

CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

# Josep Puig i Cadafalch and the origins of a diplomacy for autonomous Catalonia

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Illustrator: [Jesús Galdón](#)

## Josep Puig i Cadafalch: a statesman with international aspirations

Josep Puig i Cadafalch (Mataró 1867 - Barcelona 1956) is more often remembered for his distinguished career as an architect, archaeologist and art historian. As well as being the architect who designed Casa Amatller, Casa de les Punxes, the Casaramona factory and so many others, Puig i Cadafalch also sponsored the historical-archaeological expedition to the Pyrenees in 1907 that, among other things, discovered the Romanesque frescoes of Taüll, and the excavations in Empúries, and wrote *L'Arquitectura Romànica a Catalunya* (Romanesque Architecture in Catalonia), which brought him international recognition.

However, Puig i Cadafalch was also a person engaged with the politics of his time and a statesman. A distinguished member of the Lliga Regionalista, he was president of the Mancomunitat of Catalonia (a regional government comprising the four provincial councils of Catalonia) from the death of Prat de la Riba to the advent of Primo de Rivera's

dictatorship (1917-23). During the six years or more that he held this post, he was able to implement a robust government programme. Among the many activities he put in motion, we would like to focus on one that has been virtually ignored until now: the development of an intense foreign action policy, the first by a Catalan institution in the contemporary era.

Even as a young man, Puig i Cadafalch showed a keen interest in international affairs, and this would become a hallmark of his entire career. For example, as an archaeologist and art historian, not only did he join a large number of European societies and academies, but he also became a member of North American and even North African societies. He took part in international congresses, gave academic lectures in Paris, Harvard, Oxford and Bonn, and was acclaimed by the international scientific community, receiving three honorary doctorates from the University of Fribourg (1923), the Sorbonne (1933), and the University of Toulouse (1949), respectively, in addition to the doctorate awarded by the University of Barcelona.

This international dimension would also be very present in his political career, long before he headed the Mancomunitat, when he travelled to Paris in 1905 to decry the situation in Catalonia, which led to the creation of Catalan Solidarity in the Ligue des droits de l'homme; or again in 1912, when he returned to Paris to represent Catalonia at the congress of the Union des Nationalités.

## The end of the Great War: opportunity or mirage?

One of the first major foreign «operations» undertaken by Puig i Cadafalch was after the conclusion of the Great War (1914-1918). Empowered by the Council of the Mancomunitat, he embarked upon a campaign to congratulate the winning powers and «the Governments of the nationalities of Europe that have achieved recognition of their Right». This took the form of letters and telegrams sent to the allied powers, excluding, as an exercise in contention, the Central American republics, even though formally they too numbered among the victorious allies of the First World War. Turning to the «liberated peoples», he sent missives to Poland, *Bohemia* (sic) and *Yugo-Slavia* (sic). Telegrams were sent both to Prague and to *Agram* (the German name for Zagreb, which was used while it was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), and to their representatives who were in Paris at the eve of the peace negotiations. In the case of Great Britain, King George V's reply was received through the British ambassador in Madrid. In the case of France, the answer came through the French consul in Barcelona, Charles Philippi. A heartfelt telegram was also received from Paris, sent by Trumbic, the president of the Yugoslav National Council, and a telegram of thanks from Jules Pams, the French Minister of Home Affairs and a distinguished North Catalan politician who had received the congratulatory note from the president of the Mancomunitat.

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## political career

In the reply sent by the British ambassador, Puig i Cadafalch saw an opportunity to deepen relations with this Great Power. The success achieved in this initiative can be seen in the second letter sent by the ambassador to Puig i Cadafalch in which, after a visit to Barcelona, the English diplomat has glowing words of praise for Catalonia, recalling «the heroism of the Catalan Volunteers» or mentioning «the ingratitude of those British statesmen (...) who two centuries ago abandoned Catalonia to the vengeance of the French», in a clear allusion to the Treaty of Utrecht. It is obvious from the letter's tone and content that the president of the Mancomunitat had succeeded in conveying some of his tenets to the ambassador during the latter's stay in Barcelona.

However, less than two years later, in spite of this *wager* on London, Puig i Cadafalch turned his gaze toward Dublin, in an act of pragmatism that is very characteristic of diplomatic praxis. The creation of the Irish Free State (1922) had a significant impact on Catalan public opinion and the president of the Mancomunitat extended it a solemn albeit restrained welcome.

## The strategic relationship with France and the North Catalan connection: Emmanuel Brousse, Jules Pams and Field Marshal Joffre

For Puig i Cadafalch, the decision to foster relations with France was not just a logical strategic option but also a personal choice. Puig i Cadafalch had always been a Francophile, not just from a political or diplomatic perspective but also from an intellectual standpoint. Thus, while fostering close political and institutional relations, he was also active in cultural, academic and scientific diplomacy. A key factor for understanding the policy with respect to France is the North Catalan connection; that is, the fraternal relations between Puig i Cadafalch and the most radically Catalanist sectors of North Catalan society with influence in Paris. Here, the leading names were without doubt Emmanuel Brousse, Jules Pams and Field Marshal Joffre, although other important figures would also be involved.

Emmanuel Brousse, a journalist and politician from Perpignan (député in the National Assembly from 1906 to 1924 and secretary of state for Finance from 1920 to 1921), was the most active ally for Catalanist interests in France. With his incessant activism and fervour, he would become one of the biggest headaches of the Spanish ambassador in Paris and, at one time, he was even banned entry into Spain. Jules Pams, also from Perpignan, was Minister of Agriculture (1911-13) and of Home Affairs (1917-20), *député* at the National Assembly, senator and French delegate at the League of Nations. He also maintained close contacts with Puig i Cadafalch, and although relations were not as close as with Brousse, he had considerable influence in Paris. Josep Joffre i Plas, field marshal of France, was a Roussillon-born Catalan speaker, the son of an emigrant from Reus who had made a successful living in Rivesaltes. He sponsored the Catalan Volunteers who fought in the

French Foreign Legion during the First World War and became a symbol and icon for the Catalanist sectors, including the most radical.

In October 1919, Joffre received a number of tributes in Perpignan. Puig i Cadafalch was invited to them and attended accompanied by a numerous Catalan delegation that included Àngel Guimerà, Santiago Rusiñol, Enric Morera and Dr Solé i Plà. Puig i Cadafalch was received with full honours and he took the opportunity to invite the marshal to visit Catalonia to preside the *Jocs Florals* (poetry competition) in Barcelona in May of the following year. Joffre's visit to Barcelona the following year exceeded all expectations. The Spanish Government opposed enormous resistance and did its best to prevent it from happening; indeed, it only happened because Joffre finally went to Madrid first to bestow a decoration on Alfonso XIII before going to Catalonia. His arrival in Barcelona drew enormous crowds, as did his visit to the City Hall or the session of the *Jocs Florals*, at which Guimerà's speech stirred patriotic fervour. In a context of frustration with the failure of the attempts to achieve self-rule, the prevailing popular enthusiasm was apparent in the large crowds that congregated everywhere Joffre went and at which, supposedly, separatist slogans were chanted, eliciting violent charges from the national police force, the Guardia Civil. One of the people injured in these charges was Antoni Gaudí. The ceremony at the Palau de la Generalitat was a highly contentious event and was met with another police charge when the people who had attended it left the building and entered the Plaça de Sant Jaume.

## From Louvain to Rheims, via Belloy-en-Santerre

Among the many activities performed to promote the Catalan cause in France, the most publicised were those related to the memory of the Catalan Volunteers who fought alongside the Allies in the Great War. With the support of Barcelona City Council and other corporations, the Mancomunitat proposed to rebuild a village that had been destroyed during the conflict. The village of Belloy-en-Santerre was suggested, but that was not possible «probably because of some diplomatic instruction», to quote the parliamentarian Albert de Quintana. In the end, it was decided to make a contribution to the fund to rebuild the cathedral of Rheims, which had been heavily damaged during the hostilities.

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Another highly significant example of this type of diplomacy and the goals that it pursued was the participation of a delegation from the Mancomunitat at the ceremony to lay the first stone in the reconstruction of the Library of the University of Louvain (Flanders, Belgium). Although the Mancomunitat did not make any contributions to a specific fund (Barcelona City Council donated a parcel with a thousand books), it did send a delegation

consisting of Jordi Rubió and Rafel Campalans. The letter that Campalans wrote to Puig i Cadafalch to inform him of the journey is highly revealing of the contacts made with academics and supporters of the Flemish nationalist movement.

## Relations with the Consular Corps: an implicit recognition?

One of the most voluminous bodies of documentation on Josep Puig i Cadafalch's foreign action is that concerning his relations with the Consular Corps accredited in Barcelona. The fact that these relations were so intense and long-lived implies, even if only indirectly, a certain recognition of the authority and representative power accorded by the Consular Corps to the Mancomunitat and its president as institutional figureheads for Catalonia, in spite of the lack of powers and resources with which the institution was vested.

Puig i Cadafalch viewed the large consular community in Barcelona as a suitable mechanism for informing about the reality of the situation and Catalonia's aspirations for self-government. For example, he had the proposed 1919 Statute of Autonomy translated into several languages and handed it out to all members of the Consular Corps, receiving in return indications of genuine interest and even curious signs of support, such as that given openly by official letter by the Consul General of Switzerland, Frederic Gschwind.

At the same time, with the intention of giving added force to his message, the president of the Mancomunitat took particular care to repeatedly inform about the modernising work performed by the Mancomunitat. By displaying the new administration's successes, and therefore its efficiency, in spite of its meagre budget, Puig i Cadafalch believed that it would add greater weight to the demands for increased political autonomy.

## The League of Nations and the Barcelona Conference: an unrepeatable opportunity

The International Conference on Communications and Transit, organised by the League of Nations, was held in Barcelona from 10 March to 20 April 1921. It was the first intergovernmental conference organised by this international body, recently created as a result of the treaties that had put an end to the First World War. Chance had it that it was held in Barcelona, and a Catalan journalist who worked at the League of Nations at that time, Eugeni Xammar, played the role of facilitator so that this international summit could be held at the Palau de la Generalitat, ceded by the president of the Mancomunitat, and Barcelona City Hall's Saló de Cent, facing the Palau across the Plaça de Sant Jaume.

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Puig i Cadafalch was aware that this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that could not be missed: he would host —for six weeks— a top-level diplomatic event, with delegations from 42 states, officials from the League of Nations, press and international experts; in total, more than 300 people from around the world. Aware of its significance, Puig i Cadafalch not only ceded the Palau de la Generalitat, adapting it to the needs of the League of Nations; he also regaled them with all sorts of hospitalities, such as visits, distribution of publications, gifts, etc. Unlike Barcelona City Council, which organised a grand banquet at the Saló de Contractacions at the Llotja de Mar for 300 people, the president of the Mancomunitat systematically organised through his secretary Ramon Cunill a series of lunches and meetings that were undoubtedly less glittering but pursued a clear goal: interact with each of the almost 200 diplomats, experts and senior officials who were attending the Conference. Visits were also organised for delegates to some of the Mancomunitat's most noteworthy successes, such as the building that housed the Library of Catalonia and the Institute of Catalan Studies, the Palau de la Generalitat itself, or the Industrial University. An excursion to Montserrat was also offered, which was enthusiastically praised by the delegates and harshly criticised by the less Catalanist press in Barcelona.

Subsequently, Puig i Cadafalch would make use of the contacts made in Barcelona on a number of occasions, either to ask for support in international technical missions organised by the Mancomunitat or for input on how to influence certain debates that were relevant to Catalonia at the League of Nations.

## The League of Nations, the national minorities and the debates of 1922

The end of the First World War precipitated the demise of the German, Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman empires. A few months earlier, the Russian Empire had also started to break up in the aftermath of the October Revolution, also closely linked to the War. This led to a complete redrawing of national borders in central and eastern Europe, the Near East and part of the Middle East. A large number of new states were born, and states that were sovereign before the War underwent substantial territorial changes. Within this context, the recently born League of Nations was endowed with mechanisms to protect national minorities, with the particular aim of making sure that any frictions in this area would not trigger new armed conflicts. However, these instruments were not universally applicable; that is, they did not apply to all member countries of the League of Nations, they only applied to the countries that had undergone territorial changes (including their creation as a new state) as a result of the Great War. In spite of its territorial and legal limitations, this new reality generated considerable interest and debate in those countries where the issue of nationalities was a politically sensitive and highly charged subject, as was the case of Catalonia.

Enforcement of this system was not without controversy; many of the new states in central and eastern Europe felt uncomfortable with the fact that in an international organisation like the League of Nations, one of whose fundamental columns was the principle of legal

equality, only some of its members were bound by certain obligations —with respect to national minorities— that the others had no necessity to observe. Thus, in September 1922, the British academic and South African delegate at the League of Nations, Gilbert Murray, tabled a proposal at its Assembly to generalise application of the minorities treaties to all of the League's members, which included Spain. The intense debates that followed failed to transform this proposal into a tangible reality. However, a resolution was approved that, while not being binding on any state, expressed the hope and trust that «the states that were not bound to the League by any legal obligation with respect to minorities would, nonetheless, observe in the treatment of their respective minorities, at least, the same degree of justice and tolerance as that demanded by the treaties».

All of this was followed with passion in Barcelona and with concern in Madrid, and is reflected in the requests of information on the subject made by Puig i Cadafalch to Joan Estelrich and his replies. And although the debates did not have the outcome hoped by intellectuals such as Antoni Rovira i Virgili, among others, it does show Puig i Cadafalch's capability not only to follow the major international debates that were relevant to Catalonia but also the desire to influence them.

## The Catalan diaspora: between institutional recognition and national radicalism

Another key area in Puig i Cadafalch's foreign action is without doubt his relations with the Catalan diaspora; in particular, the world of casals, centres, choral societies and other types of organisations created by Catalans around the world —particularly in Latin America—, which started to pop up everywhere during the period between 1910 and 1920. The Mancomunitat and its president were the institutional reference in Catalonia for the organised Catalan diaspora, and Puig i Cadafalch was careful to cultivate good relations with them, with the result that many of these centres would become mouthpieces of the Mancomunitat's works and publications. The documentation also shows just how closely Catalan and Spanish politics were being followed from abroad, and the growing radicalisation —from the national standpoint— of a large part of the diaspora, especially during the 1920s, coinciding with the proposal and failure of the 1919 Statute of Autonomy.

In this context, the role of the journalist and attorney Antoni de Paula Aleu (1847-1926) takes on particular significance. In close contact with Puig i Cadafalch, he would disseminate the interests of political Catalanism and the Mancomunitat from his home city of Buenos Aires to the rest of South America. Indeed, after the failure of the autonomy campaign, it would be Aleu who would engineer the creation of the Catalan Action Committee in the summer of 1919 in South America. This organisation was formed to coordinate the activities performed by the organised diaspora in 16 centres in 4 countries (Argentina, Chile, Uruguay and Paraguay) and three «periodicals» that were linked to them. As an illustration of his dedication, and the difficulties he had to face, we could quote from this letter sent by Aleu to Puig i Cadafalch in September 1919: «...and if you only knew how time-consuming and difficult it is to explain to these people what we are, what we want, and where we are going...».

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Paris, for obvious reasons, would be another epicentre of the Catalan diaspora, with a significant diversity of entities with different orientations and leanings, often overlapping with each other in their activities, such as the Centre Català, the Casal Català of Paris or the Paris Committee of the Lliga Nacional Catalana. The organised Catalan diaspora was also active in the city of New York. Although there is no lack of precedents that evidence an active Catalan presence in this city at the close of the 19th century, it would not be until 1920 that the Centre Nacionalista Català (Catalan Nationalist Center) of New York would be formed and its existence would be notified immediately to president Puig i Cadafalch. This institution would soon be complemented with the Comitè Cultural Català (Catalan Cultural Committee) of New York.

## Relations with the Holy See: from the Nunciature to the election of Pius XI

Relations between the Catalan authorities and the Apostolic Nunciature (the Holy See's embassy in Madrid) were never smooth, and Puig i Cadafalch's period as president of the Mancomunitat was no exception, especially with regard to the «Catalan affair». This was particularly apparent in what are known as the Barcelona Corpus Incidents of 1919.

On 22 January 1922, the *Pope of Peace*, Benedict XV, died from complications of flu in the Papal Palace in Vatican City. Immediately, the Conclave was called to choose his successor. Vidal i Barraquer, the archbishop of Tarragona and made a cardinal just over a year earlier, took part in it.

Chosen on 6 February, the new Pope was the cardinal of Milan, Achille Ratti, who took the name of Pius XI. From Rome, Cardinal Vidal i Barraquer gave instructions to inform Puig i Cadafalch immediately. This choice was not a minor matter. Before becoming a cardinal, Ratti had been prefect of the Ambrosian Library (Milan) and subsequently of the Vatican Library, where he had received and discoursed with a number of Catalan scholars, mainly specialists who were looking for Lullian manuscripts.

Puig i Cadafalch made a number of attempts to take his message to the new Pope. Finally, after early failures, he achieved his goal. On 16 October 1922, the Holy See's Secretary of State, Cardinal Gasparri, sent a letter to the president of the Mancomunitat on the instructions of Pius XI and whose content can be considered clear evidence of a 20th-century pontiff's affection for Catalonia. A man of letters, he recalled the support that he had given in his younger days to Catalan scholars: «when, as Prefect of the Ambrosian Library in Milan, and later on, as Prefect of the Vatican Library, I helped them in the arduous search for the Lullian codices, in the work of collating and deciphering old

manuscripts and diplomas, to which we owe the truly wondrous outcome of witnessing the later emergence of that magnificent monument to medieval Catalan literature, *Codex prínceps* from the *Llibre de la Contemplació*».

He added, on behalf of the Holy Father, that: «he is pleased to reassert once again his particular benevolence for the strong and beloved land of Catalonia. And he does this with the sweetest hope that this noble land, growing in strength every day with new and admirable manifestations of activity and fervour in the conquest of the intellect and the spirit, will not diverge even for an instant from the glorious traditions of its past...».

## The challenge of institutionalisation: Joan Estelrich, *Expansió Catalana* and the proposed Offices of Foreign Relations

In 1919, Puig i Cadafalch was re-elected president of the Mancomunitat. In his inauguration speech, given on 12 September before the parliamentarians of the Mancomunitat, he outlined his government's programme and announced, among other proposals, the intention to create two new bodies within the Mancomunitat: the Catalan Institution of Propaganda, and the Institution of Social Policy, the latter formed with the specific goal to address the deep crisis and social conflict in which the country was immersed.

The exceptionalness of the proposal for the Institution of Propaganda lies in the fact that it is the first project to create a foreign action instrument specifically tailored to contemporary Catalan government institutions. As Puig i Cadafalch himself said: «Everyone understands the importance of being known in the world: you only have to look at the effort made by the nations that have regained their sovereignty, and think of the consequences for our material and spiritual commerce. To know and be known! Here's a job worth doing.»

In parallel, and almost at the same time, Joan Estelrich —born in Majorca but living in Barcelona, an intellectual and the future right-hand man of Cambó— was developing his proposal for *Expansió Catalana*, an entity that was paradoxically similar to the proposal made by Puig i Cadafalch. Thus, at some time during 1920, Estelrich also put forward —we do not know if it was on his own initiative or at the request of Puig i Cadafalch— a surprising project for Offices of Foreign Relations which stands out for its modernness.

However, in the end, neither the Institution was formed nor were the Offices opened. What would be developed was a sustained, continuous line of foreign action under the presidency of Puig i Cadafalch at the Mancomunitat, on one hand, and, on the other hand and in parallel, the deployment of *Expansió Catalana* by Estelrich.

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