

The Spanish Holocaust by Paul Preston

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In this welcome addition to Spanish Civil War literature, Paul Preston challenges the ‘Pact of Forgetting’ – the Spanish political decision to avoid confronting the legacy of Francoism after Franco’s death in 1975 – and investigates the rhetoric and reality of extermination in Spain during the period 1931-38. Preston is Director of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the London School of Economics; he has previously published the definitive biography of General Francisco Franco, and has won the prestigious History Prize of Catalonia for *The Spanish Holocaust*. Alongside extensive detailing of the campaigns of the opposing Republican and Rebel armies, Preston devotes attention to the savagery committed against civilians, including sexual violence, torture, and mass executions. Moving beyond a standard chronological account, the author examines the theme of extermination in the Spanish Civil War through racial, religious, colonialist, and gendered lenses. Supplementing Preston’s examination are personal histories of individuals from both sides of the conflict, providing the reader with a comprehensive account of the origins of prejudices and the escalation of institutionalised and spontaneous violence in the Rebel and Republican zones, respectively.

The Spanish Holocaust recounts the story of the deliberate murder of men, women and children during the Spanish Civil War – which includes the approximately 200,000 extra-judiciously executed during the July 1936 coup, the 20,000 Republicans executed in 1939 after Franco’s victory, and the half-million refugees forced into exile and concentration camps. Preston structures *The Spanish Holocaust* into six parts, each investigating the suffering of the Spanish people during the Civil War during different stages of the conflict. In part one, he establishes the sources of class and racial divides

with a particular focus on the hostility between the Spanish working and landowning classes and the characterisation of the rural proletariat as an example of racial degeneration (p.22). Preston also argues that the transferring of racial prejudices from colonial Morocco to the Spanish Left by veterans of the Spanish-Moroccan War – by the Army of Africa, in particular – escalated the objective not only for victory but also for the annihilation of the enemy by rightists during the Civil War (p.34). Preston's strongest argument arises when he contrasts the nature of the violent acts committed by Rebels and by Republicans in the 1936 coup. By closely recounting, day by day, the campaigns of two Rebel generals – Gonzalo Queipo de Llano in the South and Emilio Mola in the North – the author exposes what he refers to as the ‘institutionalized’ violent suppression against working-class resistance (p.128). Conversely, the violence enacted by Republicans, he argues, was spontaneous – a mob mentality in reaction to the Rebels’ organised brutality; the chapter’s title, ‘The Consequence of the Coup,’ makes this position transparent. Part four details the events of the Siege of Madrid, and then focuses on the rivalries within the Republican faction. Preston then recounts Franco’s ‘slow war of annihilation’ and his ‘investment in terror’ in part five (p.383). The concluding chapter looks at the continuation of violence after the war with the trials, executions, and imprisonment of Republicans, Socialists, Communists, and Anarchists. Accompanying Preston’s text are sixteen pages of contemporary photographs and excavation sketches, a fifteen-page appendix that features maps charting the division of Spain and areas of repression, and a useful glossary explaining the dominant political organisations during the war.

A large portion of this monograph examines the Spanish Civil War through a unique lens – through the violent acts committed off the field of battle. Specifically, the author explores the experiences of Republican women and the discourse and reality of sexual violence during the conflict. Preston reproduces Queipo’s speeches, which advocate the rape of working-class women by Rebel soldiers ‘so that they might make the acquaintance of real men’ (p.149). He also details the financial and psychological hardships faced by the families of Republican soldiers. Women whose husbands ‘disappeared’ were not provided with death certificates, which prevented them from remarrying, and since they were not legally widows they had no right to administer any

property owned by their husband. If a woman's husband was imprisoned, the burden fell on her to pay for his food, laundry, and other provisions. Oftentimes, innocent family members were executed as substitutions when Republican soldiers could not be found (p.207). Also an under-investigated angle in accounts of the Spanish Civil War, Preston outlines the derogatory homosexual rhetoric employed by Rebel leaders to characterise their Republican opponents. Queipo's speeches, for instance, portray the Republican soldier as a 'queer' or 'pervert' (p.149). Later, Juan Luis Trescastro Medina admitted to murdering the poet Federico García Lorca 'for being a queer' and humanist Amelia Agustina González Blanco 'for being a whore' (p.173-74). This area of focus sets this publication apart from other Spanish Civil War studies that fail to examine the assaults committed against civilians at the local level.

In an original contribution to the literature, Preston's account of the Spanish Civil War endeavours to situate violence committed against the Spanish people as acts of genocide. *The Spanish Holocaust* has received criticism for its title. Specifically, critics accuse the author of sensationalism, given that the word 'holocaust' has become synonymous with the genocide of European Jews in the twentieth century, which was greater in scale and in its level of institutionalisation than the atrocities that took place in Spain (Treglown 2012). Defending his decision to employ the word 'holocaust,' Preston effectively argues that the Rebels' 'war effort was built on a prior plan of systematic mass murder,' and that this reality has been largely overlooked in extant publications (p.xii). Preston makes a detailed claim for the exterminatory nature of both the rhetoric and actions of the Rebels during the Spanish conflict by such figures as General Gonzalo Queipo de Llano, General Emilio Mola, and Franco himself. While Preston's sympathies clearly lie with the Republicans, this does not prevent him from detailing the acts of vandalism and arson committed by this group. He also describes the Republicans' carrying out of sexual torture and murder of members the clergy without bias.

In *The Spanish Holocaust*, Preston dares to explore details of a period of Spanish history that have been hitherto ignored and the voices that have been silenced – literally, under the 'Pact of Forgetting'. He provides his readers with an engaging, comprehensive, and meticulously researched account of the reality of extermination during the Spanish Civil War. While the text will undoubtedly appeal to experts in the field of Spanish

history, *The Spanish Holocaust's* wide scope and attention to detail establishes it as an excellent resource for any academic study of the Spanish Civil War, its antecedents, and its aftermath.

Bibliography

Treglown, Jeremy. 2012. The Spanish Holocaust by Paul Preston: review. In *The Telegraph* (28 February 2012) <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/historybookreviews/9103580/The-Spanish-Holocaust-by-Paul-Preston-review.html>>.