

SPAIN

# A People Betrayed by Paul Preston review — the pain in Spain continues to reign

The country's history is a tale of corruption and violent division, says Isambard Wilkinson

Isambard Wilkinson

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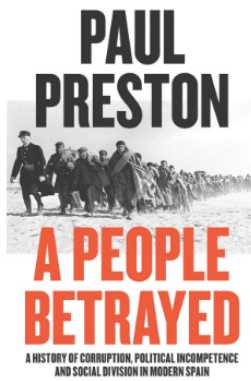
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Paul Preston has written a Spanish history about a period so steeped in assassination, mob violence, civilian bloodshed, corruption and failed governments that about halfway through reading it I wondered if I had the grit to carry on.

I hadn't even reached the civil war of 1936-39, but [General Francisco Franco](#) had just put down a largely unarmed rebellion of Asturian miners with artillery and bombs. Women were raped, prisoners tortured and executed. "This war is a frontier war and its fronts are socialism, communism and any force that attacks civilisation in order to replace it with barbarism," Franco commented of the bloody suppression of the miners in October 1934.

The next line typifies what makes *A People Betrayed* so fascinating. Preston describes how Juan March, a Mallorcan robber baron who had made a fortune exporting food to both sides in the First World War, gave a 100,000-peseta donation to reward the armed forces for their part in the Asturian repression.



March, dubbed the “Sultan of Spain”, embodies the corruption, that, according to Preston’s thesis, along with political incompetence, has created the social division that has blighted Spain from the 19th century to the present, impeding the country’s progression towards liberal democracy.

He pops up like a bad penny in the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, the Second Republic and Franco’s rule, bribing his way out of jail, avoiding arrest dressed as a priest, bankrolling rebels and governments, buying a parliamentary seat or paying off debts run up by Queen Victoria Eugenie with Parisian jewellers. March is also representative of a gallery of rare breeds, including light-fingered prime ministers, fornicating aristocrats and a somnolent dictator, that give life to the narrative of this hefty tome.

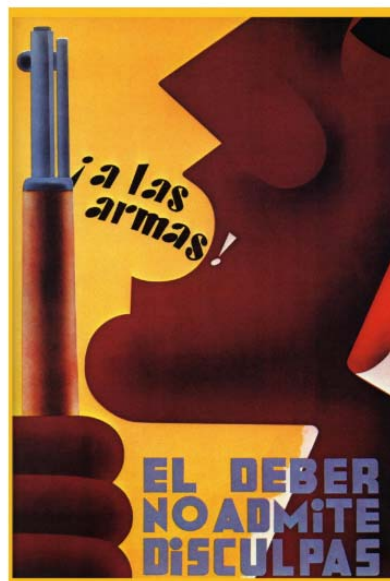
The story begins with a portrait of an impoverished country riven by social inequality, civil strife and coups d’état. [Preston](#), professor of contemporary Spanish history at the LSE, notes that between 1814 and 1981 Spain witnessed more than 25 military coups. The first of four civil wars began in 1833 and the last ended in 1939.

The unrest did not only lead to the rise of a militant left. By the 1830s Spain had lost the bulk of its empire and in the Carlist Wars of that decade and the next the “forces of reaction” — the army, the church and establishment — were on the march. In the 1860s there were fewer than 50,000 priests; at the end of the century, more than 88,000; by 1930 there were 135,000.

Preston, the author of an acclaimed biography of Franco, has a reputation for being pro-left, pro-republican. The clue to the tenor of the work is the title, which belies the fact that many Spaniards did not feel betrayed by a lack of social progress. Still, the book’s depth of research cannot be faulted, and the examples of grand malfeasance and political corruption are extraordinary. For example, after years of turmoil, in 1876 a new constitution was drawn up by the conservative Antonio Cánovas del Castillo, a cultured man who learnt by heart the speeches of Gladstone and Disraeli. It instigated an idiosyncratic form of British democracy, known as the *turno pacífico*, whereby the two main monarchist parties took turns in power, marginalising republican parties.

This sham strengthened the *cacique*, the local strongman, usually a landowner, who had the tax collector, the mayor and the judge in his pocket; such was the vote fixing that there were examples of the *cacique's* favoured deputies being returned to parliament with majorities bigger than the electorate. Flying squads of voters were deployed in Madrid, with one man voting more than 42 times. To deter undesirable voters, voting urns were put in fever hospitals, pigsties or on a high roof.

The *turno*, however, could not stop the spread of anarchist ideas and protests. In 1897 Cánovas, then prime minister, was assassinated by a young anarchist journalist. A wave of bombings and shootings led to mass arrests of anarchists, republicans and freethinkers. Alejandro Lerroux, the editor of *El País*, then a scandal-mongering and left-wing newspaper, came to prominence by exposing the abominable treatment of prisoners in the bleak fortress of Montjuic, “the Spanish Bastille”, in Barcelona. A civil guard officer accused of being a torturer challenged Lerroux to a duel; he refused, but they ended up fighting with walking sticks when they met on the streets of Madrid.



A Republican poster from 1937  
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Lerroux entered politics, becoming prime minister in the 1930s; he was outrageously corrupt and was on March's payroll. As Preston puts it: “A lifetime of shameless corruption reached its peak when, as prime minister in 1935, Lerroux brazenly sponsored a system of fixed roulette wheels.”

Before that the fallout from the loss of Spain's last colonies in 1898 had led to economic crisis, a collapse of morale and repression. Fears over the political influence of the army, which was heavy-handed in dealing with rising Basque and [Catalan nationalism](#) and unpopular because of the use of conscription to fight its north African misadventures, intensified opposition to the ancien regime.

Symptomatic of the desperation of the time, the conservative elder statesman Antonio Maura, whose reforming efforts seem quixotic in the context of Spain's apparent ungovernability, at first welcomed the coup in 1923 of Miguel Primo de Rivera, who saw himself as the "iron surgeon" needed to cure Spain's body politic.

The scion of a large landowning family, Primo, prime minister from 1923 until 1930, was viewed by the middle and upper classes as a bulwark against disorder. He was also "a gargantuan eater, an inveterate gambler, a heavy drinker who loved binges". His semi-official biography stated that "among his loves there have been women of high and low origins".

His sexual appetites caused a scandal when he formed a relationship with La Caoba (the Mahogany), an Andalusian cabaret artist alleged to be a prostitute and drug addict. After a relatively popular start, his dictatorship ended, amid strikes, coup threats and the collapse of the peseta, with his resignation, which led to the Second Republic.

Preston charts the republic's doom and the rise of Franco out of the ashes of the north African campaigns, recording that, besides Nazi German and Fascist Italian support, his flight from semi-exile in the Canary Islands to Morocco and his Africa Army's onward passage to Spain to join the coup that led to [civil war](#), were financed by March.

Preston offers potted histories of the civil war and Franco's 38-year rule until 1975, from its pernicious and economically harebrained origins to its corrupt end, when the ageing siesta-prone *caudillo* could just about lift an eyelid to sign off on garrotting political opponents.

Buried in the narrative lies ample treasure: Franco's brother, Ramón, a famous aviator and republican, in 1930 set off to bomb the royal palace, but aborted after seeing children playing in the gardens; Pablo Picasso's uncle was a general who compiled a key report on a military disaster in north Africa; one of the tutors of the future King Juan Carlos was a member of the extreme right who once plotted a suicide attack on the Spanish parliament with poison gas.

Preston's account takes us through the close-run, coup-endangered transition to democracy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He concludes that the long history of corruption scandals and political incompetence — left, right and monarchical — is the cause for Spain's polarisation and fragmentation today. Perhaps he oversimplifies the reasons for the country's present woes, not giving due weight to wider influences such as the global rise of populism and international economic pressures. Nonetheless, after I had finished reading *A People Betrayed*, I applauded Preston's — and my own — heroic feat.

***A People Betrayed: A History of Corruption, Political Incompetence and Social Division in Modern Spain 1874-2018* by Paul Preston, William Collins, 750pp, £30**