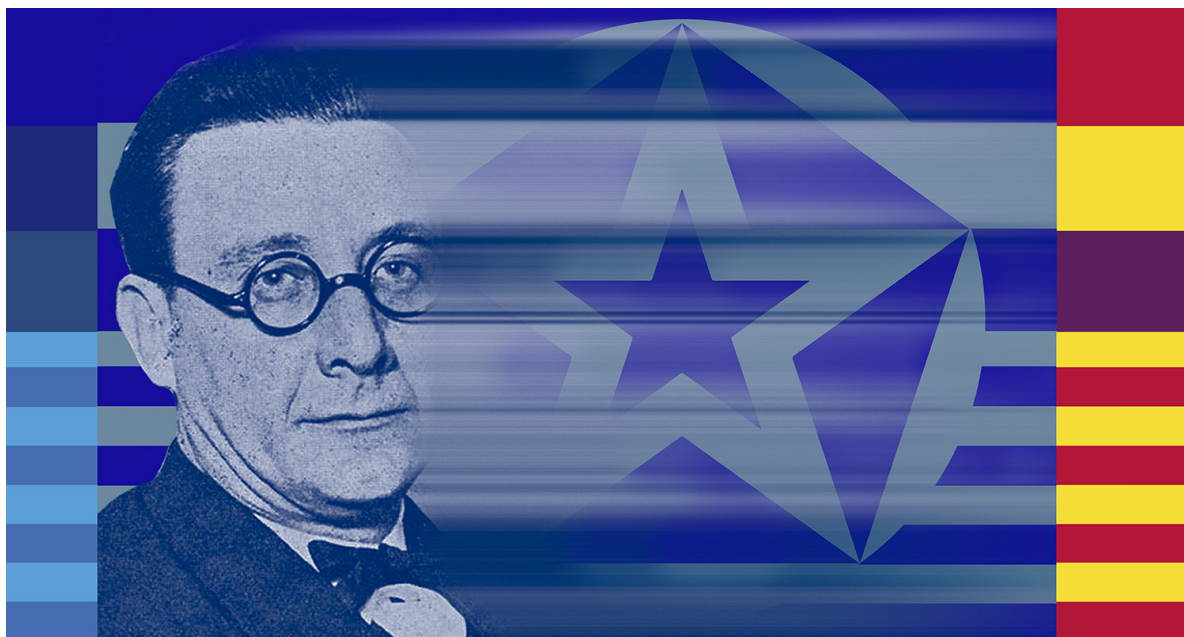


CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

# Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer at the League of Nations

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Illustrator: [Jesús Galdón](#)

This year marks a century since the formation of Acció Catalana by young activists who split from the Lliga Regionalista. One of the key proponents of this split was Lluís Nicolau d'Olwer. Rather than a vocational politician, he was a scholar and humanist who went into politics, as a moral imperative, as he always said. With Acció Catalana, he began an important political career that led him to take part in the Pact of San Sebastián in 1930 and the Revolutionary Committee that was formed after that meeting. When Primo de Rivera took power in 1923, Nicolau d'Olwer went into voluntary exile. As well as taking part in very important academic affairs and travelling around the Mediterranean, he also brought the repression of Catalan language and culture before the League of Nations. With the proclamation of the Second Republic, he was appointed Minister of Finance during the constituent period and represented Spain at the London Economic Conference held in 1933. His party, Acció Catalana, was part of the Popular Front, a coalition of parties that presented itself at the general elections of 1936 and, in March that year, he was appointed Governor of the Bank of Spain, during the Civil War. With the fall of Barcelona and the Second Republic, he left for exile, first in France, where he would endure persecution and prison and, after 1946, in Mexico, where he was Ambassador of the Second Republic in exile between 1947 and 1951. He died in Mexico on 24 December 1961.

## Activity in exile

During his first period of exile, after 1923, Nicolau d'Olwer divided his time between Paris and Geneva, which was where the League of Nations had its headquarters. Whenever he could, Nicolau d'Olwer promoted Catalan culture abroad and, during those years, both he and other members of the Institute of Catalan Studies helped consolidate one of the defining moments of Catalan language. As Primo de Rivera dictatorship's aim was to close down the Institute of Catalan Studies by depriving it of financial resources, through the dissolution of the Mancomunitat, the leader of Acció Catalana worked closely with a large number of international institutions to increase awareness of Catalonia's distinctive culture and language. Nicolau d'Olwer and Manuel Massó were observers at the League of Nations during the remaining years of exile, from 1924 to 1931 [1].

They did not hold out much hope for the minorities that had not been recognised in the Minorities Treaty signed in 1919. However, in 1922, the 3rd Annual Assembly of the League of Nations approved Murray's proposition [2], according to which each Member State was given the prerogative of applying the same principles of the Minorities Treaty to each of its minorities. Both Nicolau d'Olwer and Massó saw this as a suitable legal framework for including Catalanist pretensions [3]. It was during the dictatorship, between 1923 and 1930, that the most important actions and activities in defence of Catalan language and culture were undertaken within the sphere of influence of the League of Nations. For its significance and impact, the work of Joan Estelrich [4] and Maspons i Anglasesell [5].

By virtue of the new legal reality that emerged from the peace treaties after the First World War, the national minorities were guaranteed "preservation of their most salient spiritual characteristics" [6]. In the case of Catalan language and culture, Catalanist sectors wished to have this principle upheld for Catalonia. Acció Catalana's Council met at Perpignan in early 1924 to discuss how to address the ostracisation of Catalan language and culture under the dictatorship with the aim of bringing this before the League of Nations. Consequently, 1924 was a vitally important year for Catalonia in the international sphere [7] because, as Artur Peruchó said, "The Catalan problem was taken to the League of Nations, [...] which in turn laid the first stone of the building..." [8].

Nicolau d'Olwer was given the task of drafting the document that emerged from the meeting of Acció Catalana's Council, and which would be presented before the international body. However, before that, the document had to be put before the other Catalan delegates and then submitted for approval by all the Catalanist forces. Despite the effort made, the documentation sent and the entreaty made to the League of Nations, none of this bore any fruit. Having reached this point, both Massó and Nicolau d'Olwer opened contacts with leading figures in international politics, especially from those countries that had a delegation at the League of Nations Assembly. This work was done mostly in Geneva, but it also took our man to London, Brussels and Paris.

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Nations; he argued that it was much more than an organisation created to guarantee and organise peace and it had many other purposes and a broad spectrum of activities

On 28 June, the International Union of Pro-League of Nations Associations held its General Assembly in Lyon. At this Assembly, Nicolau d'Olwer proposed a synthesis of the desiderata of the unprotected minorities [9]. At that time, Acció Catalana's leader attended all of the League of Nations' congresses and assemblies, taking notes that he subsequently sent to *La Publicitat*. Despite the failed attempt, he was able to put the freedom of propaganda to good use and, in Geneva, made contact with many people, especially journalists employed by leading dailies, interested in the affair of the national minorities, to whom he sent information in English and French about the Catalan cause [10]. Two of these interested people were the editor of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* and *Herr Ewald*, who went to see Nicolau d'Olwer. As a result of that meeting, the idea was proposed of organising a Congress of National Minorities the following year, 1925. This would give rise to the Congresses of European Nationalities, in which Catalonia would play a leading role [11].

## Reflections about the League of Nations

Nicolau d'Olwer kept a very open mind about the League of Nations, in spite of the failure in Geneva; he argued that it was much more than an organisation created to guarantee and organise peace and it had many other purposes and a broad spectrum of activities. According to Acció Catalana's leader, the League of Nations worked on three levels: the first, occupying a very specific and limited space, would be the circle "... formed by the founding powers, the former Allies of the Great War, to mutually guarantee performance of the peace treaties..."; the second was formed around a second, more open circle, consisting of a sort of "confederation composed of all of the covenant's signatories, with the intention of avoiding conflicts between them and, should they arise, to settle them by peaceful means..."; and finally, the third, a much broader and more nebulous circle "manifested by the collaboration of non-signatory states in several initiatives organised by the League (economic conference, disarmament, etc.)" [12]. Nicolau d'Olwer believed that this extremely broad field of action excessively complicated the organisation's work, precisely due to the existence of peoples with national particularities outside of the European context. Should they require more precise attention from Europe, this could lead to neglect of the others. One of the most common international criticisms levelled against the organisation was that the League of Nations only thought about Europe, hence the formation of the Pan-Asian League in 1926. As Nicolau d'Olwer himself acknowledged, the minorities problem in Europe was very different to that of the other continents. Europe had put the policies related with minorities on hold, and Nicolau d'Olwer warned that they could become a threat to peace. In his opinion, some kind of mechanism or guarantee was needed to make it impossible to oppress nationalities or national minorities living in the different European states [13].

Even during those inter-war years, Nicolau d'Olwer maintained his confidence in the work that could be done at the League of Nations; he still had faith in the institution, in spite of its shortcomings, as he reflected in an article published in *La Publicitat* on 21 July 1928. Since its creation, the international body had gained increasing interest among public opinion around the world. In the opinion of Acció Catalana's leader, this was indicative of the weight that the League was starting to have in settling affairs between states, to the consternation of those who vilified it and advocated isolation within national frontiers. For better or for worse, said Nicolau d'Olwer, the League of Nations was absolutely necessary. However, this did not prevent him from being critical, aware of the need to overhaul it structurally and functionally. Acció Catalana's leader was always noted for his balanced reasoning, and in these reflections, one can see a wish to defend the institution in which he acknowledges that it cannot be questioned for not having done what it could not do. The fact is, the League of Nations had been born with intentional or unintentional shortcomings, and therefore, an international body, created in the context existing at the time -after a terrible war- could not do anything that had not been specifically stipulated and established in the foundational charter. Nicolau d'Olwer said that even though the League of Nations was probably not perfect, it was "an enormous advance compared with the free-for-all that existed before the War" [14]. Many years later, Nicolau d'Olwer would say that "Macià, at Prats de Molló, had done more for Catalonia than all the briefs sent to the League of Nations" [15], disappointed by the meagre results gained from the attempts to internationalise the Catalan case.

In conclusion, in the context of the Primo de Rivera dictatorship that came to power after 1923 and in the light of the ostracisation of Catalan language and culture, the Catalanist parties in exile undertook a series of actions within the sphere of the League of Nations. These actions included acquiring a significant presence in the various bodies linked to the League, performing paradiplomatic functions, and also publishing documents. The goal pursued was to increase awareness about and sympathy for the Catalan cause, within the scope of the Minorities Treaties signed a few years earlier, and also to find common ground, within its uniqueness, with other European minorities that were also struggling for differential national recognition.

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Nicolau d'Olwer was always willing to use the platform provided by the League of Nations to decry the repression of Catalan language and culture; he placed great faith in it but he was also aware of the organisation's shortcomings. In spite of his efforts, his work to achieve this recognition bore no fruit. The Catalanist parties had to wait until the end of the dictatorship in 1931 and the advent of the Second Republic for Catalan and Catalan culture to obtain recognition from the central government. After 1931, the battle would be fought on another field.

## REFERENCES

- 1 — FABREGAT FRUNCIDO, R. (1952) *Macià: su actuación al extranjero*. Ediciones Catalanas de México, Mexico, p. 37.
- 2 — Gilbert Murray (1866-1957) was a humanist, professor of Greek at Oxford and lifelong supporter of the Liberal Party, as well as vice-president of the League of Nations Society (1916); between 1921 and 1922, he was the League's delegate for South Africa. He was one of the leading proponents of the revision of the Minorities Treaties. In spite of his leading role during the early years of the League of Nations, Murray gradually lost prominence and this led to less attention being paid to his proposals. See: Seixas Núñez, Xosé Manuel, *El problema de las nacionalidades en la Europa de entreguerras. El congreso de las Nacionalidades Europeas (1925-1938)*, Doctoral dissertation, 1992, pp. 159, 189 and 218.
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- 7 — NUÑEZ SEIXAS, 2010, *op. cit.*: 113-206, in which the author develops the importance of the internationalisation of the Catalan cause as a tool for pressuring the dictatorial regime "...which had abolished all Catalan self-government institutions and prohibited official use of Catalan...".
- 8 — PERUCHO, 1930, *op. cit.*: p. 237.
- 9 — PERUCHO, 1930, p. 233.
- 10 — PERUCHO, 1930, p. 235.
- 11 — For more information about this affair, see: PERUCHO, 1930, *op. cit.*
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- 15 — NICOLAU DE OLWER, LLUÍS. (1958) *Caliu: records de mestres i amics*. Mexico: Fournier. p. 35.



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