



Political Intrigue, Censorship, and Humanity

We Saw Spain Die. Foreign Correspondents in the Spanish Civil War. By Paul Preston. London, Constable & Robinson, 2008.

By Angela Jackson

Paul Preston, highly regarded as the author of many outstanding books about the Spanish Civil War, now brings his encyclopedic knowledge to bear on a different aspect of the conflict: the foreign correspondents who risked their lives and sometimes damage to their professional careers to report on what they saw in Spain. With his customary skill, Preston weaves together the historical context, the work of the correspondents, and their human stories behind the news.

Determined detective work has unearthed new material that enriches the content in 12 wide-ranging chapters. The great tragedies of the war are conveyed through the wonderful writings of correspondents such as Jay Allen, who reported on the massacre at Badajoz, and George Steer, who shocked the world with his description of the bombing of Guernica. There is political intrigue aplenty as, for example, in chapters dedicated to evaluating the evidence in the case of the disappearance of José Robles and on the role of Mikhail Koltsov in Spain.

Especially moving are the accounts of the struggles the correspondents faced to get their stories

out. After overcoming the problems of censorship in Spain, they frequently had to convince their own newspaper editors that the reports on Nationalist bombings and reprisals were not wild exaggerations but unpalatable truths. The last communication from Louis Delaprée before he was killed on a flight from Spain to Paris was an indictment of the policy being implemented by his employer, *Paris-Soir*. Half of Delaprée's reports had not been published, thereby leaving room for extensive coverage on the love life of Edward VIII and the abdication crisis in England. "You have made me work for the wastepaper basket," he wrote. "I shall send nothing more... The massacre of a hundred Spanish children is less interesting than a sigh from Mrs. Simpson."

Preston's chapter on the rebel zone reveals the heavy restrictions imposed by Franco to prevent correspondents from seeing what was happening for themselves, leaving them feeling, as one journalist wrote, like "a bunch of schoolgirls under the guidance of a schoolmistress." Not only was censorship much more tightly enforced by the Nationalists than by the Loyalists, but the reporters also suffered a greater degree of mistreatment if they stepped out of line.

One of the great strengths inherent in Preston's writing is his ability to portray the characters in historic dramas with wit and vitality. Idiosyncratic personalities leap from the pages to engage the reader. Hugh Slater's white

Rolls Royce is "dreadfully noticeable on the battlefield." Ernest Hemingway treats all and sundry with "splurging magnificence" at the Hotel Florida. Thwarted in love, the dissolute Basil Murray acquires an ape. González Aguilera, a Nationalist press officer, believes the war was caused by the introduction of modern sewers for the masses.

But it is the humanity of the correspondents that gives the book its warmth. Most were deeply affected by their experiences in Spain, from Martha Gelhorn, who would have no truck with what she called "all that objectivity shit," to Arthur Koestler, who wrote, "Anyone who has lived through the hell of Madrid with his eyes, his nerves, his heart and his stomach—and then pretends to be objective, is a liar." However, as Paul Preston demonstrates, it was possible to combine high professional standards with a passionate belief in the Spanish Republic, though this belief brought much sadness in its wake. "We left our hearts there," wrote Herbert Matthews.

Paul Preston has written a book that will be valuable not only as a key work of reference, but also as a moving testimony to those who had the courage to bring Spain's story to the world. ▀

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