

CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

J.M. Batista i Roca: a Pro-independence Intellectual during the Interwar Period (1914-1945)

Frederic J. Porta



Illustrator: [Jesús Galdón](#)

Josep Maria Batista i Roca (1895-1978) was the first intellectual, academic, university professor and public figure who was a lifelong proponent of Catalan independence, proclaimed it publicly and acted accordingly [1]. His political action was based on strengthening Catalonia and its national spirit and awareness, nurturing character and preparing the leaders of tomorrow, inspired by the British model. Batista i Roca was one of the few intellectuals who truly sought to establish a position for Catalonia in the world – Catalan geopolitics. He would do this on five levels: pan-Catalanist, pan-Occitan, Iberian, European and, lastly, Hispanic. We will briefly outline the main ones in the following pages [2].

Geopolitics of the Catalan Countries

In separatist circles, the Catalan Countries (called *Països Catalans* within Catalonia) had been viewed as a natural cultural framework since the end of the 19th century. For Batista i Roca, everywhere where Catalan was spoken should be part of the Catalan nation. Although the cultural *Renaixença* processes had followed different paths in Majorca, Valencia and Roussillon, all of the Catalan Countries had a minimum national awareness on which a cultural and linguistic unity could be built. With the association *Nostra Parla* first and the civic entity *Palestra* later, Batista i Roca would seek to increase contacts by intellectuals, especially young intellectuals, living in the Principality of Catalonia with the nation's other territories, including L'Alguer.

Nostra Parla (1916-1923) was an association that sought to foster Catalan language and its prestige and also to foster "the spiritual unification of the Balearic Islands, Catalonia, Roussillon and Valencia", in part as a complement to the Association for the Protection of Catalan Education (*Associació Protectora de l'Ensenyança Catalana*, APEC, 1898-1939). *Palestra* (1930-1938) would continue with the same goal but integrating it within a broader strategy; the civic entity would provide a platform for disseminating national awareness to the entire Catalan nation and, above all, to the young people who, one day, would have to lead a pan-Catalanist political project. *Palestra* would also extend its activities beyond the Corbières Massif to Occitania [3].

Little by little, with an eye on the future, a network of national awakening grew naturally and organically, through personal contacts, composed of cognizant leaders such as those who had enabled the Romantic *Renaixença* to manifest in Catalonia. It was planned to use the same structure: a cultural phase, with contacts, projects and dreams; a political phase, with the enunciation of ideas and their implementation; and, finally, state reunification with their respective independences.

During the years of the Second Spanish Republic, Valencians, Majorcans and other Catalans came sporadically to the *Palestra's* summer camps, although Scouts groups were also organised in Valencia and a camp was run by *Palestra's* charitable organisation (*Obra Social*) in Majorca. In the meantime, the Association for the Protection of Catalan Education was also making attempts in Andorra to "nurture love for the language among the Andorran people". A Catalan Committee of Friends of Andorra was also created in "defence of Andorra's independence", which sustained that "defending Andorra from foreign interference is to defend the independence of a Catalan territory".

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Batista i Roca considered the idea of coordinating each nationality's rambling and Scouts movements and even designed an organisation chart for the new alliance, with three national secretariats and one general secretariat, each one with their own headquarters, in a structure that resembled that followed internally by Palestra, the Catalan ramblers and Scouts movement and the Association for the Protection of Catalan Education. Through Batista i Roca and his closest collaborators, all of these spaces and organisations were converging on a new political culture for the entire Catalan nation. Unfortunately, the outcome of the Civil War put an abrupt stop to this growing national awareness in the Catalan Countries.

Occitan geopolitics

When Romanticism took Europe back to its medieval past, the Catalans rediscovered their shared past with the Occitans, and vice-versa. Since then, they have remained enthralled by what the scholar August Rafanell has called the *Occitan illusion*. Throughout the 19th century, the idea of a Catalan-Occitan cultural unity, especially in terms of language, was shared by many intellectuals affiliated with the respective *Renaixença* movements. After the Great War, Batista i Roca believed that the time had come to define relationships and move on from a cultural or linguistic *illusion*, a romanticised, historical, almost mythical shared brotherhood in a past truncated by the Battle of Muret in 1213 —a slightly esoteric idea, only accessible to intellectuals— to a modern, political idea that could appeal to the masses. To quote Rafanell, Batista i Roca created “the first programme and the first fully national campaign (not selective or elitist) for pan-Occitanism in Catalonia” [4].

Through events and encounters, publishing pamphlets, and organising meetings and conferences, Batista i Roca sought to bring the two cultures together, prepare a unified cultural market, unite the two languages and encourage young people to meet so that, in the future, a shared cultural awareness could be developed, a Catalan-Occitan political project, that would be channelled through the Association for the Protection of Catalan Education, the recently formed National Federation of Catalan Students, and Palestra. Although there had been precedents, it was really during the period from 1930 to 1934, marked by relative stability and freedom on both sides of the Corbières Massif, that ties and links were re-established, with the endorsement of the Catalan Government, with Occitan intellectuals with the goal of building a cultural space-market that, in the future, could become a political reality [5]. The evolution towards the Revolution of October and the turbulence of the period between 1934 and 1939 in Catalonia, and between 1939 and 1945 in Occitania, put a temporary stop to the contacts and the dreams of unification, which Batista i Roca would pick up again in the 1950s.

European geopolitics

Historically, more or less once a century, Europe goes through a turbulent period not only with changes in frontiers and hegemonies, but also in the conception of the world and of power. After the religious wars of the 16th century, examples of such turbulence are the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), the War of Succession (1701-1713/15) and the Quadruple

Alliance (1718-1720), the Wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1802 and 1803-1815) and the period of the two World Wars (1914-1945). Each time that a post-war system weakens and collapses, Europe enters a period lasting two or three decades of instability, with shifting borders, ideas, hegemonies and power structures, from which it emerges totally transformed. Paradoxically, these are times of opportunity for Catalonia. Batista i Roca wanted to take advantage of the window opened between the First and Second World Wars to achieve independence for Catalonia.

In 1919, he had already started to make university contacts in Oxford, Cambridge and Berlin, and also, unofficially, in circles close to the League of Nations. He spoke and corresponded with everyone, whether they were representatives of minorities, states, republics, monarchies or empires. He channelled his activity above all through the Office of Relations and Exchanges (ORBIS), established within Palestra. By this means, Batista i Roca sought to make up for the total or almost total absence of international relations or institutions. Between 1919 and 1945 (and beyond), Batista i Roca tried to compensate for the non-existence of an unofficial or para-official Office of International Relations or Ministry or Department of Foreign Affairs in Catalonia.

Informal contacts were established through friends as well as formal contacts: reports and messages were sent to the consulates and embassies of Great Britain, France, Germany, Italy and Portugal, among others. The absence of a Catalan state-level diplomacy or advocacy of political demands before the new League of Nations led the Catalan nationalists, including Batista i Roca, to opt for indirect forms of influence. In this respect, a lot of work was done at the Congress of European Nationalities, a non-governmental organisation that sought to make up for the lack of representation of stateless nations and national minorities at the League of Nations. Batista i Roca's influence at the Congress became well-known, acquiring "a certain weight in the circles of European nationalist movements after 1933-34, particularly for his sojourns in Geneva in front of the League of Nations' press room", as Nuñez-Seixas has explained [6].

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In meetings and encounters, such as that of 1935, he succeeded in getting his proposals for European peace and respect for the rights of minorities accepted by all the attendees, and they would later be presented to the president of the League of Nations Assembly. Another example of this indirect participation, which sought to influence the League of Nations member states' perception of Catalonia, took place in 1935, after the Revolution of October. During that year, as Catalonia's representative at the Congress of European Nationalities, Batista i Roca forwarded a report about Catalonia to the Portuguese delegation at the League of Nations, in which he explained the country's political situation after the failure of

that uprising [7]. The hopes of a free Catalonia in a free and different Europe receded between 1936 and 1939, but after 1945, Batista i Roca would continue to interact with the re(nascent) European institutions.

Hispanic geopolitics: stop the War

During the three years of the Civil War, as Arnau González i Vilalta has explained in his book *Une Catalogne indépendant?*: “the possible secession of Catalonia, whether for or against, became the subject of analysis and debate in chancelleries and the press alike [...]. There was no forum for diplomatic or journalistic debate in which the possibility of a Catalan secession was not discussed” [8]. The USSR, Italy and Germany took part directly in the Spanish Civil War and thousands of foreign combatants —such as the International Brigades or the Corpo Truppe Volontarie— fought on the battlefields. And the international communication media also turned their gaze south of the Pyrenees.

The diplomatic jigsaw puzzle of those years put Catalonia as a movable piece in dispute on the chessboard of international relations at the end of the inter-war period. In March 1938, for example, when Hitler annexed Austria, the French Government briefly considered the proposal of occupying Catalonia militarily as far as the Ebro as a protective measure. Gregori Mir says that “not since the end of the War of Spanish Succession had Catalonia figured so prominently in international politics as during the Civil War” [9].

President Lluís Companys sent Batista i Roca to London on a secret mission when Franco’s troops entered Lleida in the spring of 1938. Thanks to the network of contacts built during previous years, he managed to reach the highest echelons of the British Empire, being seen personally by Lord Halifax, Edward Frederick Lindley Wood, at that time Foreign Secretary. However, the British kept the card of Catalan nationalism hidden from 1936 to 1945. In one of the reports sent by Batista i Roca on 23 June 1937, which he wrote in coordination with the Basque Government envoys Manuel Irujo and Iñaki Lisazo as well as with the Catalan Government’s delegation in Paris, he talked about a proposal to stop the war. His plan consisted of recognising the territory controlled by the Franco-led rebels and, through the League of Nations, establishing international control of Catalonia, the region of Valencia, the Balearic Islands, the parts of Aragon still controlled by the Republic, and Murcia; in other words, following almost exactly the borders of the former Crown of Aragon, applying a perspective that was more *Hispanic* than Spanish. “The English were very interested in the idea and even suggested that Holland be a member of this [international] committee”, Batista i Roca would remember [10]. The British decided not to act on the issue of Catalan nationalism: contacts would continue beyond the end of the Civil War and until the end of the Second World War but, as we all know, the liberation of Paris and Berlin was not followed by that of Barcelona or Madrid.

Conclusions

The scope of Batista i Roca’s paradiplomacy during the inter-war period was limited by the absence of state mechanisms and direct representation at the League of Nations. However,

using strategies for indirect influence, such as taking part in the Congress of European Nationalities, he attempted to make up for these shortcomings and was able to contact and send information and memorandums to the League of Nations and the delegates of several countries. The contacts made would be used during the Spanish Civil War in an attempt to obtain a separate peace with the involvement of different powers and the League of Nations. However, ultimately, this attempt failed.

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- 5 — Rafanell states that Batista and “all the ‘idealists’ who supported him had surpassed their predecessors, taking in a literal sense what the latter had preached in a literary sense”. Rafanell, August (2006). *La Il·lusió Occitana*. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 115. For an example of the evolutionary vision of phased nationalism, see: J. M. Batista i Roca (1932), *Pròleg* in Amadeu Serch, *L'exemple de Txecoslovàquia. Els sòkols. La lluita per la independència*. Barcelona: Editorial Barcino, 5-7. On the awareness of creating cultural frameworks and a common Occitan-Catalan market: Alexandre Cirici (1973). *El Temps Barrat* (Barcelona: Destino, 1973), 116-126 and 203-206. On the fostering of contacts between Occitans and Catalans by para-autonomic organisations, Carbonell's Office of Meridional Relations is a good example: Vinyet Panyella (2000). *Josep Carbonell i Gener (Sitges, 1897-1979). Entre les avantguardes i l'humanisme*. Barcelona: Edicions 62, 184-196. See, in general: Porta, Frederic J. (2022/2023), *Josep Maria Batista i Roca (1895-1978)* [Provisional title. Forthcoming publication]. Barcelona: Edicions de 1984.
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**Frederic J. Porta**

Frederic J. Porta holds a degree in Political Science, Master in World History and a PhD in Contemporary History at Pompeu Fabra University. He is currently a member of the UPF's Group of States, Nations and Sovereignities Research (GRENS) and a postdoctoral researcher Margarita Salas in Contemporary History at the University of Barcelona, within the Group of Research in National Studies and Cultural Policies. Director of *Esperit* magazine, his research focuses on the Catalan history, nationalism and separatism, the history of Europe, political movements and contemporary philosophy.