

A surrender that ended in slaughter

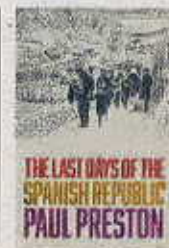
Franco showed no mercy at the end of the Spanish Civil War, says Gerard DeGroot

Wars are messy, their endings even more so. The victor seeks unconditional surrender, the loser a just and honourable peace. Since those goals are usually irreconcilable, slaughter relentlessly continues.

Dr Juan Negrín and Colonel Segismundo Casado, the last two leaders of republican Spain, had incompatible plans for how to end the civil war. On March 5, 1939, Casado toppled Negrín's government to secure an armistice with General Francisco Franco's nationalist forces. Casado assumed that he alone could persuade Franco to grant a peace of mercy rather than one poisoned with revenge. He was wrong. As a result of his folly, tens of thousands of republican supporters were murdered. We do not know if Negrín could have secured a better peace. We do know that Casado was an arrogant, cynical and selfish fool.

Paul Preston's mission in life is to bring clarity to the confusing tragedy of the Spanish Civil War. This is his 12th book on the war or its legacy. This one is written with the same sober lucidity that distinguishes the previous 11; Preston dissects the final days of the Spanish Republic like a forensic surgeon. The story is not particularly entertaining, but it is nevertheless a poignant tale of enduring relevance.

Negrín was not a communist. That fact is important because detractors such as



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by Paul Preston

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Republican soldiers slit their wrists with the jagged lids of their ration tins



MERCILESS VICTORS Franco's soldiers march in a victory parade in Vigo, Spain, in 1939

Casado claimed otherwise to undermine his authority. He was also accused of frequent orgies with prostitutes, and of enjoying gourmet food, vintage champagne and fine Havana cigars. Rumours circulated about how he gorged on tortillas made with 12 eggs and slept with three different women every night. The black propaganda was invented by Negrín's republican allies.

Negrín had a plan. He understood that the war was lost, but insisted that the fighting had to continue to force Franco to negotiate. Abject surrender, he felt, would allow the Caudillo to pursue vindictiveness without restraint. Negrín's main aim was to ensure fair treatment of republican supporters, or at least a safe evacuation.

Franco was indeed intent on retribution. On November 7, 1938, he told James Miller of the United Press: "There will be no mediation because the delinquents and their victims cannot live side by side. We have in our archive more than two million names catalogued with the proof of their crimes." Since Franco had already executed tens of thousands of republicans, there was no reason to believe (as Casado apparently did) that he possessed a merciful side.

Franco played a clever game. He stroked Casado's ego by encouraging him to believe that he alone could negotiate a deal with the nationalists. Casado, writes

Preston, "was happy to pay for Franco's mercy in Communist blood". The communists would be thrown to the wolves while the rest of the republicans would assimilate or seek exile. To encourage support for his coup, Casado spread false assurances about Franco's beneficence.

Casado's evacuation plans were chimerical. Franco intended to use the armistice as he had used the war — as an opportunity to liquidate enemies. He supported Casado's coup since it seemed the best way to rid himself of the obstinate Negrín. Casado, in other words, was Franco's willing collaborator in a sordid campaign of retribution. He did manage to negotiate the evacuation of himself and his closest collaborators, but that paltry agreement is merely testimony to his boundless perfidy.

Was Casado a Machiavellian manipulator or simply a naive man blinded by his own ego? It is difficult to decide given the contradictory signals he sent. One of his collaborators appropriately described Casado as "four-faced". Two-faced, it seems, did not do him justice.

Negrín's plan depended on international co-operation, in particular from the British. Throughout the war, Britain took refuge in cynical non-intervention, turning a blind eye toward fascist support for Franco. Negrín nevertheless hoped that

the British would at least maintain the pretence of neutrality during the final few months of the war.

Neville Chamberlain's government, however, had other plans. The foreign secretary, Lord Halifax, came to the conclusion that: "General Franco was going to win the war, and . . . the sooner this country got on terms with [him] . . . the better." Halifax wanted to be first in line to loan Franco money to rebuild Spain's shattered economy. When the issue of evacuating republican refugees arose, he insisted that the British must first seek Franco's permission. That never came.

Like slow, sadistic torture, Preston's story ploughs relentlessly towards tragedy. The vast majority of republican supporters were eventually abandoned to Franco's wrath. Encouraged by Casado to believe that evacuation plans had been negotiated, republican soldiers left their positions and trudged toward Spain's southern ports. When they discovered that no ships awaited them, many slit their wrists with the jagged lids of their ration tins.

Negrín desperately sought honourable defeat. But honour, the essence of the Spanish soul, was in short supply in 1939. Witness, for instance, the tragedy of Colonel Manuel Cascón Briega of the Republican air force. He had an opportunity to fly to safety, but refused to abandon his men. He decided instead to surrender his aeroplane in perfect condition, in the belief that a gesture of goodwill would encourage benevolence. Francoists responded to Cascón's nobility with trademark infamy. He was stripped of his uniform, forced to clean toilets and then shot.

Perhaps Negrín was always destined to fail. His plan depended on conditions — republican unity, international support, nationalist compromise — that were impossible to secure. In exile after the war, he railed against leaders like himself who had failed to prevent a war and then failed to end it honourably. "The only baptism that can whitewash us is the acknowledgement of our common faults and wrongdoings," he reflected. Casado, in stark contrast, went to his death painting history with lies.

In June 1939, the SS *Sinaia* arrived in the Mexican port of Veracruz with 1,600 refugees escaping Franco's retribution. On the starboard side fluttered a huge banner that read "Negrín tenía razón" (Negrín was right). It is difficult to argue with that conclusion.