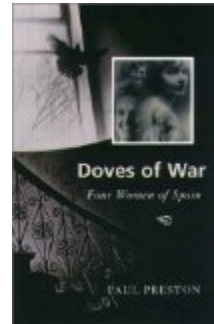


Paul Preston. *Doves of War: Four Women of Spain*. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003. x + 469 pp. \$30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-55553-560-5.

Reviewed by Jennifer G. Mathers (Department of International Politics, University of Wales, Aberystwyth)

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Women and the Spanish Civil War

The literature about women and war is both substantial and rapidly growing. Scholarship in this area encompasses those works which make use of women's involvement in conflict to advance theoretical claims, as well as those which explicitly advocate either expanded or reduced roles for women in militaries. But perhaps the largest body of writing on this subject is composed of the histories, biographies and memoirs of women who have participated in some aspect of war. These works seek to uncover women's wartime contributions, which have previously been hidden or overlooked. Paul Preston's book *Doves of War* falls squarely into this last category. As the author himself writes in the prologue, "this book has no theoretical pretensions. Its objective is quite simple—to tell the unknown stories of four remarkable women whose lives were starkly altered by their experiences in the Spanish Civil War" (p. 7).

Preston has chosen to write about four women who differed considerably in their socio-economic backgrounds, political sympathies and the nature of their participation in the Spanish Civil War. Two of his subjects were British (Priscilla Scott-Ellis and Nan Green) and two Spanish (Mercedes Sanz-Bachiller and Margarita Nelken). Two supported the Republicans while the other two were closely connected with leading Nationalist figures. The author adopts a biographical approach to his subjects, and takes great care to relate each woman's wartime experiences to the rest of her life. His use of diaries and letters gives the book a strong sense of immediacy and intimacy and his extensive knowledge of this

period enables him to present each woman in a wider social and historical context. The result is a book that is extremely rich in detail and contains many fascinating insights into events and controversies of the time from both Republican and Nationalist perspectives.

The first of the four "doves" presented to the reader is Priscilla Scott-Ellis, one of only two British women to volunteer on the side of Franco. Born into the aristocracy, Scott-Ellis grew up in a castle, waited on by servants, educated by governesses and enjoyed the frenetic social life of a debutante in 1930s London. She absorbed and accepted, apparently without question, the conservative political views of her family and social class, but her decision to go to Spain to nurse the Nationalist wounded was influenced by her desire to be near the man she loved (a member of the Spanish royal family fighting with Franco's forces) rather than reflecting a personal commitment to fascism. As Preston points out, Scott-Ellis's "reasons for going to Spain had little to do with the real issues being fought out there" (p. 34). But while she travelled to war in considerable luxury (a trip which included a shopping spree in Paris on the way to Spain), Scott-Ellis soon experienced the hardships and witnessed the horrors of nursing in a field hospital near the front lines.

Nan Green also followed a man to war, but for her the decision to leave family and friends behind in Britain was the result of a deep ideological commitment with personal considerations very much secondary. Green was a staunch member of the Communist Party of Great Britain

whose political views were a complete rejection of the middle-class values and social snobbery of her upbringing. Some months after her husband had gone to Spain as an ambulance driver, she placed their two young children in boarding school and set off for war herself. Green was soon helping to set up and administer hospitals to treat the wounded close to the front lines in whatever shelter might be available, including caves. She also found herself caught up in some of the petty rivalries and power struggles which took place among the Republican supporters, and was falsely accused of the political crime of disloyalty to the Communist Party.

Mercedes Sanz-Bachiller was a deeply compassionate and religious woman whose prominence in Nationalist Spain owed a great deal to her position as the wife of Onesimo Redondo, a principal figure in Spanish fascism. Within months of her husband's death in the war, she became "one of the two most important women in the rebel zone of war-torn Spain" (p. 206). Moved by the plight of those made destitute by the conflict, Sanz-Bachiller created a welfare organisation (Auxilio de Invierno) which provided for all the victims of the war, both Republican and Nationalist. Preston highlights the political risks of such nonpartisan humanitarianism and describes in some detail the bitter rivalry between Sanz-Bachiller and Pilar Primo de Rivera, the head of Seccion Femenina, the women's section of the Spanish Falange.

Margarita Nelken was an art critic, writer and politician. She is the only one of the four women in the book whose involvement in the Spanish Civil War was unconnected to any man but instead reflected entirely her own passionately held political views. Nelken was a cosmopolitan intellectual, who defied social convention in her private life (by giving birth to two children out of

wedlock and living with a married man) as well as in her political views (advocating equal rights for women and social justice for the landless peasantry). She was quite a bit older than Scott-Ellis, Green or Sanz-Bachiller and was in her forties by the time civil war broke out in Spain. Nelken's main contribution to the Republican war effort lay not in nursing the wounded or feeding widows and orphans but in acting as a political leader, using connections, pressure and rhetoric to keep up morale and ensure that essential services continued to operate. In some respects, the most intriguing passages in Preston's treatment of Nelken's story are his descriptions of the vilification she endured (from both left and right) which owed more to being regarded as a woman who didn't know her place than to the political views she expressed.

The book concludes with a short epilogue which draws together some of the book's themes and makes comparisons between the experiences of these four women. In this final chapter, the author also offers some discussion of the position of women in Spain in the 1930s. Although Preston remarks that "the full story of the partial emancipation and subsequent repression of women in 1930s Spain has not yet found its historian" (p. 413), it is unfortunate that he did not make more use of the works which have been published about women in the Spanish Civil War to set the stories of these four "doves" into that context, which could have helped to deepen the reader's appreciation of their experiences. It would also have been useful if such a context-setting chapter had appeared at the beginning of the book rather than at the end. Nevertheless, this book does make an important contribution to the literatures about women's participation in war and about the Spanish Civil War, and scholars of both subjects will find much to interest them in this volume.

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