

CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

# Amadeu Hurtado: the Catalan Question at the Assembly of the League of Nations

Joan Safont Plumed



Illustrator: [Jesús Galdón](#)

On 10 August 1931, a decree issued by the president of the provisional government of the Spanish Second Republic, Niceto Alcalá-Zamora, appointed lawyer, journalist and parliamentarian Amadeu Hurtado i Miró (1875-1950) as Spanish delegate at the 12th Assembly of the League of Nations [1]. With a long, successful legal career, he was also a lifelong Catalanist and republican, having begun political activity at the turn of the century and gained a seat at the Spanish Lower House as a member for Solidaritat Catalana. At the same time, Hurtado had made a name for himself as a journalist and press editor. A Francophile and admirer of the politician Aristide Briand, as an independent representative elected for the party Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (he had returned to politics at the request of his friend Francesc Macià, who had appointed him minister of his government), his interests had led him to become one of the specialists in international affairs at the new Parliament and, as such, member of the State Committee. On 9 September, Hurtado travelled to Geneva, accompanied by his son Victor, and two days later, while the first National Day of Catalonia (11 September) since the proclamation of the Republic was being celebrated in Barcelona, he arrived in time to attend the Assembly's first sessions [2].

For the Spanish Second Republic, this presence at Geneva was vitally important for the new government's international recognition and endorsement, after the crisis triggered by the airs of great nation that the dictator Primo de Rivera had initially come to Geneva with. His ambition was a permanent seat on the organisation's council and he had stormed out when this was refused, only to come back later with his tail between his legs [3]. The advent of the Republic brought about a change in international politics. The League of Nations was now no longer just a high-level showcase and an occasional foreign policy instrument, as it had been with the previous regime, but was now the central pillar of the Republican government's international politics [4]. Geneva and its multilateral diplomacy became the priority framework for foreign action and the General Assembly was seen as the perfect scenario for deploying the new Republican policy.

Personally, this was not the first time that Hurtado had attended the Assembly of the League of Nations. As he explains in his memoirs, he had gone to Geneva two years running on professional business coinciding with the Assembly's ordinary sessions and had been able to listen to the Committees' debates. In fact, it is likely that he attended them accompanied by his son Víctor, who wrote a chronicle of the Assembly in the journal *Mirador* [5]. However, this time, in the autumn of 1931, he now attended as third delegate and he was chosen as member of the Sixth Committee, concerned with public law and refugees. First of all, Hurtado attended the discussion on the adaptation of the League's general covenant to the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 1928, in which war was outlawed as an instrument for national politics in relations between countries. Precisely, during those days, he had the opportunity to meet his admired Briand, at that time French Minister of Foreign Affairs and a key figure in inter-war international politics. Nobel Peace laureate in 1926, together with the German Chancellor Gustav Stresemann, for their efforts toward reconciliation, he was a prominent advocate of the Europeanism and multilateralism embodied in the League of Nations, whose spirit was considered to be inspired by the French statesman.

For the Spanish Second Republic, Hurtado's presence in Geneva was vital for the new government's international recognition and endorsement, after the crisis triggered by the airs of great nation that the dictator Primo de Rivera had initially come to Geneva with

The other subject included –not by chance– in the Committee's mandate were the rights of minorities, a key issue since the League's formation. A number of attempts had been made to internationalise the Catalan case before the League of Nations, using the instruments created after the Great War to protect national minorities, with disappointing results, as other articles included in this dossier have explained [6]. Now, for the first time, a Catalanist was a member of the official Spanish delegation, while the autonomy promised by the new Republican regime was in the process of being negotiated. In fact, Hurtado had taken part in the legal articulation of the provisional Catalan Government (Generalitat de Catalunya) and approval of the Statute of Autonomy by the Spanish Parliament. His

presence in the delegation at Geneva was clear evidence of one of the most transcendent changes that the Republic had imposed on itself.

This fact required that Hurtado take part in the debate. It was not easy, as he himself says in his memoirs, in which he admits that he spent some difficult hours preparing a speech that he considered particularly sensitive, because of the subject matter and because he wanted to associate the minorities question with the self-government solution that was being trialled in Spain. On top of that, the speech had to be given in French before an audience of eminent politicians and jurists [7]. Speaking in French was not the problem –Hurtado spoke French almost like a native– but rather the close monitoring and doubts of Pablo de Azcárate, who had worked at the League of Nations since 1922 and was a member of the Section for the Protection of Ethnic Minorities and director of the Section between 1930 and 1933. A man obsessed with prudence, he had an acute fear of anything that Hurtado might say in his speech that could be compromising in an issue he considered to be a “hornets’ nest”. In spite of this, as he explains in his memoirs, “I went to the meeting without telling my friends that I was intending to speak and I was more nervous than I remember having been on any other occasion and I didn’t know whether I would dare to take the step; but as soon as I walked in, with no other company than the official from the State Ministry corresponding to my delegation and two reporters from Agence Havas in Madrid, I managed to get the courage up to ask for the floor. Fortunately, I’d been having a lucky spell and I got through it much better than I expected” [8]. As the League’s *Official Journal* reported, on the morning of 16 September, Hurtado spoke after the representatives from Germany, Romania, Hungary, Canada, England and France:

M. Hurtado (Spain) would no suggest any change in the procedure followed hitherto or in the legal situation relative to minorities problem. The minorities would obviously feel greater confidence in the decisions of the Minorities Committees were made more widely known. All that was needed was to find a way of giving the decisions of the Committees greater publicity without wounding the susceptibilities of the States concerned. The important point was to made them understand that it was to their advantage to assent to publicity.

Whatever the procedure adopted, the main thing to be borne in mind was the psychological aspect. M. Hurtado might cite his own country to illustrate his meaning. The new Spanish Republic was far more seriously affected by the mistrust felt abroad as to the stability of the Government than by internal difficulties. Two important Bills had been placed before the Cortes: a Bill for the Constitution of the Republic and a draft Charter of Catalonian

autonomy. These two Bills embodied all the principles enunciated by the League with regard to the right of minorities. It followed that, whereas last year the Spanish minorities had come to the League and tried to obtain protection against the sovereign State, they now formed part of the League and felt in an honour to represent the State of which they had previously had cause to complain.

In conclusion, M. Hurtado drew attention to the practical lesson which might be learnt from the example of the Spanish Republic and which be summed up in the following rule: The surest method of overcoming the supposed or real disaffection of national minorities is to have confidence in them and to grant and respect their due rights.

League of Nations. Official Journal. Special Supplement no. 99. Records of Twelfth Ordinary Session of the Assembly. Meetings of the Committees. Minutes of the Sixth Committee (Political Questions - Questions Concerning Refugees). Geneva, 1931. p. 15. Archive of the League of Nations.

Hurtado's speech was received with applause and compliments, as he himself says, including by the Quebecois representative from the Canadian delegation, the Czechoslovakian Beneš and a group of Macedonians among the public. One person who did not say anything to him was the German delegate, Minister Curtius, who was visibly irritated by the speech. The Agència Fabra transmitted the speech, which was received enthusiastically both in Madrid and in Barcelona. The press gave detailed coverage to his address, in which he talked about the change of political regime in Spain and the supposed separatist threat posed by the Catalan minority.

For the first time, a Catalanist was a member of the official Spanish delegation, while the autonomy promised by the new Republican regime was in the process of being negotiated

To dispel this fear, the Catalan parliamentarian and minister had assured that his presence in Geneva, as a Spanish delegate, while also carrying out legislative and executive tasks on behalf of Catalonia, was tangible proof that this peril was nothing more than a myth [9]. Hurtado continued to receive praise for his speech in Geneva even after he had returned to Madrid to follow first-hand the debate on the Statute of Autonomy [10]. Xavier Regàs, for example, compared in *La Rambla* Spain's actions in the League of Nations during the years of the dictatorship with the Republican delegation's brilliant contribution, giving particular

emphasis to the role of the Catalan parliamentarian:

The illustrious attorney, whom we have to thank for speaking explicitly on behalf of Catalonia at Geneva, showed with the exposition of practical results just how different Republican Spain was from that tinsel Spain that until now had paraded itself in international arenas. He showed that our Republic can be one of the solid columns of the world order built in Geneva, as it has been able to solve its internal problems through fulfilment of the latter's principles without losing, in the transition from theory to practice, one iota of its virtuousness or purity.

And given their importance, we would highlight the words spoken by the illustrious Barcelona attorney, from which it was clear that he was speaking on behalf of Catalonia. There is no doubting that before the international audience which these days is paying close attention to what is going on in Geneva, our secular claim has finally taken on official status. A resounding answer has been given to the politics (?) of the dictatorship, which had only been too pleased to consider Catalonia's aspirations as dead and buried, by including as member of the Spanish Republic's first diplomatic representation sent to the League of Nations such a distinguished Catalanist in the field of political activism and official representation as Mr Amadeu Hurtado.

Regàs, Xavier. «La diplomacia republicana. La representació espanyola a Ginebra» (Republican diplomacy. The Spanish representation in Geneva). LR, September 28, 1931.

A few weeks later, Salvador de Madariaga clinched the issue in his interview with Francisco Viu: "In the previous regime, the Spanish delegate at the League of Nations often had to settle minorities conflicts in Central European nationalities, and it was evident that he lacked the moral authority for this task as he represented a centralist tyranny that oppressed Catalonia. It has to be said that Mr Lerroux made an excellent decision when he appointed Amadeo Hurtado as our delegate in Geneva, who gave a magnificent speech as representative of Spain before the Sixth Committee." In the opinion of this politician and diplomat, "our nation has gained in international personality and today we are viewed favourably by the entire world" [11].

By way of anecdote, Hurtado remembered as one of the "sensational moments" of his

period in Geneva the day when news reached the city that the Spanish Parliament had approved the constitutional definition of Spain as “a Republic of workers of all classes, organised under a regime of Freedom and Justice”. Although initially this declaration was interpreted almost in a Soviet sense, “by the evening, just about everyone was joking about it, and when, at night, we walked with Esplà into the bar where the journalists would congregate, we were met with an ironic ovation and the chant of: ‘Here come the workers’” [12].

## REFERENCES

- 1 — *Gaceta de Madrid*, No. 224. August 12, 1931. Minister Lerroux would lead the delegation, with Salvador de Madariaga, ambassador to Washington and Lower House representative, Hurtado and the former Treasury undersecretary and university professor Leopoldo Palacios Merini as delegates; the economist and secretary general of the Bank Supervisory Authority (Consejo Superior Bancario) Francisco Bernis Carrasco, the section head of the Ministry of State Julio Casares Sánchez and the parliamentarian Clara Campoamor as deputy delegates; and Julio López Oliván, diplomat, head of the Ministry’s Politics section and delegation secretary, and Carles Esplà as assistant delegates, together with advisors, technical experts, government officials and secretaries, to give a total of 18 members. For the full list, see *HM*, August 19, 1931. Photographs of the delegation, in *ABC*, August 22, 1931.
- 2 — LVC. September 10, 1931. *HM*, September 11, 1931.
- 3 — On Spain and the League of Nations: Quintana Navarro, Francisco. *España en Europa 1931-1936. Del compromiso con la paz a la huida de la guerra*. Madrid: Editorial Nerea, 1993. Alguacil Cuenca, Pedro. “España: de la Sociedad de Naciones a Naciones Unidas”. *Anales de Derecho*. University of Murcia. No. 24. 2006. pp. 303-318. Gamarra Chopo, Yolanda. “La ilusión española de la Sociedad de Naciones”, in Gamarra Chopo, Yolanda & Fernández Liesa, Carlos (coords.) *Los orígenes del derecho internacional contemporáneo. Estudios conmemorativos del centenario de la Primera Guerra Mundial*. Zaragoza: Institución Fernando el Católico, 2015. pp. 289-312.
- 4 — In addition to the earlier references on the Republic’s foreign policy, Saz, Ismael. “La política exterior de la Segunda República en el primer bienio (1931-1933): Una valoración”. *Revista de Estudios Internacionales*, No. 4. October-December, 1985. pp. 843-858.
- 5 — Hurtado, Víctor. “Mirador a Ginebra”. *Mirador*, No. 34. September 19, 1929.
- 6 — On this subject, Núñez Seixas, Xosé Manuel. “Nacionalismo y política exterior: España y la política de minorías de la Sociedad de Naciones (1919-1936)”. *Hispania*, No. 189. 1995. And, by the same author, Núñez Seixas, Xosé Manuel. *Internacionalitzant el conflicte. El catalanisme polític i la qüestió de les minories nacionals a Europa (1914-1936)*. Valencia: Editorial Afers, 2010.
- 7 — Hurtado, Amadeu. *Quaranta anys d’advocat. Història del meu temps (1894-1936)*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2011. p. 652.

- 8 — Hurtado, Amadeu. *Quaranta anys d'advocat. Història del meu temps (1894-1936)*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 2011. p. 652.
- 9 — “El problema de les minories en la Societat de Nacions. Amadeu Hurtado en un brillantíssim discurs posa com a exemple l'Estatut d'Autonomia”. *LO*, September 17, 1931.
- 10 — «Don Amadeo Hurtado regresa de Ginebra a Madrid». *HM*, September 17, 1931.
- 11 — Viu, Francisco. «Todas las horas». *La Voz*, October 12, 1931.



#### **Joan Safont Plumed**

Joan Safont Plumed is a journalist and writer. Graduated in Law at Pompeu Fabra University, he also has a Master's Degree in Journalism and Advanced Journalism at the Faculty of Blanquerna Communication, Ramon Llull University. Recently, he holds a PhD at the University of Girona, with the thesis *L'eminència grisa: Biografia, singularitat i influència d'Amadeu Hurtado i Miró (1875-1936)*. He is a documentary screenwriter, columnist for Vilaweb and a contributor to the TV program *Més 3/24*. He writes regularly in *L'Avenç*, *Revista de Catalunya* i *Valors*. He also collaborates with the newspaper *ARA*, *El Temps*, *El Nacional* and *Crític*. Since his first book, *Per França i Anglaterra, la Primera Guerra Mundial dels aliadòfils catalans* (2012), he has worked on journalism, literature, politics and catalan society between the First World War and the Civil War. He is as well the author of *Capitans del Comerç explicats pels seus fills* (2016), *Sabotatge contra Franco. Episodis d'oposició dels que havien guanyat la guerra* (2017) i *PEN Català: un exemple de diplomàcia cultural* (2018). Ultimately, he is a collaborative professor at the *Universitat Oberta de Catalunya* (UOC).