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Spain and the Shadow of the Civil War

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The relationship between an 'unquiet past' and the concerns of the present has been a key feature of recent engagements with the Spanish Civil War, as Mary Vincent explains.

When Paul Preston's *The Spanish Holocaust* (Harper Press, 2013) was shortlisted for the 2012 Samuel Johnson Prize it confirmed a new phase in the historiography of the Spanish Civil War. Preston's meticulous documentation of atrocities brought home not only the fearsome nature of the conflict but also the brutality of the Francoist repression. With its lists of obscure names and places Preston's book illustrates how civil wars transform the ordinary. These unremarkable locations have for decades contained the unmarked graves of anonymous individuals caught up in momentous events. Neighbours, friends and relatives testified to the identity of victims whose 'crimes' were often simply those of political affiliation. The local community may not have wielded the gun – soldiers or militiamen usually did that – but it was complicit in the everyday repressive violence of the Civil War.



'Stand up against the Italian invasion of Spain!', a Republican poster from the Spanish Civil War, c. 1937

Preston's mapping of this violent reality builds on the powerful historical memory movement that has flourished in Spain since the turn of the 21st century. Organisations such as the [Association for the Recovery of Historical Memory](http://www.memoriahistorica.org.es/) (<http://www.memoriahistorica.org.es/>), which was founded by the grandchildren of men executed during the Civil War, began to search for, document and excavate the graves. This fascinating but troubling process is the subject of two recent studies: Layla Renshaw's *Exhuming Loss* (Left Coast Press, 2011) and Dacia Viejo-Rose's *Reconstructing Spain* (Sussex Academic Press, 2011). The strength of this social movement to address Spain's unquiet past led in 2007 to the Law of Historical Memory, which has produced various government initiatives, including a definitive map of collective graves.

The notion of an unquiet past stalks many cinematic representations of the Civil War, notably Víctor Erice's *The Spirit of the Beehive* (1973) and Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* (2006). The literary scholar Jo Labanyi uses the concept of 'hauntology' to analyse this phenomenon of a past that stalks the present day. The exhumations are a defining moment in addressing this unquiet past, providing incontrovertible evidence of the violence of the Civil War. These bones are anything but ghostly: they represent the moment when legend becomes history. The Francoist repression is now, as Preston has shown, undeniable.

Our knowledge of the Civil War has changed considerably since 2000, but its historical interpretations remain largely the same. The debate over responsibilities that has dominated the historiography of the Civil War since the 1970s has been reinvigorated by historical memory. The question often posed, as in Julián Casanova's *The Spanish Republic and Civil War* (Cambridge, 2010), being: 'Why did the Republic not survive?' But what is being asked is actually 'which side was to blame for the war', just as it was by Preston and Stanley Payne in the 1970s. Casanova's answer is clear and echoes the interpretations offered by Preston, Helen Graham in *The Spanish Civil War: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2005) and others who look to exonerate the Left. The military coup of July 1936 'undermined the ability of the State and the Republican government to maintain order' and led to 'unprecedented open violence'. In contrast, Stanley Payne's *The Collapse of the Spanish Republic* (Yale University Press, 2006) argues that the Left always equated the Republic with 'progressive government and so failed to construct a stable parliamentary regime'. Political chauvinism led to the exclusion of right-wing and even centrist political options. And Payne also emphasises the ill-judged actions of key individuals, notably Manuel Azaña and Niceto Alcalá-Zamora. Since their first groundbreaking work in the 1970s, both Payne and Preston have incorporated numerous research findings, many of them from the careful regional studies of grass-roots activism that characterise much Spanish historical research.

An important attempt to broaden the framework of historical studies of the Civil War is Michael Seidman's curiously named but innovative *Republic of Egos* (University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). This 'history from below' looks to recover the lived experience of ordinary Republicans. Yet, despite such initiatives, the search for responsibilities continues. The popularity of the narrative histories of Hugh Thomas and Antony Beevor – joined by myriad others in Spanish – surely does not simply reflect an appetite for military history, a genre that is badly served in histories of the conflict. With their carefully even-handed coverage of both sides, narrative histories seem to avoid the dialogue of the deaf that characterises the debates over responsibilities.

Apportioning blame for the Civil War ultimately rests on a political judgment, although the arguments of those who hold the Right responsible have gained moral force from our new knowledge of the murderous nature of the Francoist repression. For Casanova the fact that the Right rose against the Republic seals its guilt but, as with Payne's contrasting position, much emphasis is put on the sequence of events and none on the nature of civil conflict. Civil war only breaks out when political differences and social disputes can no longer be addressed by normal means. It is the last resort of societies so riven that every debate becomes a real contention, every difference a marker between intransigent sides.

There are few comparative accounts of the Spanish Civil War. The best of them, Stathis Kalvay's *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars* (Cambridge, 2006), is hard going for readers unfamiliar with academic social science. But he shows that the processes of civil war are deep and ultimately unrelated to a particular sequence of events. Much of the historiography of the Spanish Civil War explains why the conflict erupted on July 18th, 1936 and traces responsibilities back from that. But the rapid political change of the Second Republic had mobilised two opposing, class-based camps that any government would struggle to contain, particularly one with limited fiscal resources. Borrowing the approach of Niall Ferguson's *Virtual History* (Penguin, 2003) and positing a counterfactual or two – What if the Right had won the February elections? What if Nazi aid had failed and the coup been suppressed? – reveals, all the same, the overwhelming likelihood of a Spanish Civil War, albeit at a different time and via a different process.

Mary Vincent is the author of *Spain 1833-2002: People and State* (Oxford University Press, 2007)

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