

*PERFIDIOUS ALBION*  
*Britain and the Spanish Civil War*

Paul Preston

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**T**his is the latest book from the Clapton Press, a small imprint specialising in Spain and Latin America. They have brought back into the public domain many important works, long out of print, particularly valuable eye-witness accounts of the Spanish Civil War. The author of this work, Paul Preston, was until recently a Professor at the LSE for many years and is an acknowledged expert on Spain.

He provides us with a valuable account of how mistaken UK government policy was toward Spain in the 30s. Not only that, how perverse and partisan the advice reaching the government was from its own representatives locally. These were people who had – at best – a very superficial understanding of the events they were witnessing. For them, it all followed a Comintern play-book: the monarchy toppled; a weak interim government (comparable with Kerensky, surely); and reports of instability and atrocities (the former not contested, but the latter open to challenge). All leading, finally, to the election victory of the Popular Front in February 1936, something they confidently predicted was akin to Lenin arriving at the Helsinki Station.

Two figures loom large in the narrative, Sir Henry Chilton and Norman King. Both were career diplomats. Chilton, the UK Ambassador *in situ* in 1936, was, according to contemporary historian Antony Beevor, 'a blatant admirer of the nationalists and preferred to stay in Hendaye [to which the Embassy had been evacuated] rather than return to Madrid' while it was still under Republican control.<sup>1</sup>

Norman King, Consul-General in Barcelona, wrote a long report in November 1936 about 'atrocities in Spain' for the Foreign Office which included the following: 'the Spaniards are – for the most part – still a race of blood-thirsty savages, with a thin veneer of culture in times of peace'. (p. 19) Prior to giving this advice, King entertained poet Stephen Spender to dinner. Spender noted that 'without enquiring about my political feelings, he [King] told me in a spirit of camaraderie and with great assurance that he wished Companys, the constitutional president of the Catalan Republic . . . had been shot after the rising of 1934'. The other guests – 'several other representatives of British

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<sup>1</sup> Antony Beevor, *The Battle for Spain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006) p. 13

business' — then proceeded to spend the meal 'insulting the Spanish, in particular the Catalans; their food, women, behaviour, as husbands, ways of bringing up their children ("never send an English child amongst those corrupt little beasts"), their literature, their language ("insipid, bastard Latin"), their painting, all were discussed and nothing was too bad to say about any of them.' (pp. 53-4)

Spender, a leftist, was dismayed by such behaviour. But this was the language of the UK political class at the highest level. Cabinet Secretary Maurice Hankey stated on 20 July 1936:

in the present state of Europe, with France and Spain menaced by Bolshevism, it is not inconceivable that before long it might pay us to throw in our lot with Germany and Italy, and the greater our detachment from European entanglements the better.

Were France and Spain menaced by Bolshevism? And what, if anything, had Companys done to deserve being shot out of hand? Answering the former assertion, it appears Hankey regarded Leon Blum (Prime Minister of France June 1936 to June 1937) as little more than a communist stooge, even though his government had been appointed by President Lebrun, an adherent of the centre-right Democratic Republican Alliance. Hankey appears unaware, or unconcerned, that then (as now) France had a powerful, xenophobic, far right, deeply hostile to the values of the republic. Blum was the leader of the Socialist Party (not a communist) and his Popular Front was a grouping of socialists and liberals that sought, successfully, to prevent the election of a fascist government. Further, Blum adopted a policy of neutrality toward Spain, so cannot be considered a communist collaborator.

As for Companys, there were plenty of people with more rounded views about him than the officials Hankey relied on. For Irish writer and politician Peadar O'Donnell, the explanation for the extraordinary animosity to the government in Catalonia lay in its hostile attitude toward agrarian landlords.<sup>2</sup> Given that most of the Spanish officer class had estates, it was only natural that they would rebel against the anti-landowner Catalonian government. In this context, the appeal, by Franco, to religious opinion, and his framing of the rebellion as a struggle against 'communism', was merely a political tactic. A little later Máirín Mitchell, in *Storm Over Spain* (1937), would observe that problems in Spain arose primarily from hunger, and sometimes even starvation, in undeveloped, arid regions (many of which were owned by the families of the officer class). Other, positive accounts of Companys came from John Langdon-

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<sup>2</sup> O'Donnell, a Sinn Fein TD for Donegal in the 1920s, later published *Salud! An Irishman in Spain* (1937).

Davies, a *News Chronicle* correspondent and former Labour parliamentary candidate, and Geoffrey Brereton, later the author of *Inside Spain* (1938).

The clue to Companys' martyrdom at the hands of Chilton, King and Hankey was their obsession with 'British interests'. Or rather, their excessively narrow and short-term definition of those interests. A great deal of UK capital was bound up in Spanish manufacturing, notably in shipbuilding where Vickers, Armstrong Whitworth, and John Brown held 40% of the capital and provided 5% of the workforce for the company Sociedad Espanola de Construccion Naval. There were many similar examples in mining, manufacturing, and railways, all of which were threatened by Spanish control being exerted by a proactive, centre-left government. Hence the immense hostility noted by Spender amongst 'representatives of British business' at his dinner in late 1936. For those businessmen and their diplomatic colleagues, exercising balance, accuracy, pragmatism – and taking the long view – was simply not relevant.<sup>3</sup>

It took quite a while for most of the UK political class to see beyond these people's rather obvious prejudices. Winston Churchill was typical in this respect, finally coming down unequivocally against a Franco victory in late 1938. By this point — post-Munich — he realised that a Franco victory would be bad for the UK and France. (Initially, his comments had been much more guarded, reflecting the suspicion that the advent of the Popular Front would quickly lead to the establishment of a Communist state.)<sup>4</sup>

Such changes of heart came far too late in the day. Franco won. What was left of the UK's role in Spain — aside from pro-Franco apologists — was the record of those who volunteered to assist the beleaguered Republican government, and the writings of George Orwell. On the former point, UK veterans of the International Brigade included trade unionist Jack Jones, actor James Robertson Justice and author Laurie Lee. Amongst many others can be found Dr Norman Bethune a Canadian communist and surgeon, who established a field medical hospital. Preston's book provides much additional information about such volunteers, including the participation of Sir George Young (1908-1960), 'an authority on Spanish history and politics', who ran a University Ambulance Unit.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> There is a contradiction here: if Hankey *et al* had really wanted 'detachment from European entanglements' the UK wouldn't have held, or zealously defended, investments in Europe in the first place.

<sup>4</sup> Belatedly recognized in a piece published in *The Daily Telegraph* on 20 December 1938.

<sup>5</sup> Whose son – also named George – was a Conservative MP 1974-2015 and cabinet minister under John Major and David Cameron. He now sits in the House of Lords as Lord Young of Cookham.

On Orwell, chapter 6 provides the reader with a significant critique of his *Homage to Catalonia*. For most people, this is the book they will read about the Spanish Civil War. And even if they haven't read it, it is the one they will have heard about. Preston demonstrates that, although a capable piece of travel writing, Orwell's book is inaccurate and cannot be relied upon as a documentary account. Further: Orwell shows in many instances a lack of common sense, particularly when judging the actions of the Republican (and Catalanian) governments. He fails to appreciate the context within which they operated, has insufficient information to make his case and prior prejudice colours his views.

Orwell's anti-communism – to which he returned with a vigour in *Animal Farm* and *1984* – make him an unreliable critic of the tribulations faced by Companys and the many democrats of all types who flocked to defend Spain. He should be treated with caution, and better sources accessed. Therein lies the importance of Preston's book, which is a welcome addition to the bibliography of the Spanish Civil War.

Simon Matthews writes on cultural and political history. His latest book, *Everything and the Kitchen Sink: UK Film, Music and TV Before The Beatles* will be published by Oldcastle Books in 2025.