

REMEMBERING CATALONIA, PART I

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Catalans have historically understood themselves to be Spaniards, and it is within this conception that Catalan culture flourished and her people accomplished feats of genuine heroism. But

separatism requires that we sacrifice our memory—for only then are we fully receptive to a new, invented past.

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Recently, a monument to fallen civil-war era Catalan soldiers belonging to the *Terç de Requetès*, an infantry battalion of *Carlistas*—monarchist, Catholic traditionalist, Spanish patriots—was removed from its perch in Montserrat, near the patron Virgin of Catalonia. The regional government had deemed it fascist apologia, falling afoul of Spain’s “Historical Memory” law. As the monument belongs to the local Abbey, and is a place of prayer for the fallen, the monks offered to change the wording on its commemorative plaque, but this measure was rejected. Ultimately, the Abbey conceded to the government.

In this context, we may consider the words of Antoni Rovira i Virgili, the man who served as president to Catalonia’s government in exile during Franco’s dictatorship. In his *History of Nationalist Movements*, he writes that Catalonia’s Carlistas needs to be erased from memory, “as though they had never existed.” He also bitterly complains at his people’s lack of a sense of nationhood, choosing to fight for Spain throughout its history.

But *history* is precisely the problem. What has come down to us from the past must be replaced, and with the government’s removal of this monument, Rovira i Virgili’s wish is one step closer to being realized.

Indeed, in this northeastern corner of Spain, separatism requires sacrifices—convivences among Catalans, quality of life—but the principal offering it demands is that of memory. We must give up on Catalonia’s history in order to embrace a newly minted version of her. It is not the democracy of Chesterton, in which our ancestors are granted a vote, but a democracy in which the intelligentsia and political class have finally liberated their

countrymen from the burden of memory. Only when we cannot name our great-grandparents, and have no stories to tell of them, are we fully receptive to a new, invented past.

False memory is what we may describe as one of the four causes of Catalan separatism. For the general population, invented grievances are to serve as the principal motivator for supporting secession. For the movement's luminaries, however, it is but a *post hoc* construction. To false memory, then, we must add the prospect of *fading eminence*, the *force of mimesis* (in René Girard's sense) and *foreign money* as key factors in generating and fostering a separatist movement, all of which are upstream from the construction of a false historical narrative to justify the movement's ambitions.

Here in Part I we explore false memory, the falsification of history, before moving on to the other factors in upcoming essays.

The Middle Ages

The name "Catalonia," which appears for the first time in the 1117 *Liber Maiolichinus*, probably derives from the word for "castle," sharing its etymology with Castile ("land of castles"), the separatists's *bête noire*, although other etymologies have been suggested. Prior to its appearance, the Carolingians referred to a territory across the pyrenees, including much of modern Catalonia, as the *Hispanic March*, which does not sound quite right to separatist ears, and the region had, of course, been part of the Visigothic *Regnum Hispaniae* and the Roman diocese of *Hispania*.

Crucially, then, for one-thousand years prior to the existence of Catalonia, its population and territory were understood to be part of a wider Iberian identity, one which, during the Roman and Visigothic era, constituted a political unit (Hispania). And once Catalonia came into being, it continued to be conceived of as an expression of a larger Spanish identity and political project.

Portrait of King Jaume I of Aragon, a 16th century copy of a medieval altarpiece located in the city of Palma.

La primera cosa, per Deu; la segona, per salvar Espanya, “First, for God; second, to save Spain:” so speaks King Jaume I of Aragon (1213-1276) in the *Llibre dels Feits*, or “Book of Deeds,” the earliest epic poem written in Catalan, the oldest manuscript of which dates to the 1340s. King Alfonso X of Castile had asked Jaume, his father-in-law, for assistance in fighting the Moors in the southeast. After deliberating with his lords over whether to aid the Castilians, we read that a Franciscan monk was able to obtain an audience with King Jaume, informing him that a fellow monk had been visited by an angel proclaiming that “the king of Aragon whose name is Jaume will save Spain from the dangers that beset her.” The monarch is thereby convinced, and rides south into the fray. Similarly, after leaving a council at Lyon where he has agreed to participate in a crusade, Jaume hardens his men’s resolve thus: *Barons, anar nosem podem, que huy es honrada tota Espanya*, “Worthy men, we may leave, for today all of Spain is honored.”

This work, which so often praises Catalonia, sees no contradiction between this and a wider Spanish identity. Yet, today, separatists remember the 13th century Aragonese king as a hero, and even (in the opinion of Rovira i Virgili), the father of a Catalan nation whose principal identifying feature is that it is emphatically *not* Spanish.

Another key source for historic Catalan identity and its relationship to the concept of Spain is that of the 14th century *Llibre del rei en Pere d’Arago*. Here, the Catalan chronicler Bernat Desclot records how, during a French invasion, Catalan barons told their king, Pedro III, that they desired to go meet this force in the battlefield rather than remain like merchants in their cities, lest they bring shame and a bad name to “Spain’s cavalry.” Similarly, when the Count of Barcelona went to meet the Holy Roman Emperor, Desclot records his introduction as *hun cavaller de Spanya*, “a knight of Spain,” and *hun compte de Spanya a qui dien lo compte de Barcelona*, “a Count of Spain whom they call Count of Barcelona.” Furthermore, remembering the pivotal battle of the *Navas de Tolosa* against an Islamic army in 1212, Desclot writes of “how a powerful Sarracen [lord] entered Spain,

and how the three kings of Spain went to meet him”—these three, of course, include the regent of Aragon.

Concerning such joint actions, the 13th/14th century mercenary Ramón Muntaner writes in his *Chronica*, that the kings of *Espanya, qui son una carn e una sang ... poc dubtaren tot l'altre poder del mon*; The kings of “Spain, who are one flesh and one blood,” have little to fear of any power. Later, Pere Tomich, a Catalan knight who wrote a general history of Catalonia in the 1400s, provides the same conception of his region as a part of Spain, and as having fought to recover Spain from the loss suffered centuries prior at the arrival of the Umayyad Caliphate’s forces (“the loss of Spain,” as it was often called).

“Spain” is evidently not merely a geographic category in any of these primary sources, but rather an explicitly anthropological and political one, capable of being done honour to by martial feats and exclusive of the topographically Iberian realm of Muslim al-Andalus. Medieval texts invoke it as the recovery of the Visigothic kingdom’s unity, itself a continuation of Roman Hispania, in what historians have described as the *neo-gothic ideal*. It is not, however, a culturally homogenizing project (neither would Jacobin centralism be a prominent force in later Spanish history).

The cultural diversity that separatists invoke as evidence for a separate, non-Spanish, Catalonia was never understood that way before the modern era, anymore than the diversity of organs is understood to mean that a man’s heart constitutes a separate organism from his lungs, and must leave the body in order to truly be itself.

Early Modernity to the Nineteenth Century

Leaving the medieval period behind, we may turn to the early modern conquest of America, from which separatists often claim Catalonia was excluded, constructing a grievance that is also a disavowal of blame meant to bespeak a lack of moral blemish on account of the evils of imperialism. The reality is that Catalans participated both in the

conquest and administration of overseas territories by Spain.

The chief military appointment aboard Christopher Columbus' second voyage across the Atlantic was the Catalan Pedro de Margarit. The vessel also included Catalan soldiers and the man who would be the first Apostolic Vicar in the Americas, the Aragonese Bernardo Boil, who had worked as a priest in Montserrat, Catalonia. We may also cite the arrival of Catalan Franciscans to the New World in 1508, and the 1511 expedition by Joan d'Agramunt to Newfoundland. Among the conquistadores, we find Juan Orpí, who, in 1638, founded New Barcelona in Venezuela, and Gaspar de Portolá, who conquered California and served as its first governor in 1767. This is [discussed](#) by historian Jaume Vicens Vives. If anything, there was a relative lack of interest in America on the part of Catalans, given that the kingdom of Aragon was expanding throughout the Mediterranean, but they certainly did participate in the transatlantic enterprise.

A key event worth highlighting took place in 1640. Known as the *Corpus de Sang*, or *body of blood*, it marks the eruption of violence in Barcelona during the Corpus Christi celebrations. This was a reaction against the Count-Duke of Olivares's reforms under king Philip IV. Something of a famine was sweeping Iberia at the time, and the Thirty Years' War was raging in central Europe. Castile, the region which contributed the most to this war effort, was exhausted, prompting the Duke to suggest what he called a "union of arms," according to which other parts of Philip's domain would begin contributing funds and men to the campaign.

Corpus de Sang (1910) by Hermenegildo Miralles (1859-1931)

This was met with strong opposition in many theaters, including Catalonia. Partly as a consequence of this resistance, but also as a response to the French capture of a Spanish fort in the northernmost part of the region, the Duke of Olivares sent an army to the northeast. This army, however, fed itself on what livestock and crops it found and stayed in local houses (a system of auspice stipulated under Catalan law). Given the bad harvests, this proved understandably onerous for the local population, causing general discontent.

Local nobles, unwilling to pay the Duke's new tax, stoked the flames, leading to violence in Barcelona and the murder of the local viceroy.

In the uproar, the president of the regional government, Pau Claris, proclaimed a Catalan republic and recognized Louis XIII of France as sovereign. The French king sent troops (which the Catalan government was made to finance, precisely what it was avoiding in the case of the "union of arms"). King Louis reserved public positions for Frenchmen, and appointed a French viceroy rather than a local (indeed, the portion of Catalonia that would hereafter remain French, would find itself subjected to policies of cultural homogenization the likes of which were never imposed on its Spanish counterpart).

During this period, Pedro de Marca, who acted as governor of Catalonia on behalf of the French (the viceroy being *de facto* devoted to military operations) [wrote](#) the following:

I am confirmed in the opinion that, in Catalonia, all bear ill-will towards France and are instead inclined towards Spain ... I receive fresh confirmation daily ... there is no pro-French party here.

He was right to warn of general dissatisfaction, as was the Louis' viceroy, the Marquise of Brezé, who wrote that he saw "only hostile and suspicious faces" among the Catalans. By 1645, a new rebellion was underway, and the bishop of the municipality of Vic wrote a letter to the king of Spain asking that he bring "justice, as in Castile." Peasant complaints against local governors were also common at this time. To judge from contemporary accounts, Philip IV was met with some acclaim when he entered Barcelona in 1652. The Catalan government recognized Spanish monarchy and returned to Spain (albeit, again, having lost a northern piece to France).

A more prominent year in separatist historiography is that of 1714, which provides the region's 'national day' so to speak—the 11th of September. This commemorates the occasion when local government authorities (among other Spaniards) revolted against

Bourbon Absolutism, setting off the uprising by [stating](#) their intention to struggle on behalf of *tot lo Principat i de tota Espanya* (the freedom of this principality and of all Spain), and to avoid *quedant esclaus ab los demés enganyats espanyols* (becoming slaves with the rest of misled Spaniards).

It was, in other words, not a conflict between one region and the rest of Spain, but a dynastic dispute which unfolded throughout the country. Catalans were as divided as the rest of Spain on whether to support the Bourbons. Absurdly, however, this conflict, which is referred to as the War of Succession, has been rebranded, by the slight shift of a syllable, as the “War of Secession,” in certain Catalan educational materials. Again, the explicit formula used in primary sources are enough to discount separatist attempts at appropriating such instances of Catalan heroism.

The same sentiment as that of the 1714 Barcelona uprising occurs in the 1808 *Cantich català*’s railing against Napoleon:

Nosaltres som espanyols/ Y encara que siguem sols/ Contra toda la França/ Ja mai nos aturdirem/ Perque amb Deu confiem/ Que es la nostra Esperanza. (We are Spaniards; And even if we are alone against all of France, we never founder. For with God we trust in that which we hope.)

We may also refer to the Catalan author of *Centinela contra Franceses* (Sentinel against the French), the prominent poet Antonio Capmany y Montpalau. Indeed, the president of the Spanish assembly in Cadiz who proclaimed the country’s independence from Napoleon, Lazaro Dou, was himself Catalan.

In this vein, we find a robust tradition of Catalan [poets and artists](#) devoting their considerable talents to lionizing Spanish martial feats during this period. Following the 1859 attempt by Morocco to annex Spanish holdings in North Africa, for example, Joaquim Rubió i Ors’ verses recall how “Catalans were seen fighting as lions in the shade of the

Hispanic banner.” Francisco Camprodon (*per las banderas d’Espanya*), Adolfo Blanch (*mes grans vos vol der Deu, héroes d’Espanya*) and Víctor Balaguer y Cirera (*¡Victoria!, la hispana nación*) all did likewise. Nor was this enthusiasm limited to poets: Catalan volunteers, under the command of General Prim, were key to Spain’s victories in Wad-Rass and Tétouan. This is precisely the legacy on which Rovira i Virgili heaped his disapproval.

A decade later, during Cuba’s revolt against Spain, Francisco Camprodon wrote *las barras de Catalunya sont sempre’ls puntals d’Espanya*, (Catalonia’s bars, ever the mainstays of Spain) reflecting the fervent opposition to Cuba’s separation that characterized Catalan public opinion. And once more, this region contributed to the war effort with both songs and soldiers. In March 1869, a battalion of Catalan volunteers would be the first to embark to Cuba from Spain.

The subsequent loss of Cuba and the Philippines will mark a turning point for Spain. Specifically, it will threaten certain economic interests in Catalonia with the prospect of losing benefits on which they had come to rely. We leave the issue of fading eminence, however, to the second part of this discussion.