

CATALONIA AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Diplomatic opportunities in turbulent times (1931-1939)

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When studying diplomatic relations and interactions between political players of varying levels and status, there is one axiomatic premise that must be accepted: the parameters of *realpolitik* do not always align with legal and theoretical principles. It is very common for political movements, armed groups, political parties or territorial entities without any state recognition to establish contacts and dynamics that are characteristic of internationally recognised administrations. In this respect, the 1930s are paradigmatic of this break with legally established procedures on an international scale, especially after Adolf Hitler's rise to power in January 1933, but there were also other cases. In fact, the League of Nations, the body created to put an end to armed conflicts after the Great War of 1914-1918 was a foretold failure. Neither its promoters, the United States, would join it (contradicting President Wilson and, once again, isolating itself from Europe), nor did it prevent the major conflicts that marked the period after 1932: the Chaco War between Bolivia and Paraguay; Fascist Italy's invasion of Abyssinia and Albania; the foreign intervention in the Spanish Civil War; the Japanese invasion and crimes in China... Only to end, diluted and bereft of meaning, with the succession of "negotiated" occupations by Germany of Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Baltic Republics (the latter, also by the Soviet Union) between 1938 and 1940. And in the midst of all this chaos, Catalonia was there [1].

In this context of rampant instability, with the framework established by the Treaty of Versailles rendered totally obsolete and the world rapidly moving toward the Second World War, the League of Nations and other entities, such as the Congress of European Nationalities, fostered by the Germans who were not yet under Nazi control —with a significant Catalan presence— would be excluded from any multilateral international policy [2]. All established procedures ceased to apply and any player with the necessary power or some geopolitical asset to offer could enter the diplomatic arena and form alliances with whoever they wished. Catalonia was not immune to this reality, with its interesting position in the West Mediterranean, adjoining France on its southern border, with a powerful industry and a latent identity-worker conflict and different perceptions abroad about its evolution, or otherwise, within Spain [3].

Having said that, these disruptions in diplomatic theory usually take place during periods of upheaval when the states' representatives, often ambassadors, find themselves sidestepped by colleagues of lower rank, such as the consuls posted to cities or territories without state recognition, or by other informal agents. It is in this context that we can place Catalonia during the Republican period (1931-1939), both during peacetime and, above all, during the Spanish Civil War, as an Iberian appendix of the European crisis of the 1930s [4].

During the years when Catalan self-government, approved between 1931 and 1932, would become an exceptional within the Spanish constitutional framework (as the Basque Statute would not be approved until October 1936, and its effective application would be short-lived, until mid-1937), the Catalan Government (Generalitat de Catalunya) would have the status of extra-semi-quasi-official diplomatic player, although it would never be recognised as such, in a number of bilateral or general international treaties that would later be torn up. In other words, there is interest among European countries to know what was happening in Catalonia, and also to interact with its representatives; whether the people in the Catalan Government at the time had the same interest is another matter. Arising from different external origins, this would lead to a blurred interpretation of the direction that would be taken by mainstream Catalan nationalism during those years, instigated by the diplomatic services, the press and the general staffs of Western and Latin American armies [5]. For its part, the exceptional situation created in Catalonia with the approval of the 1932 Statute, without any equivalent parallels in the recognition of special territorialised charters, would combine with a complex international context where the main interference as regards the interpretation of the situation would come from the British imperial structure. Indeed, in the minds of all foreign observers - French, British, North American or German - what was defined as the Catalan "question" or "problem" had been encapsulated during the inter-war years with a useful and oft repeated (albeit inaccurate) simile that defined it as "the Spanish Ireland" [6]. It was well known among the specialists that, in the Europe that had emerged from the Great War, with problems and conflicts with national minorities and questioned new borders drawn at the peace treaties negotiated in Versailles, Trianon or Sèvres, the Catalan case was one more example of a society with a differentiated national, linguistic and political reality within, in that case, the Spanish monarchy, and now Republic.

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If this were accepted without question, the natural conclusion would be that the Republican Statute of Autonomy, under the leadership of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya and Presidents Francesc Macià and Lluís Companys, would be compelled to follow the models it could be compared with. That is, the new legal and constitutional situation in Catalonia was an imitation of what had happened in Ireland with the creation of the Irish Free State in 1922 [7]. Consequently, the creation of Catalan autonomy was understood among press and diplomatic circles in London and the British Empire, and in other places, as a sort of *dominion* that would follow the British imperial model, which had been granting self-rule – “dominion” status – to its territories with white populations since the 19th century, starting with Canada, precisely to avoid any sort of violent break as had happened in 1776 with the United States of America.

Consequently, starting immediately after 14 April 1931, when Macià imposed a situation of *fait accompli* by creating a Catalan government that, although renouncing full sovereignty, would force the new Republican government of Spain to accept self-rule while the Statute and Constitution were being written, all the diplomatic players put Catalonia within the group of entities with which relations should be kept, without knowing exactly what sort of relations. All of the ambassadors in Madrid, the consuls in Barcelona and the officials of the European and American Ministries of Foreign Affairs shared two doubts. First, everyone believed that self-rule was the first step toward total emancipation, which would conclude with *de facto* independence in a short time –especially during the Civil War, when it was believed to be inevitable– but actually the situation was more complex [8]. By transplanting the Irish-British framework to Catalonia-Spain, it was persistently said that self-rule was on a par with almost full sovereignty. If Ireland, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa maintained constitutional ties with London, if the King of England was the Head of State of all these countries while at the same time, they could take part in military actions or open embassies, what made them so different from Catalonia?

The circumstances prevailing in Europe and the idea that the post-Versailles dynamics could not vary much from one part of the continent to another would give rise to a significant error in interpretation in the analyses of Catalonia. Everyone believed, and this is what the press published everywhere (and what was said in the reports sent by the consulates in Barcelona and the embassies in Madrid, and written by states’ central foreign services), that the Catalan Government sought full sovereignty. That this was its true goal and, in fact, the self-rule attained was already a *de facto* quasi-independence. That each step taken during those years, each political decision by the Catalan authorities such as its language policy or taking responsibility for public order were unequivocal signs that Catalan nationalism was taking the country to independence from Spain. This analysis sought to transpose on Catalan reality what the Irish had done, or what the Slovaks or

Croats wanted to do with the new frontiers that had put them inside Czechoslovakia or Yugoslavia. And this provided the basis for the evolution of Catalan politics and its tension with the governments of Spain, always analysed through a national, identity-driven prism, although without ruling out the left-right dynamic. Few understood the desire to reform Spain, shared both by Francesc Cambó's Lliga Regionalista/Lliga Catalana and by Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya's federalist project, with a possible change of peninsular hegemony. In the case of the latter, the ultimate goal was to create a Catalan political system that would try to live within but separate from the Spanish Republican framework (although that would turn out to be impossible) [9]. Nobody seemed to listen to the Catalan representatives in the Spanish Republican delegations to the League of Nations in 1931, who insisted that they were happy with the autonomy status attained that same year.

And while these erroneous interpretations were being bandied about, articles on Catalan politics, its worker problems or its interactions in Spanish politics continued to feature on the front pages of the European and American press, and the reports drafted by the embassies in Madrid created a regular sub-report on Catalonia, and the consuls in Barcelona benefitted from an enhanced status, as would be seen in the internal debates at the Foreign Office or Quai d'Orsay. A decision would have to be made about what should be done with this new reality; to decide what interests each power had in that territory and what risks could be entailed by its evolution towards sovereignty in a Europe that was on the brink of another World War. The Italians believed that Fascism could have an opportunity there, the French considered the military advantages that a Catalonia under its umbrella could bring them in the event of a Mediterranean war in the foreseeable conflict with Rome, the Portuguese viewed it as a reprehensible strengthening of Catalan identity, but an interesting weakening of the Castilian peninsular centre, and, lastly, when the Civil War began, the British, the Vatican, the Germans and everyone else believed, with equal doses of fear and demagoguery, that Catalonia would become a Soviet base, with continent-wide effects. The Catalan mirror was projected onto many European realities and while Belgian diplomats saw a dangerous trend with ramifications for Flemish nationalism and the expansion of Flemish in Belgium, the press supporting European national minorities viewed it as a model to follow [10].

Faced with this new scenario, the consuls and their teams in Barcelona would be given political rank and would no longer be confined to defending economic interests in a city that had now become a major Spanish and European hub. With the presence of an extensive network of foreign press correspondents who had been living there since the 1920s, with the head offices of foreign chambers of commerce - for whom Madrid was the branch and not the centre - with large foreign communities and investments (for example, Italy and Switzerland), the Consular Corps in Barcelona would eventually establish an incipient relationship as diplomatic representatives to the Catalan Government, which the latter, to everyone's surprise, was reluctant to accept.

In a Barcelona that had become a fully-fledged European city, with a growing population, in a process of industrial expansion and with a political projection that put it on a par with the major European capitals and above many other lower-ranking capitals of sovereign nations, the Catalan Government did not always seem to respond in kind in key moments when the

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True enough, there would be a large attendance by the Consular Corps at the opening of the Catalan Parliament in late 1932 and a box available, often used by members of the United States consulate, among others. In the New Year, the Corps would be invited to an official reception with the President of the Catalan Government, and the consular reports were often different from those written by the embassies, and they would often go directly to Paris or Berlin without any filtering in Madrid. In spite of this, however, when there were opportunities to act as a sovereign power –although with serious problems in controlling its territory– especially during the long year from July 1936 to May 1937, the first Catalan ministers Joan Casanovas or Josep Tarradellas did not take the reins of a diplomatic dialogue between peers. They had no wish to venture beyond the framework of the Statute more than they were already doing and drew away from treating the consuls as ambassadors in a sovereign capital, as the Belgian or Argentinean consulates were seeming to be asking. It is true that the Propaganda Commissariat, run by Jaume Miravittles, and its delegates in Europe, especially those in Paris (Geneva) and London, Nicolau Maria Rubió i Tudurí and Josep Maria Batista i Roca, contacted the French and British governments directly, making offers and proposals, but above all probing the response of the democratic West to possible individual Catalan resolutions of the Spanish Civil War, but it never went beyond that [11]. Catalan loyalty to the Spanish Republic, questioned during the entire war by the president Manuel Azaña or by the government leaders Francisco Largo Caballero and Juan Negrín, was never betrayed, contradicting what all the diplomatic analyses said.

Despite the pressure, the Catalan Government did not do what the leader of Falange Española, son of the dictator Miguel Primo de Rivera and future “martyr” of Francoism, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, had written in an apparently premonitory letter to the (at that time) Republican general and very soon to be lord and master of Spain for almost four decades, Francisco Franco. A few days after the revolution of 6 October 1934, when the climate was already boding a similar scenario to what would end up imposing itself during the War, the leader of the incipient Spanish fascism warned the general of the implications that a conjunction of Catalan independentism with Spanish socialism could have outside Spain. Nothing less than the dual revolution that all the foreign observers believed they were seeing. Primo de Rivera wrote: “In the imminent peril, there is a decisive element that puts it on the same footing as a foreign war; namely, the socialist uprising will be accompanied by the probably irremediable separation of Catalonia”. And he added,

recalling the transfer of powers in the sphere of public order to the autonomous Catalan government: "The Spanish State has handed over to the Catalan Government almost all the instruments for defence and has given it free rein to prepare the instruments for attack. The links between socialism and the Catalan Government are well known. So, in Catalonia, the revolution will not have to seize power; it already has it. And it intends to use it, first of all, to proclaim the independence of Catalonia".

It is to be assumed that this possibility would have been negotiated beforehand internationally, especially with France: "But here comes my main point: the Catalan Government, for reasons of caution, would definitely not embark on the revolution project with having first tested the ground abroad. Its affinities with a certain nearby power are well known. So, if the independent Republic of Catalonia is proclaimed, it is not at all improbable - in fact, quite the opposite - that the new Republic will be recognised by a foreign power. And after that, how will we get Catalonia back? Invading it would be seen in Europe as an aggression against a people who, exercising their right to self-determination, had declared itself free. Spain would not just have to face Catalonia but the full anti-Spain sentiment of the European powers" [12].

However, that did not happen and no matter how many articles were published in the European and American press, no matter how many diplomatic reports and military speculations in the French *Marine Nationale* or the Italian Regia Marina insisted it would happen, it did not come to be, in spite of what the French journalist and Franco sympathiser Georges Rotvand seems to reply to José Antonio in an article published in *Le Figaro* on 18 August 1936, warning once again of an option that had been ruled out by the Catalan Government: "If Madrid is taken by the whites [Franco troops] and immediately afterwards, Catalonia declares independence on the grounds of people's right to decide for themselves and immediately joins the League of Nations, what would the League do when the whites send a military expedition against Barcelona? Would not the Catalans immediately call for the League of Nations' intervention against the whites? We believe that this apparently far-fetched project is being considered seriously in Barcelona" [13].

No, none of this led to a decided action by any member of the Catalan Government. The context and foreign analysis, the transposition of general schemes and debate to specific cases, as the British diplomat and international relations theorist Edward H. Carr had done, did not lead the Catalanists of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya to adopt a mental framework that was accepted and assimilated without question by European analysts in hundreds of press articles, consular and embassy reports or military documents, and it never did [14]. We are not talking about a *boutade* taken from a document lost in a folder on a shelf in the diplomatic archives of Nantes, the National Archives of Kew in London or the Auswärtiges Amt in Berlin. We are talking about an avalanche of papers that would transform the perception abroad of Catalonia and Spain during the years from 1931 and 1939 and would decidedly integrate the Catalan factor in its European context.

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