

Culture Books

# Playing right into Franco's hands

*Saul David* admires a brilliant study of the 1939 coup that curtailed the Spanish civil war but set up a Fascist reign of terror

## THE LAST DAYS OF THE SPANISH REPUBLIC

by Paul Preston



400pp, William Collins, £25, ebook £11.99

★★★★★

It is one of history's great ironies that the military coup of March 1939, which hastened the end of the Spanish Civil War, was remarkably similar to the Nationalist insurrection that had begun the conflict three years earlier.

Both sets of plotters alleged that the Republican government was the puppet of Moscow and on the brink of establishing a communist dictatorship.

Yet in neither case – as Paul Preston explains in his masterly and intensely moving account of the last days of the Spanish Republic – was that charge justified. Moreover, the rebels had very different objectives. Those of 1936 hoped (and, in the person of General Franco, eventually managed) to replace the Left-leaning Republic with a Right-wing dictatorship; in 1939, on the other hand, the coup leaders were anti-communist Republicans who recognised that the war was lost and wanted to bring it to a speedy, bloodless and honourable conclusion. They would only achieve the first of those aims.

To the uninitiated, the sheer number of different political groups on the Republican side alone – revolutionary anarchists, communists, socialists and centrists, not to mention their various acronyms (CNT, PCE, PSOE and UGT, to name just four) – makes the narrative of the Spanish Civil War devilishly hard to follow. Yet in Preston, author of several award-winning books on the

conflict, the reader could not hope for a more sure-footed guide.

He identifies three main players in “this avoidable humanitarian tragedy that cost many thousands of lives and ruined tens of thousands more”. Dr Juan Negrin, the prime minister of the Republic, was the “victim” of the coup, which was led with a “remarkable combination of cynicism, arrogance and selfishness” by Colonel Segismundo Casado, the commander of the Republican Army of the Centre; then there was the “culpable naivety” of the socialist academic Julián Besteiro, who gave the coup its intellectual validity.

For the Republicans, the beginning of the end had been the loss of Catalonia to General Franco's Nationalist forces in January 1939. Negrin knew that the war was lost, but reasoned that a show of resistance was necessary to achieve a negotiated peace and the evacuation of the most endangered politicians, as well as guarantees for the safety of the civilian population left behind.

It was now that he promoted a number of communists, not to prepare for a communist dictatorship, but because they had proved themselves to be the staunchest defenders of the Republic and were the only political group he could still rely on.

The motives of Casado and his confederates were less selfless. Mostly career soldiers, they “harboured the vain hope that there could be a peace settlement arranged with Francoist officers with whom they had been educated in military academies”, and thereby they might keep their posts in the post-war Spanish army.

The conspirators naively accepted Franco's verbal assurances that, in return for a Republican surrender, he would spare all but



Hail to the heroes! A 1937 pro-Republican poster printed by the anarchist CNT trade union

“criminals” and give free passage to any political opponents who wanted to leave. He did neither, and thousands were subsequently executed

or imprisoned. The author rejects the claim by some historians that Casado was a British agent. But he was “certainly in touch” with British

diplomats who “at the very least” encouraged his efforts to end the war. Why? Because, explains Preston, the British prime minister Neville Chamberlain “was anxious to see the Spanish war concluded as soon as possible since its continuation threatened his policy of appeasement”. He became, therefore, a tacit supporter of the rebel Nationalist cause and his rapid recognition of Franco's regime, after the coup and before Casado's surrender, did much to facilitate the bloody Nationalist backlash.

Unlike Casado, Besteiro refused to leave Spain because he assumed that socialists would not be persecuted, believing “fondly”, writes Preston, “that the experience of those who had displayed anti-communist attitudes within the Republican zone was something upon which the Francoists would want to draw for the reconstruction of Spain”. Arrested and sentenced to 30 years' hard labour, he was quickly disabused. He died in captivity.

Casado never realised his dream of returning to Spain to supplant Franco. Yet he would go to his grave without regret, insisting his actions were necessary and honourable. Preston differs. “With the collusion of Casado,” he writes, “Franco was able to pursue his basic aim of inflicting reprisals on the greatest number of Republicans.”

Britons today know far less than they should about the Spanish Civil War, not least because, in many people's eyes, the “wrong” side won. Our knowledge would be poorer still but for Preston's indefatigable scholarship, elegant prose and impeccable judgment.



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## Orgies and spam sandwiches

Clichés should have been pruned from this Sixties romp, says *Duncan White*

### FREYA

by Anthony Quinn



464pp, Jonathan Cape, £14.99, ebook £10.99

★★★★★

The premise of Anthony Quinn's fourth novel seems irresistible. Freya Wyley, a young woman in the vanguard of second-wave feminism, carves out a career on chauvinistic Fleet Street as Britain enters the Swinging Sixties. It's a romp through postwar Britain, from spam sandwiches to sex parties.

The novel opens with a cinematic set piece: crowds through the streets of London to celebrate VE Day. Freya encounters a friend of a friend, Nancy Holdaway, a callow girl of whom she is at first dismissive (Freya has served as a Wren) but they bond during the nocturnal revelries. At Oxford, they later cement their friendship and confide their ambitions: Nancy wants to be a novelist, Freya a journalist.

As a student, Freya gets entangled with three men: Nat Fane, a theatrical dandy keen on S&M; Alex McAndrew, an enigmatic, handsome Scot; and Robert Cosway, political and charming but also needy and duplicitous. Like Bathsbeba Everdene, Freya will have to pick one out of the three. Or will she? Can Nancy endure her friend's escapades?

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## This week in Books



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### KATHERINE HOWARD

by Josephine Wilkinson



320pp, John Murray, £20, ebook £13.99

★★★★★

Was Katherine Howard a loose woman? Historians have certainly assumed so. David Starkey wrote that she “knew how to attract men with a skill beyond her teenage years”. Wilkinson's meticulous biography of Henry VIII's ill-fated fifth wife argues that attention paid to her as a child by men such as her music teacher was tantamount to sexual abuse. *Suzannah Lipscomb*

### THE HOUSE OF FAME

by Oliver Harris



326pp, Jonathan Cape, £12.99, ebook £12.99

★★★★★

Most crime writers try to make their characters believable by keeping them embedded in plausible situations, like flies stuck in a treacle; but there are some characters who only seem real when they're in the most outlandish scenarios. One of these is DC Nick Belsey, the cop with superbly demonic chutzpah who crashes police cars while drunk. *Jake Kerridge*

### THE BLACK PRINCE OF FLORENCE

by Catherine Fletcher



336pp, Bodley Head, £20, ebook £9.99

★★★★★

This painstaking study is the first retelling in 200 years of the life of Alessandro de' Medici, the illegitimate son of Lorenzo de' Medici by a slave woman of African descent. Nicknamed *il Moro* (“the Moor”), Alessandro rose to become, in his early twenties, the first ever duke of Florence. His assassins declared him a tyrant, and the story stuck, but Fletcher reassesses. *Frances Wilson*

### THE BLADE ARTIST

by Irvine Welsh



288pp, Jonathan Cape, £12.99, ebook £9.49

★★★★★

Welsh has written nearly a dozen novels, but whatever he does, it is judged against his provocative 1993 debut, *Trainspotting*. This is partly Welsh's own fault, since he returns to those characters again and again. This latest novel spins a thriller out of Frank Begbie, one of his nastiest creations. It's lean and propulsive, but the “ominous hints” are as subtle as a punch. *Orlando Bird*

### PENGUINS, PINEAPPLES AND PANGOLINS

by Claire Cock-Starkey



192pp, British Library, £12.99

★★★★★

Claire Cock-Starkey's charming miscellany documents the awe felt by European travellers on first seeing pineapples or exotic creatures such as the dodo, the dolphin, the duck-billed platypus (“the beak of a Duck engrafted on the head of a quadruped”) and the manatee (“It has breasts and privities like a woman... The flesh of it eats much like Pork”). *Iona McLaren*

### SPUTNIK'S GUIDE TO LIFE ON EARTH

by Frank Cottrell Boyce



352pp, Macmillan, £9.99

★★★★★

The inspiration for this touching children's novel is the story of Laika, a stray Moscow dog sent up into space by the Russians in the rocket Sputnik II in 1957. There was never any plan for Laika to come back, and, indeed, she didn't. But what if she didn't die? What if she met someone up there and told them about the wonders of Earth? *Tim Auld*

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www.londonbookandscreenweek.co.uk/event/an-evening-with-julian-fellowes

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