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Review of Moreno, J. (2023) El Rey Patriota. Alfonso XIII y la nación
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Citation

Storm, H. J. (2023). Review of Moreno, J. (2023) El Rey Patriota. Alfonso XIII y la nación. *Bulletin For Spanish And Portuguese Historical Studies*, 48(1), 247-249. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3714637>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies

Journal of the Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies

Volume 48
Issue 1

Review 5

2023

Review of Javier Moreno Luzón, *El rey patriota. Alfonso XIII y la nación*

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Recommended Citation

Storm, Eric (2023) "Review of Javier Moreno Luzón, *El rey patriota. Alfonso XIII y la nación*," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 48 : Iss. 1 , Review 5.

Available at:

<https://asphs.net/article/review-of-javier-moreno-luzon-el-rey-patriota-alfonso-xiii-y-la-nacion>

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Moreno Luzón, Javier. *El rey patriota. Alfonso XIII y la nación*. Barcelona: Galaxia Gutenberg, 2023. 592 pp. + 30 ill.

In 1902, Alfonso XIII ascended to the throne at the age of 16. Strongly impressed by the defeat in the Spanish-American War, the new king would dedicate himself to the regeneration of the patria. Even though his powers as a constitutional monarch were limited, he played a vital role in Spain's political life during the first three decades of the twentieth century. When the *turno pacífico* between Conservatives and Liberals began to falter, he became the supreme arbiter of Spanish politics; after each political crisis it was his task to nominate the next prime minister. From the very start, he also managed to have a say in the appointment of high military officers, and, thanks to his close dynastic contacts, the king played a crucial role in the country's foreign policy and as such was partly responsible for the disastrous campaign in Morocco. After losing his faith in the parliamentary system, he endorsed the 1923 coup that led to the military dictatorship of Miguel Primo de Rivera. When in 1931 the return to constitutional normalcy led to a republican victory in the municipal elections, the king decided to leave the country. He was only 44 years old when Spain ceased to be a monarchy. Ten years later he died in a hotel in Rome.

In his biography, Javier Moreno Luzón not just gives a convincing portrait of the king's life, but also uses it as a lens to provide a magnificent analysis of a turbulent part of Spanish history. The book forms the culmination of the author's earlier investigations into the functioning of the political system of the Restoration and Spanish nationalism, as well as into more specific topics, such as national commemorations and the scouting movement. He regularly situates events and developments in an international context; thus, he does not present Spain as unique and different.

Another strength of the book is its composition. The sixteen chapters have a clear theme, but also follow a loose chronological order, leading to a very fluent narrative. Thus, a chapter that examines the nation-building role of the royal trips to the different parts of the country during the early years of his reign is followed by a chapter on the king's activities in favor of the nation's cultural heritage, acquiring for instance the dwelling of Cervantes in Valladolid and turning it into a museum.

Alfonso XIII quickly succeeded in gaining a broad popularity—not just by the ease with which he conversed with all sorts of people, or the courage he showed when an anarchist tried to kill him on his wedding day, but also because many people projected their hopes for the future onto the new king. The decline of his fortunes also receives a detailed treatment. Thus, in the years immediately after the First World War, the king's visit to Las Hurdas, showing his concern for the fate of even the most miserable of his subjects, earned him widespread praise. But in the next passage the author shows how Alfonso's subsequent stay in the fancy French beach resort of Deauville—where he spent his time playing polo, flirting with women and gambling in casinos—severely damaged his reputation. Moreno Luzón also highlights the contrast between the king's

participation in the grandiose centenary of the Cathedral of Burgos, in which he praised El Cid, whose remains were reburied in this Catholic temple, as a precursor of the *Tercios de Flandes*, and the fate of thousands of ordinary soldiers who succumbed shortly after in Annual, where the Spanish colonial army suffered a humiliating defeat in 1921.

Even though the author does not frequently engage with historiographical debates, *El rey patriota* offers a number of fascinating insights. He shows that in the early years the king embodied the hopes of regeneration of many different layers of society, uniting large parts of the population. Although Alfonso was always close to the army and the Church, he actively encouraged various progressive initiatives to reform the country. He particularly supported the social-liberal government of José Canalejas (1910-12) and attempted to integrate moderate Catalanists such as Francesc Cambó, republicans such as Melquiades Álvarez and left-wing intellectuals, such as those of the Institución Libre de Enseñanza, into the political system. The early years of the First World War, in which Spain remained neutral, also gained him an international reputation. Alfonso XIII and Queen Victoria Eugenia took myriad humanitarian initiatives in favor of prisoners of war, the repatriation of the wounded and establishing contacts between family members on both sides of the front. The king even tried to mediate between the warring parties.

The year 1917, nonetheless, was a real turning point. Widespread social and political unrest undermined the stability of the Restoration regime, while the Russian Revolution made a lasting impression on the king. His fear of a revolution drove him into the hands of Catholic conservatives and army hardliners. In 1919 he dedicated Spain to the Sacred Heart of Christ. His subsequent support for the military dictatorship and his unrelenting patriotism did not unite the population anymore, but rather increasingly alienated Basque and Catalan nationalists, the left, and even moderate liberal politicians. Some corruption affairs, his frivolous lifestyle, and the many rumors about his extramarital affairs further undermined his popularity. The elections of April 1931 became a referendum on the monarchy. Whereas in 1917 Alfonso XIII had threatened to step down in favor of his eldest son, this was not on his mind again. His two eldest sons suffered from hemophilia, but his third son Juan (the grandfather of the current king) was a healthy boy of seventeen. Was he blinded by his idea of having a providential mission and his increasingly narrow conception of patriotism? What if he had realized that his time was over, deciding to abdicate during the fifteen months that passed between the end of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and the arrival of the Second Republic? Would the monarchy have survived? Could it even have stopped the political polarization that led to the Civil War and the long dictatorship of Francisco Franco?

Even though personally I would have preferred some more attention to the private life of the king—his youth, his close relationship with his mother, his liaisons—*El rey patriota* provides a nuanced and very readable portrait of both his life and times. It is recommendable for experts on the Restoration era,

and it provides an excellent introduction to a crucial period in the history of Spain for undergraduate students and those with an interest in modern Spain. Hopefully, the book will soon be available in English as well.

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