

THE CATALAN SEPARATIST INTEREST IN SERBIA DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR (1914–1919)

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ABSTRACT: *During the First World War, Catalan separatism established parallels between Catalonia and other European nations. Its propaganda presented a Germanophile Spain against an Alliedophile Catalonia. Separatism also encouraged young Catalans to fight in the French Foreign Legion. In this way, separatists established a syllogism: when the Allies would defeat the Central powers, they should return the aid by pressuring Spain to grant Catalonia autonomy or even independence. By presenting Catalonia as a nation or 'state' oppressed by Germanophile imperialism, separatist propaganda compared itself to states or nations, such as Belgium, Lithuania, the Czech Lands and Poland. But, above all, with Serbia. This article explains how Catalan separatism articulated its propaganda and the strategies used to establish the parallel between Catalonia and Serbia from the beginning of the Great War to the Paris Peace Conference and the role of the Serbian consulate from Barcelona.*

KEYWORDS: Catalan nationalism; Serbia; Spain; First World War; Paris Peace Conference

In order to achieve autonomy or independence, sub-state nationalisms often use examples from other nationalist movements to present their political proposals and give them legitimacy. They are not interested in knowing the reality of these other countries or territories, but in using the political episodes they live for their own benefit.¹ In this way, sub-state nationalisms want to gain notoriety and explain their demands in an understandable way.²

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¹ Joep Leersen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006); Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Miroslav Hroch, "Nationalism and National Movements: Comparing the Past and the Present of Central and Eastern Europe," *Nations and Nationalism*, 2 (1) (1996): 35–44; Peter Stearns, "Nationalisms: An Invitation to Comparative Analysis," *Journal of World History*, 8 (1) (1997): 57–74.

² Gary W. McDonogh, "Other People's Nations: Towards an Interactive Model of Nationalist Movements," *Canadian Review of Studies in Nationalism*, 14 (2) (1987): 297–316; Andrea Brighenti, "Visibility. A Category for the Social Sciences," *Current Sociology* 55 (3) (2007): 323–42; Daniele Conversi, *The Basques, the Catalans and Spain: Alternative Routes to Nationalist Mobilisation*

Catalan nationalism's use of foreign models for this purpose has been important since the end of the 19th century. It has established parallels with nationalist movements in Ireland, the Czech Lands, Lithuania, Macedonia, among others.³ The following article is a case study on the parallel that Catalan separatism —the segment of Catalan nationalism that demanded a state for Catalonia, federated or confederated with the rest of Spain or, directly, independence— established between Catalonia and Serbia in order to gain notoriety in its organizational phase during the First World War. To achieve this, separatist propaganda depicted a Spain favorable to the Central Powers that oppressed a Catalonia supportive of the Entente powers.

As separatism encouraged young Catalans to fight in the French Foreign Legion, it established a syllogism: when the Allies defeat the Central powers, they should return the human aid by pressuring the Spanish monarchy to grant Catalan autonomy, to promote a regime change to a federal republic or/and independent Catalonia. To present Catalonia as a nation or 'State' oppressed by an imperialist and Germanophile Spain, separatist propaganda compared it to states or nations such as Belgium, Lithuania, the Czech and Poland. But, above all, with Serbia.

To explain this issue, the article first briefly outlines the knowledge that existed in Catalonia about Serbia at the beginning of the 20th century, especially as a result of the Balkan Wars. Then it briefly details the origin and evolution of Catalan nationalism up to the appearance of organized separatism in the framework of the First World War. After, it exposes the beginning of separatist interest in Serbia and the role of the Serbian consulate in Barcelona. In the next part, it traces the peak moment of the separatist campaign in favor of the Serbs, between the autumn of 1915 and December 1916. Finally, the article explains the performance of separatism at the Paris Peace Conference, as well as the expectations placed in Serbia, and it ends with a conclusion.

Catalanism in the face of the Balkan Wars

The assassination of King Alexander I and Queen Draga in June 1903 made Catalanism pay attention to Serbia. The crime was extensively covered by *La Veu de Catalunya*, the official publication of the *Lliga Regionalista*, the party representing the conservative wing of Catalanism. Likewise, *La Il·lustració Catalana*, edited by the conservative Catalanist associated with the *Unió Catalanista*, Francesc Matheu, also reported on the assassination.⁴

(London: Hurst & Co., 1997); M. Pinard, *Nationalist Movements Explained: Comparisons from Canada, Belgium, Spain and Switzerland* (New York: Routledge, 2021).

³ Xosé Manuel Núñez Seixas, "El mito del nacionalismo irlandés y su influencia en los nacionalismos gallego, vasco y catalán (1880–1936)," *Spagna Contemporanea*, 2 (1992): 25–58; Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, "El Mirall de Catalunya: Models Internacionals en el Desenvolupament del Nacionalisme i del Separatisme Català, 1875–1923," *Estudios de Historia Social* 28–29 (1984): 213–19; Joan Esculies, Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, and Josep Pich, "Catalan Nationalist Perspectives on the Ilinden Uprising of 1903," *Journal of History—Association of the Historians of the Republic of Macedonia* 48 (2013): 107–32.

⁴ "Lo de Servia," *La Veu de Catalunya*, 13 June 1903, 1; "L'escena del regicidi," *Ibid.*, 14 June 1903, 1-2; "La nit tràgica al Konak," *Ibid.*, 15 June 1903, 2; "El rey de Servia," *Ibid.*, 22 June 1903, 1-2; "Lo dels Balkans," *Ibid.*, 6 July 1903, 1; Wilfred Coroleu, "Crònica," *Il·lustració Catalana*, 21 June 1903, 1-2; *Ibid.*, 28 June 1903, 1.

Attention toward Serbia emerged at a time when Catalanism was already closely observing the Balkan region, particularly Macedonia, due to the multiple uprisings against Ottoman rule. The peak of these revolts came in August 1903 with the Ilinden Uprising, which *La Veu* covered, relying on its practice of gathering international news from foreign press sources.⁵

In the spring of 1912, the flourishing Balkan nations formed the Balkan League, an alliance against the Ottomans. *La Veu de Catalunya* reported on the mobilizations through dispatches from the Havas Agency. *El Poble Català*, the newspaper of the Unió Federal Republicana Nacionalista, a Catalanist center-left party, also covered the events. It relayed news gathered from the French and British press, and during the conflict, it acknowledged that the information could sometimes be contradictory.⁶

Lliga Regionalista assumed that Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, and Montenegro sought to take advantage of the moment to attack the Ottoman Empire.⁷ In its view, the Balkan Peninsula was a ‘wasps’ nest of nations, a tangled mix of races, peoples, religions, and languages.⁸ For the regionalists, the war had a nationalistic ground but was primarily driven by a strong religious dimension.⁹ In contrast, the center-left Catalan nationalism rejected this interpretation and insisted that the central motivation was fundamentally nationalist. *El Poble Català* hoped that the situation would be resolved ‘according to the principle of liberty and national identity’.¹⁰

Regionalism, in an approach that left-wing nationalism articulated in a more nuanced manner, also framed the First Balkan War as a struggle between modernity and barbarism.¹¹ From this perspective, nationalism was conceived as a transformative tool, a modernizing force. Based on this vision, conservative nationalists employed the argument to reinforce their imperial discourse regarding Spain. In other words, modernizing nationalism, in this case, Catalan nationalism, could serve as a means of renewing the Spanish state.

The center-left nationalism, however, firmly opposed the imperial stance advocated by the *Lliga*. Furthermore, *El Poble Català* argued that the war could indeed serve as a means to achieve greater autonomy and praised Serbia’s historical belligerence against the Ottomans.¹² Meanwhile, *Renaixement*, the organ of the Unió Catalanista—a platform of entities that at the time sought to unify the entire Catalan nationalist movement—was in favor of the Balkan League.

In December 1912, the Balkan League defeated the Ottoman Empire, and on May 1913, the Treaty of London sealed the end of the First Balkan War. However, the unresolved nature of the crisis led to a new conflict: the Second Balkan War

⁵ Joan Esculies et al., “Catalan Nationalist on the Ilinden Uprising of 1903.”

⁶ “Hi haurà guerra?,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 1 October 1912, 1; “Lo dels Balkans,” *Ibid.*, 2 October 1912, 1; “La guerra d’Orient,” *Ibid.*, 17 October 1912, 1.

⁷ R. [unknown] “La qüestió d’Orient. La movilitació als Balkans,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 7 October 1912, 1.

⁸ “La qüestió d’Orient. Els Estats Balkànics,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 1 October 1912, 1-2.

⁹ “De l’Orient tràgic. Per la reconquesta,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 3 November 1912, 1; “L’epopeya d’Orient,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 5 November 1912, 1.

¹⁰ “Tolerància religiosa,” *El Poble Català*, 22 October 1912, 1.

¹¹ “De l’Orient tràgic. Per la reconquesta,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 3 November 1912, 1; “Europa i l’Orient,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 11 November 1912, 1.

¹² Antoni Rovira i Virgili, “El ‘statu quo’ territorial,” *El Poble Català*, 10 October 1912, 1.

(1913). This time, the Catalan nationalist press did not grant it the same significance or coverage as the first war. It was an even more challenging conflict for Catalan nationalism to grasp, as the Balkan nations were now fighting among themselves: former allies were battling Bulgaria.

This led regionalism to acknowledge that ‘it is difficult to make an independent judgment’.¹³ For the *Lliga*, the fact that Bulgaria was assigned the role of the villain or responsible for the war was detrimental to the image of nationalism itself—and, consequently, to that of Catalan nationalism as well.¹⁴ For center-left nationalism, the new war also resulted in the loss of international sympathies that Greece, Bulgaria, and Serbia had primarily gained during the previous war against the Ottoman Empire. The conflict was no longer perceived as a struggle for ‘rights’ but rather for ‘ambitions’.¹⁵ The weekly newspaper *Renaixement* likewise failed to grasp the dynamics of this new war, dedicating barely two articles to it.¹⁶

In a shared analysis, both conservative regionalism and center-left nationalism agreed that it was now Serbia and Greece’s turn to advance, ‘driven both by their nationalist ideal and their imperial design, as nations with a glorious imperialist tradition’.¹⁷ At this moment, with Bulgaria’s fall in the Second Balkan War, Serbia took the lead, becoming the state with the greatest prospects for asserting dominance in the peninsula. Through the Treaties of Bucharest (August 10, 1913) and Constantinople (September 29, 1913), Serbia, alongside Romania, emerged as the leading regional power.¹⁸

In the realm of center-left Catalan nationalism and within the *Unió Catalanista*—from which, as we shall see, separatism would emerge—admiration for Serbia arose of the Balkan Wars, specifically following the Second Balkan War, to the detriment of Bulgaria.¹⁹ From a regionalist and conservative nationalist perspective, however, this interest did not materialize. *La Veu de Catalunya* depicted Serbia and Greece as the two leading nations after the Balkan Wars, yet the Second War complicated the binary analysis of good versus evil. The religious axis—the crusade—lost momentum, and the struggle between emerging nationalisms could be called into question. Consequently, regionalism preferred to look the other way.²⁰

¹³ R. [unknown] “Àustria i la guerra,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 16 July 1913, 1-2.

¹⁴ R. [unknown] “Els darrers aconteixements als Balkans,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 31 July 1913, 1.

¹⁵ Antoni Rovira i Virgili, “Revista estrangera. El plet búlgaro-serbi-grec,” *El Poble Català*, 2 June 1913, 1. And also from the same author, “L’Idea nacional en els pobles bàlcànics. La segona guerra bàlcànica – La Bulgària,” *El Poble Català*, 11 July 1913, 1.

¹⁶ Raimon Casals Peypoch, “La qüestió dels Balkans. Negres ombres,” *Renaixement*, 9 January 1913, 18; *Ibid.*, “La qüestió dels Balkans. Indecisions perjudicials,” *Renaixement*, 10 April 1913, 173; *Ibid.*, “La qüestió dels Balkans. L’allau imperialista,” *Renaixement*, 10 July 1913, 312-313.

¹⁷ Antoni Rovira i Virgili, “L’Idea nacional en els pobles bàlcànics. La renaixença búlgara. La lluita secular entre’ls grecs i els búlgars,” *El Poble Català*, 12 July 1913, 1.

¹⁸ Margaret MacMillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (New York: Turner, 2014), 557-596; Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 317-326.

¹⁹ Antoni Rovira i Virgili, *Història dels moviments nacionalistes*, (Barcelona, 2008 [1912-1914]); Raimon Casals Peypoch, “La qüestió dels Balkans. La llopada cerca presa,” *Renaixement*, 5 December 1912, 588.

²⁰ R. [unknown], “Els darrers aconteixements als Balkans,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 31 July 1913, 1.

The blossom of Catalan separatism

When the First World War erupted in 1914, the Spanish government officially declared its neutrality. This decision, broadly supported by the political elite, was primarily driven by Spain's economic and military limitations, as well as the lack of formal alliances with either of the belligerent factions. Additionally, King Alfonso XIII sought to enhance Spain's international standing through diplomatic engagement, aiming to play a pivotal role in organizing a peace summit following the war.²¹

After two decades of political organization and activism, Catalanism achieved a significant milestone with the establishment of the *Mancomunitat de Catalunya* in April 1914. This institution resulted from the unification of the four Catalan provinces—Barcelona, Tarragona, Lleida, and Girona—under a single governing body, led by the Provincial Council of Barcelona. Its first president was Enric Prat de la Riba, leader of the Lliga Regionalista. Although the *Mancomunitat* did not confer full autonomy—since no Catalan Parliament was established and the regional government lacked independent financial resources—it was widely regarded as a crucial step toward the realization of Home Rule.²²

Regarding the First World War, the Lliga Regionalista officially maintained a stance of neutrality. However, its members held divergent positions: while some, including Enric Prat de la Riba, were openly Germanophiles and supported a victory for the Central Powers, others aligned with the Allied cause, and some remained strictly neutral. The Catalan leftists and separatists, seeking to gain control of the *Mancomunitat*, constructed a strategic yet deceptive syllogism to advance their cause. Their propaganda asserted that the Lliga Regionalista was unequivocally pro-Germanophile, aligning it with the Spanish government—regardless of whether it was led by Liberals or Conservatives—as well as with King Alfonso XIII.²³

During the years of the Great War, the first Catalan pro-independence groups—then called separatists—appeared. The approach of separatism was that Catalonia should have its state and then freely decide to federate or confederate with the rest of Spain's territories or even with Portugal. On the other hand, separatism was still and would continue to be a small segment of Catalan nationalism, although very noisy in terms of propaganda, throughout the 20th century.²⁴

At that time, separatism was mainly made up of white-collar young people from the Centre Autonomista de Dependents de la Indústria (CADCI), who worked in small offices or as store salespeople. Their political reference was the psychiatrist and Unió Catalanista's president, Domènec Martí i Julià, who proclaimed that national liberation and social liberation were two sides of the same coin.²⁵ It was a

²¹ Francisco Romero, "Fatal Neutrality: Pragmatism or Capitulation? Spain's Foreign Policy during the Great War," *European History Quarterly*, 33 (2003): 291-315.

²² Albert Balcells, Enric Pujol and Jordi Sabater, *La Mancomunitat de Catalunya i l'autonomia* (Barcelona: Proa, 1996).

²³ Joan Esculies and David Martínez Fiol, "Spanish or Catalan? Competing Identifications among Volunteers from Spain in the French Foreign Legion during WWI," *First World War Studies*, 8(1), (2017): 1-15.

²⁴ Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, *Breve historia del separatismo catalán* (Barcelona: Ediciones B, 2018).

²⁵ Jordi Llorens, *La Unió Catalanista i els orígens del catalanisme polític: Dels orígens a la presidència del Dr. Martí i Julià, 1891–1903* (Barcelona: Publicacions de l'Abadia de Montserrat, 1992).

speech that appealed to young people who wanted to climb socially and saw themselves as a worker's aristocracy.²⁶

Separatism did not have a political party but was organized under the *Unió Catalanista*, a platform of entities, which drafted a constitutional project, where Spain and Catalonia should become a dual state, following the example of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy.²⁷ In the years of the Great War, separatism began to organize itself into nationalist centers or youth groups that brought together young people and were often led by members of older generations. At the beginning of the world conflict, Catalan separatism was organizing and looking for its discourse, beyond a 'Catalonia for Catalans', even without the aim to participate in the Spanish elections.²⁸

Separatism found a way to do this by establishing parallels in the international sphere between Catalonia and other national movements that aspired to autonomy or independence. So, to explain itself to the Catalan audience and to take advantage of other people's struggles propagandistically, separatism presented itself as an ally of multiple 'national liberation' struggles. For this purpose, separatism found the outbreak of the Great War very useful. It was, to this end, a great mosaic of opportunities and the appearance, above all, of 'small nations' that fought and tried to rid themselves of the occupation of large empires.²⁹

A quick interest in Serbia

On July 28, 1914, the Austro-Hungarian Empire declared war on the Serbian kingdom. Three days later, when the European powers began to exchange declarations of war, which would lead to the beginning of the First World War, the *Unió Catalanista* and *Esquerra Catalanista* [Catalanist Left], a tiny party presided by the historian and journalist Antoni Rovira i Virgili, organised a solidarity meeting with the Balkan country. The event took place at the *Casal Nacionalista* in the VI district of Barcelona, an entity chaired by Francesc Rosell Montané, secretary of the psychiatrist.³⁰

During the event, Francesc Xavier Casas Briz, a historical member of the *Unió Catalanista* and president of another important center, the *Casal Nacionalista* of the IV district, remarked that the nationalists had to feel sympathy for Serbia because it represented 'the struggle of a nation that defends its independence, against another that lengthens its hoarding claws, seeking to engulf in its flight the nationalities that aspire to be themselves'. Casas also expressed the hope that Catalonia would derive some benefit from the 'global scrapping'.³¹

²⁶ Joan Esculies, "The Cradle of Catalan Separatism: White Collars in Barcelona during WWI," *Studies on National Movements*, 2 (2014): 1–20.

²⁷ Josep Termes and Agustí Colomines, *Les Bases de Manresa de 1892 i els orígens del catalanisme* (Barcelona: Generalitat de Catalunya, 1992).

²⁸ Joan Esculies, "El nacionalismo radical catalán (1913–1923)," *Spagna Contemporanea* 43 (2013): 7–28; *Ibid.*, *Via fora! El separatisme català i el teatre patriòtic* (Barcelona: Edicions de 1984, 2014).

²⁹ Xosé Manuel Núñez Seixas, *Internacionalitzar el nacionalisme: El catalanisme polític i la qüestió de les minories nacionals a Europa (1914–1936)* (València-Catarroja: Editorial Afers, 2010).

³⁰ "Noves," *Renaixement*, 30 July 1914, 385.

³¹ *Ibid.*

Rovira i Virgili then expressed that, due to his recent studies, referring to the half-dozen pages he had dedicated to Serbia in his three-volume *Història dels moviments nacionalistes* [Nationalist Movements History], published between 1912 and 1914, he felt very interested in Austria's war against Serbia.³²

The historian deliberately omitted to mention Hungary due to the recurring comparison of Catalanism with this territory.³³ According to Rovira i Virgili, the king Alexandre I and Draga, assassinated in 1903, did not love their people and 'from there began the renationalization of their brothers who were slaves until the victorious struggle in the Balkans, which, encouraging them, already began the liberation of all Serbian slaves'. The historian was referring to the Balkan wars, which Catalanism had followed closely, also supporting Serbia.³⁴

Next, Daniel Cardona, who was 25 years old at the time and who, in the 1920s, would become the leader of Irish-style Catalan paramilitary separatism, intervened on behalf of the Joventut Catalanista of Barcelona.³⁵ Cardona assured that the civil government of Barcelona had asked them not to attack any of the belligerent parties during the event. However, he said that it was necessary to take note of the Irish and Serbian lessons.³⁶

That same weekend, the Serbian honorary consul in Barcelona, Alejandro de Lacour, declared to the press that he was officially ignorant of the declaration of war in Serbia and that he had no news of it other than to wait for news. In any case, he maintained that the Serbs resident in Spain had gone to defend the homeland before they were called and specified that 58 Serbs had lived in Barcelona until then, who had also left.

In fact, the call for mobilization had taken place on July 25, two days after the Austro-Hungarian ultimatum, and three days before the formal declaration of war. On the economic aspect, Lacour emphasized that the war would cause problems in Spain because every week six thousand chickens from Serbia entered the port of Barcelona.³⁷ The press wanted to know if he would continue as a consolation and if he had submitted his resignation, and he admitted that he saw no reason to do so.³⁸

In June 1911, the Madrid native Alejandro de Lacour Moreno da Souza (1872–1921) settled in Barcelona was appointed as the first honorary consul in Barcelona under the plenipotentiary minister of Paris.³⁹ The consulate was established at Passeig de Gràcia, 16.⁴⁰ Lacour had presided over the Joventut Carlina of Barcelona at the end of

³² Antoni Rovira i Virgili, *Història dels moviments nacionalistes* (Barcelona: Editorial Base, 2008 [1912–1914]), 423–28.

³³ Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, "El Mirall de Catalunya: Models Internacionals en el Desenvolupament del Nacionalisme i del Separatisme Català, 1875–1923," *Estudios de Historia Social* 28–29 (1984): 213–19.

³⁴ Joan Esculies, "Sèrbia, un vell amor?" in Enric Ucelay-Da Cal and Josep Pich, eds., *La Fi de la Belle Époque i la Gran Guerra* (Barcelona: Nova Editorial, 2016), 251–76.

³⁵ Fermí Rubiralta, Daniel Cardona i Civit (1890–1943): Una biografia política (Catarroja-Barcelona: Afers, 2008).

³⁶ "Miting de suport a Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 6 August 1914, 400–401.

³⁷ "En Barcelona," *La Publicidad*, 2 August 1914, 2.

³⁸ *La Vanguardia*, 21 August 1914, 3; "Dues visites al Governador Civil de Barcelona," *La Vanguardia*, 26 August 1914, 9; *La Vanguardia*, 26 February 1915, 4.

³⁹ Appointment official document. Alejandro de Lacour's family's archive.

⁴⁰ *Papitu*, 7 February 1912, 93.

the 19th century, and then was a member of the Partido Tradicionalista of Catalonia. He was Catholic. He was married and was a lawyer and a landlord, but he was in banking. He was deputy director of *Crédit Lyonnais* in Barcelona.⁴¹

At the beginning of August, on the 6th, *Renaixement*'s editorial spoke about Serbia and Austria and the value of nationalism. In the view of the separatist weekly linked to the *Unió Catalanista*, the war had its origin in the fact that 'the constitution of the states is opposed to nature' and this had caused 'nationalist sentiment to manifest itself again recently, little by little. It was missing if he didn't finish driving the Turks beyond the Bosphorus. And it has given life again by incarnating itself, the Slavic soul, in that of [Gravilo] Princip and she was the one who pulled the trigger of his pistol'.⁴²

That same day, the weekly published an interview with 'a high-ranking Serbian figure', who spoke Catalan. He assured himself that he was not the consul, but he could have been, and simply refused with the intention of misleading. This character assured that the Serbian government was aware of the act of sympathy organized at the *Casal Nacionalista* of the VI district.

Next, the character gave the information that thanks to the consul's management in Barcelona more than six thousand Serbian chickens were consumed in the city. A suspicious piece of information because Lacour had given it to the press the previous week. He also explained that 'right now we had requests for samples of high consumption fabrics in Serbia, from various Catalan manufacturers to introduce them there, but unfortunately the war has violently interrupted the management'. Then the character commented that it was better not to organize demonstrations, implying that the Spanish government would repress them and that it was better to do other kinds of action.⁴³

As argued, it is likely that the anonymous character was the consul himself, because one of these other actions immediately took place. This consisted of leaving the personal card as a sign of accession to Serbia at the consulate on Sunday, August 9. According to *Renaixement*, there was a campaign against it led by some local press that assured that the consulate would be closed. However, five days later, the weekly claimed that between 3,200 and 3,500 cards had been collected, including those from the leadership of the *Unió Catalanista*.⁴⁴

The separatist press campaign

After the initial interest and demonstration of empathy, Catalan separatism did not refocus attention on Serbia in the following months. There is not a single reason to explain this, but several. To begin with, at the beginning of August 1914, what separatism saw as an aggression by Austria on Serbia became a world conflagration.

⁴¹ "El escrutinio," *La Publicidad*, 3 May 1909, 3; "De elecciones," *La Vanguardia*, 28 April 1909, 3; "Las elecciones municipales," *La Vanguardia*, 3 May 1909, 6.

⁴² "Editorial," *Renaixement*, 6 August 1914, 389-390.

⁴³ X. [Francesc X. Casas Briz?], "Parlant amb un alt personatge servi [sic]," *Renaixement*, 6 August 1914, 398-399.

⁴⁴ "Manifestació pro-Servia [sic]," *Renaixement*, 13 August 1914, 415.

Then separatism focused on building an Aliadophile propaganda discourse and drew a Germanophile Spain and monarchy in contrast to an Aliadophile Catalonia. It did not matter neither that King Alfonso XIII declared himself a Francophile in private. Nor did it matter that in Catalonia there were also diverse positions.

What interested separatism was establishing the syllogism we have already mentioned: Catalonia was an Aliadophile and was subjugated by a Germanophile Spain. Therefore, when the Allies — France, above all, and England (and later the United States) — won the war, these powers would have to help Catalonia obtain autonomy or even independence.

Precisley in October 1914 Antoni Rovira i Virgili pronounced in Barcelona the conference '*Cada nacionalisme necessita una política internacional* [Every Nationalism needs an International Policy]'. He advocated for the necessity of a strategy to promote Catalan nationalist claims seizing the momentum. Rovira's inspiration was Thomas G. Massaryk's Czech Action Comitte and Roman Dmowski Polish National Comitte organizations and campaigns.⁴⁵

In Catalonia the re-elaboration of the discourse was deeply influenced by the so-called 'Miracle of Marne', the victory of the French troops in the northeastern region of the country against the German army. The man who made it possible was the French general Joseph Joffre. He was born in Rivesaltes, a town close to Perpignan, in the Roussillon — since 1659 part of France due to the Pyrenees Treaty, but until then part of Catalonia (and, thus, Spain). Due to his origins, and despite he considered himself a truly French with very limited or no sympathies to Catalan nationalism, the Catalan leftist and separatist intelligentsia publicized his figure as the paradigm of the *Catalan soldier*, 'a fighter for the freedom of the World'.⁴⁶

Catalan separatists, therefore, favored military implication from the very beginning. However, the process of creating Aliadophile propaganda was slow. On the one hand, because separatism was in the organizational phase. On the other hand, he needed press bodies to echo his views. In this sense, the appearance, starting in July 1915, of the weekly *La Nació*, which complemented the work of *Renaixement*, was essential.⁴⁷ Catalan separatism began to draw parallels between Catalonia and other small nations, especially following the course of invasions and battles. For example, only the beginning of the Great War was focused on Belgium, and then on different phases of the conflicts in Poland, Lithuania, and the Czech Lands. Otherwise, the separatist press did not mention any Yugoslav movement and it is not clear at all if it was aware of it.

Of all the parallels, however, Serbia became the great point of reference for Catalan separatism as an empire (Austro-Hungary/Spain) oppressed a small nation (Serbia/Catalonia) —despite Serbia had never been part of the Dual Monarchy as was the case with Catalonia and Spain—. Therefore, the victory of Serbia with the help of the Allies would also be the victory of Catalonia, and the support, especially from

⁴⁵ Antoni Rovira i Virgili, *Història dels moviments nacionalistes* (Barcelona: Editorial Base, 2008 [1912–1914]).

⁴⁶ Patrick Garreau, *1914, une Europe se joue sur la Marne*, (Paris: Economica, 2004).

⁴⁷ *Renaixement* was published from November 1910 to June 1916 and *La Nació* from July 1915 to April 1917.

France, for the South Slavic cause should also be given to the Catalan autonomist or independence demand.⁴⁸

At the beginning in October 1915, the greatly combined offensive of the Austro-Hungarian and German armies from the north, and the help of the Bulgarian army from the southeast, against Belgrade activated sympathy propaganda with Serbia.⁴⁹ Antoni Rovira i Virgili published in *Renaixement* the article ‘L’esdevenidor de Sèrbia’ [Serbia’s Future]. In it he maintained that this country was already ‘an important factor in European politics’ and for that reason, Austria-Hungary ‘wanted to crush it’. Above all because following the two Balkan wars, Serbia had doubled its size and was on its way to become, according to the historian, a European power.

Rovira predicted that Serbia would emerge from the war ‘bled out, but stronger and more glorious than ever’ and he also assumed that it would obtain a longed-for outlet to the sea. And the sea is life and wealth for Serbia. And so, the day to come that ten million Serbo-Croats will be gathered in Greater Serbia’. The historian assumed that ‘the earth must be watered with blood for the ideal to bear fruit’.⁵⁰

In the same issue of the weekly, Francesc Rosell Montané interviewed Alejandro de Lacour. Martí and Julià’s secretary presented the drama of the three armies’ attack and gave voice to the ‘Serbian diplomat’. Lacour expressed that ‘the current situation in my country is very serious: we are going through difficult times that we can say are definitive for the existence of Serbia’. Rosell concluded the interview by affirming that ‘despite all the complications, Serbia will succeed’.⁵¹

On October 23, *La Nació* published an anonymous column, and it was also published and highlighted that ‘little Serbia is a great nation. For years, it has been fighting a titanic battle not to lose its independence. More powerful Central European empires, they swear to him; they don’t leave him a moment of peace and tranquility. He added that the incorporation of Bosnia and Herzegovina into the Austro-Hungarian Empire had been a tragedy because it increased ‘the incoherent mosaic of nations that forcibly constitute it’.⁵²

Despite the exalted discourse of Catalan separatism, the situation on the ground was dramatic. On November 25, the withdrawal of Serbian civilians and military was ordered, leaving populations and positions to the southwest, Montenegro and Albania. On reaching the Adriatic coast, some 125,000 Serbian soldiers were embarked on Greek islands dominated by the Allies.

In any case, the Bulgarian forces maintained and extended positions and France also had to withdraw at the end of November. Then, *Renaixement* dedicated its leading article, entitled ‘Als catalans’, to a call for solidarity with Serbia. It was admitted that with the exception of the rally of July 31, 1914 in Catalonia ‘nothing has been done for poor Serbia, not alms, not a consolation for these poor women and these children who die fighting for justice!’.

⁴⁸ Joan Esculies and David Martínez Fiol, *12.000! Els catalans a la Primera Guerra Mundial* (Barcelona: Ara Llibres, 2014).

⁴⁹ Andrej Mitrovic, *Serbia’s Great War* (London: Hurst and Co., 2007), 146.

⁵⁰ Antoni Rovira i Virgili, “L’esdevenidor de Sèrbia,” *Renaixement*, 17 October 1915, 567-568.

⁵¹ Francesc Rosell, “Informacions de Renaixement. Serbia en greu perill. Ço que diu un diplomàtic serbi,” *Renaixement*, 17 October 1915, 575-576.

⁵² “Al Vol,” *La Nació*, 23 October 1915, 6.

The weekly pointed out that at another time solidarity had been requested for Belgium and that ‘today that Serbia is threatened with being also robbed of its sovereignty, we, in the name of the Catalan nationalists, in the name of Catalonia, come to demonstrate our sympathy for the Serbian cause’. *Renaixement* declared its sympathy for the Serbian cause and against ‘corrupting imperialism, monstrous denial of which we are also victims, trying to commit a new crime, stealing Serbia’s Independence’. The weekly added ‘Catalonia fights for its national affirmation, cannot miss the great demonstration of sympathy that is organized around the world in favor of the Serbian’.⁵³

The next issue, *Renaixement*, again dedicated the leading article to Serbia. This showed moderate confidence in the future of Serbia. It depicted a country that, since the 14th century, had been the victim of the imperialist ambitions of some States with the aim of making it disappear as a Nation-state. From the biological perspective of separatism, ‘Serbia has always existed in the realization of a natural fact, and despite the continuous dissolving action of the enemy, the homeland has existed’.⁵⁴

In the same issue, a new article by Rossell and Muntaner talked about the failure of the Dardanelles campaign and the plan that field marshal, Radomir Putnik (1847-1917), had proposed to attack Austria by crossing the Danube, instead of concentrating troops in the Dardanelles campaign. The columnist felt that he had not been listened to and lamented the failure of the Allied campaign.⁵⁵ In fact, Serbia was never planned to participate in the Dardanelles campaign and the attack to Austria-Hungary was across the Sava not Danube and was undertaken under the Russian influence. It appears clear here that the journalist was misinformed, despite we do not know which sources he consulted.

Two manifestoes and the Serbian orphans

In parallel, on November 25, 1915, a group of Catalans in Paris addressed a manifesto to the Serbian ambassador there, Milenko Vesnich. ‘In these moments when the Serbian people, harassed by three powerful enemies, defend with unparalleled heroism the land of their ancestors, we, Catalans resident in Paris, have the duty to address them, with the firmness of our admiration, the testimony of our deep sympathy. The greatness nations are not measured by their territorial extension’.

The manifesto also maintained that all the freedom-loving peoples could not let the depredations of which Serbia was a victim by without protest. ‘This is how we believe we interpret the feelings of our compatriots from Catalonia protesting once more and loudly against the German-Magyar-Bulgarian invasion that aims to annihilate the Serbian nation forever’. It was signed by the writer and publicist Alfons Maseras, the cartoonist P. Inglada, the pianist and honorary teacher of the Schola Cantorum de Paris and the Nova University of Brussels, J. Joaquim Nin, the writer J. Perez-Jorba, the painter J. M Xiró, the merchant and president of the Catalan

⁵³ “Als Catalans,” *Renaixement*, 21 November 1915, 645-646.

⁵⁴ “Sèrbia,” *Renaixement*, 28 November 1915, 661-662.

⁵⁵ R. [Francesc Rosell Montané, ?], “Sèrbia, la víctima,” *Renaixement*, 28 November 1915, 670.

Center of Paris, Pere Balmaña, the painter Josep M. Sert, the painter Ramon Pichot and the sculptor Josep Clarà, among thirty figures from the Catalan Culture.⁵⁶

At the beginning of December, separatism announced that the separatist Joventut Nacionalista de Catalunya [Nationalist Youth of Catalonia] would organize a Pro-Serbia event. However, this was not done. We don't know the reasons.⁵⁷ In the middle of the month, however, it was announced that a message addressed to Serbia had been drafted 'with the signature of all the most prestigious Catalan personalities and in which the admiration of our homeland for the heroism with what has endured the invasion of its national territory and Catalonia's firm confidence that Serbia will return splendidly to the possession of its sovereignty'.⁵⁸

Indeed, the 'Message to the Serbian Nation. To the Serbs' was published in *Renaixement* on December 19, 1915. The text showed admiration for 'the heroic deed of defense of your homeland' because 'we who have an aspiration for national freedom, pay tribute to you from our stronger sympathy'. It was said that Catalonia felt the Serbian tragedy as its own because there was no greater pain than the loss of independence, 'and we who two centuries ago went through the serious transit of seeing our State disappear, by armed force, we perfectly understand your feeling'.

Again, following biologism, it was said that 'against the action of nature no one has ever been able to do anything; for a moment it may seem that men's deviance imposes itself on the natural, but time to come, as the biological fact unfolds, normality has returned'. With this argument, it was argued that Serbia would regain its sovereignty because 'imperialism is a human deviation that leads to decadence precipitated by one's own mistakes'. The Serbs were treated as 'companions of misfortune' and the adhesion to their cause was sent in the name of Catalonia 'so that you can fully satisfy your nationalist ideal'.⁵⁹

At the end of December 1915 and the beginning of 1916 *Renaixement* still published some references about Serbia.⁶⁰ In mid-January, the future professor of mathematics Lluís G. Castellà, published an article in which he discussed that 'Serbia, the great, the admirable, the heroic, together with little Montenegro, are the ones who have the vision clearer of the role to be played in the consciousness of humanity'. After talking about the battle of The White Mountain (Bohemia, 1620), he justified the murder of Alexander and Draga by being 'a foreign dynasty' —which was not true—. In short, Serbia, the columnist said, had to arm itself because it had 'the consciousness of being a people'.⁶¹

Precisely the following week, an anonymous article stated that the Allies as a whole had not done enough for Serbia, and that when it was free it would remember friendly voices like Catalonia.⁶² At the end of January, the 'Message to the Serbian

⁵⁶ "En honor de Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 19 December 1915, 720-721.

⁵⁷ "Pro-Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 5 December 1915, 691.

⁵⁸ "Pro-Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 12 December 1915, 707-708; "Noves," *La Nació*, 18 December 1915, 8.

⁵⁹ "Missatge a la Nació Sèrbia. Als serbis," *Renaixement*, 19 December 1915, 718.

⁶⁰ R. [Francesc Rosell Montané, ?], "La greu dolor de Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 26. December 1915, p.739; A. [?], "La poesia heròica de Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 2 January 1916, 750-752; "Sèrbia serà lliure," *Renaixement*, 2 January 1916, 753-754.

⁶¹ Lluís G. Castellà, "Admiració a Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 15 January 1916, 35-36.

⁶² "Catalunya i Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 22 January 1916, 59-60.

Nation' was published again, with more names such as those of the Catalan communist Andreu Nin, and the socialist Manuel Serra i Moret, among others.⁶³

The interest of separatism in Serbia continued in the winter of 1916 with the impetus of a fundraising campaign for Serbian orphans. In mid-February, separatism announced that to contribute to the international campaign that was being carried out in this regard, the consul of Serbia, the *Renaixement's* editor, Francesc Rossell i Vilar, and the cartoonist Feliu Elies 'Apa' were preparing a postcard to collect money.⁶⁴

The separatist weeklies, *Renaixement* and *La Nació*, and also the Aliadophile funded by the French consulate in Barcelona, *Iberia*, participated in this campaign.⁶⁵ On March 4, 1916, for example, *Iberia* published fragments translated into Spanish from *Ode alla nazione serba*, which Gabrielle d'Annunzio had published at the end of the previous November in *El Corriere della Sera*.⁶⁶ The fragments of the poetry were accompanied by a drawing by Apa for the campaign for Serbian orphans in which an eagle (Austro-Hungary) was carrying a lamb (Serbia) to the sky.⁶⁷ By mid-March, the postcard was about to launch.⁶⁸

The beginning of the campaign took place in April when the famous Catalan nationalist playwright Àngel Guimerà — imitating D'Annunzio — wrote 'Serbia'. A poem that was given to the Serbian consul in Barcelona, Alejandro de Lacour, and that gave the start to the collection for Serbian orphans. Separatism did not drive a similar campaign for any other warring country.⁶⁹ At the end of May, *La Nació* published Guimerà's poetry exclusively.⁷⁰

Catalan combatants in the East

In February 1916, doctor Joan Solé i Pla and a few nationalist friends founded the Comitè de Germanor amb els Voluntaris Catalans [Brotherhood Committee with the Catalan Volunteers].⁷¹ As the Catalan nationalist parties were not prone to unite in a Catalan sacred union, this group pretended to represent it. Clearly, the Lliga Regionalista did not want to form any kind of political union with the Catalan leftist and separatist parties, as the latter used the pro-Alliadophile discourse to undermine the Regionalist's power.⁷²

The Committee aimed to encourage young Catalans to join the French Foreign Legion. By helping France, it was expected that after the war, the French

⁶³ "Missatge a la Nació Sèrbia," *Renaixement*, 29 January 1916, 77-78.

⁶⁴ "Pels orfes serbis," *Renaixement*, 12 February 1916, 112.

⁶⁵ Joan Safont, Per França i Anglaterra. La I Guerra Mundial dels aliadòfils catalans, (Barcelona: A Contra Vent, 2012).

⁶⁶ Gabriele D'Annunzio, *Ode alla Nazione Serba*, (Milan: Tipografia Internazionale, 1915).

⁶⁷ *Iberia*, 4 March 1916, 10-12; Andrej Mitrovic, *Serbia's Great War* (London: Hurst and Co., 2007), 175.

⁶⁸ *Renaixement*, 18 March 1916, 192.

⁶⁹ Àngel Guimerà, "Sèrbia," *La Nació*, 20 May 1916, 1; *La Nació*, 10 June 1916, 8.

⁷⁰ *La Nació*, 10 June 1916, 8; *La Nació*, 19 August 1916, p.6; *Ibid.*, 26 August 1916, 2; *Ibid.*, 9 September 1916, 4; *Ibid.*, 7 October 1916, 4; *Ibid.*, 25 November 1916, 7.

⁷¹ Joan Esculies, *Joan Solé i Pla. Un separatista entre Macià i Companys*, (Barcelona: Edicions de 1984, 2011), 88-93.

⁷² Jordi Casassas, "Els quadres del regionalisme. L'evolució de la Joventut Nacionalista de la Lliga fins el 1914," *Recerques*, 14, (1983): 8-32.

Republic would help Catalan autonomist or independentist demands. During the war, close to a thousand Catalans, many of whom were already living in France when the conflict began, fought with the Legion. Nationalist propaganda invented that 12,000 Catalans had fought in the Legion, although historiography has shown that the figure was a myth.⁷³

But from the very beginning, the Committee sent money and parcels — with novels, Catalan History books, handkerchiefs, notepaper, envelopes, tobacco, socks, and even chocolate, soap, and grocery — to every Catalan found in the trenches. Not surprisingly, the names of Solé i Pla and the Committee secretary, Josep Castanyer, soon became popular among the legionnaires.⁷⁴ They asked the volunteers to give them more names of Catalan fellows and to explain their daily life, above all the battle scenes with Catalan protagonists. Soon, the doctor was known as the ‘Catalan volunteers’ father’.

The founding of the Committee led to increased propaganda on Serbia. Focused, however, on the Catalans who fought in the East, even if they were very few because the bulk of the fighters with the French Foreign Legion were on the French fronts. We don’t know the exact number. In the Solé i Pla archives, there is the file of three of them, with whom he maintained correspondence: Alfred Barceló, born in Barcelona in 1893 and dead in Salonica in 1916; Pau Roca, born in l’Espluga de Francolí, Tarragona, in 1890 and dead in Serbia in 1916; and also, Josep Antoni Torres Bartolomé, born in Sant Martí de Provençals, Barcelona.⁷⁵

Catalan separatism took one of the great myths of its imaginary from the old past grandeur of the Catalano-Aragonese Confederation.⁷⁶ During the 13th and 14th centuries, the Kingdom of Aragon (including the Catalan counties) reached its maximum geographical expansion conquering lands in modern Greece using troops of brave mercenaries called ‘*Almogavers*’. These foot soldiers were, of course, illiterate, but a famous Catalan writer and soldier, Ramon Muntaner (1265-1336) accompanied them in some of their battles in Constantinople, and afterward he wrote one of the four main Catalan medieval chronicles.⁷⁷

Thus, again, separatism assumed ‘*Almogavers*’ in its imaginary as figures of chronist-soldiers. Therefore, Solé i Pla was avid to read epic stories on the letters of the Catalan volunteers — turned into modern ‘*Almogavers*’. All in all, then, as they were bad writers, Solé i Pla fused their stories, added a bit of epic and nationalist propaganda, and published them in the Catalan leftist and separatist press.⁷⁸

⁷³ David Martínez Fiol, *Els ‘voluntaris catalans’ a la Gran Guerra (1914-1918)*, (Barcelona: Publicacions de l’Abadia de Montserrat, 1991).

⁷⁴ Letter from Agustí Pujol to Joan Solé i Pla, 15 August 1916. Comitè de Germanor amb els Voluntaris Catalans [Brotherhood Comitee with the Catalan Volunteers, BCCV] fond, Arxiu Nacional de Catalunya – Catalan National Archives [ANC].

⁷⁵ Volunteer’s personal files, BCCV fond, ANC.

⁷⁶ Pere Anguera, *Literatura, patria i societat. Els intel·lectuals i la nació*, (Vic: Eumo, 1999).

⁷⁷ David Agustí, *Los almogávares: la expansión mediterránea de la Corona de Aragón*, (Barcelona: Slex ediciones, 2004); Ferran Soldevila, *Les quatre grans cròniques*, (Barcelona: Editorial Selecta, 1971).

⁷⁸ Joan Esculies, David Martínez Fiol, “Els catalans a la Gran Guerra: un mite que perdura,” in Frederic Fanés, Josep M. Minguet (eds.), *Barcelona Zona Neutral 1914-1918*, (Barcelona: Fundació Miró, 2014), 109-114.

At the end of September, Solé i Pla dedicated a first chronicle to the Catalans who fought ‘in the East’.⁷⁹ And, in mid-October, another, entitled ‘Reconquering the personality of Serbia’, in which it was said that the Serbian rulers were going to renounce independence to avoid war, but this was not enough because the Austrian war plans were already drawn up. ‘We all know the horrible atrocities committed during the two invasions suffered by the Serbian people; the first, from Austro-Hungarian troops, and the second from Austro-German-Bulgarian troops, which have destroyed half of Serbia’.⁸⁰

The separatist doctor pointed out that Italy, France and England had defended Serbia and were taking care of its orphans, who were to be ‘the new saplings that will have to make a nation rise again, proudly’. And he added that ‘Catalonia, which knows the infinite torments felt in the bowels of the oppressed peoples, sympathizes with Serbia with all its heart, with all its soul, with all the strength of its spirit, and some brave and generous Catalans have rushed to put his own existence in defense of the freedom and life of heroic Serbia’.⁸¹

Solé i Pla maintained that ‘some Catalan women are also in the Serbian medical ambulances! What comfort will Catalan men not feel when they are assisted, injured or sick, by sisters of their race, of their homeland! There are two Catalan doctors there’. An aspect we could not verify.⁸² The presence of Catalan nurses in Serbia had already been considered in August and the doctor insisted on it at the end of October.⁸³

In mid-November, Solé i Pla again spoke of the ‘brave Catalans fighting for the liberation of Serbia’, insisting that the penalties they suffered were much greater than those of the fighters on the French fronts due to the climate and the lack of relief. ‘Our brothers who are working to free little Serbia from the clutches of the imperial tyrants have been so busy that they have hardly been able to rest for a single day’.

The doctor said that the constant rain meant that they had to sleep on wet ground. ‘If it were not about the freedom and dignity of Serbia, in the vindictive collaboration of which we have put our whole being into it, then, very often, the physical suffering is so great, that there is to go back home’. The father of the Catalan volunteers, however, maintained that once the war is over and with ‘the glory of having contributed to the national restoration of Serbia, their children will thank us for it all their lives, liberating Europe and the civilized world will remember it, and Catalonia will feel proud to have guys like our legionnaires’.⁸⁴

A week later, Solé i Pla raised the same arguments again.⁸⁵ And he also added information received ‘from a son of Provence, a friend of Catalonia, he tells us the longings and hopes of the Catalan legionnaires who fight together with the armies of

⁷⁹ Arnau de Vilanova [Joan Solé i Pla], “Els voluntaris catalans a França,” *La Nació*, 23 September 1916, 1-2.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Arnau de Vilanova [Joan Solé i Pla], *La Nació*, “Reconquerint la personalitat de Sèrbia,” 14 October 1916, 1-2.

⁸³ “Notes de guerra. De les hores de lluita i de treva,” *La Nació*, 28 October 1916, 7; “Crida de la CREU ROJA sèrbia als amics del poble serbi,” *La Nació*, 12 August 1916, 6.

⁸⁴ Arnau de Vilanova [Joan Solé i Pla], “Els voluntaris catalans a Sèrbia,” *La Nació*, 11 November 1916, 1-2.

⁸⁵ Arnau de Vilanova [Joan Solé i Pla], “Prosseguint el reconqueriment de la nació sèrbia,” *La Nació*, 18 November 1916, 1-2.

King Peter of Serbia, and says that they are disciplined and strong people, who humanize war as much as is possible and prudent for them, despite the ferocity of the Austro-Prussians'.⁸⁶

This typology of articles continued until the end of 1916.⁸⁷ From then on, too, *La Nació* published fragments of the *Serbian Blue Book*, extracts from Serbian diplomatic correspondence that explained, from their point of view, the motivations that had led to the war. The thesis of the Austro-Hungarian interest in annihilating Serbia and limiting its territorial expansion was presented.⁸⁸

Contacts at the end of the war

Durign the year 1917, the separatist propaganda centered on the Great War decreased due to the Spanish internal crisis. A period of severe political, social, and military unrest that exposed the fragility of Spain's constitutional system. The crisis was driven by three major conflicts: the military crisis, the parliamentary crisis, and the social crisis. The military crisis emerged when junior officers (*Juntas de Defensa*) protested against favoritism in promotions and sought better salaries and working conditions.

Simultaneously, the parliamentary crisis unfolded as regionalist and opposition parties, excluded from decision-making, convened an alternative Assembly of Parliamentarians in Barcelona to demand constitutional reforms and greater autonomy. Meanwhile, the social crisis erupted in a general strike, led by socialists and anarchists, in response to rising inflation and deteriorating living conditions. The government reacted with harsh repression, leading to numerous arrests and casualties. Ultimately, the crisis weakened the constitutional monarchy and intensified demands for political change, foreshadowing the instability that would characterize Spain in the following decades.⁸⁹

The separatist propaganda also decreased due to the conditions of separatism itself. Domènec Martí i Julià died in April 1917. Joan Solé i Pla and the incipient leader of the new separatist space, Francesc Macià, participated in the Assembly of Parliamentarians, the failed revolutionary attempt in the summer. These were political or paramilitary movements that sought to reconfigure the state.⁹⁰

After all that tumultuous year, with the entry of the United States into the war, separatism turned to propaganda in favor of Woodrow Wilson and self-determination.⁹¹ Until November 1918, once the armistice that put an end to the Great War was signed, Catalan separatism promoted the *Àlbum d'homenatge de Catalunya a Sèrbia* [Catalan Tribute Album to Serbia], which consisted of a collection of signatures in

⁸⁶ "Notes de guerra. De les hores de lluita i de treva," *La Nació*, 18 November 1916, 5.

⁸⁷ "Pels homes que lluiten per la llibertat del món," 30 December 1916, 8.

⁸⁸ "El llibre blau serbi," 16 December 1916, *La Nació*, 6-7; Captain Morley [Antoni Rovira i Virgili], (1914-1925) *La guerra de les nacions. Història documentada*, (Barcelona: Societat Catalana d'Edicions, (1914-1925).

⁸⁹ David Martínez Fiol & Joan Esculies, 1917. *El año en que España pudo cambiar*, (Sevilla, Espuela de Plata, 2018).

⁹⁰ Joan Esculies, *Joan Solé i Pla. Un separatista entre Macià i Companys*, (Barcelona: Edicions de 1984, 2011).

⁹¹ As many others, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment*.

support of carried out by Serbs in the premises of the separatist entities and the editorial offices of their newspapers, who continued to make articles in favor of Serbia.⁹²

On November 17, doctor Joan Solé i Pla, by then president of the Unió Catalanista, and other members of this separatist entity such as Vicenç Albert Ballester, Josep Castanyer, Antoni Carbonell and Antoni Huguet, on behalf of the Committee Pro -Catalonia, went to the Serbian consulate, at the junction of Passeig de Gràcia with Gran Via, to deliver the album to the consul, to show 'Catalonia's tribute to one of the most heroic peoples on earth'. The album also contained 'Sèrbia', Àngel Guimerà's poetry.

While the reception was taking place, numerous uncompromising nationalists, among them a commission from the Joventut Els Nets dels Almogàvers, a separatist entity, who had left a Francesc Macià's conference at the CADCI, arrived to the consulate to sign the membership list. Meanwhile, a group of young people from Requetés —the Carlist paramilitary organization— arrived claiming long live Spain and against Catalonia and the Allies. The meeting led to blows with sticks and umbrellas and the military intervened with saber blows and charges on horseback. During the fight, the Requetés shot and wounded a forty-five-year-old man in the head. The police made several arrests.⁹³

At the end of the month, at the CADCI, the center where a large part of the young separatists came from, a tribute was paid to Serbia and Belgium with the presence of Lacour and Solé i Pla.⁹⁴ As part of this good understanding of separatism with the consul, the doctor came to qualify as a member of the 'Secret Service of Catalonia'.⁹⁵ Both had a very good relationship.⁹⁶ This allowed the doctor to agree with the consul that he would send him a list of the Catalan fighters, alive and dead, on the Salonica front so that he could send it to the Serbian embassy in Madrid to decorate them.

At the beginning of 1919, however, the legation had not received the list.⁹⁷ Solé i Pla suffered from phlebitis which temporarily removed him from propaganda activity.⁹⁸ At the end of January it was Lacour himself who informed the embassy that the delay was due to the doctor's illness.⁹⁹ The Serbian diplomatic documentation does not allow us to know if this list was sent and if these Catalans were decorated. It is

⁹² Vicenç A. Ballester, "A Sèrbia," *L'Intransigent*, 15 November 1918, 2; Rafael Ràfols Camí, "Una gran missió de la Catalunya autònoma. La Unitat Nacional," *L'Intransigent*, 29 November 1918, 2.

⁹³ "Homenaje a Serbia," *La Publicidad*, 18 November 1918, 3; "La conferencia d'en Macià," *L'Intransigent*, 22 November 1918, 2.

⁹⁴ "Homenaje a Serbia i Belgica," *La Publicidad*, 1 December 1918, p.9.

⁹⁵ Joan Solé i Pla, "El doctor Solé i Pla explica com caldria organitzar el nostre ordre públic," *La Rambla*, 20 April 1934, 5.

⁹⁶ Letter from Joan Solé i Pla to Manuel Alcàntara Gusart, 6 September 1948, Mexico DF, Antoni Rovira i Virgili Fonds, ANC.

⁹⁷ Letter from Alejandro de Lacour to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovans' Madrid Embassy, 7 January 1919, Barcelona, Diplomatic Representation in Spain, Embassy of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovans in Spain-Madrid, 94-303, F.895, Archives of Yugoslavia [AY].

⁹⁸ Joan Esculies, *Joan Solé i Pla. Un separatista entre Macià i Companys*, (Barcelona: Edicions de 1984, 2011).

⁹⁹ Letter from Alejandro de Lacour to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovans' Madrid Embassy, 27 de January 1919, Barcelona, Diplomatic Representation in Spain, Embassy of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovans in Spain-Madrid, 94-303, F.900, AY.

most likely that Solé i Pla did not finish the management, because his phlebitis was prolonged at the beginning of 1919.

The relationship with Serbia, however, did not end there. At the beginning of that year, the Paris Peace Conference began in Paris. Conservative Catalan nationalism, predominant at the time and represented by the Lliga Regionalista, did not send a delegation to the French capital to try to influence the commissions of the *big four*. The Lliga aimed for Catalan autonomy within Spain and only used the threat of meeting with British, French or American representatives to force a negotiation with the Spanish government. But that didn't work. The reasons and motivations are beyond the scope of this article.

On the other hand, Catalan separatism did try the international option. Although late and without preparation. Since Solé i Pla was not recovered from phlebitis, he sent his trusted man, Josep Castanyer. The secretary of the Volunteers Committee traveled to Paris on April 15, 1919. Two days later, Castanyer, the Catalan ex-combatant in the French Foreign Legion, Daniel Domingo Montserrat, and Víctor Ball, a Catalan resident in Alsace-Lorraine, visited the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs as 'the representatives of the future Catalan Delegation that wishes to be admitted to the Peace Conference'.

The delegates handed a secretary a bundle of documents, which Castanyer had prepared in Barcelona. Among these were leaflets, various propaganda, and newspapers, demonstrating Catalan support to the Allies and remembering the Catalans who died on the side of France. The central document, with the stamp of the Pro-Catalonia Committee and written in French, was addressed to 'Messieurs les Délégués de la Conférence de la Paix, Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris'.

The text exalted the role of the delegates that 'at this solemn and unique moment in the history of the world, a formerly free and independent people, subjected for many years to a systematic regime of oppression, has full confidence in the august function of redemption of the oppressed races entrusted to you'. Noting also 'the courage, tenacity and enthusiasm of more than 12,000 of our brothers who fought for your cause', and affirming that 'Catalonia, honourable delegates, wants to be completely independent.' Finally, he maintained that the request was anonymous to avoid problems with Spanish justice system. This document was also handed over to the British Foreign Office delegation and the American Mission.

Among other visits, on the afternoon of April 21, Castanyer, Domingo and Bal met with the Serbian ambassador in Paris and a representative at the Peace Conference, Milenko Vesnic. When recording his trip, Castanyer expressed that this visit 'was one of the main reasons for our mission to the capital of France'. He defined Vesnic as 'the man of the frankest generosity for Catalonia and who, at the same time, represents the bravest people in Europe'.

In greeting him, he reminded the separatist Josep Puig i Cadafalch, the president of the Mancomunitat. The meeting was brief and, according to Castanyer, Vesnic 'ratified some statements that, not long ago, he had made favorable to Catalonia'.¹⁰⁰

¹⁰⁰ Comitè Pro-Catalunya [Josep Castanyer], 'Impressions d'un nacionalista català per terres de França', May 1919, Joan Solé i Pla Fonds [Unclassified fonds], ANC.

He was referring to the gratitude following the message from the Catalans in Paris in 1915. The young separatist, with a naïve point, thought that Vesnic would speak on behalf of Catalonia at the Peace Conference. However, none of that happened at all. On April 24, Castanyer returned to Barcelona.

Conclusions

Catalan separatism chose Serbia to establish the main parallel between Catalonia and a nation-state oppressed by Germanophile imperialism during the First World War period. The fact that the Austro-Hungarian Empire attacked it, and in subsequent phases, the German Empire and Bulgaria allowed raising an image of oppression of large empires against a ‘small’ state that married very well with the expected image that separatism aimed to project Catalonia, with respect to Spain.

At the beginning of the First World War, little was known about Catalonia in Serbia, apart from the information that had transpired, especially during the two Balkan wars. This allowed separatism to establish a simple comparison without contradictions to be transmitted to the Catalan audience. Nor did it matter that the bulk of the thousand Catalans who fought in the French Foreign Legion did not fight in Serbia.

The good understanding that was established between consul Alejandro de Lacour and the separatists, especially with Doctor Joan Solé i Pla, also contributed to the propaganda campaign. The Madrid native came from a world totally opposed to separatism, Carlism or Traditionalism. However, the consul and the doctor collaborated so that the situation in Serbia was known in Catalonia and that separatism took advantage of it to make itself known. The existing documentation in Barcelona and Belgrade does not allow us to go deeper into the origin of this relationship.

After the Great War, at the beginning of 1920, Pere I’s son formally introduced Milenko Vesnić as Prime Minister to the King of Spain through a letter. He addressed him with the cordial salutation: “*Monsieur mon frère de votre majesté le bon frère Alexandre, prince regent.*” Amidst this atmosphere of diplomatic cordiality, it appears unlikely that Catalan separatism could have received any substantial support from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.¹⁰¹

Otherwise, Lacour continued to be the Serbian consul in Barcelona. For a short time, though, because he died at the age of 49 in November 1921 due to diabetes.¹⁰² On the other hand, separatism remained a minority movement within Catalan nationalism, dominated by the conservative *Lliga Regionalista*, and did not gain anything tangible from its support for the Serbs. But, as he intended, the propaganda that assimilated Catalonia and Serbia helped him gain notoriety during the First World War.

¹⁰¹ Letter from Alexander, Prince regent from the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes to Alphonse XIII, king of Spain, 24 January 1920, Belgrade, Diplomatic Representation in Spain, Embassy of Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes in Spain-Madrid, 94-859, F.334, AY

¹⁰² Death certificate, Alejandro de Lacour’s family’s archive; “Alexandre de Lacour,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 1 December 1921, 8.

In this way, the article contributes understanding the nationalist movements' mechanisms at the beginning of the 20th century, used to establish paradiplomatic collaborations and parallels between historical situations and episodes. And, likewise, which elements were taken into account to choose some examples and discard others.

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THE CATALAN SEPARATIST INTEREST IN SERBIA DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR (1914–1919)

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Summary

This article examines the role of Catalan separatism during the First World War (1914–1919) and its strategic use of international parallels, particularly with Serbia, to legitimize its political aspirations. Catalan separatists framed Spain as a Germanophile power and Catalonia as an Allied sympathizer, establishing a narrative that sought international support for autonomy or independence.

The article explores how Catalan nationalists used Serbia as their primary reference point, portraying it as a small oppressed nation struggling against imperialist forces (Austro-Hungary), akin to Catalonia's supposed subjugation by Spain. Catalan propaganda aligned itself with the Serbian cause, organizing solidarity campaigns, advocating for Catalan volunteers in the French Foreign Legion, and engaging in diplomatic efforts.

The Serbian consulate in Barcelona, led by Alejandro de Lacour, played a key role in facilitating these connections. However, despite these efforts, Catalan separatism remained a marginal movement, overshadowed by the Lliga Regionalista and lacking substantive international backing.

At the Paris Peace Conference (1919), Catalan delegates attempted to gain recognition, presenting petitions to French, British, and Serbian representatives, but failed to achieve any diplomatic success. Ultimately, while the Catalan-Serbian parallel helped separatists gain publicity, it did not translate into concrete political gains.

This case study contributes to the understanding of paradiplomatic strategies in nationalist movements, illustrating how separatist rhetoric employs historical analogies to gain legitimacy on the international stage.

KEYWORDS: Catalan nationalism, Serbia, Spain, First World War, Paris Peace Conference

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