CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Catalanism, the League of Nations and the National Minorities

Albert Balcells



Illustrator: Jesús Galdón

The European national minorities after 1919

Initially, the League of Nations was hampered by three shortcomings: the defection of the United States, the exclusion of Germany and the absence of Russia. France demanded infeasible war reparations from Germany, the runaway inflation destabilised the fragile Weimar Republic, the French occupied the Ruhr between 1923 and 1925, and Austria was denied the right to unite with Germany after losing Hungary and the Slavic possessions of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, the League of Nations created organisations that have endured, such as the International Labour Organisation, and successfully mediated in conflicts such as that of the Åland Islands between Finland and Sweden, the division of Silesia between Germany and Poland in 1921, the protection of Bulgaria against Greece in 1925 and the conflict between Bolivia and Paraguay in 1932 and between Peru and Colombia in 1938.

In Europe, the League of Nations could not ignore the problem of the national minorities if

it wanted to avoid another war. Eight million Germans lived outside the borders of the Weimar Republic. Three million Magyars had become subjects of neighbouring states. A total of 5% of the Polish population were Germans, having lived for centuries in territories that were now part of the new republic, and 28% of the population of the new Czechoslovakia were German, as were 5% of the Romanian population, which also included an even larger Hungarian minority. In many cases, drawing national boundaries along ethnic lines was impossible not only because they all lived together in the same territory, but also because the new borders were subordinated to the interests of the victorious powers in two aspects: to limit Germany's influence and power, and to create a buffer zone between Germany and Soviet Russia that was strong enough from the strategic viewpoint to enable France to surround Germany with new allies that enabled it to replace the extinct Franco-Russian Alliance existing prior to 1914.

The aim was to avoid such brutal solutions in Central and Eastern Europe as the large-scale population movements between Turkey and Greece in 1923, in which one and a half million Anatolian Greeks and half a million Muslims living in Greece were expelled from their respective places of birth and lost all their property in the process. It was vital to guarantee individual rights for racial, linguistic and religious minorities, without going so far as to recognise the collective right to self-government as this was considered an internal affair of each State and the League of Nations did not question the member states' sovereignty. In the event of a claim by a minority protected by the treaties, the offence could end up before the Permanent Court of International Justice created in The Hague in 1921, if the accused state was found guilty but appealed against the decision. If the minority should start an armed insurrection, the League of Nations had to refuse to intervene. In actual fact, the protection of "racial, language and/or religious minorities" denied them the right to national self-determination and was reduced to the mere protection of individual rights. Under no circumstances could it give support to independence movements.

The treaty of June 1919 with reunified, independent Poland provided a model for the other treaties with the new states of central and east Europe, such as Czechoslovakia, Austria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece, Bulgaria, Hungary and Turkey, which also had to accept this in the peace treaties that fixed their borders. And they also affected Finland, Albania, Latvia, Lithuania and Iraq.

A first Catalan appeal to the League of Nations was presented at the meeting held by its Council in San Sebastian in July 1920 and was presented again in November 1920, without any possibility of being considered. It was signed by Vicenç A. Ballester's Pro-Catalonia Committee, the Catalan Nationalist Centre in New York and the Ligue Nationale Catalane in Paris, with another 165 signatures from radical Catalanists. The demand to revise the Treaty of Utrecht of 1714 and Catalan independence rendered it impossible to include it for consideration. It was the last manifestation of Wilsonianism, the trust in President Wilson's Fourteen Points, formulated in 1918, which promised freedom for subjugated peoples. Indeed, this idea generated some hope in Catalonia so that several Catalan towns had named streets, squares and public gardens after the North American president.

> President Wilson’s Fourteen Points promised freedom for subjugated peoples. This idea generated some hope in Catalonia so that several Catalan towns had named streets, squares and public gardens after the North American president

France and Italy, which had unrecognised minorities, and Great Britain —all three permanent members of the League of Nations’ executive council, together with Japan— wanted to limit the protection of the rights of national minorities to the new states. Spain, a temporary member of the council, supported them for fear that Catalans and Basques could appeal to the League of Nations. On the other hand, the states subject to the treaties, such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and the new Baltic republics, wanted to generalise the obligation to respect the rights of minorities to all of the League of Nations’ member states to avoid being placed in a situation of inferiority. Accordingly, on 23 September 1922, the League of Nations approved a recommendation to all member states to treat their national minorities with the same consideration required of the states subject to the treaties. The next step, which was never taken, would have been to convert the recommendation into an obligation.

Catalanism and the Congresses of European Nationalities

Alongside but separate not only from the League of Nations but also from the International Federation of League of Nations Societies, which provided support, the Congresses of European Nationalities were held every year after September 1925. Their secretary was the Estonian German Ewald Ammende (1893-1936). The forerunners of the Congresses of European Nationalities are to be found in the Jewish communities in Europe and in the doctrine of national cultural autonomy as a personal principle proposed by Karl Renner and Otto Bauer’s Austromarxism before 1914 as an alternative to the formula of the sovereign nation state.

The recommendation approved in September 1922 immediately found a receptive audience in Catalonia, although it was not a national minority but a compact nationality not recognised by the state to which it belonged. In 1919, the Mancomunitat de Catalunya (a regional government formed by the four provincial councils of Catalonia) had not been able to put into effect the statute of autonomy approved by 97% of the local councils, which represented 98% of the Principality’s population. Cambó’s second ministerial collaboration in 1921 did not achieve even the slightest decentralisation and the gradualist approach to autonomist nationalism advocated by the Lliga Regionalista de Catalunya was rejected by many as ineffective, leading to the formation of Acció Catalana in June 1922 by discontented Lliga members.

In September 1922, Barcelona City Council approved a motion to ask the Spanish Government to follow the League of Nations recommendation concerning the rights of national minorities, which would have favoured the use of Catalan in schools and courts of justice. In 1923, Jaume Carrera Pujal published the book *La protecció de les minories*

nacionals (*The protection of national minorities*), in which he recommended persevering along this route, although he did not agree with the definition of minority given by the League of Nations or the minority's obligation to be loyal to the state to which it belonged.

The nationalist aspirations of Catalonia received a further setback in September 1923 with the dictatorship of General Primo de Rivera, which banned the Catalan flag and language in corporations and schools, closed Catalanist centres, dismissed many teachers employed by the Industrial University's technical schools and, finally, abolished the Mancomunitat de Catalunya in 1925.

In this context, in 1924, the leaders of Acció Catalana proposed to the leaders of the Lliga Regionalista and the Catalan republican nationalists that they file jointly an appeal with the League of Nations, given that the denial of rights suffered by the Catalans was not allowed in east and central Europe. The leaders of the Lliga Regionalista backed out for fear of the reprisals they might receive and the Catalanist republicans considered that the appeal would lack force if it was not signed by all the autonomist parties. Finally, the Acció Catalana parliamentarian at the Mancomunitat, Manuel Massó i Llorens, in exile after fleeing from a military trial, submitted the Catalan appeal to the League of Nations in Geneva on 4 April 1924. However, its British secretary general, James Eric Drummond, replied that the League of Nations could only intervene in the national minorities protected by the treaties and this was not the case of the Catalans. The League of Nations' Secretariat had received similar petitions from Flemings, Alsatians and French-speaking Canadians.

In spite of this, Catalan paradiplomatic channels were opened. It was a non-violent alternative to the use of arms to achieve independence advocated by Francesc Macià and Estat Català, prepared at the same time and foiled, in November 1926, by the French police in Prats de Molló. Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer, leader of Acció Catalana, was operating within the sphere of the League of Nations, while Joan Estelrich, Cambó's right-hand man in cultural action and director of the Bernat Metge Foundation, was particularly noted for his paradiplomatic activity. Estelrich had already advocated the creation of a foreign propaganda platform for Catalan nationalism in March 1920, with his lecture *Per la valoració internacional de Catalunya* (*For international appraisal of Catalonia*), later printed in pamphlet form. Earlier, in 1919, he had created the Office for Catalan Expansion. Between 1924 and 1927, Alfons Maseras published *Le Courrier Catalan* in Paris for the French Regionalist Federation. Maseras in Paris and Eugeni Xammar in Berlin were the two agents coordinated by Estelrich, with significant involvement by Nicolau d'Olwer in Geneva, to publicise the Catalan national cause abroad. Nicolau d'Olwer even advocated the union of Europe in the *Revista Jurídica de Catalunya* in 1928, with his essay *Idees i fets entorn de Paneuropa* (*Ideas and facts concerning pan-Europe*), with a proposal that could be considered a precursor of the current European Union.

At the assembly of the International Federation of League of Nations Societies, held in Lyon in June 1924, Nicolau d'Olwer, acting on behalf of the Catalan Society for the League of Nations, managed to get the Catalan question included in the next assembly's agenda, scheduled to be held in September 1924 in Warsaw. However, the assembly was also

attended by the Spanish Society, founded by Quiñones de León, Spain's permanent ambassador in Paris, and, as a result, Nicolau d'Olwer was unable to get the International Federation to send a motion to the League of Nations to urge the Spanish Government to respect the rights of national minorities in Catalonia. Finally, the Spanish Government closed the Catalan Society for the League of Nations in Barcelona in April 1927.

> Alongside but separate not only from the League of Nations but also from the International Federation of League of Nations Societies, which provided support, the Congresses of European Nationalities were held every year after September 1925

Three years earlier, in September 1924, in Geneva, Nicolau d'Olwer had contacted the secretary of the Congresses of European Nationalities, Ewald Ammende, a politician representing the German minority in Estonia, who travelled to Barcelona to meet Catalanist politicians in June 1925. The first Congress of European Nationalities was held in Geneva in September 1925, attended by 50 delegates from 33 European minorities belonging to 12 different nationalities. There was particular interest in including the Catalans in these Congresses, not just because they were willing to pay the same as other communities —2.000 Swiss francs, 15% of the national minorities organisation's budget— but also to act as a bridge between Germanic and Slav peoples, and to refute the French version that the Congresses of European Nationalities were nothing more than an instrument for pan-Germanism and German border revisionism, an untrue accusation that was particularly difficult to counter until Germany joined the League of Nations in 1926. France feared Alsatian autonomist aspirations and supported Spanish colonialism in Morocco, which was divided into two protectorates controlled by France and Spain, respectively. The Rif War did not end until 1926, and defeating the rebels required military coordination between France and Spain.

The Catalans at the Congresses of European Nationalities

The Catalans were invited to the second Congress of European Nationalities, held in 1926. The Catalan delegation was composed of Estelrich, Joan Casanovas (future president of the Catalan Parliament), Francesc Maspons i Anglasell and Josep Pla. Later on, they were joined by Manuel Serra i Moret, Rafael Campalans, Miquel Vidal i Guardiola and Francesc Tusquets, spanning the entire political spectrum from the Lliga Regionalista to the Unió Socialista de Catalunya, and including the Catalanist republicans and Acció Catalana, as Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas has explained in his book *Internacionalitzant el nacionalisme. El catalanisme polític i la qüestió de les minories nacionals a Europa (1914-1936)*. The jurist Francesc de Paula Maspons i Anglasell, who had run the Mancomunitat's Office of Legal Studies as a defender of Catalan civil law, was voted vice-president of the Congresses, which brought together 40 national groups representing a total of fifty million Europeans.

However, in addition to the international societies that were lobbying the League of Nations, the Catalan nationalists needed a sovereign power to sponsor them and this could only be Germany. After signature of the multinational treaty of Locarno in October 1925, the withdrawal of French troops from the occupied German territories, and the Dawes plan with American loans to help stabilise the German economy, the Weimar Republic was admitted to the League of Nations and took the seat initially intended for the United States.

Participation in the Congresses of European Nationalities forced the members of the participating organisations —Acció Catalana, Lliga Regionalista— to publicly disavow the armed attempt made by Estat Català in Prats de Molló in November 1926, which, on the contrary, was viewed favourably by Catalan groups in America who had no faith in the paradiplomacy undertaken in Geneva.

The timing seemed to be good for Catalan interests because, in early 1926, Primo de Rivera's Spain gave up its seat at the League of Nations when it was refused a permanent seat on the executive council. However, Germany did not wish to create a conflict with Primo de Rivera's Spain after the trade agreement that had been signed in 1925. This agreement's terms were very favourable for German industry, arousing suspicions that the head of the Spanish legation which negotiated it, the recently appointed Viscount of Cussó, had been bribed.

Spain returned to the League of Nations in March 1928, after the Spanish diplomat Manuel Aguirre de Cárcer had been appointed president of the national minorities committee as compensation, effectively blocking any further Catalan demands. A proposal to make application of the minorities treaties universally compulsory, submitted in 1929 by such diverse states as Poland, Germany and Lithuania, failed to gain acceptance. Aguirre de Cárcer would later be Spanish ambassador in Rome and, in July 1936, he declared allegiance to the military uprising that started the Spanish Civil War.

In May 1929, there was another incident exploited by the Catalanists, who acclaimed the former German chancellor and current foreign minister, Gustav Stresemann, at his visit to Barcelona on his way to Madrid, after the statement made to a journalist who asked him what he thought about the minorities issue. The German statesman replied that he did not know whether the League of Nations' executive council would make any decision at its meeting in Madrid because he did not know the Spanish Government's intentions toward the Catalans and Basques; Primo de Rivera answered with an unofficial note which visibly annoyed Stresemann.

> Catalan nationalism had not achieved any improvement in the League of Nations' policy toward national minorities; on the contrary, their actions had only served to turn Spain into an implacable adversary of the minorities' cause in Geneva

In 1929, Estelrich published the book *La qüestió de les minories nacionals i les vies del dret* (*The question of the national minorities and legal options*) in Barcelona. At the same time, *La qüestion des minorités et la Catalogne* (*The question of the minorities and Catalonia*), also written by Estelrich, was released in Lausanne and Geneva. In 1929, Maspons i Anglasell published *Tornant de Ginebra: impressió sobre la crisi de les llibertats nacionals* (*Returning from Geneva: impressions on the crisis of national freedoms*) and, in 1930, he published *Punt de vista català sobre el procediment de protecció de les minories nacionals* (*Catalan views on the procedure for protecting national minorities*). In 2016, a number of his articles were republished in the book *Els catalans a Ginebra: la reivindicació de Catalunya al món* (*Catalans in Geneva: defending Catalonia before the world*). The cases of the national minorities were so different from each other that it was difficult to build a common strategy.

The overall result of Catalan action in the field of national minorities was not particularly impressive. Catalan nationalism had not achieved any improvement in the League of Nations' policy toward national minorities. On the contrary, their actions had only served to turn Spain into an implacable adversary of the minorities' cause in Geneva.

The 1930s

With the change of regime on 14 April 1931, Macià's Generalitat and the 1932 Statute of Autonomy, the previous paradiplomatic activity ceased to hold any interest. The Catalans seemed to have attained unaided the rights that the League of Nations sought to guarantee for national minorities. Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya viewed that it did not need an active foreign policy beyond its cultural relations with the Occitans, and the Lliga Regionalista shifted its attention to focus on security and disarmament, acting within the Interparliamentary Union in alignment with the Spanish delegation. Estelrich worked within this Interparliamentary Union from 1931 onwards and was member of the executive council after 1935. The Interparliamentary Union, which operated in parallel to the League of Nations, also had its headquarters in Geneva but had been founded much earlier, in 1889. Estelrich was also a member of the Spanish delegation at the Assembly of the League of Nations in 1935, when Spain was governed by a centre-right coalition, after the worker uprising of 6 October 1934, with the Statute of Autonomy suspended and the Lliga Regionalista now a member of the right-wing tripartite government of a Catalan Government presided by a general governor appointed by the Spanish central government.

Catalan attendance of the Congresses of European Nationalities was continued during the 1930s only by Maspons i Anglasell, placed at the head of an extraparliamentary group in favour of independence, namely, the Partit Nacionalista Català, and by Josep Maria Batista i Roca, founder of the civic entity Palestra as a Catalan national youth front and also proponent, in 1933, of alliances with Basque and Galician nationalists within Galeusca. Batista i Roca reformed the Catalan Union for the League of Nations and attended the last two Congresses of European Nationalities which had Catalan delegates: the Congress of September 1935 in Berne, at which Batista i Roca decried the restrictions imposed on the Catalan autonomy after the uprising of 6 October 1934, and the Congress of September

1936 in Geneva, after the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War.

During the Second Republic, the left and right-wing Catalanists involved in Spanish foreign policy tended to gravitate toward the French position and, therefore, kept their distance from the Congresses of European Nationalities. Removed from any diplomatic function but in a senior scientific position, after being Minister for Economy in the first Republican government, Nicolau d'Olwer was president of the International Union of Academies, with headquarters in Brussels, between 1935 and 1937. At the 11th Congress of European Nationalities, held in September 1935, Basque nationalists Jon Andoni Irazusta and José Antonio Aguirre presented a plan to gain the support of Great Britain as a counterweight to France.

And near the end of the Spanish Civil War, Batista i Roca was sent by President Companys as secret envoy to the Foreign Office, together with the Basque nationalist José Ignacio de Lizaso. The goal was to persuade the English and French to arbitrate an armistice that would put an end to the War, but guaranteeing Catalan and Basque autonomy, which, in the latter case, had ceased to exist. Marià Rubió i Tudurí made similar contacts in Paris. These attempts to obtain an armistice, as well as being branded as defeatist, were discredited by the rumour that they were also pursuing a peace deal for Catalonia separately with General Franco. This seems very unlikely, as was later confirmed when Franco abolished the Catalan Statute on 5 April 1938. All in all, there was little hope in achieving a favourable outcome. Neither Berlin nor Rome had any inclination to restrain the Republic's enemies after Franco's troops had isolated Catalonia by land from the rest of Republican Spain, with the Republic's Government now in Barcelona. Paris was not prepared to intervene and turn Catalonia into a French protectorate. The head of the Government, Juan Negrín, with the support of communists and anarchists, maintained an unyielding stance, manifested in the Battle of the Ebro, the Republic's last offensive, defeated by the enemy and in which Catalonia exhausted its last human and material reserves.

In the international arena, the Congresses of European Nationalities would share the same fate as the League of Nations, overwhelmed by conflicts that exceeded the scope of its powers. The League of Nations was unable to prevent the Japanese invasion of Chinese Manchuria in 1931. Hitler's Germany left the organisation in 1933, with expansionist Japan following suit. Mussolini's Italy would do likewise in 1936 after it was condemned for the invasion of Abyssinia. It was unable to prevent the persecution of Jews in Germany. At the same time, Nazi influence increased in the Congresses of European Nationalities with Werner Hasselblatt, the Baltic-German who succeeded Ewald Ammende, who had died in April 1936, which had the effect of delegitimising the minorities organisation. However, in spite of this, it is worth pointing out that the Congresses of European Nationalities were the predecessor of the Federal Union of European Nationalities, formed in 1949 together with the Council of Europe, which was the first proponent of the European Union which would be formed later.

In the autumn of 1936, following in the wake of Cambó, Estelrich had chosen to support the so-called "Nationals" in the Spanish Civil War as the lesser of two evils. The propaganda directed against the Spanish Republic from Estelrich's office in Paris forced him to

temporarily put aside the Catalan national cause, in the hope that, after the Civil War, right-wing Catalanism would be able to maintain certain minimum prerogatives in exchange for its collaboration. This hope would be dashed by the implacable repression of all signs of collective Catalan identity after 1939. Estelrich would eventually be appointed Spanish delegate to the UNESCO in 1953, when Spain started to be admitted to international organisations after the isolation imposed for its former sympathies with the defeated fascist regimes.

In interwar Europe, the question of the national minorities was no minor matter; Hitler used it to unleash the Second World War in 1939 and, six years later, twelve million Germans would be expelled from Eastern Europe in revenge, with half a million civilians dying during that tragic exodus.

REFERENCES

- Albert Balcells. "La Conferència de Pau de París (1919), Catalunya i la Societat de Nacions". *Catalunya i els tractats internacionals.* Barcelona: Eurocongrés 2000, 2003.

- Jaume Carrera Pujal. *La protecció de les minories nacionals.* Barcelona, Catalana, 1923.

- Joan Estelrich. *Dietaris* (edited by Manuel Jorba). Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2012.

- José Manuel García Izquierdo. *Francesc Maspons i Anglasell. Polític, jurista, periodista (1872-1966)* (Doctoral dissertation). Barcelona: Universitat Ramon Llull, 2016.

- Gregori Mir. *Aturar la guerra. Les gestions secretes de Lluís Companys davant el govern britànic.* Barcelona, Proa, 2006.

- Albert Balcells. "La Conferència de Pau de París (1919), Catalunya i la Societat de Nacions". *Catalunya i els tractats internacionals.* Eurocongrés, 2000, Barcelona, 2003.

- Gregori Mir. *Aturar la guerra. Les gestions secretes de Lluís Companys davant el Govern*

Britànic. Proa, Barcelona, 2006.

- Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer. *Democràcia contra dictadura. Escrits polítics, 1915-1960* (selection and introduction by Albert Balcells). Barcelona: Institut d'Estudis Catalans, 2007.

- Xosé Manoel Núñez Seixas. *Internacionalitzant el nacionalisme. El catalanisme polític i la qüestió de les minories nacionals a Europa (1914-1936).* Catarroja; València: Afers; Universitat de València, 2010.

- Borja de Riquer. "Joan Estelrich, de representant catalanista als Congressos de Nacionalitats Europees a delegat franquista a la UNESCO". *L'Avenç,* No. 368, 2010.

- Joan Estelrich. *Dietaris.* (Edited by Manuel Jorba). Quaderns Crema, Barcelona, 2012.

- Josep Serrano Daura (coord.) *Francesc Maspons i Anglasell (1872- 1966): homenatge,* actes de la jornada d'estudi de la Societat Catalana d'Estudis Jurídics. Barcelona, 2016.

- José Manuel García Izquierdo*. Francesc Maspons i Anglasell, polític, jurista i periodista.* Doctoral dissertation from the Universitat Ramon Llull, 2016.

- Artur Perucho, *Catalunya sota la dictadura: dades per a la història* (edited and presented by Josep Palomero). Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 2018 (first edition: Badalona, Proa, 1930).

- Frederic Porta Capdevila. *Josep Maria Batista i Roca (1895-1978). Biografia del primer intel·lectual independentista* (Doctoral dissertation). Barcelona: Universitat Pompeu Fabra, 2021.

- Borja de Riquer. "Joan Estelrich. De representant catalanista als congressos de nacionalitats europees a delegat franquista a la UNESCO". *L'Avenç*, No. 368, 2011.



Albert Balcells

Albert Balcells is Professor Emeritus of History at the Autonomous University of Barcelona and an affiliated member of the Institute of Catalan Studies. During his long career, he has focused on class struggle, the relations between Catalanism and workerism, political thought, institutions of high culture and historical memory in 20th century Catalonia. With a PhD in History at the University of Barcelona, he was a professor at the Autonomous University of Barcelona since 1970. He was also president of the Historical-Archeological Section of the Institute of Catalan Studies from 1998 to 2006. He previously served as vice-dean of the Official College of Doctors and Graduates in Philosophy, Arts and Sciences of Catalonia (1980-1987) and first vice-president of the cultural association, Ateneu Barcelonès (2003-2007). He was awarded with the Ramon Fuster Prize (1992) and the Carles Rahola essay Prize (2007). In 1995, he received the Creu de Sant Jordi, one of the highest civil distinctions awarded in Catalonia. His latest publications include: *Llocs de memòria dels Catalanans* (2008), *El pistolerisme, Barcelona 1917-1923* (2009) and *El projecte d'autonomia de la Mancomunitat de Catalunya del 1919 i el seu context històric* (2010). He is the editor and co-editor of the collective books *Puig i Cadafalch i la Catalunya contemporaneous* (2003), *Història de la Historiografia catalana* (2004), *Els Països Catalans i Europa durant els darrers cent anys* (2009). He has also compiled and edited articles by Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer *Democràcia contra dictadura. Escrits polítics, 1915-1960* (2007).