Paul Preston is a prolific scholar of Spain’s Second Republic (1931–9). His huge and compelling Franco: A biography (1994) demolished much of the abundant mythology surrounding one of the longest-lasting dictatorships in history. His subsequent biography of King Juan Carlos (2004) balanced the unrelenting criticism that the other had directed at Franco with effusive praise for the King, who – it was argued – successfully steered Spain from dictatorship to democracy. Like much of his earlier work, Preston’s popular synthesis, A Concise History of the Spanish Civil War (1996), reflects the method of a political historian working “from above”, whose main interest lies with great men and women, and their followers.

Preston continues in this vein in The Spanish Holocaust. This time he chronicles the terror initiated by both the Right and the Left which erupted immediately after the military rebellion against the Republic on July 17, 1936. The author provides more detail on the killings committed in both the leftist Republican and rightist Nationalist zones than any other historian. He deploys the fruit of ten years’ research on the terror in an effort to give balanced coverage of the atrocity on both sides. Grisly portraits of the murderers of various ideological persuasions and their crimes constantly shock the reader. Preston rightly reminds us that the rebellious officers, whom Hitler and Mussolini quickly aided – were largely responsible for the eruption of this carnage.

In its exposure of widespread and intense suffering, The Spanish Holocaust reflects a current in contemporary culture that is unhealthy preoccupied with competitive victimhood. In presenting a putative Spanish Holocaust, Preston likens the deaths, executions and murders of 50,000 rightists in the Republican zone, and 130,000 leftists in the Nationalist zone during the Spanish civil conflict to the almost 6 million Jews exterminated by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Second World War. The “politicide” of the Spanish Civil War overwhelmingly targeted adult males who had been political activists of both Left and Right. The genocide of the Spanish Civil War was a key reason for the annihilation of men, women and more than a million children who happened to share a religious or ethnic heritage.

A further problem with Preston’s method is that he rates some victims as more equal than others. He stresses that Republican leaders were more likely to adopt humanitarian rhetoric and practices towards their enemies than their Nationalist counterparts, and argues that the repression in the Republican zone was merely a response to the military coup of July 1936. The Left’s killings were “hot-blooded and reactive ... spontaneous and defensive”. In contrast, the Right under General Franco possessed “exterminatory power” and employed “systematic mass murder”. An avalanche of recent literature has challenged these antiquated views, establishing that repression in the Republican zone was not merely a “spontaneous and defensive” reaction by uncontrollable elements. Instead, the killings were part of a largely deliberate and calculated effort to eliminate “fascists” (very broadly defined), rightists – and also members of the clergy, who were perceived as fifth columns and potential obstacles to workers’ or people’s revolution.

The murderers were closely connected to, and usually approved by, the parties of the Left – Socialists, Communists and anarchists. Preston, forms of terror in the Republican and Nationalist zones were similar in many respects. His simplistic assertion of a rightist “programme of extermination” overlooks the massive recycling of Republican prisoners of war into the Nazi concentration camps throughout the conflict. In fact, Nationalists may have integrated proportionately more POWs into their army than any other civil-war belligerents in twentieth-century Europe. The author’s tendency to exculporate the Spanish Left leads to an underestimation of Soviet influence on the Paracuellos massacre outside Madrid in November, 1936, when a coalition of Spanish leftists executed approximately 2,400 rightist prisoners. His emphasis on repression of Catalan-speaking districts distorts Catalan history. Despite charges of “cultural genocide”, the Nationalists tolerated the speaking of Catalan in their army, and had an elite unit of highly decorated Catalans. But Preston is less interested in exploring the complexities of dual loyalties in Catalonia and elsewhere than in discounting the moral capital of the Nationalists.

The Spanish Holocaust also paints a tenacious picture of the Second Republic. Preston argues that the incendiary claims of its more hot-headed spokesmen were more rhetorical than serious. The violence of both Left and Right is therefore not contextualized as a struggle between revolutionaries who attacked property rights, and counterrevolutionaries who defended them. This analytical framework can shed light not only on the Spanish Civil War, but also on earlier conflicts – the Paris Commune, the Russian Revolution and the Finnish Civil War. Instead of investigating revolutionary activities from the bottom up, Preston concentrates on the words and actions of leaders. He portrays a “reformist” Republic assaulted by rightists who regarded Spanish leftists as “foreign”. In his account, property-owners had little to fear, but were “provoked” by the “rightist media”. Yet revolutionaries regularly attacked private and church property after the elections of February 1936 that brought the leftist Popular Front to power.

Nor were the lives of rightists and property owners safe. Paradoxically, and despite its Marxist principles, much leftist Spanish historiography has tended to play down violent manifestations of class struggle. A good example of the multiple weaknesses of Preston’s method is his treatment of the assassination of the far-right politician, José Calvo Sotelo, the event that triggered the Civil War itself, according to many historians. Members of the state police abducted Calvo Sotelo from his apartment in the middle of the night and shot him, gangster-style, on the back seat of their vehicle. This cold-blooded killing helped to convince a wavering Francisco Franco to join the rebellion against the Republic. According to Preston, “Republican and Socialist leaders were appalled [by the murder] and the authorities immediately began a thorough investigation”. But the most recent major studies of the Popular Front have demonstrated the “astonishing inertia”, as one historian puts it, of the Republican President and Prime Minister in the face of calls to find the assassins.

While Preston champions Republican efforts to limit executions and observe due process, he neglects a similar but less effective process in the Nationalist zone. His claims about “Franco’s slow war of annihilation” ignore the fact that the Generalissimo’s special military tribunal, which was established at the end of 1936, examined more than 30,000 cases during the following two years and dismissed half of them. Preston’s model cannot explain the steep decline of death sentences after 1941, or the liberation of over 150,000 prisoners between 1941 and 1943.

If much of the information provided is partial, some is unreliable. I have not been able to find any proof of Preston’s unsubstantiated statement that “papal declarations” described fascism as “the best weapon with which to defeat proletarian revolution and defend Christian civilization”. Preston also claims that “a number of rightist prisoners were assassinated” in reprisal for the first Nationalist air raid on Madrid on the night of August 7, 1936. Like other writers, Preston considers the air raid of that night with the first actual raid, which did not take place until August 27–28; but no other historian has claimed that prisoners were shot in reprisal.

He provides no footnote for his singular asseration. Similarly, no one else has alleged that Madrid was bombed on August 21–22, let alone that the bombing caused severe damage near the Modelo prison. Again, no source is provided for this claim.

The over-emphasis on repression as the key to the Nationalist war effort entails a misrepresentation of the conflict, a success of which formed one of the major reasons for the Republican defeat. Preston’s assertion that counter-revolutionaries employed “education through terror” to immediately expel or kill peasants who had expropriated land needs qualification. When new owners were producing effectively, Nationalist officials were reluctant to intervene to return the land to its original proprietors immediately. Rather than killing or expelling the radical peasants of Extremadura who had “illegally” occupied farms, agricultural authorities offered them incentives to produce grain and meat.

Likewise, Preston is incapable of explaining the failure of his preferred narrative. The war was based on unrealistic price controls and unsystematic confiscations, which discouraged production for the market. Thus Preston resorted to templates from the history of miliary terror to explain the Republican defeat. Preston’s politicized approach, which positions terror as an all-purpose explanation, cannot sufficiently account for increased productivity in industries that fell into Nationalist hands. Although some of the initial advances were due to repression, the Nationalist capacity for adequately feeding miners and steel workers was essential to raising output.

Though a specialist on Spain, Preston has little familiarity with the vast and sophisticated literature about sum mass murder and genocide. When he deals with Jews – a marginal topic in The Spanish Holocaust, despite its title – he does so with little comparative vision. The Spanish counter-revolutionaries did not wage a racial war against Jews, but used anti-Jewish rhetoric on the last starving Republican civilian and soldier, and by blaming Republican leaders – Indalecio Prieto and Segismundo Casado – for a supposedly premature Republican defeat. Preston’s politicized approach, which positions terror as an all-purpose explanation, cannot sufficiently account for increased productivity in industries that fell into Nationalist hands. Although some of the initial advances were due to repression, the Nationalist capacity for adequately feeding miners and steel workers was essential to raising output.

After nearly forty years of Franco’s repressive dictatorship, it was necessary and healthy that his victims – many of whom were guilty only of the “crime” of leftist sympathies – receive proper recognition. Yet Paul Preston serves more as defence advocate for the victims than their historian. In his story, they are largely passive and innocent, neither revolutionary nor counterrevolutionaries, ever its flaws, venerable Marxist materialism with its promotion of the heroic class struggle revealed much more about the Spanish Civil War than Preston’s fashionable focus on the martyrs of yet another “Holocaust”.

Michael Seidman

Victimized

Michael Seidman

The Spanish Holocaust

Inquisition and extermination

in twentieth-century Spain

700pp. Harper Press.£30. 978 0 00 255634 7

US: Norton. $35. 978 0 393 06476 6

July 23, 1936: an armed woman leading a group marching through Madrid at the outbreak of the Civil War