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A People Betrayed by Paul Preston, review: this grisly history of Spain is a must-read



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The pain in Spain: Demonstrators protest against General Franco in 1969 CREDIT: ROLLS PRESS/POPPERFOTO

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By **Jonathan Meades**

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The historian whom Sir Paul Preston most recalls is Francisco Goya. In this relentless book, subtitled *A History of Corruption, Political Incompetence and Social Division in Modern Spain*, 1874-2018, year after year, decade after decade, regime after regime, chapter after chapter, atrocity is piled on atrocity: executions, mutilations, assassinations, violent strikebreaking, martial barbarity, state sanctioned “reprisals” for crimes that it had itself committed – all these are presaged in Goya’s *Disasters Of War* prints, which the Spanish artist made in reaction to the Peninsular War of 1808-14 and the French occupation of Spain but may equally be read as a horrible diagnosis of a priest-infested nation which has no appetite for agreeing to disagree or for the practice of compromise. Whatever form of governance it burdens itself with the result will be the same, condensed in the title of Goya’s print of a firing squad and its victims, *And There’s No Cure*.

Nor will there ever be one. Plus ça change and all that. Spain remains, in Preston's view, irremediable. To his subtitular corruption, incompetence and social division might be added repression and political charlatans claiming that they embody the will of the people in order to silence their opponents and justify despotism.

Franco's Nationalists called the bloodbath of 1936-39 the Holy War. The Spanish Civil War is a perhaps inadequate moniker. The unequivocal definite article grants that war a sort of exceptionalism. A Spanish Civil War suggests what Preston implicitly proposes, that Spain, for over half a century before that conflict actually happened, rehearsed for it. Trouble was forever kicking off all over. During the years covered here three prime ministers were assassinated: maybe Spain is on to something.

The narrative begins with restoration of the complicatedly inbred Bourbon monarchy after the brief and chaotic First Republic. The frail 17-year-old Alfonso XII assumed the throne. It's a clever Bourbon that knows his father. Alfonso's was probably a member of his mother's guard. So he was fortunate to escape the gene pool that had diminished to a puddle.

He was, however, not a lucky man. Although he survived two assassination attempts – one by a pastry chef, the other by a cooper, both garrotted – he lost his first wife to typhus and died of dysentery at 27. It is evident that the Spanish monarchy was as politically impotent and as vacuous as the British. The business of bent government and outrageous peculation continued no matter who was on the throne. The two main parties, conservative and liberal, enjoyed a cosy mateyness. They took it in turns to rule.

This turn system was “an exclusive minuet danced by a small privileged minority”. More or less rotten boroughs and de facto hereditary seats abounded. The status quo took advantage of high illiteracy and a dependent, all but enslaved, landless agrarian population. Bread shortages and food riots were commonplace even as the country caught up with its neighbours.



General Franco and his wife, Dona Carmen, Madrid, 1951 CREDIT: WALTER CARONE

Not that the wealth so accrued translated into political muscle. The northern, mainly Atlantic regions which had been the earliest to industrialise – the Basque Country, the Asturias, Galicia, plus Catalonia – militated for secession because they were excluded, unrepresented: of the almost thousand ministers who held office in the half century between the two republics only about 20 were Catalan. The power remained with the latifundistas who ruled vast estates with private militias under the command of stewards like Scottish factors. The military and the church also clung to power and would, of course, side with Franco's Nationalists. The philosopher Miguel de Unamuno who was too internationally famous to execute would describe the Nationalists as “catholic without Christianity... they practise ancient militarised Spanish traditions that are not Christian”.

Spain lost Cuba and was humiliated in Morocco, not least because of King Alfonso XIII's interference. Patience with forever mutating but reliably weak governments grew thin. As is so often the case, a "strong man" was called for. Alfonso, a characteristically dim-witted monarch fond of fast cars and with a tendency to make speeches which were own goals, connived in Miguel Primo de Rivera's coup without realising that it undermined his own position. In an apparent competition to demonstrate lack of self-awareness Primo published a manifesto condemning the very nepotism and favouritism which had enabled his rise. Unamuno decried it as "pornographic" and described Primo as "a pleasure-seeking general of below average intelligence".

Primo was a textbook dictator. He suspended parliament and censored the press. He was laughably mendacious, notably in his promises to Catalonia, whose secessionist parties were banned and whose bilingual street signs were removed. His reign was informed by cronyism and clientelism. He surrounded himself with yes-men. He imposed martial law which, with a change of name, transmuted into a "civilian directory".

A People Betrayed is the work of a very great historian who knows all there is to know about his often sanguinary subject and who, beyond that, can impart his knowledge in swift muscular prose. His bias towards the underdog is humane and tonic. In an interview with another great historian, Ian Kershaw, he suggested that it derived from his lifelong support for Everton Football Club. Well, we all have our mis-hit cross to bear.

Jonathan Meades's *Pedro and Ricky Come Again* will be published in October. *A People Betrayed* is published by William Collins (£30). To order a copy for £25, visit [Telegraph Books](#)