CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Wilsonianism in Catalonia and the Catalanist Attempts to take part in the Paris Peace Conference

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The attempts to internationalise Catalan aspirations for self-government. Union des Nationalités and the Catalan volunteers in the First World War

Before the outbreak of the Great War, certain sectors within Catalan nationalism began the process to internationalise their aspirations for self-government. In 1912, the architect and Lliga Regionalista leader Josep Puig i Cadafalch, who would later become the second president of the Mancomunitat, represented the Catalanists at the Union des Nationalités (UdN). This organisation acted as an information, publicity and propaganda centre and as a lobby for those who identified themselves as oppressed nationalities, particularly European nationalities, fostering a current of opinion favourable to nationalities' right to self-determination [1].

In the autumn of 1916, *Les Annales des Nationalités*, the mouthpiece of the Union des Nationalités, devoted a monographic issue to studying the "Catalan nation". The writer and journalist Alfons Maseras might have had a hand in this. Previously, other issues had been devoted to studying different nationalities, such as the Ukrainian, Lithuanian Latvian or Czech nationalities.

With the outbreak of the Great War, the more radical sectors of Catalan nationalism viewed the global conflict as an opportunity to attain Catalan self-government by aligning with the Triple Entente (a military coalition formed by France, Great Britain and Russia), and especially with France. A not very large group of these radical Catalanists decided to enrol voluntarily in the French Foreign Legion to fight, with the leitmotiv "For World Freedom". Their military endeavour received moral and material support from the Brotherhood Committee with the Catalan Volunteers, created in February 1916 by Dr Joan Solé i Pla, a member of the Unió Catalanista and friend of Francesc Macià. A majority of the Catalanist Francophiles expressed enthusiasm for the potential offered by the Catalan volunteers for the national cause of Catalonia and built the mirage of a Catalonia that had fought in the Great War alongside the victorious Powers, with the fanciful figure of ten or twelve thousand volunteers. The actual figure was much more modest: the volunteers born in Catalonia numbered just 546; if we add those who considered themselves to be Catalans in one way or another, this would give a maximum figure of 954 volunteers [2].

Messidor or the competition of Wilsonianism with Francophile

In January 1918, the president of the United States of America, Woodrow Wilson, announced his 14 points on how the world should be organised in the post-war future. They were received enthusiastically by a part of the Catalanist intelligentsia who favoured the Allied cause: Wilson defended peoples' right to self-determination and the creation of a League of Nations. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed between the Russian Bolsheviks and Germany in March 1918 was presented as an alternative to Wilson's 14 points: while the Bolshevik proposal advocated the construction of independent nation states which, like Poland, would be favourable to Germany, Wilson proposed a pro-Entente Poland and a reformed Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Catalan liberal, socialist and republican left voiced its preference for Wilson's project [3].

The Wilsonian inclinations of a large part of the Catalan pro-Allies intelligentsia were formalised on 1 January 1918 when they published the journal *Messidor. Revista quinzenal, regionalisme, solidaritat internacional, iberisme*. The publication's title reflected its alignment with the Union des Nationalités, as this organisation's headquarters in Switzerland was called "Villa Messidor". The journal, edited by the intellectual Pau M. Turull (1878-1972) from Sabadell [4], published 25 issues and received contributions from all sectors of Catalanism, from the progressivism of Antoni Rovira i Virgili and Alfons Maseras to the regionalism of Eugeni d'Ors or Manuel de Montoliu. The latter had been openly Germanophile during the War. Turull's initiatives were also supported by Cambó's secretary, Joan Estelrich (1896-1958), who founded the Office for Catalan Expansion in

Paris in 1919, with the participation of Maseras [5].

The primary goal of the review edited by Turull was to advocate the ideal of the League of Nations and was influenced by the thinking of Wilson and other leading figures in international politics at the time, such as Leon Bourgeois, a député for the French Radical Party and future Nobel Peace laureate in 1920, Paul Otlet, a Belgian writer and bibliographer, Edgard Milhaud, a French economist and socialist, and the English politicians Lord Edward Grey, Herbert Henry Asquith and Lord Cecil, among others. However, Turull's initiative was questioned in Barcelona for its internationalism and in Madrid for its Catalanism. The review's last issue was a monographic issue on the International Conference on Communications and Transit held by the League of Nations in Barcelona between 20 March and 10 April 1921.

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During the closing months of the Great War, Wilsonianism pursued the unspoken aim of boosting the morale of pro-Allied Catalanism and, above all, of radical Catalan nationalism, particularly among those sectors who had considered intervention in the War as the cornerstone of Catalanist international strategy. Thus, for Dr Solé i Pla, the guiding light of the Catalan volunteers, or Alfons Maseras, who was also a member of the Brotherhood Committee with the Catalan Volunteers, Wilsonianism became a new, modernised rallying point for pro-Allied sentiment, based on the belief that Wilson's support for the self-determination of nationalities would be applied around the world. Maseras had also been a member of the Committee for the Moral Unity of Europe; in spite of being accused of being pro-German, Maseras had no hesitation in affirming that the Committee would have defended Wilson's ideas.

The end of the War

With the victory of the Entente, expectations of a possible national liberation (people had spoken of the Great War as the "War of Nations") rose considerably among Catalanist Francophiles and Wilsonians. The radical nationalists of the Unió Catalanista and the young intellectuals and professionals of the Lliga Regionalista's Nationalist Youth declared themselves in favour of the republic and formed the Pro Catalunya Committee in an attempt to internationalise the Catalan problem and attain self-government. This Committee was proposed as a sort of watch for the Catalan volunteers who had fought in the French Foreign Legion.

The proponents of the Pro Catalunya Committee and the Unió Catalanista were aware that the prospects of internationalising the Catalan national cause would be nil without a

charismatic leader who could lobby Allied embassies on behalf of Catalonia to demand self-rule or independence, even though the separatists comprised a very small percentage of the population at that time. Two names emerged, although at that time they did not have Cambó's stature and projection as a statesman. One was Francesc Macià, who was becoming very influential among young separatists in favour of direct action and affiliated with the Autonomist Centre of Workers in Commerce and Industry (CADCI), beyond his friendship with historic militants and leaders of the Unió Catalanista, such as Solé i Pla or Manuel Folguera. A respect that had been won, above all, because he had broken with regionalism and attempted a revolt along the lines of the Irish Easter Rising of 1916 at the Parliamentarian Assembly in the summer of 1917. The other was Marcel·lí Domingo, from Tortosa, who had taken part in the same insurrection attempt and, arrested by soldiers at the Barcelona garrison, had narrowly avoided execution. The latter could be considered a point of contact with the Catalan volunteers, as he was the cousin of 19-year-old Daniel Domingo Montserrat, who had enlisted in 1917 in the French Foreign Legion in search of adventure and the opportunity to perform heroic deeds for the Catalan cause. In 1918, Domingo was the driving force behind *La Trinxera Catalana*, the publication for Catalan volunteers at the front. He would also be one of the future founders of the National Catalan Committee (CNC), whose paramount obsession was to be received by President Wilson in Paris and have the opportunity to put forward the claims of Catalanism. However, unlike Macià, Marcel·lí Domingo was not interested in being associated with such marginal political circles, at that time, as Catalan separatism [6].

> In Catalonia, against a backdrop of Wilsonian and Francophile euphoria, a campaign for self-rule was launched, initially led by the Catalanist republican minority at the Spanish Congress

While all this was going on in Paris, in Catalonia, against a backdrop of Wilsonian and Francophile euphoria (reflected in the names given to streets and squares), a campaign for self-rule was launched, initially led by the Catalanist republican minority at the Congress. Shortly after, the Lliga Regionalista, leveraging the institutional infrastructure of the Mancomunitat, would put itself at the forefront of the initiative. It was also rumoured that the Lliga Regionalista, through Cambó, might also be interested in fostering the internationalisation of the Catalan conflict, as Puig i Cadafalch had done in 1912. However, the Lliga's top leaders did not go to Paris during the Peace Conference, although they did send the former minister Ventosa i Calvell, who possibly told them that there was nothing to be gained by going there.

Idealism against the reality check

Ventosa was right. The French 3rd Republic was not interested in giving support to Catalanist demands. After the military feats of the highly publicised Catalan volunteers, the Francophile Catalanists discovered, with a naïve surprise, that the French preferred to

include the Spanish monarchy in the new world order, ignoring Catalanist aspirations for self-government [7]. Faced with this disappointment, there were still some sectors that trusted in the promises of self-determination made by Wilson.

In any case, neither the leaders of the Lliga nor those of Catalanist republicanism went to Paris to try and internationalise the Catalan problem. In fact, it was Domingo Montserrat who agreed to represent the Catalanists at the possible peace negotiations that would start in Paris after the war had ended. He was convinced that the propaganda built around the Catalan fighters would be the only tangible evidence of what Catalonia had done for the winning powers. After proclaiming himself leader of the Catalan delegation in the corridors of power of the Entente, he got down to business and formed the National Catalan Committee (CNC) in Paris, copying the model of the Czech Action Committee Abroad. The president of the National Catalan Committee was Dr Montañà, a Catalanist physician with socialist leanings, while Montserrat gave himself the role of propaganda secretary.

However, the Catalanists' constant trips to Paris, added to the self-rule campaign, caused some concern among the Spanish Government, to the point that the president of the Council of Ministers, the liberal Count of Romanones, went to Paris to seek assurance that neither the National Catalan Committee nor the self-rule campaign would influence the so-called allied governments of the Entente Cordiale in any future peace negotiations. In fact, Romanones asked for a seat at the Peace Conference. Previously, during the first half of December, the Spanish ambassador in Paris, José María Quiñones de León, expressed concern at the Catalanists' attempt to internationalise the Catalan conflict [8].

Romanones arrived in Paris the morning of Friday, 20 December 1918. His first appointment was with the French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau, followed by a meeting with Joan Ventosa, former minister for Finance for the Lliga Regionalista, member of the Spanish Congress and a close associate of Cambó. He also met the president of the Italian Council of Ministers, Vittorio Emanuele Orlando, the Italian Foreign Minister, Sidney Sonnino, and the French Foreign Minister, Stephen Pichon. Subsequently, he had a 30-minute meeting with the North American president, Woodrow Wilson, who, it seems, told him that he knew nothing at all about the Catalan question, and he also met for one hour with the French president, Raymond Poincaré. He was unable to obtain the European leaders' approval to a seat for Spain at the Peace Conference but they would have assured him that they considered the problem with the Catalans to be a purely internal issue and, therefore, would not intervene. On the afternoon of Monday, 23 December, Romanones caught the train back to Spain. A couple of days had been sufficient to close the door to internationalisation for the Catalan nationalists, before the Peace Conference had even begun [9].

One of the Lliga Regionalista's leaders, Joan Garriga i Massó, affirmed that when Romanones returned, he was able to reassure Alfonso XIII and the dynastic leaders of the Restoration that the Peace Conference would not affect Spain [10].

The Lliga's leaders were fully aware of what Romanones had achieved and did not try to take the internationalisation of the "Catalan problem" any further. It does not seem very

logical on the part of a large number of Catalanists to think that the 3rd French Republic, a paradigm of homogenising centralism and an ally of the Spanish monarchy, should show any appreciation for their pro-French sentiments and the Catalan soldiers' lives sacrificed for the Entente's victory by pressuring the Spanish Government to accept self-government for Catalonia, although that is precisely what they attempted to achieve. There is an apocryphal story that goes to the effect that when the Catalan radical nationalists and the Basque nationalists tried to include their demands in the peace negotiations, they received an unpleasant surprise. Clemenceau would have received them but when they tried to explain the historical origins on which their respective national demands were based, he exclaimed: "Stop kidding yourselves!". The fact is that the French authorities were only interested in those nationalist movements that benefited their foreign policy. This explains why the same French politicians who had supported the Union des Nationalités in 1912 dissolved it in 1919, when it was no longer useful to them.

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