

Preston's Authoritative Account Updated, Expanded

***The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution, and Revenge* by Paul Preston. Third edition, revised and expanded. New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.**

By Sebastiaan Faber

It is difficult not to be in awe of Paul Preston. It is also hard not to envy him. Over the past 30 years, he has become the world-wide authority of Spanish Civil War studies. Not only is he an astonishingly prolific and successful scholar, an influential mentor of several generations of historians, and, as founder and director of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies, a crucial promoter and sponsor of scholarship on contemporary Spain. He is also an engaging author of bestselling books, a prodigious researcher, and a generous and tireless participant in electronic discussion forums, including the ALBA listserv. As one of my Spanish friends puts it admiringly: Paul es una máquina.

The book under review, which came out in Britain last year, is the third iteration of Preston's chronological, overarching account of the Spanish Civil War. (Previous editions came out at the 50th and 60th anniversaries of the war's outbreak,

Sebastiaan Faber, currently serving on ALBA's Executive Committee, is chair of the Spanish department at Oberlin College. He is author of *Exile and Cultural Hegemony: Spanish Intellectuals in Mexico, 1939-1975*.

in 1986 and 1996.) While thoroughly updated and about 50 percent longer than the second edition, the general points of Preston's narrative remain unchanged, as does his position in the protracted "war of words" that has marked the field since 1936.

First, against competing accounts from conservative scholars (such as Payne, Malefakis, De la Cierva and, more recently, Moa), Preston argues that the outbreak of the war in July 1936 cannot be blamed on the provocations from the radicalized

left. To be sure, Largo Caballero's revolutionary rhetoric was naïve and irresponsible. However, in the end, the right was unwilling to accept anything but a return to conditions before 1931 and was determined to use violence to set back the clock.

Nor does Preston agree with accounts proposed by historians sympathetic to the Anarchist and anti-Stalinist left (such as Esenwein or Bolloten) or right-wing anti-Communists (such as Radosh), who blame the defeat of the Republic on the violent suppression of social revolution by the Comintern-dictated policy of the Spanish Communist Party, allied with the middle-class

Republican parties. Preston readily concedes that the Communists' methods were "unnecessarily brutal." Still, he remains convinced that the line followed by Negrín, the Communists, and their Republican allies—creating a conventional army with a centralized command structure, prioritizing winning the war over making revolution, and keeping up the increasingly desperate fight against Franco in hopes of eventual foreign support from the West—was by far the most realistic, given the domestic and international situation.

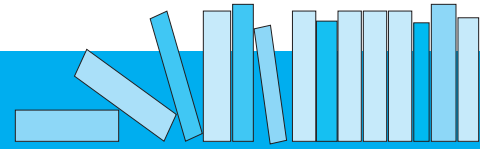
Third, against "neutral" commentators who maintain that "atrocities were committed on both

"[T]here is little sympathy here for the Spanish right, but I hope there is some understanding." Paul Preston

sides," Preston convincingly argues that Francoist repression of the enemy was not only far more extensive, but also consciously planned and imposed from above, and therefore more morally reprehensible.

Finally, Preston maintains that, while the war was at base the result of long built-up Spanish problems and tensions, its development, duration, and eventual outcome were crucially influenced by leaders and representatives of foreign nations. The war would have evolved and ended quite differently if it had not been for the spineless Western democracies that hid behind the fig leaf of non-intervention,

Continued on page 18



3 Novelists & a War

***Trinity of Passion: The Literary Left & the Antifascist Crusade.* By Alan M. Wald. University of North Carolina Press, 2007.**

By Peter Carroll

This study of U.S. writers on the left is the second volume of a planned trilogy, focusing on the impact of the Spanish Civil War, World War II, issues of racial identity, and the labor movement on various literary endeavors. As in his earlier volume, *Exiles from a Future Time*, which examined writers whose works expressed the issues of the 1920s and early 1930s, Wald proves to be an astute reader and sensitive critic of a wide range of authors, some scarcely known (Leonard Zinberg), others eminent and still influential (Chester Himes, Irwin Shaw, Arthur Miller).

The book's first chapter, which will be of special interest to our readers, is titled "Tough Jews in the Spanish Civil War." It probes the thematic interrelationships of three novels written by veterans of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade: Alvah Bessie's *The Un-Americans* (1957), William Herrick's *Hermanos!* (1969), and Milton Wolff's *Another Hill* (1994). What the three novelists shared, besides the Spanish war, were their origins in secular New York Jewish families.

"All suffered the loss of or alienation from their fathers at a young age. Two were won to radicalism in the early Depression.... The third [Herrick] was born into a

revolutionary family during World War I. Their routes to Communism, Spain, and writing novels," Wald observes, "collectively comprise a vital subset of the literary Left as well as a hitherto neglected segment of Jewish American cultural history."

Contrasting their fictional characters with various biographical narratives of specific soldiers in Spain, Wald deconstructs the primary themes that emerge in their works: an

Preston

Continued from page 16

Hitler's and Mussolini's support for Franco, Stalin's less-than-enthusiastic and anything but disinterested support for the Republic, and the thousands of foreign volunteers who joined the International Brigades.

Preston represents a third generation of brilliant British historians of 20th century Spain. The first was Gerald Brenan, whose *Spanish Labyrinth* was published in 1943, three years before Preston's birth. The second was Raymond Carr, Preston's teacher at Oxford, whose history of Spain came out in 1966. (Preston also studied with Hugh Thomas, whose *Spanish Civil War* [1961] is generally considered less brilliant than efficient and timely.) Preston's approach to Spanish history is indebted to that of his predecessors—and to the British historiographical tradition more generally—in its liberal outlook; its focus on individual agency, particularly from political and intellectual elites;

emphasis not just on the war's political outcome, but also the invention of a warrior Jewish male identity.

Measuring the "truth" of fiction remains a complicated matter, though Wald succeeds for the most part in separating history from sheer imagination. One wishes he also addressed the changing contexts in which the three novels were written—Bessie's in the heat of the McCarthy period, Herrick's in the era of Vietnam, and Wolff's in the post-Franco 1970s and '80s. ■

and its gift for efficient, engaging narrative that skillfully combines the general sweep with the telling or surprising detail.

Preston is also a disciple of the maverick American historian Herbert Southworth, who maintained that the student of the Spanish Civil War can and should be rigorous and intellectually honest, but never politically neutral. As Preston writes in his introduction, his book does not aim "to find a perfect balance between both sides": "Despite what Franco supporters claim, I do not believe that Spain derived any benefit from the military rising of 1936 and the military victory of 1939." Hence, "there is little sympathy here for the Spanish right, but I hope there is some understanding."

Preston's identity as a British historian is also clear from his interest in biography, which has been his main

Continued on page 24

National Monument Contributions

continued from page 23

Donor (\$1 - \$99):

• Isak Arbus in memory of Al Prago • Lucille Banta • Eugene Baron • James Benet • Phiip L. Bereano in memory of Perla Bereano • Dan and Jeanne Bessie in memory of Alvah Bessie • Kathryn S. Blalock • Thompson Bradley in memory of Bill Gandoff • Julianne Clark • Daniel and Susan Cohen • Juanita Contreras • Alice D. Correll • Joseph Dimow • Polly Nusser Dubetz • Edie and George Fishman • Martha Friedberg in honor of her father Saul Friedberg • Victor Fuentes • Barbara Gingher • Rhoda and Sheldon Glickman • Hilda Grunblatt • Rosalind Guaraldo • Norma J. Hart in memory of Al Schwartz • Sue Hestor • Joan Intrator • Estelle Jelinek • Lillian R. Jones • Beatrice and Henry Krivetsky in honor of Greta Sugarman • Marian Kroon in memory of Freddie Martin • Lillian T. Lanser • Jack Lerman • Marlene Litwin • Barbara Mason • Dick and Gerry Meister • Richard Miller • Gloria and Bill Powers • Michael P. Predmore • Paul Preuss • Sally Rainer in honor of Abe Osheroff • Marsha Raleigh • Gus and Joanne Ricca in honor of Carl Geiser • Bill Ritchey in honor of Moe Fishman • Bill Ritchie in memory of William B. Morrell and Morris Davis • L.W. and Kazuko Rogers • Bill Roller • Susan Saiz • Kraig A. Schwartz • Lucille and Richard Seeley • Patricia Sitkin • Erin Sheehan • Ted Solis • Eunice Stack • Margot Steigman • Dmitri R. Stein • Roslyn Stein • Richard and Elizabeth Tesh • Ethel Tobach • Ron Viner • Gloria F. Waldman • Mance Webb • Morris Weiss • Karel Weissberg and Elliott Spiker in memory of Ernest Amatniek • Jeri Wellman and Nick Bryan in memory of Saul Wellman • Lois and Robert Whealey • Peter M. Wolff • Jack and Bebe Ziebel • ❏

Preston

Continued from page 18

passion over the past couple of decades. His tremendously engaging portraits in *Franco* (1993), *¡Comrades!* (1999), *Doves of War* (2002), *Juan Carlos* (2003) and, most recently, *Idealistas bajo las balas* (2007), showcase Preston's enduring fascination with the impact of history on individuals' lives and their impact on history.

Spanish historians such as Julián Casanova have pointed out that, for all its merits, British historical Hispanism has been weak on social history, methodologically conservative, and reluctant to engage with theory. To some extent, this is true for Preston's work as well, which tends to reserve its meta-historical comments for pref-

aces and epilogues. One curious stylistic feature of this book, for instance, is its authoritative tone, with its lack of direct references to primary and secondary sources (a lack partly made up by an extensive bibliographical essay). Preston's narrative voice, it seems, tells us how it is. This makes for wonderfully efficient storytelling, but is in tension with the notion, to which Preston himself subscribes, that any narrative of the war is necessarily contentious, if not precarious. To his great merit, however, Preston has produced brilliant disciples such as Helen Graham, Sebastian Balfour, Mike Richards, and Chris Ealham, who have gone on to become outstanding and innovative cultural and social historians in their own right. ❏

History Matters

Continued from page 17

As Valis' book convincingly demonstrates, the Spanish Civil War should not be taught as an anomaly, but as an episode whose multiple meanings and repercussions must be grasped in context. In this fundamental sense, the teacher's role is not dissimilar to the role of all who fight for democracy: we share a deep belief in the connection between commitment and knowledge, action and education, past and present. *Teaching Representations of the Spanish*

Civil War provides a much-needed road map for those interested in navigating the difficult task of making that connection clear to university students. The book will help instructors across the country develop courses that help students develop the knowledge and empathy they need to further the fight for a peaceful, democratic future the world over. ❏

www.alba-valb.org