In Spain today, the civil war triggered three quarters of a century ago is still "the past that has not passed away". When a Spanish judge, Baltasar Garzón, internationally renowned for his championing of human rights, opened an investigation into the conflict's core of extreme extrajudicial violence (in which more than 200,000 people were killed), he was charged with abuse of power. Although Garzón was acquitted this week, the fact both that he was put on trial at all and that judicial investigation into the violence is now blocked leaves unresolved the vehement memory polemics of Spain's civil society, and so renders Paul Preston's monumental, rigorous and unflinching study important and opportune in ways that reach far beyond the purely academic.

Preston is Britain's foremost historian of modern Spain. He acknowledges his debt to those historians inside Spain who over the past three decades, despite huge social and political obstacles, have opened up the facts of this violence through painstaking research in local archives. But Preston's own contribution is a major one, both in tracing the fundamentalist origins of the military coup that unleashed...
the killing and in reconstructing its complex consequences. What the conspirators intended was to crush the social challenge posed by the reforming project of the democratic Second Republic. They and their supporters – whether patrician elites, conservative townsfolk or inland peasantry – saw it as heralding the end of a cherished and familiar world; indeed as the end of "Spain".

From the beginning, Preston "reminds" us that while the conflict in Spain evolved into the "war of two equal sides", as subsequently enshrined in Western consciousness, it began in July 1936 as something very different. It was a military assault on an evolving civil society and democratic regime in the name of the "true nation", in defence of which the rebels were prepared to kill, or "cleanse", as their rhetoric proclaimed. General Queipo de Llano, whose troops laid waste to south-western Spain, called it "the purification of the Spanish people".

Recognising that the initial massive violence was generated by the military rebels themselves remains the biggest taboo of all in democratic Spain's public sphere. Franco's dictatorship has never been delegitimised since his death in 1975, notwithstanding the symbolic measures of recent years. It is this military responsibility, which Garzó* sought unsuccessfully to confront, that lies at the heart of Preston's study. He builds on a lifetime's research into the destruction of democracy in 1930s Spain to show how a military-led coalition against political and social reform triumphed, against the divided and inexperienced centre-left government of the Second Republic.

The conspirators' determination to deploy terror from the start was made clear in the prior orders of the coup's director, General Mola, to "eliminate without scruples or hesitation all who do not think as we do". Their aim was to reverse both the Republic's redistributive policies of land and social reform, and the cultural shift implied in its extension of literacy, co-education and women's rights. But resistance to the rebels in much of urban Spain created such logistical challenges that the coup would likely have failed, had it not been for the provision by Hitler and Mussolini of the aircraft that transported Franco's colonial Army of Africa to mainland Spain. This gifted the rebels the brutal force which effectively rescued the failing coup.

The military rebels now unleashed the mass slaughter of civilians. Preston's book tells the harrowing story of this "cleansing" war of terror as it unfolded across the entirety of Spain's territory. Even in areas where there was no resistance to the coup, the new military authorities presided over an extermination, mainly perpetrated by civilian death squads and vigilantes, of those sectors associated with Republican change. The victims were not only the politically active, or those who had directly benefited from reform, but also those who symbolised cultural transformation: progressive teachers, self-educated workers, "new" women.

As Preston shows, all these sectors were perceived by the army's rebel commanders as akin to insubordinate colonial subjects. His use of "holocaust" in the book's title will rightly spark debate. But Preston's intention is not to equate Spain with the Holocaust. Rather he wishes to effect a category shift in how people think about what actually happened in Spain, in order to suggest parallels and resonances between the cases which allow a deeper understanding of Europe's dark mid-20th century as a whole, and of the mechanisms of human violence itself.

Even in the areas of Spain where the military coup failed, in one crucial respect it "succeeded" fully. There too it unleashed extrajudicial killing which, combined with the killing in the rebel zone, would change Spain's political landscape forever. In Republican territory this killing, which for a time the government was powerless to prevent because the coup had collapsed the instruments of public order, was perpetrated against civilian
The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain, B...

...the regime, buoyed up by the Cold War, then killed all these binary categories for nearly 40 years, through its apartheid policies and an endlessly reiterated discourse of “martyrs and barbarians”. This is what marks Francoism apart – the lasting toxicity of its originating strategy, which still burns the social and political landscape of 21st-century Spain, endlessly reiterated discourse of “martyrs and barbarians”. This is what marks Francoism apart – the lasting toxicity of its originating strategy, which still burns the social and political landscape of 21st-century Spain, a picture that Preston seeks to redress. Preston’s study is history as a public good, a substitute for the truth and reconciliation process that has not taken place in Spain three and a half decades after the dictator’s death.

But, as Preston shows, matching culprits to crimes was not the real point of the exercise. Tens of thousands were tried merely for their political or social alignment with the Republic. As one prosecutor declared: “I do not care, nor do I even want to know, if you are innocent or not of the charges made against you.” This was the Franco regime’s “fatal” moment.

Through its choice of legitimising strategy it mobilised a social base of perpetrators, building on their fears and losses during the war, while, at the same time, it criminalised the Republican population, perpetrating an abuse of human rights on a vast scale.

Worse still, the regime, buoyed up by the Cold War, then kept alive these binary categories for nearly 40 years, through its apartheid policies and an endlessly reiterated discourse of “martyrs and barbarians”. This is what marks Francoism apart – the lasting toxicity of its originating strategy, which still burns the social and political landscape of 21st-century Spain, three and a half decades after the dictator’s death.

That Spain’s public sphere is still shaped by the values and perceptions bequeathed by four decades of Francoism is blindingly evident in the Garzó* case. Inside Spain, the afterlife of violence remains; and with it the need for a democratic coming-to-terms, inherent in which is an openness to the difficult past. Preston’s study is history as a public good, a substitute for the truth and reconciliation process that has not taken place in Spain and an antidote to those who still regard Franco as a good Christian gentleman.

That this remains unfinished business is clearly indicated by the child-trafficking scandal recently exposed in Spain, whose origins stretch back to the dictatorship’s criminal social-engineering policies. The picture is clear: the victimised social groups are the same as those, in 1936, were subjected to the military rebels’ “prophylaxis”.

Preston will be speaking at the ‘Independent’ Bath Literature Festival on Wednesday 7 March (bathlitfest.org.uk)

You may also like these
- Manchester United striker asks to leave - reports (GiveMeSport)
- How to Turn a Photo into a Space-Age Line-Art Masterpiece (Shutterstock)
- Mercedes GLA 45 AMG revealed in Detroit (CarBuyer)
- Popular Songs in a Different Key (Noisey by Vice)

From around the web
- Tribal Communities in South Africa Subject of New, Gorgeous Musical Documentary (Firsts.com)
- Top tips on piano lessons for kids (Roland)
- Johnny Rotten gets honored & clowns Miley Cyrus at the BMI London Awards (Nightlife Television)
- American Rappers are Turning to British Producers (Noisey by Vice)
- Manchester United do not need a top four finish (GiveMeSport)
- Make Your Own Simpsons Avatar (5dollarblog)
- Ofcom should decide on media ownership, say Lords (Evening Standard)

Recommended by
- Corporate Wine Events
  Legendary Corporate Entertainment Events By Jascots - Call Now!
  jascotscorporatewineevents.co.uk
- 9 Best Stocks to Own Now
  Here's a list of recommendations that several top analysts agree on
  www.dailytradealert.com
- We Want to Read Your Book
  Publishing poetry, novels, memoirs, how-to, religious, most genres.
  dorrancepublishing.com

Suggested Topics: Catalonia, Spain, Military, Democracy
  History

0 COMMENT

Post a Comment
  Login

Coca-Cola’s multicultural Super Bowl ad infuriates Twitter users

Angry users claimed that people living in the United States should #SpeakAmerican

How to use the toilet – as explained by the Sochi Winter Olympics

Snowboarder reveals ‘bathroom rules’, including No Fishing

Mourinho credits ‘Scot’ McCulloch for inspiring Blues to victory over City

Thank God that debacle’s over, bring on Sochi

The Jump finale, review: Damp squib sees NONE of original contestants still standing

Arts & Entertainment blogs

Clean Bandit’s live performance of Rather Be
Moderate sales and lots of people at Delhi’s India Art Fair

Friday Book Design
Blog: Faber Fine Press

Don’t miss a beat
Get our weekly email round-up of the best arts and entertainment stories

Independent Travel Shop

5* Halkidiki holiday from £499pp
Find out more

Audleys Wood Hotel, Hampshire from £99pppn
Find out more

Luxury St. Anton ski holiday from £379pp
Find out more

http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-spanish-holocaust... 04/02/2014