

The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain

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Paul Preston is a renowned historian, and is considered one of the world's leading experts on 20th-century Spanish history. His book on the genocidal actions taken against Spanish civilians between 1936 and 1945 is an important resource that has changed historiography on the period. From the perceived failures of the elected government to the rise of Francisco Franco and his subsequent authoritative takeover of Spain (that lasted 41 years), his book covers these events in painstaking detail. The ensuing, bloody civil war led to the death of hundreds of thousands, and the author carefully detailed every aspect of how the murders unfolded. Repression occurred on both sides, and Preston carefully laid out the origins of extermination in Spain, from the legacy of the *Africanistas*, to emerging genocidal rhetoric to finally murder on a massive scale. He has written a text that is masterly and authoritative in scope, seeking to place the extermination of the Spanish during this period in analysis of genocide. He quite evenly, detailed the crimes against humanity of both the left and the right as well as the subsequent concealment of the same. The radical rightists, the army, and even citizen mobs carried out mass acts of genocide against civilians who had been categorized, dehumanized, and purposely targeted for death. Preston, who in March 2012 speaking at the Embassy of Spain in London, argued that the Francoists, like Francisco Franco and other military – and civilian – conspirators killed more Spanish than the Nazis killed Germans.⁽¹⁾ Preston begins the text with a prologue that defends his use of the word holocaust in the title of the book, a decision, and his intent with selecting the word, will be discussed later in this review.

The book, constructed in six parts, begins with a chronological examination of how 'between 1918 and

1921, a period of bitter social conflict' (p. 3) set up the events of 1936 and 1945, that saw the murder of thousands of people. Franco, and many others, were *Africanistas*. These *Africanistas* were veterans of the Spanish colonial wars in North Africa. Like Franco, some were referred to as Bridegrooms of Death because of their extreme nationalistic belief that they should stop at nothing to free Spain from the degradation caused by modernists and others, even if this meant genocide. Preston attempts to argue that these events were, in part, a response to 20th-century modernity coupled with anti-Semitic, anti-Masonic, anti-Communist, anti-decadency propaganda, and combined with additional propagandist constructs that saw other groups defined as an antagonistic threat, and therefore as an enemy to be exterminated. Few groups were left untouched, from across a broad socio-economic range. Farm-workers were depicted as subhuman, but so were some university professors. Indeed, the Francoists saw modernity as a threat, and those who defended it were put to death in barbaric ways.

Parts one and two continue to explain how historical precedent set the stage for later events, the societal upheavals, exterminationist policies, and later genocidal acts that defined so many of the actions of the radical right in their quest to destroy any defined enemy of the Spanish fatherland. The first two parts of the book explain how conflicts emerge in Spain before the Civil War, and also consider how societal upheavals as well as differing – sometimes extremist – political ideologies set the stage for genocidal acts against the citizenry once the Francoists came to power. Preston's careful chronological analysis of what preceded genocide is important and presents a complete picture of what predated Franco, what set precedent for the perpetrators, and why genocide eventually unfolded. Painstaking in detail, both major and minor figures are included in this analysis, as Preston is careful to explain that both sides, the left and the right, committed barbaric acts. Repression emerged after the military collapse, with criminality prevalent, and who were encouraged to act against a predefined enemy. Thus, he argues that the rightists had intent, which was planned out (although to be careful in considering this context, many actions were sporadic and led by mobs, without any central plan issued), and prepared for some time before the murders were carried out. The militia rebels had a deliberate plan of extermination that emerged after the coup.

As the book unfolded, we learn about adolescent killing squads (p. 202) and other horrors perpetrated against the populace. Even religious figures were fined, abused, and/or imprisoned for questioning the actions of the regime, and soon thousands of clergy would be killed. Resistance seemed futile, as no one was untouched by these horrors. Perhaps more on bystanders, resisters, and upstanders could have been included; surely there were more than the book suggested? Evacuations of citizens as well as media condemnation of the atrocities did occur, and certainly, the world media covered what was happening to the populace. People were tortured by being 'forced to drink castor oil and beaten' (p. 202). Children were often killed while their parents were forced to watch in order to increase psychological suffering. The horrors continue to be detailed by Preston through every single part of the book. Part three addresses the aftermath of the coup and the momentous increase in genocide against citizens. The final three parts, from the autumn of 1936 on, address the increasing campaign of terror from Madrid, to Talavera de la Reina, to years past the end of the Second World War. Were the actions of the killers a central act of state? Preston argued that yes, some acts were part of centralized orders from the authorities, but early on, pogroms were led by the mobs. The explanation for the terror enacted against thousand and thousands of citizens is detailed exhaustively throughout the latter half of the text, while placing the acts in a construct that explains the events surrounding the abuses and murders.

Throughout the book, Preston attempts to set the actions of the Francoists and the militia in a genocidal context. Further, as mentioned, he begins the text with an explanation as to why he chose the word holocaust to describe what happened in Spain between 1936 and 1945. Arguing that the Spanish extermination had 'anti-Semitic rhetoric' (p. xi) he seeks to place the events that saw the extermination of hundreds of thousands of Spanish citizens in a larger, yet relative construct to the Nazi Holocaust. Should the word genocide have been used instead? One feels that had Preston made this decision, criticism about the work itself would not focus so heavily on his use of the word holocaust.

The narrative topics are controversial, and debate among reviewers is still ongoing as to the specificity of crimes against humanity in this period, crimes that Preston has so thoroughly made a case for. One issue

centered on the very emotive word holocaust in the title of the book. Scholars may disagree with Preston's intent with the use of the word holocaust; however, it remains an undeniable fact that thousands of Spanish citizens died in Nazi camps, placing these victims in the larger Nazi Holocaust construct. What about the other victims who died not by the hands of the Nazis and their non-Spanish collaborators? Indisputably, they were also victims of genocide. Why the connections beyond the Nazi Spanish victims? There are parallels that are undeniable; in 1933, after the Nazi concentration camp Dachau was opened, Juan Tusquets Terrats, a priest and later collaborator of Franco, a vehement anti-Masonist and anti-Semite, was invited to tour the camp, later remarking that 'they [Nazis] did it [issue the invitation] to show what we had to do in Spain' (p. 36). Spanish refugees died in several Nazi camps, including Mauthausen, where 'about 60 per cent of the Spanish Republicans who died in German camps perished' (p. 516). Conversely, Franco allowed Jews to enter Spain as a passageway out of Europe, and other Francoists saved Jews, especially in 1944, when some Hungarian Jews were given refuge. Using the word holocaust to describe what happened in Spain could be argued as perhaps somewhat problematic, in that because it is, again, an emotive word, the usage detracts from Preston's line of reasoning, which was to present what happened to hundreds of thousands of people as genocide.

Genocide, using Preston's text and research as reference, was committed and this fact was indisputable. Preston was careful to state that in no way did he mean to equate the Nazi Holocaust with what happened in Spain; simply, he used the word to make a case for comparative analysis. Preston has argued that he does not need to defend the use of holocaust, and has explained that he viewed it [holocaust] as having had myriad historical constructs; consequently, in the aforementioned 2012 speaking engagement he himself explained that his purposeful use of the word holocaust was meant to shock. Even so, Preston's narrative suggested that there were indeed deeper connections to the Nazis than previously understood. Therefore, his argument supports additional investigation.

From 1936–39, rhetoric against the targeted Spanish citizens included conflation with anti-Semitism; further, language used included such as the need for extermination because of a regimental constructed connection with not only Judaism, but Bolshevism as well. Having not been previously placed in the category of the millions of non-Jewish other victims targeted by the Nazi regime and their collaborators Preston's argument for the placement of the victims within the context of genocide indeed needs further extrapolation. He has argued that the usage of the word holocaust was not used to identify actions against Jews until the Nazi Holocaust. That is simply not correct. One of the first recorded usages of the word holocaust to describe actions against the Jews occurred in 1189 by a court chronicler of Richard I. Was the word holocaust used in other ways to describe events that did not include Nazi victims? Yes, but in the second half of the 20th century, and until today, it has been used historically in the context of the Nazi Holocaust. In a 29 June 2010 article in the *Los Angeles Times*, Marvin Hier argued that the use of the word in any other context is incorrect, as 'The Holocaust had one purpose: the total annihilation and extinction of a race' whereas the events in Spain did not have this outcome.⁽²⁾ Why did Preston then make the decision to use the word? Surely he understood that many would take umbrage with it. Using the word seemingly suggested that the author wanted to conflate Franco with Hitler, and vice-versa; therefore, did the actions of both equal the other's deeds? Anyway, conflating the two men and their regimes remains difficult, as it is factually incorrect to suggest this, and although Preston does not do so general readers could be left with this impression. Doing so presents an enormous problem and could potentially dissuade readers from approaching Preston's authoritative work, which asserts that looking more closely at the crimes of the right could possibly place these events in a larger construct which includes the crimes of the Nazis. The widespread use of anti-Semitism was one such argument that Preston made for considering his thesis.

Because anti-Semitism was prevalent, and used in propaganda to classify who was the 'enemy', was it correct to then suggest that the Francoist form of anti-Semitism be examined alongside that of Nazi-constructed anti-Semitism? The Nazis had a clear goal of *Endlösung* or Final Solution to the Jewish Question, and six million Jews (and five million others) were killed by them. The Nazis had an explicit intent: kill every single Jew in the world. The Nazis, for total annihilation, specifically targeted the Jews, and this was not what happened in Spain. Can what happened in Spain be classified as genocide? Preston argues

that yes it must, but clearly stated that he did not mean to equate the Nazi Holocaust and Spanish genocide. He chose to use the term holocaust so that discussion in a 'comparative context' can occur (p. xii). However, although the text implies that the goal of the perpetrators was to exterminate the entire left – of which the targets included various groups, from feminists to vegetarians (p. 37) to 'Socialists, trade unionists, Republican officials and schoolteachers' (p. 204) – this is not borne out by the time the book reaches its conclusion. More is needed on other civil wars of the late 19th and early 20th century, as well as a clearer analysis as to if these events had, in any way, shaped or influenced what happened in Spain. Additionally, analysis on European fascism, totalitarianism, and authoritarianism as well would have helped contextualizing the Spanish events with Europe as a whole.

Nonetheless, a debate over nomenclatures aside, what happened to Spanish citizens was genocidal, and deserves to be analyzed as such. There are eight stages of genocide currently recognized (classification, symbolization, dehumanization organization, preparation, extermination, and denial), and while not all have to be present in order for an event to be declared genocide, Preston makes an argument that what happened in Spain during this period under investigation should be considered in this context. Did the events meet some or most of those genocidal categories? The enemies of the state were classified and symbolized as a threat; the rural proletariat were depicted as subhuman, and in some cases, denied their Spanish identity. Until 1947, almost 200 Spanish concentration camps existed, and the slave labor system lasted for years after Franco's takeover of the government. Execution squads, vigilantes groups, and 'ordinary' citizen mobs set out to rape, plunder, and kill; the goal was extermination of the enemy. Denial abounded, and one aspect of the Amnesty Act of 1977 forbade any punishment for perpetrators of crimes against humanity, effectively denying the victims justice.

One important aspect of the book is its ongoing analysis of crimes against women during this period, a topic seldom discussed in other works. Throughout the narrative, Preston exposes horrific crimes against women and girls. Women had their breasts branded like animals, typically because of the activities of their husbands (such as if he was a writer who critiqued the Francoists, or belonged to another group classified as the enemy such as teachers or unionists) leading them to be damned by association. For example, women did not have to be associated herself with communism, but if her husband or other male relative was, she was constructed as a 'red' enemy who needed to be eradicated. Even women who did not marry in civil ceremonies were targeted. Feminists were also a target, and were identified as unnatural and classified as such. The abuses knew no bounds. Pregnant women were abused, raped, shot. Women with children were tortured in freezing prison cells with little to no food, water, medicine or even proper bedding (p. 204). One woman who had just given birth was forced to climb stairs repeatedly, causing life-threatening injuries. The doctor at the jail declined to help her, telling her that 'the best cure for her was death' (p. 205). Preston refers specifically to numerous rapes, yet the word rape is not found in the index. Problematic of course, and the entry in the index for women only covers an association, and women prisoners and prisons. This could have been expanded upon in the index, especially because Preston includes throughout the narrative ongoing crimes against women that, as the book details, increased as the state infrastructure disintegrated after the 1936 coup d'état. Mass rapes by Republican perpetrators were commonplace rather than not, with one example of a young girl raped by 50 men (p. 333). Rape, often done right before the women were murdered, was intentional (shockingly defined by the perpetrators not as atrocities but as 'fun') (p. 333). Wives were tortured and shot if their husbands could not be found. Enslavement of women and girls occurred, and gang rape was promoted; thus, rape was entirely systematic. These actions all had genocidal consequences; therefore, scholars should begin to consider Preston's narrative in a new light: that an argument be made that gendercide was indeed committed against thousands of females. Subsequent Franco policies towards women were misogynist, with women experiencing deeply unequal treatment until well after his death in 1975.

In conclusion, Preston's scholarship rectifies historical falsisms that have overlooked this period of Franco Spain, and appropriately portrays what happened as genocide. Still an ardent enthusiast of the period, the author doggedly and indisputably exposed the criminals of both sides without fail. For this, his scholarship in revealing the criminals is commendable, and his narrative remains highly deserving of praise. The book is incredibly detailed, and is accompanied by over a hundred pages of footnotes, maps, images, and a concise

glossary of terms. Numerous primary sources are used throughout the text, many unpublished. Also extremely helpful to the non-Spanish experts is the use of maps as a point of reference for the numerous cities and towns painstakingly detailed as centres of crimes against humanity. For those unfamiliar with the period, Sebastian Balfour's *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (3) is a good starting point before approaching Preston's opus.

The Spanish Holocaust is absolutely, and most highly, recommended to scholars interested in genocide, the history of Spain, the Spanish Civil War, and the regime of Franco.

Notes

1. The Cultural Office-Spanish Embassy, *Book Launch: The Spanish Holocaust by Paul Preston*. London, 5 March 2012 <<http://vimeo.com/38161651>> [2] [accessed 19 September 2012].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Marvin Hier, 'Holocaust: a huge word made small', *Los Angeles Times*, 29 June 2010. <<http://articles.latimes.com/2010/jun/29/opinion/la-oe-hier-holocaust-ove...> [3] [accessed 1 October 2012].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly Embrace: Morocco and the Road to the Spanish Civil War* (Oxford, 2002).
[Back to \(3\)](#)

Other reviews:

Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-spanish-holocaust-inquisition-and-extermination-in-twentiethcentury-spain-by-paul-preston-7468500.html> [4]

Guardian

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/mar/09/spanish-holocaust-paul-preston-review> [5]

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[6] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/historybookreviews/9103580/The-Spanish-Holocaust-by-Paul-Preston-review.html>

[7] <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storycode=419372>

[8] <http://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/spanish-holocaust-inquisition-extermination-twentieth-century-spain/>