*The undefeated?: violence and the afterlife of Francoism*

In his comprehensive and unflinching book Paul Preston, Britain’s foremost historian of modern Spain, puts before an Anglophone readership the scale and intensity of Spain’s violent experience of state and nation-making in the twentieth century.[[1]](#footnote-1) Two substantial questions immediately pose themselves; first why this process was so vastly brutal, and second, given that it was so, why all subsequent telling has remained for so long at the margins of the broader contemporary historiography in English? Even today comparative and transnational studies dealing with extremely violent states and societies rarely (ever?) refer to twentieth-century Spain. Even in those focusing specifically on the relationship between mass killing, ultra-nationalist projects and state making in interwar Europe, the at best stock or passing reference to Spain is usually jarringly at odds with the analytical and bibliographical sophistication of the main account. Or else it is positioned equally askew by having as sole mention a flat and dessicated reference to ‘Spain’ as the ‘cockpit’ of international diplomacy or as ‘the prologue to world war’ (as if foreign intervention only affected the substance of international relations) and which – oddly – always seems to function to allow the ‘comparative’ account to move on entirely from Spain to ensuing examples of Nazi political adventurism, these subject to quite a different level of holistic methodological analysis.

Nazi and Fascist intervention was an immediate and crucial factor shaping violent state and nation building in Spain. First, because it permitting Franco and his fellow army rebels to salvage a failing coup. In its original form of country-wide garrison rebellions, this had met large scale *ad hoc* urban resistance. But Hitler and Mussolini provided the aircraft to ensure the swift delivery to mainland Spain of Franco’s colonial Army of Africa, composed of indigenous mercenaries commanded by Spanish career officers (*Africanistas*). This intervention gifted the rebels the standing army which effectively rescued the coup from oblivion. Second, continuing Axis intervention provided the military hardware that made possible the rebels’ escalation to full-scale war. This imperial entanglement was thus integral (quantitatively and qualitatively) to the potentialisation of vast new atrocity across the country in what rapidly became a complex, multi-directional dynamic of terror, criss-crossing back and forth between civilian front and the developing conventional military front, just as it moved back and forth between the evolving rebel/Francoist zone and the territory slowly being rearticulated as ‘the Republic’. Through it, foreign intervention was itself instrumental in the making of new meanings and sources of legitimation for the violence - whether perpetrated by the rebels or their opponents - which in turn became pivotal to the emerging strategies of state and nation building implemented by the victorious Francoist coalition.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Under the dynamic of increasing material aid from Germany and Italy, and of subsequent Soviet intervention in response to it, the war in Spain took on other forms/dimensions too, including a series of major battlefield confrontations – the ‘war of two sides’ that to this day remains enshrined in Western memory. But as Paul Preston reminds us, the war also continued throughout in the deeper mode in which it had originated with the coup of 17-18 July 1936 – as a military offensive against an evolving civil society and against forms of levelling social and political change which the rebel leaders feared and loathed. Behind them stood their own fearful and enraged civilian support base, among patrician elites, conservative provincial townsfolk and inland peasantry. But for all this, what made actual war possible was the availability and preparedness of a military leadership to catalyse and structure nationally these mobilizing hatred and fears. Without the component of military leadership and articulation, then however intense the emotions and ideas inhabiting the social coalitions for and against change, and whatever the ensuing sporadic extra-parliamentary violence – either by the supporters or opponents of reform, some form of political accommodation or outlet would have to have been found in the end, however, long drawn-out and difficult that road.

This original, and also ongoing, war as envisaged by the rebel military leadership needed no conventional battlefields, for its targets were from the start pre-eminently other civilian constituencies. The ‘war’ was everywhere – because so too was this ‘enemy’. The conspirators’ determination to deploy terror from the initiation of the coup was made clear in the prior orders of its director, General Mola, to ‘eliminate without scruples or hesitation all who do not think as we do’, which of course meant that among those first in the firing line would be many army officers – often those of more liberal hue, but also political conservatives who took seriously their oath of allegiance to the established (Republican) power. The ideological-discursive genealogy of this fundamentalist logic is extensively charted and analysed in the opening part of *The Spanish Holocaust* (‘Theorists of Extermination’) which also constitutes a major original contribution to the current debate over how Francoism can most adequately be defined - a debate tha has long foundered amid the historical (and intellectual) sterilities of the ‘fascist minimum’. The goals of the Spanish military coup were of breathtaking intent– to take total control of polity and society in order to reverse modernity. As Mike Richards indicates in his piece for this forum, ‘conflict [in Spain] in the 1930s revolved around a bald choice - to modernise or not - rather than debate about the *nature* of modernisation and which social class was best suited to act as the ‘engine’ of modernity’.

Preston’s book tells the harrowing story of this war against change as it unfolded against civilians across the entirety of Spain’s territory. As such it constitutes an empirical scholarly achievement that is unparalleled within the specialist historiography in any language. Even in areas where there was no resistance to the coup the new military authorities deployed terror, presiding over an extermination, mainly perpetrated by co-opted civilian death squads and vigilantes, of those sectors associated with Republican change – not only the politically active, or those who had directly benefited from redistributive land or social/labour reform, but also those who symbolized cultural transformation: progressive teachers, self-educated workers, ‘new’ women. As Preston shows, all these sectors were perceived by the *Africanista* commanders as akin to insubordinate colonial subjects. General Queipo de Llano, whose troops laid waste to south western Spain in the summer of 1936, called this culture war ‘the purification of the Spanish people’. His troops waged war largely on civilians – for the rural ‘popular militias’ were rarely more than motley-armed locals. There was as yet no reconstituted Republican army in existence, the coup having provoked/induced the collapse of the security forces and army across the territory where the rebellion failed.

*The uses of violence*

Implicit inQueipo’s comment, as previously in others made by Generals Mola and Franco, was some level of awareness that their rebellion could not be an old-style palace coup of the sort that had once been common in Spain, because by the 1930s it already had a highly mobilized society, acutely polarized in both social-cultural and ideological terms – *both* *for and against the rebels*.[[3]](#footnote-3) By summer 1936 many constituent sectors of the anti-reform coalition were mentally ready for incorporation to a violent defence of a ‘traditional’ or ‘organic’ nation-state (post-coup they would provide members for the paramilitary death squads). Even so, the military conspirators never staked their rebellion on these forces. The evidence of significant popular pro-Republican reform mobilization was too great – indeed the revolutionary general strike of 1934, although defeated everywhere, convinced Franco and other military hardliners that a conscript peninsular army was not to be trusted and that the colonial Army of Africa had to be the core of the future coup attempt, after its successful deployment in violently suppressing the general strike in the northern coalmining region of Asturias.

The high level of domestic resistance to the military agenda is important because it signals just how much structural and social change had already occurred in Spain in the 1920s and 30s , compared to other southern European countries. In Spain the radio-listening, professional republican association-joining urban middling classes, combined with an army of internal labour migrants from countryside to city had already introduced a more substantial challenge to older forms of social and political order than was to be found elsewhere in either Portugal or Greece. The Second Spanish Republic, born in April 1931, with its clear vocation to speak for the city, was itself a *product* of this development, as well as a generator. And what the Second Republic offered by way of reform was not just of the very tangible sort - land, labour and welfare reforms (crucial though they were in beginning a structural redistribution of social and economic power). It also offered qualitative change, atmosphere-changing measures; for example, some of the secularisation measures, especially attempts to secularise the streets and public space, and the provision of alternative ceremonial (civil marriage and burial, and above all, of education and particularly co-education, the education of girl and boys together in the same classroom). These things were developed by the Republican authorities, but not imposed into a vacuum– which is to say, they found a ready audience, as so too did the Republic`s nurturing of a relative urban eclecticism/ cosmopolitanism and its attendant freedoms, including those related to gender and sexuality. Spain was not Weimar, of course, but even so it was light years away from the much more limited initiatives and audiences for such things available elsewhere in southern Europe. It was also more than just a matter of urban cultural change – for the Republic, notwithstanding its many political and strategic limitations, was altering the balance of power beyond, in the rural depths of *la España profunda*. This met opposition among the conservative smallholding peasantry of the inland north and among many provincial townsfolk, again especially (though not exclusively) in inland northern half of Spain, who were deeply hostile to Republican cultural values. But elsewhere on the strongly federalist eastern/south eastern sea board and in the southern half of Spain where mass landlessness obtained, the Republic`s message of change elicited a profound response. Above all it was the Republic`s language of political rights that did this. Republic was the first regime that assumed ordinary people had rights. And that language of rights the Republic spoke, and more importantly, allowed to be spoken, permitted people in small town and village Spain who dared to, to think differently - this perhaps more than anything else was what drove patrician Spain to sheer apoplexy. It was against this supreme perceived threat to older ways of being and thinking in ‘deep Spain’ that a fear-ridden patrician and also a populist crusade conservatism united and rose behind the military coup of 17-18 July 1936.

It is crucial to bear in mind this complicated picture. For it was this relative depth and complexity of social and cultural change which had penetrated into village and small-town Spain; the range of modern cultural collateral already present by 1936 - the result of a cumulative process of social change across the 1920s and 30s - which explains the violence of the Francoist counter-response. The armed conflict of 1936-39 upped the *ante* hugely in terms of making new meanings to justify extreme state-led violence. But this prior context was pivotal and needs underscoring: it was the relative complexity of Spain`s alternative social and cultural solidarities and collateral ‘modernity’, already by 1936, which in important part explains the force of the Francoist blast (and the prison universe of later) – because so much had to be definitively destroyed. Even though Spain was not Germany, in terms of the density of its civil society, the latter is a more illuminating and appropriate comparator here to explain what happened, than are Spain’s putative southern European ‘homologues’.

Indeed specifically in terms of ‘pre-war’ political mobilization across society, 1930s Spain had more intensive levels than did Germany. Without the widespread populist conservative social and political mobilisation, often in organisations linked with or justified by the institutional Catholic Church, it is impossible to explain why and how the numerically stretched military rebels were so rapidly able to avail themselves of substantial civilian paramilitary support to enact their ‘purification’. According to their own discursive explanations for the coup, these sectors had risen in a ‘crusade’, in the name of the ‘true nation’ and in defence of which they were prepared to kill.

In Spain, then, the war, that is to say the deep war which predated and outlasted the battlefield clash (this latter in a sense a ‘screen’ produced by the Republic’s enabled defence against the military odds) was the extremely violent result of three converging factors: jagged and acutely uneven internal metropolitan development, a colonial (and to a lesser extent peninsular) military elite prepared to kill the human bearers of change, and the availability of an already independently socially and politically mobilised populist conservative base, driven by a powerful intimate narrative of fear which interpreted the transformative and leveling reform of the Republic as the end of a cherished and familiar world, indeed as the end of ‘Spain’. All this was hugely potentialised by foreign weaponry, as it was too by the cycle of retributive killing unleashed by the military rebellion in Republican territory – for once there was war then it engulfed everything, atrocity was everywhere and every ‘side’ had its perpetrators. In such an arena – and also given the very depth and extent of the mobilized social and cultural collateral of the ‘enemy’, then what emerged after Franco’s internationally enabled military victory in 1939, could not be any ‘return to’ traditional authoritarianism in a demobilised society. That society had long since ceased to exist, even before the civil war. And through war, religion – the alliance of throne and altar – had also become something else. For the victorious Francoist coalition, ‘the nation-state trumped religion as justification for liquidation’.[[4]](#footnote-4) This was something new – and ‘modern’ in spite of itself.

*Afterwards: the ‘ war’ Francoism made*

After Franco’s military victory, the mass murdering dimension inherent in war-forged Francoism became fully apparent, as the final section of Paul Preston’s study explores. In a bid to create the homogeneous nation of which the conspirators dreamed, based on ‘traditional’ values and social deference,the regime engaged in the killing, mass imprisonment and social segregation of the Republican population. To do so, the regime exhorted ‘ordinary Spaniards’ nationwide to denounce their compatriots’ ‘crimes’ to military tribunals. Tens of thousands did so – out of a combination of political conviction, grief and loss, social prejudice, opportunism and fear. Thus did the Franco regime, born of a military coup that itself triggered the killing, pose as the bringer of justice. But this was justice turned on its head, given the notorious lack of fit between the acts of wartime violence themselves and those denounced and tried for them – no corroboration was required nor any real investigative process undertaken. But, as Preston shows, matching culprits to crimes was not the point of the exercise. Tens of thousands were tried merely for their political or social alignment with the Republic – as one prosecutor declared: ‘I do not care, nor do I even want to know, if you are innocent or not of the charges made against you.’ This was the Franco regime’s ‘fatal’ moment: it made the choice of a toxic legitimating strategy through which it mobilised a social base of perpetrators, building on their fears and losses sustained during the war, tying them to the regime in perpetuity, while, at the same time, it criminalised the Republican population, perpetrating an abuse of human rights on a vast scale. More damaging still, the regime, buoyed up and legitimated by the Cold War, then kept alive these binary categories for nearly forty years, through its apartheid policies and an endlessly reiterated nationalist discourse of ‘martyrs and barbarians’. Through this the regime tied one category of extrajudicial dead to itself: the ‘martyrs’, those killed in Republican territory, were cast in this nationalist script as the ‘sacred’ dead; they were exhumed in the 1940s, given ceremonial reburial and perpetually celebrated as the eternal value, the lodestone of the dictatorship. This meant that the ‘postwar’ dictatorship was founded upon, and demanded, the endless reiteration of a past fracture, so that it remained the present, with devastating consequences for the future. What is more, these embedded mind games of dictatorship emerged largely unscathed from the dismantling of regime structures after Franco’s death, with Spain’s transition to a parliamentary democracy in the late 1970s. For complex and highly disparate historical reasons, but which all relate to the acute social limitations of that transition, as well as to the endurance of particular narratives of social and economic change constructed during Spain’s vertiginous industrialisation of the late 1950s and 60s, the same dictatorial mind games remain powerfully alive in the field of memory in Spain today.[[5]](#footnote-5) They have been further boosted by the peculiar asymmetries of the post (?) Cold War international order has since 1989, as an increasing tide of right wing populist nationalism across Europe now facilitates the full-on recuperation of Francoism inside Spain in the inevitable form of a domestically serviceable myth. As in the 1930s, so too today Spain emerges as a touchstone, its historical reckoning blocked by a continental conjuncture.

1. Paul Preston, *The Spanish Holocaust: Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain* (London: HarperCollins and New York: W.W. Norton, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is true that the abiding goals of the Franco coalition would at times (during the battlefield conflict of 1937-38) be in tension with the imperial game plan of its German and Italian backers for a swift military conclusion. But this was never irresolvable - the stakes were too great for all parties. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Cf. Peter Anderson, *The Francoist Military Trials: Terror and Complicity, 1939-1945* (London/New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 6, 68, 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Michael Richards, in his contribution to this forum. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For the ways in which the social memory of war and repression, combined with Francoist narratives upon them, to shape popular experiences and understanding of economic change under the later dictatorship, see Michael Richards, *After the Civil War. Making Memory and Remaking Spain since 1936* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013). For the long afterlife of Francoist violence, see the later chapters in Helen Graham, *The War and its Shadow. Spain’s Civil War in Europe’s Long Twentieth Century* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)