



El rey patriota:

Alfonso XIII y la nación.

By Javier Moreno Luzón

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El rey patriota: Alfonso XIII y la nación. By Javier Moreno Luzón. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2023. ISBN 978-84-19392-11-4. 589pp, 31 pages of photographs. €25.

Javier Moreno Luzón's *El rey patriota* is the culmination of his work on the Spanish monarchy and King Alfonso XIII (r. 1886–1931). Focussing on the cultural history of the monarchy during a long, eventful and troubled reign, it explains how the monarchy was intertwined with not just politics, but with religion, festivals, sports and leisure, and the very notion of “Spanishness.” In doing so, Moreno Luzón—of the Complutense University in Madrid—offers a finely-drawn portrait of a king who struggled with the issues of his time, but whose monarchy was fated with being overthrown in a republican revolution. The book also provides a fine model for investigation of culture and monarchy in late modern societies.

Alfonso XIII reigned in Spain from birth since his father, King Alfonso XII, had died during Queen Maria Christina's pregnancy. He played an active personal role in addressing issues such as the repercussions of Spain's defeat in a war against the United States in 1898 and the loss of most of Spain's remaining colonies; debates about national “regeneration;” Spain's position during the First World War; continuing challenges from republicans, anarchists and regionalists; and the advent of a dictatorial regime in 1923. Yet Alfonso remains less familiar than many contemporary monarchs, and he has sometimes been relegated to the background by English scholars.

Of only three or four biographies of Alfonso XIII in English, the most recent was the 1963 work of the pro-Franco Charles Petrie. General histories give scant attention to the king. For instance, John Crow's *Spain* (reprinted in 2005), simply states that when Alfonso assumed his full powers as monarch in 1902, Spain “stood on the threshold of an epoch promising greatness,” but that the king “was not equal to his responsibility” (Crow 256). William D. Phillips Jr and Carla Rahn Phillips' *A Concise History of Spain* (2010) mentions several key events of the reign, but undertakes no real assessment of the monarch. Spanish scholars meanwhile have been divided between those who view Alfonso as inappropriately exercising his power and favouring reactionary and oligarchical interests, versus those who judge him a traditionalist and idealist trapped and defeated by historical circumstances.

Modern Spanish monarchs are finally becoming better covered in English scholarship. On Alfonso XIII, Teresa González-Aja's “Sport, Nationalism and Militarism,” in

The International Journal of the History of Sport (2011), pointed to the multiple facets of the monarch's persona. Richard Meyer Forsting's fine *Raising Heirs to the Throne in Nineteenth-Century Spain* (2018) explored the ways that the military officers and clerics responsible for Alfonso's education moulded his disposition to conservative ideas and factions. *Monarchy and Liberalism in Spain* (2021), edited by David San Narciso, Margarita Barral-Martínez, and Carolina Armenteros, has been a very welcome study of sovereigns from 1780 to 1931, arguing that rulers such as Alfonso were more progressive than often assumed. The essay on Alfonso XIII in their volume was authored by Moreno Luzón.

Moreno Luzón himself edited a pioneering reassessment of the king in 2003—*Alfonso XIII: un político en el trono*—and his *Modernizing the Nation*, translated into English in 2012, is a wide-ranging consideration of Spanish history during Alfonso's reign, pivoting on political developments. Now Moreno Luzón's *El rey patriota* focusses more directly on the king himself. The title points to patriotism and the king's own absolute identification with the Spanish nation as the key to his persona and reign. Moreno Luzón's chapters often highlight a particular event or ceremony. Some relate specifically to the dynasty, including the unveiling of a memorial to Alfonso XII in 1902 and Alfonso XIII's wedding to Princess Victoria Eugenia of Battenberg in 1906. Others show the king setting his imprint on a particular version of Spanish culture: the inauguration in 1917 of an annual Fiesta de la Raza in honour of the Hispanic "race," the consecration of the country to the Sacred Heart of Jesus in 1919, and the reburial of remains of the medieval hero El Cid in 1921. Yet other chapters feature Alfonso's actions in a national and international context, such as a visit to one of Spain's poorest regions and the opening of the Seville World's Fair. Moreno Luzón stresses the importance of rituals and "monarchical scenography" (28), cultural and propagandistic initiatives that placed the sovereign at the centre of national attention (and that made use of new technologies such as the cinema). Publicity and performance were everywhere deployed by the monarch and his supporters in efforts to assure the king's popularity and influence.

Moreno Luzón concludes that Alfonso showed acute intelligence, rapid decision-making and great dedication, but was impressionable, vain, a playboy, and obsequious to the Catholic clergy. He rejects the idea of other scholars that Alfonso's monarchy was doomed from the outset, and demonstrates how the king initially managed to revivify the institution. With deft comparisons to other monarchies, he argues that Alfonso was pursuing parallel strategies to peers in other countries—Spain's monarchy was not an exceptional case in Europe, despite its specific traits. Alfonso's version of nationalism was

a “fusion between the crown and the nation” buttressed by belief in a strong, united, Catholic Spain that both was a European power and, despite the *desastre* of 1898, should remain an international one (523). The military was primordial to Alfonso’s project, the monarch a “soldier-king” promoting the army as a pillar of national regeneration and an exemplar of loyalty, discipline, and sacrifice. The author indeed refers to the “consubstantiation between nation, army and Catholic faith” with the monarchy (348).

Moreno Luzón’s narrative moves chronologically through Alfonso’s reign, while it gives due attention to continuing themes such as the complex parliamentary manoeuvres of rival parties, the roles of the military and church, colonialism, regionalism, Alfonso’s travels, and social questions. It also assesses why the monarchy toppled in 1931 (though to be restored in 1975). The volume gives ample background for those not experts on Spanish history and, even with its great length, is thoroughly engaging. A family tree of the monarchy, a list of the prime ministers under Alfonso, and a summary chronology would have been helpful.

El rey patriota stands as one of the most comprehensive and original studies available of any modern king, with an approach to culture and monarchy that might well be adopted by other scholars. It deserves translation into English.

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