

# Research impact: making a difference

## Seeking justice for forgotten victims of the Spanish Civil War

Paul Preston's lifelong research into the causes, course and legacy of the Spanish Civil War has exposed atrocities and helped commemorate and compensate victims

### What was the problem?

In February 1936, the left-wing Republicans narrowly won the Spanish general election. In July, the right-wing army, led by General Francisco Franco, staged a military coup. The country was then embroiled in a civil war in which the rebel forces were supported by Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany while the Republicans were aided by the Soviet Union. Franco eventually declared victory in April 1939 and went on to rule Spain for the next 36 years.

Estimates of between 110,000 to 200,000 people were executed by the Nationalists during the Civil War. It was not until 2008 that the first court hearing into these mass executions was finally opened.

### What did we do?

Over the last two decades, LSE History Professor Paul Preston has published eight key books on the period:

*The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, Revenge* (2006) is an account of the origins and consequences of the Spanish Civil War.

*Juan Carlos. Steering Spain from Dictatorship to Democracy* (2004) is the definitive biography of a king who, despite a Fascist upbringing, steered Spain back towards parliamentary democracy after Franco's death.

*We Saw Spain Die: Foreign Correspondents in the Spanish Civil War* (2008) reconstructs the difficulties faced by foreign journalists during the war.

*Franco: A Biography* (1993) is internationally regarded as the standard work on the Dictator, while *¡Comrades! Portraits from the Spanish Civil War* (1999) and *Doves of War: Four Women of Spain* (London, 2002) are vivid portraits of the main protagonists.

*The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (2012) is a 600-page study which examines the fate of the 200,000 people who were murdered behind the lines during the Spanish Civil War. It was the first book to examine the motives and strategies behind the atrocities conducted by both sides. Preston analysed a massive body of material (trial records, court denunciations, memoirs and interviews with survivors), making a fundamental contribution to the 'memory wars' surrounding Spain's recent past.



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Preston also established a network of local historians across Spain's fifty provinces to help collate and debate a huge secondary literature generated by his research.

*The Last Stalinist. The Life of Santiago Carrillo* (2014) is the biography of a key figure in left-wing Spanish politics who was considered a 'father' of Spanish democracy. Preston's 40-year research established that it was Carrillo's loyalty to Moscow and his countless, ruthless betrayals that ensured his rapid promotion.

## What happened?

Professor Preston is internationally recognised as the leading authority on Franco and the Spanish Civil War.

*The Spanish Holocaust* generated international attention as well as hundreds of articles and reviews. It challenged the pacto de silencio by which the Spanish elite had avoided dealing with Franco's legacy. Preston broke lifelong taboos and *El País* stated that he had finally helped Spain to come to terms with the consequences of political brainwashing. Four and a half thousand readers subscribe to Preston's Facebook page, through which they can share their stories and contribute to the 'memory movement', as well as to personal and collective catharsis.

His books have been translated into 11 languages and *The Spanish Holocaust* was named *Sunday Times History Book of the Year*. Preston was awarded the *Premi d'Honor of the Fundacio Lluís Carulla* and the *Grand Cross of the Order of Isabella the Catholic* from the Spanish Government in recognition of services to Spanish history.

*The Spanish Holocaust* united local historians who had been researching repression since the 1980s and helped them to contextualise violent episodes and reveal a previously hidden reality. Preston also collaborated with non-governmental organisations to seek compensation for the victims of Franco's repression.

Preston's work has stimulated general awareness about the historical origins of contemporary political divisions in Spain. This was particularly powerful in the case of Baltasar Garçon, a judge who was charged with abuse of power for attempting to investigate the crimes of the Franco dictatorship. He was acquitted in 2012 and Preston was invited to contribute an analysis of the trial to *Socialist Lawyer*. He highlighted the continuing influence of the 'pacto de silencio' and the fact that the only trial that had been brought relating to that period was one directed against a judge attempting to investigate right-wing atrocities.

"It will never again be possible to write a history of that period without having read *El holocausto español*".

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Preston has been a frequent speaker at the Hay Festival from where he led a podcast with an audience of one thousand people. He has delivered the BBC Radio 3 *Free Thinking* Lecture as well as many other keynote lectures on the period, including at the British Film Institute (2009) and at *Historical Memory: Policy and Practice* (2010), jointly organised by Memorial Democratic of Barcelona and LSE. He has appeared on numerous UK and Spanish television and radio broadcasts, including *The Brits Who Fought For Spain* on BBC 4 TV (2009) and *The Last of the International Brigadiers* (2011) and *War of Words* (2012) on BBC Radio 4.

*The Spanish Holocaust* has also become a key text in the educational sector. It is on the core reading list for undergraduates and postgraduates studying Spanish History and Politics in at least nine UK universities, as well as across Spain, France and the USA.

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Paul Preston CBE is the Príncipe de Asturias Professor of Contemporary Spanish History at the LSE. He was born in Liverpool in 1946 and has dedicated the bulk of his professional life to writing the history of twentieth century Spain. He has taught at the Universities of Rome, Madrid, Valencia, Reading and London and lectured widely in Europe and America. He is a Fellow of the British Academy and holds the Marcel Proust Chair of the Academia Europea de Yuste.

Among his books are *Franco: A Biography* (1993); *Juan Carlos. A People's King* (2004); *The Spanish Civil War. Reaction, Revolution, Revenge* (2006) *We Saw Spain Die. Foreign Correspondents in the Spanish Civil War* (2008) and *The Spanish Holocaust. Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (2012).

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