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Review of Stanley G. Payne, Nicety Alcala-Zamora: el fracaso de la Republica conservadora

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Payne, Stanley G. *Niceto Alcalá-Zamora: el fracaso de la República conservadora*. Madrid : Fundación para el Análisis y los Estudios Sociales, 2016. 295 pp, illustrations.

The title of this volume skillfully summarizes its argument that Alcalá-Zamora (1877–1949) failed to stabilize the Second Republic. From 1930 to 1936, he was “la figura pública más importante de España” (9). Raised in an atypical liberal but Catholic family which supported both the monarchy and religious freedom, the future president of the Second Republic was honest, hardworking, and precociously talented. Although his Liberal Party favored intervention on the side of the Allies in World War I, Don Niceto was an influential neutralist who correctly believed that entry would be a disaster for Spain. Knowledgeable concerning military affairs, his suggestions as Minister of War in 1922–3 anticipated those of his future political rival, Manuel Azaña, in 1931–33. Like his successor, Alcalá-Zamora insisted on civilian control of the military. He was less perspicacious in his centralist opposition to regional, especially Catalan, autonomy.

In the late 1920s, perhaps influenced by the model of the successful French Third Republic and postwar economic growth, Don Niceto moved towards acceptance of a republic which — he miscalculated — would be conservative. The author is critical of the violent revolutionary pressures which preceded the elections of 1931, although it is hard to imagine that the electorate would have been so quickly consulted without the illegal Republican rebellions and failed *pronunciamentos*. Nevertheless, Payne stimulatingly argues that the “proceso revolucionario,” (53) which culminated in the civil war, began with the abortive insurrections of 1930.

This revolutionary process would often lead Republican governments to tolerate leftist violence more than the rightist variety. Both types were aggravated by the youth bulge in the population and by militarized police forces which were untrained in techniques of crowd control. Anticlerical attacks by the left in 1931 hindered Alcalá-Zamora’s goal of creating a large conservative republican party. Furthermore, this new president of the Republic (1931–36) was rooted in nineteenth century elitist politics and never understood the dynamics of mass politics, especially its revolutionary strains. His jealousy of Alejandro Lerroux prevented Don Niceto from appreciating the Radical Party’s potential to stabilize the Republic. Payne shows how the president unwisely manipulated a minor scandal — *el estraperlo* of 1935 — to discredit this major centrist political party. Likewise, but perhaps with more reason, Alcalá-Zamora distrusted the CEDA and its leader, Gil Robles, whom he feared as a potential *caudillo*. Payne makes the insightful point that Alcalá-Zamora’s refusal to empower Gil Robles discredited whatever remained of the CEDA’s constitutionalism and legitimized the anti-parliamentary extreme right. The president’s rejection of the two major parties of the right and center made him an objective ally of the left in 1935–36.

The 1936 elections on which Alcalá-Zamora irresponsibly insisted led to the victory of the Popular Front, breakdown of public order, and consequent threats to lives and property. Even the French left objected that such flagrant disorder could harm the electoral results of its own Popular Front coalition. Foreign embassies in

Madrid prepared to shelter those threatened by revolutionaries. In May 1936, a month after the leftist Cortes had dismissed him as president, Alcalá-Zamora himself experienced near his charming hometown of Priego “extorsionadores revolucionarios que paraban a los coches privados para sacarles dinero” (241).

As usual, Payne manifests an extraordinary dominance of Spanish and foreign primary and secondary sources. However, I think that greater context—which is often found in the author’s previous works—would help place the Second Republic in perspective. Consolidation of a modern democracy in a country which had formed much of its unity around medieval Catholic Church proved daunting. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century Spain remained the most backward country of Western Europe (Portugal excepted). Corrupt politicians fraudulently manufactured parliamentary majorities, the military intervened regularly and unconstitutionally in civilian politics, regions demanded autonomy, and the Church continued its venerable role as a provider of social services. Unlike their Western European counterparts, Spanish elites permitted clerical education to flourish and did not establish a system of quality public education. While considerable progress occurred in the first third of the twentieth century, illiteracy remained high while industry and agriculture — with hundreds of thousands of impoverished land-hungry peasants — lagged behind the leading powers. Thus, it is not surprising that the anticlerical republicans who dominated during much of the Second Republic blamed Spanish backwardness on an intolerant and long-dominant Church which had legitimized traditionalist elites. No wonder that the lay French Third Republic, victorious in World War I, became a model for the left-center. A rupture with Roman Catholicism has never been easy in modern European nations.

Spanish Catholics did not help themselves by failing to organize effectively at the regime’s beginning. When they did create the mass party of the CEDA, it refused to declare itself republican and thus was suspected of “fascist” subversion or, more precisely as the author indicates, of Salazarist-style authoritarianism. Like the left, the right — including those whom Payne calls “moderate Catholics” — refused to follow the democratic rules of the game. Both sides reproduced political “fragmentation” and the defiance of the constitution, which had also characterized the previous monarchical regime. Thus, the president himself remained reluctant to allow the normal functioning of the parliamentary system and attempted to manipulate it to conform to his own inviable plans.

Payne is frequently convincing in his criticisms of Alcalá-Zamora. The author shows the process by which Alcalá-Zamora evolved from the Spanish Thiers who would establish and stabilize a conservative republic and became the Spanish Kerensky whose missteps would lead to a long civil war and the establishment of a much longer dictatorship. At the same time, Payne demonstrates his subject’s humanitarianism, dignity, and integrity. The president — unlike his nemesis, Franco — was reluctant to use the death penalty. In his postwar exile first in France and then in Argentina, he conducted himself honorably and won the respect of many of his former enemies.

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