

Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies

Journal of the Association for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies

Volume 46

Issue 1

Review 4

2021

Review of Roberto Villa García, Alexandro Lerroux and the Failure of Spanish Republican Democracy: A Political Biography (1864-1949)

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Recommended Citation

Seidman, Michael (2021) "Review of Roberto Villa García, Alexandro Lerroux and the Failure of Spanish Republican Democracy: A Political Biography (1864-1949)," *Bulletin for Spanish and Portuguese Historical Studies*: Vol. 46 : Iss. 1 , Review 4.

Available at:

<https://asphs.net/article/review-of-roberto-villa-garcia-alexandro-lerroux-and-the-failure-of-spanish-republican-democracy-a-political-biography-1864-1949>

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Villa García, Roberto. *Alexandro Lerroux and the Failure of Spanish Republican Democracy: A Political Biography (1864-1949)*. Translated by Julius Ruiz. *Sussex Studies in Spanish History*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2021. 207 pp + ill.

Once again, Sussex Studies in Spanish History has fulfilled the mission of an outstanding academic press by translating into English this excellent investigation of the major early twentieth-century politician, Alejandro Lerroux. His biographer, Roberto Villa García, continues the recent search for a usable democratic past among Spanish center-right politicians of the Second Republic. A left perspective has generally dismissed centrist politicians as demagogic, conspiratorial, and corrupt.¹ Instead Villa García argues that Lerroux was an arch-pragmatist who, after his early revolutionary period, wanted to build a moderate republic which would include both left and right. He constructed the largest and most successful republican party of early twentieth-century Spain.

Lerroux emerged from modest roots to become a significant and somewhat venal tabloid journalist. This radical republican conceded that the constitutional monarchy offered reformist possibilities. His 1901 transformation into a popular parliamentary deputy from Barcelona was aided by the mutual anti-clerical and republican sympathies among late nineteenth-century anarchists, trade unionists, and other progressives. In Catalonia, he always considered himself a Spanish patriot, hostile to regional separatisms but somewhat more flexible about limited autonomy. This son of an army veterinarian was seldom anti-militarist or anti-imperialist.

As a life-long republican, Lerroux eventually opposed the Primo de Rivera dictatorship and supported the advent of the Second Republic in 1931. Like Georges Clemenceau in neighboring France, Lerroux wished to make the Radical Party the center of a new parliamentary republic of order that would protect private property while integrating Catholics and former monarchists. His biographer argues that this opportunity was missed because of the “revolutionary” policies of the leftist forces of the new regime, which refused to accommodate conservatives and monarchists. In addition, during certain key periods the Left Republican-Socialist alliance failed to maintain public order, individual freedoms, and property rights. It also gratuitously alienated military officers whom, Lerroux believed, a conservative republic could win over. The Left Republican leader, Manuel Azaña, rejected these plans in favor of an alliance with an increasingly

¹ Important exceptions are Nigel Townson, *The Crisis of Democracy in Spain: Centrist Politics under the Second Republic, 1931-1936* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2000) and Stanley Payne, *Alcalá Zamora and the Failure of the Second Republic, 1931-1936* (Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2017).

revolutionary Socialist left. Lerrooux's compromises with the right reminded Azaña of what he considered to be previously failed Restoration practices.

The Socialist-Left Republican coalition of 1931-1933 did alienate conservatives, and Lerrooux's Radicals benefited from the swing to the right in the November 1933 elections. At the same time, he and his party suffered from the meddling of the "scheming" President of the Republic, Niceto Alcalá-Zamora, who attempted to divide the Radicals, the major centrist party (113). By early 1934, the Socialists were planning a revolutionary assault on the center-right republic. Likewise, the CEDA, after 1933 the major party on the right, exhibited a questionable loyalty to the regime. The Second Republic has aptly been called a democracy with too few democrats. Prime Minister Lerrooux's defense of the amnesty of officers who had attempted to overthrow the Republic in the August 1932 *Sanjurjada* showed that his own political maneuvering limited his commitment to republican democracy.

Lerrooux suppressed energetically and enthusiastically the leftist Asturias revolt of October 1934 with armed forces led by General Franco. In this failed revolution over 4,000 persons were killed or wounded. Lerrooux rewarded Franco with the leadership of the Army of Africa. He dismissed the rebels' argument, supported discreetly by Azaña and other left republicans, that the semi-loyal CEDA was an imminent fascist threat. Prime Minister Lerrooux regarded this view as a justification of "a [leftist] patrimonial view of the Republic" (134), which refused its broadening to conservative elements.

Bolstered by his new republic of order, Lerrooux was felled by a relatively minor scandal, the *estraperlo*, whose significance resided not in the revelation of corruption per se but rather in its negative consequences for the conservative republic. His political enemies on the left and right and even some of his coalition partners used the affair to discredit the Radical prime minister. The author details Alcalá-Zamora's and CEDA leader Gil-Robles' unwise maneuvers, which weakened the center and would eventually award power to the Popular Front coalition. Although Lerrooux rejected "fascism," he initially supported the military rebellion of July 1936 which he thought would create a republic on the model of Salazar's Portugal. That country offered the Radical Freemason, whom *franquistas* rejected, exile during the civil war.

As Villa García indicates several times, Clemenceau was a model for the Francophile Lerrooux, as he was for Winston Churchill. However, neither Clemenceau nor Churchill had to operate in the context of early twentieth-century Spain. Political historians—such as Villa García and many others on the left, right, and center—do not give sufficient attention to the socio-economic differences between the Iberian Peninsula and the republics/constitutional monarchies of northwestern Europe. Unlike Spain during its Second Republic,

most of these nations had largely resolved the thorny issues of the relationship between Church and State; agreed to the supremacy of civilians over the military; guaranteed agrarian reform and property rights; and promoted national integration. Placing Spain in this context of relative backwardness would offer political historians a deeper understanding of the failures of the major politicians of the Second Republic, as well as those of the previous semi-constitutional monarchy. This is not to argue that the fate of the Second Republic was predetermined—thus the contingent-laden political perspective of Villa García and other skillful political historians is most valuable. Nonetheless, the inability to settle these longer-term economic, social, and political problems divided Spain and forced a “democratic” Lerroux to ally and sometimes plot with an anti-democratic right. Ultimately, the polarization resulted in an environment where the left and right fought each other in a revolutionary/counterrevolutionary civil war of attrition.

In addition to a very perceptive political analysis, this volume offers readers some revealing photographs of Lerroux (whose visual style resembles French Prime Minister Léon Blum) and his collaborators. The translation by historian Julius Ruiz is first-rate. The book’s quality is such that I pardon the author of “ageism” when he refers to Lerroux during his last tenure as prime minister as “the old man” even though he was only my current age, a youthful 70.

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