

'A People Betrayed' Review: Robbery Under Law

Within Spain's wildly varied ruling classes exists a long tradition of bribery, nepotism, amorality and greed.



Gen. Francisco Franco

Photo: Photo12/Universal Images Group/Getty Images

By Tunku Varadarajan

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'This book makes no attempt to suggest that Spain is unique in terms of corruption or governmental incompetence,' writes Paul Preston early in "A People Betrayed." And yet nearly 600 pages later—as I glided to the end of this prodigiously detailed and absorbing book—I wondered whether Mr. Preston's avowal wasn't a subtle joke. No, he doesn't "suggest" that Spain is matchless in terms of venality and political ineptitude, at least among the nations of Western Europe. He practically shrieks it from the rooftop.

Spain is, of course, unique in ways other than the depth of its corruption. A European people conquered and colonized by non-Europeans—the Moors—it expelled its Muslim rulers (and most of its Jews) and embarked on a maritime empire that was rivaled only by Britain's. In its modern history, it has resembled a political laboratory, home to virtually every form of undemocratic government before settling into true democracy after the death of Gen. Francisco Franco, who ruled Spain for 36 years until his death in 1975.

A People Betrayed

By Paul Preston

Liveright, 750 pages, \$35

Mr. Preston is, by some distance, the most prolific historian of modern Spain. The “people betrayed” of his title are the Spaniards, who have faced more than 25 “*pronunciamientos*, or military coups,” between 1814 and 1981. The last was the work of Antonio Tejero Molina, a madcap colonel in a tricorne hat, whose televised attempt to hijack power left the country briefly, but genuinely, breathless with fear.

Mr. Preston opens his account in 1874, when the monarchy was restored in Spain after a republican interlude that had lasted 22 months. He ends in the present day, and the book offers page upon page, chapter upon chapter, of intolerance, cruelty, bribery, speculation, nepotism, amorality, opacity and greed. Corruption has thrived under all forms of rule in Spain: monarchy; right-wing dictatorships; proletarian socialism; and, most depressingly (though in Mr. Preston’s view unsurprisingly), in the modern democracy that has now taken root in Spain.

It is a robust democracy, for all its problems with separatism in Catalonia; and a reader might want to chide Mr. Preston for not always acknowledging that laudable fact. Yet corruption is Mr. Preston’s theme, and he sticks to it like a limpet. His thesis—that the Spanish elites have let the people down time and again—is not entirely original. Writing in 1845, the English traveler Richard Ford concluded that “the real permanent and standing cause” of Spain’s desolation was “BAD GOVERNMENT, civil and religious.”

Yet the *diablo* is in Mr. Preston’s detail. The account of corruption in his tale is encyclopedic, and its scale vast. Spain’s construction industry has always been a venal playground where bids were rigged, fortunes made and politicians suborned. As has been widely reported, Spain built more houses than France, Germany and the U.K. combined in a building boom that lasted from the late 1990s to the global recession of 2008. If the realty payola seems humdrum in its conception—if not its dimensions—the corruption of a century ago could be squalidly imaginative. In the 1920s, the son of a civil governor of Barcelona was given the national monopoly of rat extermination, “an ironic parallel,” Mr. Preston writes, “with his father’s commitment to the extermination of reds.”

By the 21st century, we’ve moved from enrichment by rodent to rip-offs by royalty. Between 2004 and 2006, the son-in-law of King Juan Carlos—a former captain of the Spanish Olympic handball team who was ennobled as the Duke of Palma upon marriage to the king’s daughter—made hundreds of thousands of euros by over-invoicing the state for events he organized on behalf of a “supposedly non-profit-making research consultancy.” On one occasion, he charged the municipality of Valencia three million euros for setting up three conferences “on the advantages for cities in hosting sports events.” The real cost, Mr. Preston tells us, was a 10th of that sum.

Born in 1946—seven years after the end of the Spanish Civil War—Mr. Preston is the reigning king of a tribe of brilliant 20th-century British historians who have shaped our understanding of Spain, often better than their Spanish counterparts have done with their own history. Franco’s Spain was a place where honest discussion of the Civil War was impossible, and its universities were not exactly temples of free inquiry. This offers some explanation for the dominance, until after Franco’s death, of British narratives.

Raymond Carr and Hugh Thomas, both intellectual precursors of Mr. Preston, wrote peerless works on Spain's Civil War, as did Gerald Brenan, whose book "The Spanish Labyrinth" (1943) was the first notable examination of the war's social and political underpinnings. Throw into this mix the more accessible writings of George Orwell and Stephen Spender, not to mention Ernest Hemingway, and you'd be inclined to ask what the Spanish story would have done without chroniclers in the English language.

The Carr-Thomas-Preston trinity has a personal history as well as a shared obsession. Mr. Preston first studied Spain in the late 1960s in a graduate class taught by Hugh Thomas at the University of Reading. Thomas was the author of "The Spanish Civil War" (1961), which a generation of Spaniards read clandestinely (and reverently) in translation. Mr. Preston went on to enroll for a Ph.D., which a "very insensitive" Raymond Carr refused to supervise. He had wanted Mr. Preston to work on Miguel Primo de Rivera, the military dictator who ruled Spain in the 1920s. Mr. Preston—then a chippy, working-class young man from Liverpool—preferred to focus on Spain's radical Second Republic, which succeeded Primo de Rivera in 1931 and was extinguished by Franco's Nationalists in 1939.

The leftist affinity has stayed with Mr. Preston for a lifetime, and he is sometimes accused of viewing Spain through a Manichaean lens—regarding Franco's side as unvaryingly diabolical and the Republicans who lost the Civil War as broadly angelic, even as he has conceded that the latter committed their share of atrocities. In a review in these pages of "The Spanish Holocaust" (2012), Stanley Payne, the great American historian of modern Spain, questioned Mr. Preston's use of the H-word in his title and judged the book to be weakened by its partisanship—as Mr. Payne saw it—especially in its characterization of leftist killings as merely accidental and Franco's score-settling as part of a darker plan for extermination.

"A People Betrayed" doesn't provoke the same criticism, even though Mr. Preston does underplay the effect of Spain's opening up to the outside world—more from necessity than anything else—in the second half of Franco's dictatorship. American military bases were established on Spanish soil. Spanish citizens went abroad for work—to France, Germany and Switzerland—and brought liberal ideas back with them. Tourism saw foreigners flock to Spain, with their freer ways (including the bikini), unburdened by Catholic dogma. Mr. Preston's chapters on the Franco era are, in this sense, the least satisfactory in the book, discounting the manner in which Spain's pragmatic, often apolitical, people adapted to their many restrictions.

Where Mr. Preston is most rewarding is in his book's first third, which takes us to the end of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship of the 1920s, teeming with men like the "Mallorcan robber baron" Juan March, who made a fortune on contraband cigarettes. "So successful was March's smuggling operation," Mr. Preston writes, "that it was decided to grant him the official monopoly" of tobacco sales in Spain—for a fee. March also helped finance pro-regime newspapers. He was later to bankroll Franco's war against the Republicans.

Primo de Rivera—the man Mr. Preston didn't want for his Ph.D. thesis—came to power in a coup in 1923 in which King Alfonso XIII was complicit. Happier with the unprincipled Primo by his side than with a civilian government, Alfonso was a sybarite who cared only for fast cars, driving them at speeds that terrified his cabinet. The coup occurred after Spain had been humiliated in northern Morocco, its army routed by Berber irregulars who had procured their rifles from corrupt Spanish officers. The military at the time absorbed 35% of the state budget, and the wastefulness of Spain's politics, writes Mr. Preston, "was matched by the military

inefficiency reflected in the excessive, indeed macrocephalic, size of the officer corps.” (The army had one officer for every four soldiers.)

Corruption was not only pecuniary. Mr. Preston sparkles when he describes the *turno* system that existed after the restoration of the monarchy in 1874. The Conservatives and the Liberals—monarchist parties both—had a cynical “non-aggression pact,” under which they went through the motions of elections but ensured that power was transferred back and forth. Mr. Preston calls this “electoral falsification.” Was there an ideological difference between the two sides? Perhaps. “The Conservatives,” writes Mr. Preston, “looked mainly to the concerns of the wine and olive growers of the south while the Liberals protected the interests of the wheat growers of the center.”

Today power changes hands through the ballot box. But scarcely any elected government post-Franco has been unstained by graft. The cozy politics of wheat and wine have given way to the high-rolling corruption of fixers and money-launderers. Fittingly, Mr. Preston describes the contemporary phase of Spanish politics as “the triumph of corruption and incompetence.” It is a pity, then, that he ends his book—so ripe with irrefutable detail—on a seemingly limp note.

“Whether anyone can resolve endemic political incompetence,” he writes, “remains to be seen.” One can’t but conclude that Mr. Preston has just thrown up his hands—and resigned in exhaustion.

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