

Review*The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*, By Paul Preston

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Preston's book focuses upon the two decades in Spain from roughly 1930 to 1950, which saw well over a million men, women, and children, killed – many of them deliberately murdered by death squads. It is a sobering read. It forces you to reflect on what is happening right now in Syria and Libya; and cautions all those of us who have ever hoped or worked for revolutionary upheavals anywhere in the world at any time.

Preston's achievement is to describe the charnel house that Spain became in a way that reveals the nature and extent of the visceral hatreds that shaped Spanish society in the course of class war and numberless massacres. He details a situation in which it became the deliberate and stated policy of one side literally to exterminate the other.

In south and south-western areas of Spain social life was dominated by large estates worked by landless labourers. In the twenties and thirties of the last century it remained a semi-feudal society in which the landlords, their bailiffs and stewards, worked with the Civil Guard and parish priests, to ensure that peasants remained docile and compliant. In the north, small and medium sized farmers, shared a similar suspicion and fear of landless labourers. The whole society, both north and south, was held together by the imposition of the traditionalist values of an ultramontane church, and a military caste with deep roots amongst big landowners, farmers, and professional people of all kinds. Consequently, the innovations of trade unionism, anarchism, socialism, and republican politics, from the beginning of the twentieth century among peasants and town workers, were widely

feared as sources of instability by anybody that owned a bit of land or a business, however small.

The well heeled saw all attempts to narrow the power of the Church, or to raise the wages of labourers, as a direct threat, in which their ownership of property was placed in immediate jeopardy. Strikes were widely regarded as acts of gross insubordination, exhibiting an unnerving contempt among the lower orders for their betters, and even as insurrections against lawful authority. Similarly, all schemes that aimed at land reform were regarded as nothing less than confiscation; attempts to guarantee employment or to raise the wages of workers or peasants were intrusions upon the God-given rights of Spain's 'civilised classes'.

After years in which there was widespread repression of peasants, miners, and industrial workers, years in which the army, police, and even artillery, was deployed against strikers, these tensions came to a head. In the middle of July 1936 right wing army officers rose in revolt against the elected government and proceeded to wage war against the Republic, which they had sworn to defend. Styling themselves as "Nationalists" the rebels bizarrely accused all those who defended the elected and lawful government of the country of mutiny and rebellion against "Catholic Spain". In order to provide a spurious legality to their criminal enterprise the rebels established a military dictatorship, and declared "martial law" on 28th July 1936.

In large areas of Spain the military rebels were quickly defeated, but the criminals rapidly established themselves in a number of provinces in south-western and north-western parts of the country – enough places at any rate from which to commence their war against the Spanish Republic. Under the impact of these events the state and the authority of the lawful government collapsed; the left-republicans, socialists, and anarchists, filled the vacuum, and within a matter of days, were rousing the population to the defence of the Republic. In all the cities, towns and villages in which the military rebels were defeated, popular defence committees were established by left-republican mayors or by anarchist or socialist trade unions and political parties. Under the

authority of these committees militias were hastily organised and whatever arms could be found were handed out and defensive arrangements put in place.

Among the first measures taken almost everywhere was the arrest and imprisonment of the local landowners, disloyal army officers, bigwigs, and priests. Everybody, who was suspected of siding with the fascists, with the church, or the military insurgents, was rounded up and imprisoned. Then, in retaliation for deaths caused by rebel bombing, or in response to reports by refugees of terrible atrocities committed by the rebels, demands for the execution of prisoners came thick and fast. In some towns and villages the committees were able to defend the local right wing prisoners, but in other areas the local young socialists, the anarchists, or communists, got their own way, and prisoners were removed in batches from prisons or the basements of town halls where they'd been held, and were killed by the dozen. Sometimes there was the semblance of legal process, but more often than not the local landowners, priests, businessmen, or people known to sympathise with the rebels were simply murdered by militiamen at the crack of dawn.

These were popular crimes. It was extremely difficult for the Republican authorities to control or to stop the slaughter. In larger towns, great crowds would assemble outside prisons following rebel air raids demanding blood, and these crowds, assisted by armed militiamen, at times succeeded in killing dozens, and in some incidents, hundreds of right wing prisoners, many of whom were entirely innocent of taking any action at all against the Republic. Anarchists, young socialists, and communists, even formed death squads which set out across the countryside in cars, trucks, and charabancs, in search of priests and other 'class enemies' to murder, and on occasions, these 'enemies' might even include small farmers who resisted anarchist proclamations of "libertarian communism", because they had no intention of standing idly by while their farms, animals, and tools, were seized by landless labourers for the 'common good'.

In November 1936 as the war went against the Republic, the Government was evacuated from Madrid to Valencia; control of Madrid's police and prisons passed to the Communist Party, while the roads out of the city that remained open were in the hands of the anarchists. The communists were able to merge most of the secret prisons run by various militia and political parties in the city, which were dedicated to the capture and murder of anybody suspected of rebel sympathies, into a single security apparatus. As rebel troops tightened their grip, digging-in less than two hundred meters from Madrid's main prison, the communist authorities feared that they might lose control of the situation; they were particularly scared by the idea that imprisoned army officers would stage mass breakouts. Consequently, on the 6th and 7th of November they began the evacuation of fascist and rebel prisoners, and those who, by virtue of their social position or connections, were considered unreliable. They were marked down for "definitive evacuation" or "release". Over a period of weeks, roped together in twos, deprived of all their personal possessions, the prisoners were transported in convoys of buses and trucks through the anarchist lines to various villages on the outskirts of the city, where they were murdered and their bodies dumped in hastily dug pits or disused drainage ditches.

These horrors, however, paled before those committed by the rebels, who thinking of themselves as warriors engaged in a Holy War against a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy, pursued a deliberate policy of extermination of all Republicans in every city, town, and village, which they occupied. There was no question of extra-judicial killings being prompted by military danger, by more or less spontaneous revenge, or as the result of political disorder or tumult, as they were on the Republican side. On the contrary, the rebel forces under the command of General Franco deliberately carried out a programme of terror wherever they took control. They murdered liberal schoolteachers, judges, Republican mayors and officials, and all the members of trade unions or left wing parties they could lay their hands on. The rape and murder of Republican women was routine and was even celebrated

in rebel wireless programmes. Republican women were often force-fed castor oil, and with their heads' shaved, they were paraded, incontinent, through the streets. Republican militiamen and soldiers were immediately shot on capture – until the collapse of the Republican lines at the end of the war in March 1939 large numbers of prisoners were not taken by Franco's forces – the wholesale killing of prisoners was policy, it was routine. In many places literally thousands of people were murdered in bullrings and other places of detention – the killings often taking days, if not weeks.

Preston argues that at key points in the war Franco refused to pursue strictly military objectives in preference for ensuring that captured territories were exposed to the process of “social cleansing” by firing squad; Franco was prepared to move slowly in order to ensure that in each area taken all traces of Republican influence was exterminated. Indeed a vast archive of card indexes was established in Salamanca on which were held the names and details of members of political parties, trade unions, and masonic lodges, which enabled the rebels remorselessly to track down and murder literally tens of thousands of Republicans.

In March 1939, as the Republican government finally collapsed about a million people fled the country. 20,000 wounded Republican soldiers, stranded in Barcelona, were abandoned to their fate, as 400,000 of the city's inhabitants, strafed and bombed, trekked north towards the frontier. Large numbers were interned in camps in France, and when a year later the Nazis entered France, many of the Spanish refugees found themselves transported to concentration camps, where thousands of males over the age of 13 were immediately exterminated. Many women and children were packed into cattle trucks and returned to Spain where Franco imprisoned the women and put their kids in orphanages run by the Roman Catholic Church in order to ensure that any Republican nonsense about democracy or free thought they might have picked up from their parents was knocked out of them by the Christian Brothers or the Daughters of Jesus.

By 1940 Franco's victory was complete, yet the policy of terror and repression was continued. Out of 15,860 public

servants in Catalonia when the rebels took control 15,107 were dismissed. In the years between the end of the war in April 1939, and the lifting of martial law in 1948, 20,000 Republicans were executed by Franco's dictatorship. Without considering the uncounted people lost in air raids, those who died on the roads – from exhaustion or machined gunned from the air, or those who perished from malnutrition, disease, or summary execution in prisons and labour camps, some 200,000 people were killed in battle; a further 200,000 were murdered behind the lines, and untold numbers perished at the hands of the Vichy French and the Nazis.

Preston's patient and detailed account of this vast tragedy reveals clearly what happens when a social order collapses. Revolutions do not happen because some group of individuals want them, or campaign for them; they are not the product of voluntarism or intention. On the contrary they emerge gradually, gathering pace as an unstable and unsustainable social order disintegrates, and is replaced by a new set of arrangements. In Spain these new arrangements rested upon the extermination of an entire generation of Republicans, and the imposition of the dictatorship of General Franco that lasted until the late 1970s, when the conditions for a stable bourgeois democracy, which had grown up under the carapace of authoritarian rule, finally emerged.

What Preston has achieved with this book is the recovery of the thoroughly anti-Semitic character of the rebels, and the active complicity of the Catholic Church; most importantly he has recovered the genocidal character of rebel policy throughout the war and its aftermath – the Republicans were treated as a dangerous and distinct *ethnic* group, rather than as a multitude of different people sharing a political outlook and a range of different allegiances and affiliations. They were regarded as a homogenous cultural and social entity – a pestilential *ethnicity* ripe for extermination – entirely distinct from authentic Spaniards. Leading churchmen and parish priests advocated repression and openly supported killings by the bushel. On occasions gun-

toting priests murdered prisoners, while it was more usual for them to restrict their participation to the grotesque scenes re-enacted in countless village squares and cemeteries throughout the country where they listened to the confessions of those about to be killed. Republicans were the agents of the Jewish-Marxist-Masonic conspiracy; they were not deserving of Christian charity or forgiveness, and redemption was possible only through punishment and death. Republicans were declared not to be Spanish, which is literally what Franco told the Nazis concerning Republican refugees in France – he simply insisted that the Reds were stateless.

At times Preston loses his way in the mass of detail, and has, perhaps spent too much space and energy, in attempting to arraign Santiago Carrillo, the leader of the Spanish Communist Party, with the murder of more than 2,000 rebel prisoners held in Madrid's prisons in November 1936. He fails, in any event, to definitively nail the culprit because no hard evidence is found to exist – its all circumstantial – instead Preston tangles the reader up in a bewildering array of aliases and code words employed by Soviet security agents and their Spanish comrades in diary entries and minutes of dubious provenance to little purpose, other than to leave us with the clear impression that Preston is not a fan of the communists and anarchists, involved in what was undoubtedly a terrible crime. However, despite the weakness of Republican institutions, and the sinister violence of the revolutionary organizations, Preston firmly rejects any equivalence, moral or otherwise, between those fighting for the Spanish Republic and the so-called “Nationalists”. Preston is in no doubt that the rebels, as he insists on calling the Francoists, were the principal authors of the Spanish Holocaust.