrains from adding that Franco did not follow Vichy in having Spanish nationals of Jewish descent shipped on a massive scale to German concentration camps and fails to point out how this became an increasingly remote possibility from an early stage in the Second World War, during which Spain became one of the escape routes used by the Allies for Jews fleeing Nazi persecution. Preston also minimises the impact that the Republic's anticlericalism and lurch to the left had, not only those on the far right of the political spectrum, but on more moderate liberal opinion that had supported the overturn of the monarchy in 1931.

This is a book from which neither side emerges smelling of roses. But its effect falls short of being cathartic. There is a distinct whiff of acrid smoke covering the sections on nationalist Spain, written with the clear intention of inciting the reader to take sides against it. For Preston, the difference between the sides lay in that the atrocities committed by the republicans were generally not planned, while those committed by the Franco side were the consequence of a right-wing racist conspiracy, whose brutality was endemic of a system, as well as a world view predicated on the myth of a Christian Spain.

Jimmy Burns

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