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Review of: Jimmy Burns, *La Roja: How Soccer Conquered Spain and How Spanish Soccer Conquered the World*

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Jimmy Burns, *La Roja: How Soccer Conquered Spain and How Spanish Soccer Conquered the World*. New York: Nation Books, 2012. 384pp.

This is a journalistic account of the history of football/soccer in Spain, or as the U.S. subtitle so aptly puts it: “how soccer conquered Spain and how Spanish soccer conquered the world.” Jimmy Burns is an established author on this topic and is well qualified to write about Spanish football. He does an exceptional job, though with slight reservations.

The book has a both a preface and an introduction. The preface gives a capsule history of then Coach Luis Aragonés 2008 nicknaming of Spain’s national team *la roja* and its historical and political resonance. Burns’ introduction is more personal, describing how he came to love soccer. His father did not like soccer and his mother, despite being a *madridista*, only took him to bullfights. He was occasionally taken to Real Madrid games by a friend of Gregorio, Burn’s grandfather. He only describes his grandfather as “an eminent doctor who had kicked the ball around in his youth”.(xvi) This grandfather was Gregorio Marañón.

Published before this summer’s Euros, Burns gives an engaging account of Spanish football and football in Spain (not necessarily the same) culminating in the 2008 European and 2010 World championships. It ranges widely, from the first games played by the English at Rio Tinto to the influence of non-Spaniards on the development of the game. Most of the famous players are here as well as an interesting dissection of recent national team coaches: Clemente, Aragonés, and del Bosque. There are descriptions of colorful figures such as Francisco Bru, who wore a holstered pistol when he refereed.(56) As a former player (and current referee), I thoroughly recommend this book as a fast-paced history of Spanish soccer. But, if that was all it was, it would be of little interest to the readers of *The Bulletin*. What causes this book to be of interest to those deprived souls who could not care less about the beautiful game or *la roja* is the way Burns intertwines soccer and Spain’s twentieth-century history. For example, Francisco Giner de los Ríos was a major proponent of soccer in education. He believed that soccer would appeal across class lines and displace bullfighting, “a legacy of primitiveness and repression.”(44)

Burns’ narrative uses the binary division of the “Two Spains.” It is a device that makes for compelling reading, but it obscures the historical

complexity of events: “Railways came belatedly south of the Pyrenees, so many parts of Spain, not least the South, remained in a primitive state of underdevelopment.”(11) He also uses problematic phrases and anachronisms: “King Fernando of Castile, Saint Fernando, the Spanish monarch who began Andalusia’s fight back against occupation by Arab Islamists in the thirteenth century...” Aside from the loaded expression “fight back,” there is the anachronistic use of Islamists. A modern variant of the Black Legend appears in his description of General Millán Astray: “the personification of violence, cruelty and fanatical obsession with death that hangs over much of Spanish history.”(94) I realize Burns is writing for a popular audience, yet some measure of a more sober language about Spanish history would have been welcomed.

The binary is markedly evident in his contrast between the sport during the Franco years and after Franco’s death. Burns begins on page one with the charge that the Franco regime politicized soccer, “it separated us soccer lovers into democrats and fascists.” (The reader is assumed to know that Burns, as both an Englishman and a longtime fan of FC Barcelona, is clearly on the side of the democrats — after all, this is a book published by *The Nation*, that bastion of American progressive opinion.) Detailing the use of the earlier nickname *la furia española*, Burns cements the nickname to fascism, describing it as “part of the regime’s militarist nomenclature.”(2) He culminates this with an account of the reactionary values ascribed to *la furia española* by quoting from a 1939 issue of *Arriba*, “In sport, the *furia* best manifests itself in soccer, a game in which the virility of the Spanish race can find full expression, usually imposes itself, in international contests, over the more technical but less aggressive foreign teams.”(3) While not directly examining gender in quotes like this, Burns continues this gendered depiction of the sport, arguing that Francoism made it into combat: “soccer was to be played as if the ground was a battlefield and the players soldiers. What mattered were courage, sacrifice, and above all the physical annihilation of the opponent. Neither skill nor creativity, let alone fair play, was part of the armory.”(3) Ironically, Burns documents that the first written use of this nickname was in 1920 by a Dutch newspaper. This article also linked it to Spain’s imperial past, but unlike Francoism’s positive portrayal, in the 1920 example linked *la furia roja* negatively to a specific event in Spanish imperialism and military conquest: the 1576 sacking of Antwerp.(59) Burns’ does not fully explain how the Franco regime is responsible for the adoption of this nickname despite its first appearance almost twenty years earlier, this historian wants a closer analysis of this transformation. Furthermore, herein lies another of problem for historians. The presumption is popular audiences do not want references or citations. The lack of these — beyond a small bibliography — make

it difficult to follow up on some very tantalizing statements — such as the two mentioned in this paragraph.

Popular opinion is that supporters of Real Madrid, Franco's chosen team, are at least rightists — if not fascists. Burns sets the record straight by documenting the rise of Vicente del Bosque. Coach of Spain since 2008, he led Spain to its 2010 World Cup triumph (and the 2012 Euros). Little known is that del Bosque, a Real Madrid player from 1970–1984 and then its “permanent” coach from 1999–2003, is the son of a “*rojo*.” Del Bosque described his father to Burns as “a radical, he had progressive ideas. He was caught up in the Spanish Civil War, taken prisoner by the Franco forces, and served a sentence. You see, he was a pure-blooded Republican. He worked as a clerk for the national railways.” After the 2012 Euros, Burns expanded on del Bosque's heritage in an interview with journalist Eoin O'Callahan on the cancelled and missed *Fox Soccer Report*. In a discussion of the book and the success of the Spanish national team, Burns further noted that del Bosque's father was a trade unionist. A Real Madrid player and coach is a man whose own personal history proves that it was not only a team of the political right. Even a diehard *culé* like me respects that.

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