

**Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*,
W.W.Norton & Company, New York, 2012.**

Reviewed by Darryl Anthony Burrowes

The prolific Hispanist, Paul Preston, has deliberately chosen a provocative title for his latest book, *The Spanish Holocaust*.¹ Preston first started work on the book in 1999, in an attempt ‘to show as far as possible what happened to civilians and why’, during the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939) and in the years afterwards (p.xi). As if the use of the word ‘holocaust’ in the main title of the book is not contentious enough, Preston compounds controversy by using the words ‘inquisition and extermination’ in the subtitle. This was a painstaking decision by the author who ‘thought long and hard about the title’ (p. xi). He feels strongly the need to present the reality of Francoism to a public both inside and outside Spain that still, thirty-seven years after Franco’s death, holds mythical representations spawned by Cold War politics; that General Franco was a ‘soft’ dictator unlike Hitler and Mussolini; that he ‘masterminded Spain’s economic “miracle” in the 1960s and that he heroically kept his country out of the Second World War’ (p.xii). Such myths emanated from Francoist image-makers but were disseminated over the years by a compliant western media that accepted Franco’s rebranding after the Second World War as the *centinela de occidente* (protector of the West)² rather than pro-Axis sympathizer. Franco was reincarnated, if not exactly as a ‘good guy’, but as a harmless and stable bulwark in the fight against an expansionist Soviet Russia. This is an image that is anathema to Professor Preston, who has always made it clear to

his readers where he stands vis-à-vis Franco. One of his early books is dedicated ‘to the memory of David Marshall and to the other men and women of the International Brigades who fought and died fighting fascism in Spain’,³ and in the acknowledgements to his 1993 biography, *Franco*, he writes, ‘For many years, my wife Gabrielle put up with the presence in our home of an uncongenial uninvited guest in the person of Francisco Franco.’⁴ This latest addition to the Preston corpus has an agenda to destroy the ‘soft’ dictator image by recounting case after case of heinous murders perpetrated in Franco Spain.

Whether the title is appropriate in the Spanish context is debatable. The word holocaust is somewhat problematic and has experienced several linguistic shifts. For years it was used to describe violent death, often involving fire, of large numbers of people. In the early twentieth-century it was applied to great massacres with a genocidal intent, such as the Armenian genocide. However, from the mid twentieth-century onwards it has commonly and uniquely been associated with the Nazi genocide of six million Jews. During the Cold War the phrase ‘nuclear holocaust’ was coined, without any reference to genocidal intent, to describe a future conflagration scenario. The one common element to all usage of the word is large scale slaughter, although what qualifies as large scale is a relative concept in itself.

The Spanish death statistics are on a scale considerably smaller than the Jewish holocaust in Europe. Preston writes ‘200,000 men and women were murdered extra-judicially or executed after flimsy legal process’ (p.i). He believes that the same number of men were killed on the various Spanish battle fronts and he adds that another 20,000 Republicans were executed after

the official ending of the war. His reckoning of the death count is further increased, although he doesn't give any actual figures. He writes: 'Unknown numbers of men, women and children were killed in bombing attacks' and more died 'of disease and malnutrition in overcrowded, unhygienic prisons and concentration camps' (p.i) and others died because of the slave-labour conditions of the regime's work battalions and also as a result of being forced into exile and ending up in French and Nazi concentration camps. Like many other conflicts, it is of course impossible to be definitive with Spanish Civil War death statistics. Records are hard to come by and many were 'lost' or destroyed either inadvertently or intentionally and many deaths were probably never recorded.

Preston's rationale for a 'Spanish Holocaust' however, rests not so much on the scale of the slaughter, but on the premeditated, systematic and genocidal way the Francoists carried it out. In the first chapters he traces the roots to the sporadic 'class' violence of the late nineteenth century which became more demonstrative and unrestrained during the years of the *Dictadura* of General Miguel Primo de Rivera (1923-30). A culture of violence gradually became 'legitimized'. Right-wing organisations such as Unión Patriótica and Acción Popular 'attacked' groups that they considered to be 'anti-Spain' for advocating fundamental and progressive, but not necessarily a revolutionary, overhaul of Spain's obsolete social and economic structure. With the advent of the Second Spanish Republic in 1931 the opposition to the left became more vocal. A concerted hate campaign of vile rhetoric was mobilized at levels resembling the Nazis in Germany. Republicans were represented as 'sub-human' who like 'pestilent vermin' needed to be 'eliminated'. José Monge Bernal of the right-wing party, Acción Popular, described

Republicans as ‘dregs of society’ coming from ‘sewers’ who ‘inundated’ the streets and squares ‘convulsing and shuddering like epileptics’ (p.14). This irrational rhetoric became transformed into a ‘rationalized’ dogma in which the left were portrayed as a disease that required a crusade of national purification. The myth of the ‘Jewish-Masonic-Bolshevik’ international conspiracy gained currency in the right-wing press, and was embraced by the *latifundistas* (large landowners), Catholic hierarchy and military officers alike, whose entrenched powers were threatened by a reforming Republic. Liberals and the left-wing were portrayed as racial inferiors and the Republic and its supporters were represented in the same vein as Spain’s two archetypal others – the Jew and the Moor. Acts of violence against the Spanish working class became patriotic and legitimate acts of national survival.

In many ways this is a work of scholarship at its finest. Preston includes 119 pages of footnotes, the majority of which cite three or more references. However, presumably in the interest of balance, Preston describes the slaughter and atrocities that took place at the hands of the Republicans. Such discussion is important but it is problematic in the context of the title of this book. The slaughter carried out by the rebels was three times greater than that committed by Republicans. Furthermore, Preston points out that Republican violence was spontaneous and happened in response to the rebel coup. The Republican leaders were disgusted and ashamed by the violence and sought to bring it under control (p.384). This is a significant difference between the two sides and should enable Preston to exclude ‘Republican’ atrocities from being labelled in a book as part of a holocaust.

Preston makes a strong case for labelling the rebel atrocities as a holocaust. The rebel leadership encouraged and used violence in order to annihilate a class enemy and developed a philosophical – ideological basis derived from a patchwork of right-wing theorists to justify this end. He also reveals the ‘industrial scale’ of the Francoist slaughter and persecution by describing the military court system that was set up during the war and that ‘intensified’ in activity after the war (p.476). Such measures certainly mirror the process that took place in Nazi Germany.

Preston draws a portrait of a Franco who believed in the fundamental tenets of hate ideology and who is committed to implementing it in his actions without constraint. For Franco a bloody resolution to left-wing unrest was the best resolution and Preston relates how Franco never forgave General Domingo Batet for negotiating a peaceful solution to the Catalan leader, Lluís Companys’ 1934 declaration of Catalan independence instead of making a bloody example of the Catalans (p.81).

The Spanish Holocaust is not published by an academic imprint but by mainstream publishers Harper Press in the United Kingdom and W.W. Norton in the United States at a price point that in theory should make it accessible to a more general readership. However, I suspect this will not happen, not because of any dryness of style or of the intensity of the subject matter, as readability and academic rigor are two basic hallmarks of writing that Preston holds dear, but simply because it is a work of 700 pages.

¹ There are now fifteen major works in the Preston corpus.

² This phrase was used by the Franco apologist, Luis de Galinsoga for his book, *Centinela de Occidente: Semblanza biografica de Francisco Franco*, that was published in 1956 at the height of the Cold War.

³ P. Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*, W.W. Norton, New York, 2007. David Marshall was born in Middlesbrough in 1916 and went to Spain as a member of the International Brigades in September 1936. He saw action at Albercete and in the defence of Madrid. He was shot in the ankle, repatriated to England and campaigned for aid for the Republic.

⁴ P. Preston, *Franco: A Biography*, Basic Books, New York, 1994.