

Paul Preston
Historian and writer

“The mass graves of Iraq are no different to Spain’s”



Paul Preston, in an earlier photograph. / MARCELLI SÄENZ

RAQUEL GARZÓN, Madrid
“On this day, the red army now disarmed and captive, our victorious troops have reached their last objectives.” With these words Franco proclaimed an end to the Civil War on April 1, 1939. The victory had cost three years of fighting and more than half a million dead. “And it was going to cost more yet,” said the historian Paul Preston one of the best-known specialists in modern Spanish history. With Franco there began, for “the defeated,” an age of terror which the author of *The Three Spains of 36* does not hesitate to compare with Saddam Hussein’s regime “in terms of repression and cruelty.”

Now, 65 years after the end of that fratricidal war, while recovering from a recent open-heart operation, 58-year-old Preston is writing his new book, *The Spanish Holocaust*, which he hopes to release next year. This ambitious project, the Liverpoolian says, aims at something so far non-existent: “an overall vision of the repression that took place on both sides, during the Civil War and afterwards during the Franquist regime.” In this interview, the professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics, and author of the 1994 monumental biography *Franco, Caudillo de España*, analyses the historical value of a war “by which no Spanish family is left untouched,” reflects on the need for a policy of memory “so as not to repeat the past,” proposes a style of history that “will combine rigor and human drama” and explains why, for certain Franquists, the war would have been avoided if sewers had not existed.

Question: Now, 65 years after the end of the Civil War, is there anything left to say?

Answer: History is never cut and dried. There are always adjustments, new documents, new interpretations. The international historical importance of the Civil War is well established. It was the main prologue to the Second World War, because it changed the European balance of forces in favor of Hitler and Mussolini, and against France and Great Britain. I don’t believe there are going to be any sensational discoveries altering the lines of interpretation of the conflict, but I think historians have 50 or 100 years of work ahead of them to tell the thousands of small stories in the war.

Q: Which ones, for example?

A: There is still no good history of the role of the national army in the Civil War: how it was built, how it was paid. The same goes for the personalities of the war. A figure absolutely unknown in Spain, for example, is Gustavo Durán, a composer and friend of [poet Federico Garcia] Lorca, who on the first day of the Civil War enlisted in the railway workers militia. He dropped his musical career, and became a general of great strategic ability. I have always thought that history must be rigorous, but also attractive. The life of a young musician with no interest in military matters, who in three years becomes a general, is something incredible. Stories like this will go on appearing.

Q: Why *The Spanish Holocaust*?

A: Historians of international relations have underrated the Spanish tragedy. This is why so many have looked more at the crimes of Hitler and Stalin. I don’t propose

to compare it with the Jewish holocaust but I believe that, viewed as a whole, the suffering of the Spanish people deserves the name of holocaust. We shall never know the total number of victims of the Civil War. With an uncoun- ted mass of exiles and the thou- sands of people who died uncoun- ted in combat, there will always be many unknowns as to how many were killed, and where and how. As for the victims of the Franquist repression, I estimate they amount to about 100,000. If we consider the world-wide hor- ror felt, for example, at the crimes of Pinochet, who caused some three or four thousand deaths, the difference is huge.

Q: Does your book turn upon all these questions?

A: Yes. Essentially, upon the human drama. I’m not going to give away all the secrets in the book but I will say that there are sketches, portraits of victims and killers. From General Emilio Mola, who was the first to point out the importance of terror to cow the enemy, to Captain Gonzalo de Aguilera, another officer in Franco’s army, who was the liaison between the troops and the foreign press. Aguilera stated that in the 19th century well-meaning people had committed the error of promoting hygiene and sewers,

thus driving away the specter of the plague, which previously, by the will of God, had decimated the working-class quarters. This, he said, was the reason why the Army now had to undertake this purge. An anecdote that tells more than any statistics.

Q: Did your view of Franco change, on writing his biography?

A: Before beginning to work on *Franco* I had the image of a cruel, mediocre man, no more. With research, I found a much

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more complex figure. Now, after more than 30 years of study, he still seems somewhat mysterious. There are things about Franco which are such a mixture of foolishness and ability, that you are left in doubt whether what he did succeeded out of mere luck, or because he had a peasant cunning that helped him to overcome infinitely more sophisticated enemies. In the fall of 1944, for example, he wrote a letter to Churchill in which, more or less, he says: Since

Germany is about to be defeated, the only powers remaining in Europe are us, England and Spain. And with the air of grand concession, he offers Churchill an alliance with himself. Foolery or cunning? At that time Spain amounted to nothing in a military sense.

Q: The press release for your book compares Franco with Saddam; why?

A: Saddam admired Franco a great deal. For many years, in his relations with the great powers, he used to have the same mixture of foolery and cunning as Franco, which kept him in power until the end. Repression and cruelty are also points in common. The mass graves found in Iraq are not much different from those now being dug up in Spain.

Q: Franco’s repression has been the object of many studies here in Spain. What novelty does your view offer?

A: This is true, and I don’t propose to make a catalogue of the repression. What so far does not exist is an overall view, which what I’m setting out to produce. My book will be a reconstruction of the ambience of horror and terror. It will analyze the massacres on both sides during the war, making a distinction between the attitude of the republican govern-

ment, which in the face of outrages committed in the republican zone attempted to stop the violence, and the attitude of Franco, the soldiers and the Church, who endorsed terror as a deliberate element of power. And then what amounted to the long holocaust of the defeated: the official and unofficial courts that produced the mass graves that are now being found.

Q: To keep alive the image of the war throughout the dictatorship was one concern of the regime. How did this contribute to the repression?

A: In the years just after the war this repression was a mixture of prisons, trials, tortures and executions for the people marked out. But there were several levels that affected the dissidents and their families. Massive humiliation, psychological humiliation, economic humiliation. The media distinguished between two types of Spaniards: the real ones, and the others, and the defeated, who were seen as immoral and dirty. This was so especially in the 1940s and gradually softened with economic development, but right down to his last public speech, on October 1, 1975, Franco spoke of how the regime had to stay alert to threats.

Q: March 11 and the Aznar government’s handling of the information — can this be seen as a return to the old practices of the Spanish right, which, at the time, even denied the bombing of Guernica?

A: I am reluctant to make comparisons between recent events and those of the Civil War. I think you have to see things in their own context. If there was an attempt to conceal the real origin of the attack and the atrocities of Atocha, this is not related to the Civil War, but just to the cynicism and ambition of politicians. To attempt to profit from that horror and massive suffering is an indignity.

Q: What unfinished business does Spain have, concerning its past?

A: In Spain there has been no process such as happened in Argentina, Chile and South Africa: commissions of truth and reconciliation. After a bloody Civil War and a dictatorship which, as I said, constituted a holocaust, the Spanish were determined not to pass through either of these things again, and, if memory had to be sacrificed to facilitate the construction of a democracy, so it had to be. These reasons are commendable; they explain the amnesty of 1977 and constitute a massive act of citizenship. But today, while there are still survivors, I think things should still be done to keep the memory alive. An exhibition such as *Las prisiones de Franco*, now on show in Barcelona, is a landmark. So are the activities of the Association for Recovery of Historical Memory.

Q: For the sake of building a policy of memory, should the new Socialist government de-classify the documents of Franco’s regime?

A: The main piece of unfinished business are the papers of Franco, both private ones and those he signed in his work of government. It’s a national shame that the papers of someone who was head of state, instead of being available to any historian, are in private hands. The new government may bring favorable changes in this matter. I think it’s important. In fact, fundamental.