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Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Arnau González i Vilalta, is an untenured professor at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; this article is a highly synthesized version of a book in Spanish, *Cataluña bajo vigilancia. El Fascio y el Consulado italiano de Barcelona (1930-1943)*, Valencia, Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2009. I am grateful to Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona, the help given in the final redaction of this article.

The Catalan Nationalist Option: Italian Fascist Intrigues in Barcelona (1931-1943)

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Among other perhaps more salient features, Italian foreign policy under the Fascist regime of Benito Mussolini was characterised by the existence of various types of nationalist and separatist movements that could favour its geopolitical interests in Europe.¹ As a result, Italian diplomacy maintained close ties with nationalist groups of various sizes in territories claimed by Italian irredentism, such as Corsica and Malta, and established contacts with Croatian nationalists in the traditional Balkan area of influence of its foreign policy, elsewhere, in order to weaken the two main colonial powers in the Mediterranean, Great Britain and France.² The plan was to empower Italian expansionism in both territorial and ideological terms. Italian representatives also maintained contacts with nationalist movements, such as those in India and elsewhere, that were against British or French interests.³ In this respect, Catalonia in the 1930s and 1940s was a significant object of attention to the Italian diplomatic corps in Spain, both in Madrid and in

* Dr. Arnau Gonzàlez i Vilalta, is an untenured professor at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona; this article is a highly synthesized version of a book in Spanish, *Cataluña bajo vigilancia. El Fascio y el Consulado italiano de Barcelona (1930-1943)*, Valencia, Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2009. I am grateful to Enric Ucelay-Da Cal, professor at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra of Barcelona, the help given in the final redaction of this article.

¹ For reasons of conceptual clarity, this paper will capitalize the Italian movement and will refer to all other “Fascisms” in the lower case.

² This article is a highly synthesized version of a book in Spanish, *Cataluña bajo vigilancia. El Fascio y el Consulado italiano de Barcelona (1930-1943)*, Valencia, Servei de Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2009.

³ For example, G. Scotti, *“Ustascia” tra il fascio e la svastica* (Udine 1976); M. Martelli, *L’India e il Fascismo* (Roma 2002), and S. Fabei, *Mussolini e la resistenza palestinese* (Milano 2005).

Barcelona, and obviously also to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome.⁴ Naturally such attraction was shared by its British and French rivals.⁵

The Italian focus on Barcelona was seen from a twofold perspective. First, there was the danger and potential of Catalan separatism, so a major task was the i.e. monitoring and analysing the development of the Catalan nationalist movement. Second, such intelligence-gathering was realized from an ideological point of view, open to the possible introduction of Fascism in an independent Catalonia, or at least for it to be an accessible gateway for *fascist modernity* into Spain between 1931 and 1936. Obviously, much time was also devoted to following Spanish domestic affairs and, as a matter of course, to keeping the community of Italian anti-fascist exiles in Barcelona under surveillance.⁶ This study will deal exclusively with the attitudes towards Barcelona and its special political dynamic among the Italian diplomats assigned to Spain.

Subsequently, such vigilance seemed quite justified. After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in July 1936, Italian diplomacy, a key ally of the Francoist *New State* under construction, kept close watch on all the nationalist initiatives by Catalans, in search of one sort of solution to the conflict in the international arena, and Franco's option proved unreliable. However After 1939 and the victory of the pro-Franco forces, until the fall of the *Duce* in 1943, however, Italian diplomatic concern for Catalonia was primarily focused on two Italian issues: on the reconstruction of Italian economic and industrial interests in the hinterland of Barcelona and, during World War II, on Allied and Axis propaganda in the Catalan capital, a major Mediterranean port.

⁴ To date, the bibliography on relations between Spain and Italy has not covered the documentation of the Barcelona Consulate, for example U. Frasca, *La Spagna e la diplomazia italiana dal 1928 al 1931* (Alessandria 2000); and I. Saz, *Mussolini contra la II República* (Valencia 1986). However, a few reports from the Embassy in Madrid have been reproduced by the ambassador, R. Guariglia, *Primi passi in diplomazia e rapporti dell'Amabsciata di Madrid 1932-1934* (Napoli 1972).

⁵ Y. Denéchère, *La politique espagnole de la France de 1931 à 1936* (Paris 1999), 134-150; E. Moradiellos, 'El gobierno británico y Cataluña durante la Segunda República', *Cuadernos Republicanos*, 30, (April 1997), 35-46; 'El gobierno británico y Cataluña durante la República y la Guerra Civil', *El Basilisco*, (January-June 2000), 21-36; P. Preston, *Idealistes sota les bales. Històries de la Guerra Civil*, (Barcelona 2007), 25-46.

⁶ C. Venza, 'La Mecca dell'anarchismo? Esuli libertari a Barcellona durante la Seconda Repubblica', a A. Landuyt (cur.), *Carlo Rosselli e la Catalogna antifascista, Quaderni del Circolo Rosselli*, 2 (1996), 40-48.

The tense relations between Catalonia and Spain and Italian interests (1931-1936)

When general Miguel Primo de Rivera resigned in January 1930 as the cabinet president of the Spanish dictatorship established in 1923, the Italian Consulate in Barcelona began to worry. He immediately suggested to Rome that, in its understanding, Catalonia was moving towards independence and socialism.⁷ This extreme view of Catalan politics, (although it could never be proved), would be maintained throughout the following years in the reports by Italian diplomats assigned to Spain.

During the Spanish II Republic, some main points of interest in Catalonia-Spain relations were outlined over and over again by the Barcelona Consulate and through it, by the Embassy in Madrid. This insistence centered on analysis of the possible evolution, separatist or otherwise, of the autonomous regime in Catalonia that existed after April 1931. Of prime concern were the contradictions of Catalan nationalism (or what is locally called “catalanism”, a more ambiguous catch-all term) and the influence of other nationalist movements in the Iberian Peninsula, such as Basque nationalism, were main concerns. At the same time, there was also a preoccupation with syndical struggles taking place in Catalonia that affected the area of the Italian-owned industries (mainly Pirelli and Cinzano vermouth).

As a result, when Francesc Macià (1859-1933), the leader of Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (ERC), a new left-wing nationalist-federalist party, won the municipal elections of 14 April 1931, and promptly proclaimed the Catalan Republic (at the same time as the Spanish Republic was established in Madrid), the Italian Consulate in Barcelona wrote to Rome in an alarmed tone: after all, Macià had led an Estat Català (or Catalan State) insurrectional force in the 1920s. The process which would consolidate Autonomous Regional Government of Catalonia, which was finally established under the name of the Generalitat de Catalunya -explained the consular report- was sure to become one of the main sources of conflict in the new Spanish Republic, as well as a potential source of instability in the Western Mediterranean.⁸ As a result of this viewpoint, the Embassy in Madrid quickly wrote a report entitled “The Republic and [its] national problems”, which, after analysing social and religious difficulties, considered the “Catalan question” as one of the main factors of destabilisation for the new Republic.⁹ According to this point of

⁷ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1919-1930, Rapparti Politici 1929-1930, p. 1593, R. 8-II-1930 (Consolato Barcellona).

⁸ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), Telegramma, 14-IV-1931 (Consolato Barcellona); R. 15-IV-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

⁹ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 22-IV-1931 (Ambasciata Madrid).

view, the debate on Catalan-Spanish politics and identity weakened the Spanish State, which until the approval and final establishment of the Statute of Catalonia in 1932 had to exist with the constant concern arising from the ever-increasing demands made by supporters of Catalan autonomy.¹⁰ As a result, every time there was some disagreement between the Barcelona regional government with the Republican central government, either due to the legal procedure for the Statute or for any other reason, the Italian reports stressed the possibility of some manoeuvre towards separatism.¹¹

The Statute as an ultimatum

In the reports sent to Rome during 1931, the diplomats assigned to Spain continually stressed the "radical" position of the Catalan government and its president, Macià. The Italians felt that the draft Statute of Autonomy for Catalonia was an ultimatum to Spain, which would be obliged to react, so as to maintain Spanish territorial unity.¹² This interpretation is belied by actual events, but does show the vague but ambitious nature of the catalanist position at that time, as well as Spanish right-wing fears. In this context, before the plebiscite on the statute of 2 August 1931, the consul in Barcelona, Romanelli, thought that a process of Spanish disintegration in the not too distant future was practically certain.¹³

This extreme representation of the positions of the ERC and Catalan nationalism in general as defined by the Consulate and the Embassy during the first few weeks, continued after the legislative elections to the Constituent "Cortes" or Spanish Parliament on 28 June 1931, in which the ERC obtained a large majority in Catalan districts.¹⁴ Apart from the electoral successes of ERC in the first months of the new Republic sustained in the following years, Italian observers, probably somewhat disoriented by the speed of the changes taking place, constantly underlined a supposed current of opinion opposed to autonomy among a large part of Catalan society, an expectation which was always contradicted by events.¹⁵

¹⁰ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 22-IV-1931 (Ambasciata Madrid).

¹¹ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 9-V-1931; R., 18-IX-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

¹² ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 6-VI-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

¹³ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 20-VI-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

¹⁴ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 4-VII-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

¹⁵ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 13-VIII-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

However, Macià (although he had led a paramilitary nationalist movement) did not rise up in revolt, and the Catalan Autonomous Government was not disloyal to Republican legality until October 1934, when Macià was long dead and buried. Despite the Italian reports suggesting an image of a Statute of Catalonia which on 14 April 1932 was described by the ambassador in Madrid as not "just the [origin] of an 'autonomous region' but instead a true independent State", this affirmation was clearly exaggerated, and reflected very biased, ultra-conservative sources.¹⁶

The failed coup d'état of August 1932 by general Sanjurjo in Seville took place within this context of constant controversy created by the "Catalan question".¹⁷ This did nothing more than reinvigorate and encourage the Constituent "Cortes" to approve the Statute of Catalonia on 15 September 1932. Elections for the regional-level Parliament of Catalonia were immediately called, and despite the expectations to the contrary of the Italian Consulate in Barcelona, they were once again won by ERC with an absolute majority.¹⁸ Once the results became known, the Embassy in Madrid began to include a specific section on Catalonia in the reports that it sent to Rome.¹⁹

As a result, after the official establishment of the Statute of Autonomy, the Consulate's concerns about the evolution of catalanism, represented to a large extent by ERC, only increased. In addition to fears regarding separatism, the consulate felt that the Catalan government was "soft" or revolutionary anarcho-syndicalism. Throughout 1933, the references to Catalonia focused especially on social tensions and anarchist revolutionary attacks. However, worried analysis of the positions and contacts between nationalists and supporters of autonomy in other areas such as the Basque Country and Galicia also continued.²⁰ The Italians were convinced that these movements were imitations of the Catalan process.²¹

¹⁶ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 3 (1932), R., 14-IV-1932 (Ambasciata Madrid).

¹⁷ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 3 (1932), R., 20-VIII-1932, (Consolato Barcellona).

¹⁸ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 3 (1932), R., 12-XI-1932, Miscellanea, Lettere di Barcellona, (Consolato Barcellona).

¹⁹ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 3 (1932), R., 26-XI-1932, Miscellanea, Lettere di Barcellona, (Consolato Barcellona).

²⁰ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, Questione particolare, busta n. 5 (1933), R., 7-VIII-1933, (Consolato Barcellona). On Galeuzka, see J. L. De la Granja, *Nacionalismo y II República en el País Vasco* (Madrid 1986) 358-366.

²¹ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 31-I-1933, (Ambasciata Madrid). For this question, see A. Sallés & E. Ucelay-Da Cal, 'L'analogia falsa: el nacionalisme basc davant de la República Catalana i la Generalitat provisional, abril-juliol 1931, April-July 1931' in M. González Portilla, J. Maluquer de Motes & B. De Riquer (eds.), *Industrialización y nacionalismo. Análisis comparativos* (Bellaterra 1985) 443-470.

The contradictions of Catalanism

As well as covering both the institutional dynamic in its strictest sense of left-wing Catalan nationalism in power, i.e. the ERC, as well as the local conservative opposition party, the Lliga Catalana (Catalan League), the reports also presented their government in Rome with the main internal problems and contradictions of catalanism. These contradictions, according to the Consulate, basically consisted of the relationships and alleged "non-aggression pacts" between the main industrial union in Catalonia, the anarcho-syndicalist CNT, (the National-i.e. Spanish Labor Confederation) and the Catalan government party ERC, and hypothetical consequences such agreements might have on weakening police action against social violence. Second, the reports covered the separatism that was "promoted" -according to the Italian perspective- by socially-conservative and moderate nationalism of the Lliga and its industrial interests. In the Italian view, catalanism was extremely difficult in the way it approached the issue. On the one hand, ERC needed the support of the CNT for any autonomous or separatist undertaking, while the right-wing Catalan Lliga could not escape from its own structural contradiction, that of wishing to leave Spain without losing the Spanish domestic market for its Catalan-manufactured goods. The report explained this perception using a metaphor for an almost impossible action:

A misunderstanding seen particularly in Catalonia, is that the same people who support the trend towards separatism from a theoretical and sentimental point of view are at the same time interested in maintaining [Spanish] national unity, because Catalonia's industry had a total need for the Spanish domestic market and customs protection. We will see how Catalonia manages to square this particular circle.²²

However, this comment shows that the Italian diplomats did not understand the underlying contradiction in Catalan nationalism, which was its non-separatist nature or at least its ambiguity. Unlike nationalist movements such as the one in Ireland (despite the failed Home Rule process prior to 1916), Catalan nationalism would be defined throughout the twentieth century as aspiring to achieve autonomy for Catalonia and federalism in Spain, with separatism politically marginalised.²³ This issue was analysed more correctly in Rome by Fascist commentator Nicola Pascazio:

²² ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 27-IV-1931 (Ambasciata Madrid). A very similar analysis was made by the British Consulate in Barcelona on 12-I-1933 in *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, part II, Series F, Europe 1919-1939, v. 26, Spain June 1931-June 1936, (Gerogetown 1993) 78.

²³ For the impact of the struggle for Irish independence on Catalonia, see J. C. Ferrer i Pont, *Nosaltres Sols: la revolta irlandesa a Catalunya* (Barcelona 2007).

Catalonia is three-quarters republican and federalist, and has always seen the solution to its autonomy in federalism. [...] The theoretical basis for separatism comes from a group of diehards led by colonel Macià. In substance, separatism itself is nothing more than a protest by the Catalan people against Madrid-based uniformity and centralism; but by organising the State into a Federation, circles in Madrid believe that Catalan dynamism would lose its protest-based character.²⁴

Despite this clear-eyed perception, it was no less true that various currents of Catalan nationalism strayed within the context of international politics, seeking support in institutions such as the Congress of European Nationalities, in the shadow of the League of Nations, as well as sending out feelers to various European chancelleries.²⁵

Of equal importance in this matter was the constant opposition by Catalan authorities to stronger anti-labour measures was also important to Italian observers. The Catalans also advocated police moderation instead of punitive action, as law enforcement was still in 1931-1932 under control of the provincial civil governors appointed from Madrid; this local pressure was especially applied to the Barcelona governor.²⁶

The usefulness of a freer Catalonia to Italian foreign policy

It was clear that at a time when the *Duce's* Fascist Italy proclaimed itself to be a Mediterranean power ahead of France, the geostrategic importance of Catalonia (to which the coveted Balearic Islands were linked by language and tradition) could not be ignored.²⁷ As a result, in addition to speculatively considering future Italian economic interests in Catalonia, the Foreign Ministry in Rome wondered on various occasions what the correct Italian attitude should be towards Catalonia, which in political terms, and during the years 1931-1934, appeared to be moving towards increasingly higher levels of autonomy. Nevertheless, besides contemplating the opportunities for spreading philoFascism there, Italian diplomats were also concerned with what might be called Catalonia's "foreign" policy with regard to possible alliances with France. But they were also uncomfortable with

²⁴ N. Pascasio, *La rivoluzione di Spagna* (Roma 1933) 338.

²⁵ X. M. Núñez-Seixas, *Internacionalitzar Catalunya. El catalanisme polític, la Sociedad de Naciones y la cuestión de las minorías nacionales (1914-1936)*, (an unpublished book soon to be published by the Ramon Trias Fargas Foundation). My thanks to the author for making it available for consultation.

²⁶ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 17-VI-1931 (Ambasciata Madrid); busta n. 3 (1932), Miscellanea, Lettere di Barcellona, R., 20-II-1932 (Consolato Barcellona).

²⁷ C. Bernieri, *Mussolini a la conquista de las Baleares* (Barcelona 1937).

increased Catalan action in the Pyrenean staalet of Andorra and the territories within France, French Catalonia (the department of Pyrénées-Orientales) and the Occitan-speaking south of the “hexagon”, which shared much the same language and where mutual understanding was deemed especially easy.

In this regard, just one day after the proclamation of the Catalan Republic in 1931, consul Romanelli wondered what the attitude of the new authorities towards Italy would be.²⁸ Despite the difficulty from the Italian viewpoint of conceiving of anything other than an independent Catalan State or a dependency within Spain, Catalanist demands for greater sovereignty began to arouse Italian curiosity to the extent that they could involve the opportunity to find an ally in a region of "clear" French influence.²⁹ On this subject, consul Romanelli wrote:

It is true that as far as Italy is concerned [...] the consolidation of an increased Catalan identity may also be of benefit to us. Indeed, one may anticipate that the Madrid government, the most Masonic there has [ever] been in Spain, will be entirely in the hands of France for many reasons. That is why Catalonia, partly due to contrast, and partly due to mistrust of its neighbour [France] would be interested in turning towards us, and for us, achieving friendship with Catalonia would mean gaining friendship in a region where our greatest commercial and industrial interests are based, in the region that influences practically the entire Spanish Mediterranean coast.³⁰

This Italian opinion was very heavily conditioned by the influence of France on Catalonia and Spain in general. But French officials, unlike the Italian diplomats assigned to Barcelona, had a much more in-depth knowledge of what was happening in Catalonia, given their police observations posts on a common border.³¹

As a result, after this first observation by the Italian consul in Barcelona, which did not receive an answer from the ambassador in Madrid, there is no similar reference until a year later, in April 1932. During the celebration of the first anniversary of the proclamation of the II Republic in

²⁸ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 15-IV-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

²⁹ For the alternative of an alliance between France and Italy from 1935 onwards, see R. Festorazzi, *Laval-Mussolini. L'impossibile asse. La storia dello statista francese che volle l'intesa con l'Italia* (Milano 2003).

³⁰ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 2 (1931), R., 17-IV-1931 (Consolato Barcellona).

³¹ The French documentation on Catalan nationalism is very extensive and differs from mere consular reports. For example, see the archives of the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (ADN), Ambassade du Madrid, Série C, n. 139, Question Catalane; Consulat du Barcelona, Série B, n. 1, Regionalisme 1919-1930.

Spain, the Catalan President and the Italian vice-consul exchanged a few words on their desire for closer Catalan-Italian relations. This change in attitude by the Catalan authorities led the consul to ask Rome once again about what position he should adopt:

At this point it is worth asking how we should consider the imminent possibility of a significantly autonomous Catalonia, the autonomy of which will tend to increase rather than decrease? In my opinion, looking at it generously, it is easy for many reasons to conclude that however little we look at history and geography, the possibility can do nothing but further our immediate interests in both political and economic terms.³²

The same question was posed once again in February 1933 as a result of the visit by the Italian ambassador in Madrid, Raffaele Guariglia, to Barcelona. After that inspection, Guariglia sent an extensive and interesting report to Rome in which he gave details of a range of impressions and discussions he had been involved in with members of Catalan society.³³ Guariglia said that it was necessary to correct the image of Barcelona and Catalonia. The Catalan capital and its industrial belt were usually regarded as centers of social upheaval, with underlying labor difficulties, which could be easily solved –in his opinion- by simply improving the organisation of the police. Given Italian Fascist presumptions about order and control, the ambassador wrote:

That is why nowhere in Spain to the same extent as in Barcelona, where economic, industrial and financial interests are greater than in the rest of the country, do right-minded people eagerly view Fascism and the Duce with liking and as the only hope.

And he even commented on the opportunities for Fascism in Catalonia in comparison with Madrid:

And also only in Barcelona, where the development of trade and international contacts has spread a more modern mentality, it is possible to understand true Fascism with its propositions and economic and social achievements, as against the Fascism of the type that some circles in Madrid tend towards, which seems to be stuck in the mentality of the reactionaries of '48.

Later in the report, Guariglia downrated the relative importance of the leader of conservative Catalan nationalism, Francesc Cambó (1876-1947).

³² ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 3 (1932), Miscellanea, Lettere di Barcellona, R., 23-IV-1932 (Consolato Barcellona).

³³ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 5-II-1933 (Ambasciata Madrid).

Due to the passage of time since 1931, Cambó and the Lliga were incapable of overcoming the almost "legendary" figure of Macià, the true figurehead of autonomy. He then continued by adding that the Statute did not appear to lead to a Catalan separation from Spain, a further reference to Italian interests in terms of the future:

In any case, considering that Catalonia is the closest part of Spain to Italy historically, politically, economically and where, as I mentioned, the fastest currents of sympathy towards Fascism can be constructed, I think that we would be wise to cultivate a special friendship with this region, regardless of the effects that the application of the Statute may have on political life, and provide moral support, as far as it is possible, to any local sector that shows itself capable of ensuring lasting peace and social order. This would also be in the interests of our industries in Catalonia and trade, where I feel there are very substantial opportunities for development.³⁴

However, Guariglia did not understand that the overt introduction of Fascism in Catalonia was impossible, at least as an infiltration of the central parties of Catalan politics. Indeed, between 1931 and 1936, both the left-wing ERC and the right-wing Lliga formally advocated non-separatist Catalan nationalism, and used the term "fascist" as an accusation when criticising their opponents. As a result, for some observers, the ERC was the party that dominated all Catalan institutions thanks to fascist-style demagogic and violent politics, while, for others, the Lliga was a reactionary force which would end up leading Catalonia, with its Spanish allies, towards a Mussolini-style regime.

However, Italian interests in Catalonia during the period 1931-1936 were also affected by the manoeuvres of French diplomacy. The Italians thought that if Republican Spain once again clearly moved towards an openly pro-French orientation (after failing to renew the Spanish-Italian treaty of 1926), Catalonia perhaps might counteract this French influence.³⁵ As a result, everything that related anything Catalan with France and its foreign policy was of the utmost concern to the Italians. With regard to Andorra, the various conflicts in this suddenly unstable if tiny principality in the Pyrenees (of which the President of the French Republic and the Catalan bishop of la Seu d'Urgell were joint sovereigns), aroused Italian interest during the period 1933-1934.³⁶ As a result, Catalan influence in Andorra was carefully monitored, as well as the industrial conflicts arising from the construction of hydroelectric dams in the mountains, tensions which, in addition to a

³⁴ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 5-II-1933 (Ambasciata Madrid).

³⁵ J. Coverdale, *I fascisti italiani alla guerra di Spagna*, Roma, Laterza, 1977.

³⁶ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 3-VIII-1933 (Ambasciata Parigi).

constitutional crisis led by pro-Catalans, to a French occupation in August 1933; moreover, the Andorran elections in September of that year were closely watched.³⁷

Furthermore, the Italian reports showed some concern towards some isolated manifestations of Catalanism that were more anecdotal than substantial. At first, there are some references to demonstrations of solidarity by the population of French Catalonia, which were a matter of concern due to the possible spread of demands for Catalan autonomy to other parts of France. Second, the Occitanist cultural movement was attentively described, although without too much importance being attached to its activities.³⁸ These factors were also of much more direct concern to the French authorities, who did not want to hear talk of about the spread of Catalanism to their territory or to Andorra.³⁹ However, these concerns of the French Consulate in Barcelona during the 1930s, contradicting the Italian analysis, were dispelled by several interviews with President Macià and other members of ERC, who guaranteed the non-existence of Catalan feeling in French territory.⁴⁰

Finally, and perhaps most importantly in terms of Catalonia's "foreign" policy, there were various reports from the Italian Embassy in Madrid in the second half of 1933, which announced a secret agreement between the autonomous government in Barcelona and the General Staff of the French army (an affirmation, it should be added, which has not been confirmed by French documentation): in the event of war, it was averred, French troops would be allowed to pass through Catalan territory to act in the Balearic Islands.⁴¹ This Italian worry subsisted up to the end of the Spanish Civil War.

³⁷ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 12, 13, 18 i 28 de juny de 1934 (Consolato Barcellona). A. González i Vilalta, *La nació imaginada els fonaments dels Països Catalans (1931-1939)*, (Catarroja-Barcelona 2006) 235-255. For a general and summarised overview of pan-Catalanism, see A. González i Vilalta, *The Catalan Countries Project (1931-1939)*, Working Papers 252, (Barcelona 2006).

³⁸ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 21-IV-1933 (Consolato Barcellona). With regard to Occitanism, see A. Rafanell, *La il·lusió occitana* (Barcelona 2007).

³⁹ This subject is constantly discussed in the documentation of the Viguerie Française en Andorre in the period 1931-1936, and the documentation of the French Consulate in Barcelona and the French Embassy in Madrid, in the Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes del Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (ADN). For an introduction, see Y. Denéchère, *La politique espagnola de la France de 1931 à 1936* 136-137.

⁴⁰ ADN, Ambassade du Madrid, Europe n. 981, 28-XI-1932, "Entretien avec V. Gassol"; Europe no. 431, 25-III-1933, "Secret". Entretien avec M. Macia."

⁴¹ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 5 (1933), R., 27 VI-1933 i 12-XII-1933 (Regio Ministero della Guerra. Ufficio Coordinamento). R. Guariglia, *La diplomatie difficile. Mémoires 1922-1946* (Paris 1955) 53-54.

The increase in Italian attention alleged the fascist opportunities in Catalonia (1933-1934)

This gradual and increasing interest in Catalonia was of particular importance during the years 1933-1934. This coincided with the beginning of the policy of international export of Fascism advocated by Mussolini from 1933 onwards, ending the idea of Italian exceptionalism.⁴² During this period, the turbulent relations between the autonomous government of Catalonia and the Spanish Republican government concerning various disagreements over respective powers and jurisdictions, were covered by the Italians in great detail. Indeed, it was during this period when contacts were maintained with key elements, of known separatist sympathies, in Catalan government party and in new and significant institutions, such as the Catalan police, under autonomous control after mid 1933.

Macià died on Christmas Day 1933; a new President, Lluís Companys (1882-1940), was duly elected by the Catalan Parliament. Companys reoriented the ERC towards the left, but also gave greater leeway to separatists in the youth wing of the party. The new year 1934 therefore began with a major constitutional confrontation between the catalanist and leftist regional government in Barcelona and the centre-right central government in Madrid as a symptom of the left-right struggle in overall Spanish terms.⁴³

From June 1934 onwards, at a time of very high tension between the autonomous and central governments, the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs started to pass on reports on this issue from the Consulate of Barcelona to its main European delegations. For example, the reports of 13 and 14 June were sent from Rome to the embassies in Paris, London, Berlin, Warsaw, Moscow and Brussels.⁴⁴ The reports on the "Catalan question" continued, such as the documents sent on 28 June and 6 July, which mentioned some information gathered from the Madrid press, that said that Italy wished to promote an internationalised Barcelona in a future independent Catalonia.⁴⁵ This undoubtedly alarmist perspective was reinforced by a more in-depth analysis of developments in the "Catalan question" during the first four years of the Republican period, which concluded that the Republic could not survive without the support of Catalonia, but it could neither do so with the constant destabilisation that this created.

⁴² P. Milza & S. Bernstein, *Storia del Fascismo* (Milano 2004) 377-382.

⁴³ E. Ucelay-Da Cal, *La Catalunya populista. Imatge, cultura i política en l'etapa republicana (1931-1939)* (Barcelona 1982) 157-221.

⁴⁴ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), 26-VI-1934 (Ministero degli Affari Esteri).

⁴⁵ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 6-VII-1934, (Ambasciata Madrid).

In a very interesting report that dealt with all the points mentioned above, as well as the contacts established between Italian representatives and some sectors of catalanist opinion, ambassador Guariglia concluded:

if one day, under the pressure of inevitable events and despite our possible wishes to the contrary, Spain reached the point not perhaps of the complete separation of its regions, but a form of federalism, we would have to think a great deal about developing our political relationship with Catalonia, which would be of some advantage. [...] We should not forget that the Catalan problem has been acute and complicated for the last two years, and one day it may not only be the greatest internal problem for Republican Spain, [...] but may also have some more interesting international consequences for us than the separation of Ireland from England.⁴⁶

One possibility that was a cause of constant concern to the Italian authorities was the possibility of preparation by the Catalans of an armed separatist initiative.⁴⁷

However, from 1933 onwards, this was complemented by interest of the Italian diplomatic authorities in Barcelona in the development of the ERC's alleged "shock troops", the so-called *escamots* (literally "squads", like the Italian *squadristi*) as possible future fascists. This separatist militia, dependent on the ERC youth wing, the Joventuts d'Esquerra Republicana d'Estat Català (JEREC), engaged in 1933 in some extremely controversial acts of violence against political opponents. In October, a mass rally with uniformed sections was held in the Catalan capital, which provoked howls of outrage. These actions aroused some Italian attention because of the constant criticism that it received, which identified it with the Fascist model.⁴⁸

A few months after the first reference in October 1933, the Barcelona Consulate sent a new report focusing exclusively on the JEREC and the *escamots* to Geisser Celesia, chargé d'affaires at the Madrid Embassy. Analysing the development of the JEREC, its internal structure and its various

⁴⁶ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 24-VII-1934, (Ambasciata Madrid).

⁴⁷ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R. 20-VIII-1934, (Ministero degli Affari Esteri).

⁴⁸ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 31-III-1933, (Consolato Barcellona). For the controversy arising from the accusations by fascists towards the JEREC see J. B. Culla, *El catalanisme d'esquerra (1938-1936)* (Barcelona 1977) 111-210. For the JEREC, E. Ucelay-Da Cal, 'Los «malos de la película»: las Joventuts d'Esquerra Republicana y la problemática de «un Fascismo catalán», *Ayer* 59 (2005): 3 147-172. M. D. Ivern i Salvà, *Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya (1931-1936)/2* (Barcelona 1989) 301-336. For Catalan political organisations as a whole, see I. Molas, *Diccionari dels partits polítics de Catalunya, segle XX* (Barcelona 2000) and *El sistema de partits polítics a Catalunya (1931-1936)* (Barcelona 1972).

sectors, the consul Alessandro Probizer spelt out its most interesting features for Fascism and Italian foreign policy: Probizer argued that the youth organization had a hierarchical base that was undoubtedly of a military nature, with a considerable number of armed and trained members. After taking all these characteristics into consideration, he stressed two main aspects: "in reality it is a party militia which looks after the interests of Signor Macià's party." Even more important for Italian diplomacy was the fact that the *escamots* had their own sources of financing, unlike other potential European fascist groups (such as the Croatian *Ustashi*) which Italy subsidised, as the economic funds came directly from the ERC and indirectly from the Catalan government.⁴⁹

This latter question, which was of great importance to the Consulate, was a major advantage for the JEREC. This was because the gradual influence of Fascist Italy on Catalonia would not need economic resources, but could instead focus on the purely ideological aspect, as well as on organisational, propaganda and cultural questions. Such Italian interest did not disappear, despite the formal dissolution of the *escamots* at the end of 1933, which was compensated for by the increasingly large influence of these same sectors within the Catalan government. In specific terms, the main separatist leaders Dr. Josep Dencàs and Miquel Badia were appointed respectively to the posts of Councillor (*conseller*) of the Interior and Commissioner for Public Order in the Catalan government.⁵⁰

As a result of this interest in the political development of the JEREC, and in particular the fact that its leader, Dr. Dencàs, had become acting Councillor of the Interior, an interview took place between the latter and the Italian vice-consul in Barcelona. The meeting, which was not planned in advance, took place by chance as a result of the arrest of an Italian citizen and the exchange of various notes between the Consulate and the Catalan Councillor.⁵¹ As a consequence of the repeated comments regarding the Italian political system in Dencàs letter, and other information received by the Italian diplomats regarding his supposed proximity to Fascism, the Vice-consul Majorini held a meeting with him, and sent a transcript to Consul Probizer:

Dr. Dencàs first spoke of his enthusiastic admiration for the ethic of Fascism, the main points of which he hopes to apply one day in Catalonia, despite admitting that he will not even be able to mention

⁴⁹ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 4 (1933), R., 25-X-1933, (Consolato Barcellona).

⁵⁰ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 11-VI-1934, (Consolato Barcellona). Its necessary compared the post of "Conseller" in the Catalan autonomous government with that of a Minister.

⁵¹ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 9-VII-1934, (Consolato Barcellona).

it by name for some time as this would make ERC lose public support. We in ERC -he said- have found ourselves needing to forge a kind of people that are by their nature against not only war but also against discipline in any form [...] we have taken advantage of the two arguments that could have been politically successful for us, the Catalans' nationalist feeling "and that democratic finger." ERC today has achieved what it wanted, and is in no way looking to the extreme left.

These words by Dencàs were justified by what he described as the urgent tactical need of Catalan separatism and nationalism to take up a left-wing position due to the prevailing conservatism of the Bourbon monarchy before 1931.⁵² Dencàs went on to discuss the new need to work to create a rapprochement between Catalonia and Italy:

Italy can and should look with interest at Catalan development. And this should happen without any sentimentality, which is of no use in foreign policy except for national pride, which is however perfectly justified. Catalonia is returning to its history, its traditions, and its civilisation; an essentially Roman civilisation. Our languages share more words that are similar than they do with Spanish. Spain has been, and always will be, apathetic, Saracen and subservient. Even today, Spain is a French fief.

The indirect reference to the geographical importance of Catalonia in a future Mediterranean conflict between France and Italy, which would subsequently be made more explicit, was an argument used by Dencàs to stress the usefulness for Italian interests of co-operation with Catalan radical nationalism. According to Dencàs, it was impossible for this separatism to consider any agreement with France, due to French "mutilation" of Catalonia (the annexation in the Franco-Spanish Treaty of the Pyrenees of 1659). He even added arguments that were definitely in favour of an alliance:

Wouldn't Catalan friendship be good for Italy, with the hospitality of our coasts, an ideal base for submarines? The Italian government should consider the advantage it can obtain from a unitary Spanish state, inevitably subject to France, and an independent Catalonia, that is strong and its sincere friend.

The goodwill of both parties was essential in this rapprochement. While for his part Dencàs said that he was framing the Catalan youth, disciplining it, militarising it, without them realising it, "within the *escamots*,

⁵² E. Ucelay-Da Cal, 'The Shadow of a Doubt: Fascist and Communist Alternatives in Catalan Separatism, 1919-1939' (Barcelona 2003), *BCN. Political Science Debates*, 2, (2003), 123-191.

action troops of a purely Fascist nature”, the Italian government had to begin to generate interest in Catalan affairs. This interest needed to be aroused gradually and could start with an exchange of tourist visits between the two countries or regular missions to Barcelona by outstanding Fascist intellectuals who understood conditions in Catalonia.⁵³ After the content of the interview with Dencàs was passed on to ambassador Guariglia, the latter replied to the Consulate regarding the position to be adopted concerning the JEREC. Guariglia asked the Barcelona consul to continue to seek a closer personal relationship with Dencàs, showing his positive feelings towards the comments of the separatist leader, but without committing himself to anything.⁵⁴

Emphasising this point, Guariglia sent a report to Mussolini on 24 July 1934, entitled “The political situation in Spain and the question of Catalonia”. In this report, Guariglia underlined the need to pay special attention to the development of the conflict between autonomous Catalonia and the Republican government in case there were any changes to the Spanish territorial status quo:

There is no doubt [...] that the Catalan problem warrants our attention, not only in terms of its relationship with the existence and political coherence of the Spanish State, but also with regard to the possible move towards ever increasing autonomy. If we really want a strong Spain, but only to the extent that it can be more independent in its policy with regard to France without disturbing the politics of the Mediterranean, an increasing separation of Catalonia from the rest of Spain is not in our interests. [...] Many Catalan political circles feel the need for Italy's friendship and seek it, as it can be seen not only by the recent declarations by the Minister of the Autonomous Government of Catalonia, Signor Dencàs, but also by the position of the left-wing Catalan parties towards us, despite their anti-fascist declarations for domestic consumption. Two deputies on the Catalan “left” came to the Embassy some time ago to specifically ask me to increase sympathy in Italy for the Catalan cause, and made comments to me that were no different for those by Mr Dencàs, and they assured me that only in an autonomous Catalonia and not in a centralised Spain could Italy find understanding for its Mediterranean policy.⁵⁵

However, despite the Dencàs-Majoroni interview and the subsequent reports being irrefutable proof of the contacts established between part of Catalan

⁵³ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 9-VII-1934, (Consolato Barcellona).

⁵⁴ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 16-VII-1934, (Ambasciata Madrid).

⁵⁵ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 24-VII-1934, (Ambasciata Madrid).

nationalism and separatism and fascist Italy, it is no less obvious that they led to no specific results. However, it can be said that this relationship went deeper than some attempts to establish contact with Nazi Germany, and that only the Italian preference for Spanish fascist options and the outcome of the events in Catalonia of 6 October 1934 ended this tentative connection.⁵⁶

Things change after 1934. On October 6, under pressure from the extreme nationalist sectors of the JEREC, Companys, President of Catalonia and leader of the ERC, rebelled against the central government. In recent alliance with the Spanish socialists and leftists opposed to the centre-right republican executive, Companys in Barcelona proclaimed a "Catalan State within the Spanish Federal Republic", but was quickly arrested by army forces. Immediately, Italian diplomats broke off any contact with Catalan separatist sectors, at least officially. The poor preparation of the October uprising, the resulting imprisonment of the Catalan government under charge of treason, and the suspension of the Statute of Autonomy in January 1935 were seen by the Italians as all representing the longterm failure of Catalan nationalism-separatism, which therefore no longer constituted an alternative of interest for Mussolini's Italy.⁵⁷

Despite this, there were others contacts between Catalan nationalists and representatives of Fascist Italy. From 1934 onwards, the Italian Consulate in Barcelona tried to introduce fascist propaganda into the Catalan press (which was considered generally hostile to Italy) with relatively little success.⁵⁸ At the same time, subsidies to Italian centres in Barcelona were increased in an attempt to promote Fascist influence in Catalonia. This led to negative reactions in some Italian diplomatic circles. In early 1936, Orazio Pedrazi, the new ambassador in Madrid, criticised the efforts made in Barcelona in detriment to efforts in Madrid, inherently more important. According to Pedrazi a local initiative of the Barcelona Consulate that had led to negative reactions in the Spanish capital due to it being understood as: "A hostile attitude to Spanish national unity, which seems as if we were taking the

⁵⁶ X. M. Núñez Seixas, 'Nacionalismos periféricos y Fascismo: Acerca de un memorandum catalanista a la Alemania nazi (1936)', *Historia Contemporánea*, 7 (1992), 311-333. French diplomacy noted other attempts at contact between areas of the Catalan State with Nazi Germany in 1935, ADN, Ambassade du Madrid, Série C, no. 133, Europe n. 37, Ambassade n. 72, 8-IV-1935, l'Estat Catala et l'Allemagne.

⁵⁷ ASMAE, R. P., Spagna, 1930-1945, busta n. 6 (1934), R., 13-X-1934 (Consolato Barcellona). In October 1935, little notice was taken of the information reaching the Consulate regarding the possible creation of a nationalist and fascist Catalan party, the Moviment Nacionalista Totalitari, which used the magazine "Fermes" as its medium, International Institute of Social History (IISH), Amsterdam, CNT-FAI Collection, p. 29, A5-A6, 24-X-1935, (consulted using the microfilmed copy in the FAI archives in Castelló de la Plana).

⁵⁸ Archivio Centrale dello Stato (ACS), MCP, busta n. 204, Rapporto della Ambasciata di Madrid, 8-II-1935. IISH, Fons CNT-FAI, p. 35, A1-A2, undated reports on the Catalan press; p. 29, A5-A6, report of the Catalan press of March 1936.

possibility of an independent Catalonia for granted, and directing our cultural propaganda efforts towards it.”⁵⁹

Nevertheless, despite such a critical attitude after 1934 onwards, various long-term attempts were made to establish some Italian-Catalan friendship organisations. Leading members of the Italian community in Barcelona, the local *Fascio Luigi Avversari* and the Consulate, were in contact with moderate or conservative catalanist sectors, and in particular with the influential Lliga deputy in Madrid, Joan Estelrich. Their aim was to form an effective Italian-Catalan cultural-exchange centre. This meeting place naturally would include outstanding Catalan conservatives and the Italian colony among its members.⁶⁰ This project, which directly involved Estelrich, who already had close links with Italy (he had participated in the *Convegno Volta*, a high-level international intellectual roundtable meeting on a vast scale held in Rome in 1933), finally did not materialise. However, the idea came to fruition in another form, and from a Spanish perspective: in 1936, when a “Friends of Italy Society” was established, with its office in Barcelona, and with leading figures from conservative nationalism among its members, it was understood by all to be a clear response to the “Friends of the USSR” established in Madrid.⁶¹

Finally, while not strictly linked to Catalan nationalism, a Catalan section of the CAUR (the Italian acronym for the “Action Committees for the Universality of Rome”, a platform for intellectual projection of the regime) was almost established in 1934. As a result, at the same time as the Spanish section of this international fascist organisation was founded, its main promoter, Eugenio Coselschi, was beginning contacts with the non-catalanist monarchist, José Bertran Güell, in order to create the Catalan section.⁶² But this project needed the approval of the consul in Barcelona and the ambassador in Madrid, and was finally not realised. Nevertheless, it was highly indicative of the increasingly independent role with which the Italians were willing to view Catalonia. Had this project been undertaken, it would have meant that Catalonia was a sort of recognized “nation without a State” with its own representation in an international fascist organization, much in the same way that, after the Civil War, the pro-communist PSUC, or the Unified Socialist Party of Catalonia, was accepted in 1939 as a full member of Komintern.

⁵⁹ ACS, MCP, busta n. 204, Rapporto Della Ambasciata di Madrid, 16-I-1936.

⁶⁰ Joan Estelrich Collection, Correspondence, 3-III-1933.

⁶¹ *Un manifesto*, “El Noticiero”, Barcelona, 4-II-1936.

⁶² ACS, Ministero della Cultura Popolare, busta n. 203. Report dated 4-VI-1934. For the CAUR in general, see M. Cuzzi, *I CAUR. La Internazionale delle Camicie Nere 1933-1939* (Milano 2005).

The Spanish Civil War or how to avoid any attempt at Catalan separatism (1936-1939)

After the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in the summer 1936, Italy quickly became the main ally of the forces rebelling against the government of the Republic. Italian authorities had direct relation with the coup-makers since least 1934, although their attitude was that such players were one more options in a complex, unstable situation.

From this privileged position, Italian diplomacy shifted from its earlier ambiguities and now tried to *end* the political influence of Catalan nationalism in Spain by all methods.⁶³ It did so in two ways. The first of these was by trying to influence the pro-Franco forces to remove all the conservative supporters of Catalan autonomy who had joined the side of the rebels after the beginning of the war from their ranks. For Italy, the construction of a new “fascist” Spain under the leadership of general Franco entailed the removal of the “cancer” of Catalan (and Basque) nationalism.⁶⁴ The Italian foreign ministry therefore did not trust the “catalanist” sectors led by the financier Cambó, from Italian exile, which provided moral, propaganda and financial support to the Francoist cause. This was the case because the Italians thought they had political intentions that were aimed towards Spanish territorial disintegration. For this reason, an Italian report given to Franco in 1938 recommended the complete destruction of the Catalan Lliga, as well as the removal of all its members from positions of power and influence in the new Francoist regime. According to the Italians, this need was urgent because otherwise the Spanish renationalisation process and the construction of a “New Spain”, based on the principle of a standardised and fascist nation-State, would be impossible from the point of view of Italian fascist geopolitics. In other words, the creation of a fascist State in the southern Mediterranean under Italian influence entailed a change in the European political scenario. This would hinder - or at least this was the Italian intention - normal communications between French North Africa and France itself. But the Italians were not consistent. Despite following this policy, the Italian fascist regime did not break off all ties with conservative Catalan nationalists, most of whom were exiled in Italy.⁶⁵ As a result, with Italian permission and support, broadcasts supporting Franco from Rome by Radio Veritat, which were mostly in Catalan and to a lesser extent in Spanish, began in November 1936

⁶³ See A. González i Vilalta, *Rumores de independencia, peticiones de mediación y contactos internacionales del catalanismo según la diplomacia italiana (1936-1938)*, Madrid, International Congress of the Spanish Civil War, November 2006.

⁶⁴ ASMAE, R.P., 1931-1945, Spagna e vari stati, busta n. 32 (1938).

⁶⁵ R. Doll-Petit, *Els "Catalans de Gènova" : història de l'èxode i l'adhesió d'una classe dirigent en temps de guerra* (Barcelona 2000) 185-205. _

under the aegis of the ex-propaganda attaché at the Italian Consulate in Barcelona and the circles around Cambó.⁶⁶

Furthermore, based on Italian hopes to build a fascist Spain without any territorial changes, except for the inclusion of the Balearic Islands in some kind of Italian sphere of influence, left-wing Catalan nationalism loyal to the Republic was even more dangerous than the conservative wing. Indeed, it was in the Balearic Islands where Italian military effort was vital in preventing the conquest of the island of Majorca in August 1936 by militias under the direction of the Catalan government, an intervention which led to some British concern.⁶⁷

In other words, any initiative by the Catalan autonomous government which still survived within the territory controlled by the Republic which involved a search for an individual end to the conflict or which entailed achieving independence or the maintenance of autonomy was very closely monitored by the Italian diplomats. In the final analysis, the appearance of new small States such as Catalonia or the Basque Country which could be influenced by France, Great Britain or the Soviet Union was not part of Rome's plans.⁶⁸ This situation was accentuated due to the Franco-British policy of non-intervention, which was perceived by Italy as a sign of weakness.⁶⁹

After all the efforts to play with the Catalan political context, the Italian Foreign affairs ministry abandoned all its earlier feints. This does not mean that all Italian institutions involved or meddling in Hispanic problems shared the same attitude. Mussolini may have controlled virtually all the ministries from above, but middle-level officials could perhaps develop alternatives, if these were not too explicitly contradictory with the Duce's announced orientation. In any case, this matter needs further research for a deeper understanding of these internal divergences of an only apparently unified "Italian" policy.

In the second half of 1936, with the Spanish conflict underway, Catalonia acted almost as an independent State due to the collapse of Republic

⁶⁶ B. de Riquer, *L'últim Cambó (1936-1947)* (Vic 1996) 144-156.

⁶⁷ A. Eden, *Memorias, I, 1923-1938* (Barcelona 1962), 530, 532-533, 552, 563; J. Massot i Muntaner, *El desembarcament de Bayo a Mallorca. Agost-setembre de 1936* (Barcelona 1987), 249-264. By the same author, *Vida i miracles del "Conde Rossi". Mallorca, agost-desembre 1936. Màlaga, gener-febrer 1937* (Barcelona 1988).

⁶⁸ J. Avilés Farré, 'França i el nacionalisme català als inicis de la Guerra Civil', *L'Avenç*, 23 (March 1998), 16-20. J. Casanovas i Prat, 'La Catalunya de Mr. King: el consolat britànic de Barcelona durant la Guerra Civil 1936-1939', *Perspectiva Social*, 35 (1994), 43-61.

⁶⁹ E. Colloti, *Fascismo e politica di potenza. Politica estera 1922-1939*, (Milano 2000), 296.

authority, and remained under the control of the anarchists and subsequently the Moscow-controlled Communists. Seen by Affari Esteri, Catalonia was therefore of no use to Italian foreign policy, and if any of the constant rumours circulating around Europe were true, it would do nothing more than hinder the fascist plans for the future. This, however need not have been the position of the MinCulPop (the Fascist party-controlled Ministry of Popular Culture) or other more ideological, as opposed to Italian State organismes. As a result, during the first few months of the Civil War, Italian diplomats gathered testimony that announced the imminent proclamation of the independence of Catalonia under Franco-British protection.⁷⁰ This concern was not limited to Italian diplomacy, but also affected Hitler's Germany as an ally of Francoist Spain. Berlin was not pleased by the prospect of Catalonia weakening the Francoist project in favour of France. As a result, on 2 September 1936 the Italian Embassy in Paris sent several diplomatic delegations, including the Barcelona Consulate, a note stating the concern of the German ambassador in Paris in this respect.⁷¹ This possibility was reiterated on 2 October by the Italian ambassador to Berlin, who said that the German authorities saw as inevitable the creation in "Catalonia of a "*cuscinetto*" [literally a "cushion"] State to safeguard their [French] communications with Africa."⁷² Even more significant were the comments by the Italian Foreign Minister, count Galeazzo Ciano, mentioned by British diplomats in Turkey, in which he said that "an independent Catalan Republic would change the status quo in the Mediterranean".⁷³ This Nazi-fascist perspective was finally confirmed on 21 October 1936, at the meeting in Berlin between the respective foreign ministers, Konstantin Von Neurath and Ciano, at which they agreed on a "common action" to "prevent the creation and consolidation of a Catalan State."⁷⁴ Just a month later, on 28 November 1936, in Burgos, the provisional capital of the Francoist regime, a secret agreement was signed between Franco and Mussolini, in which fascist Italy undertook to help the "national government of Spain" to "maintain the independence and integrity of Spain and its colonies."⁷⁵

With this in mind, despite Italian diplomacy acting as an intermediary in some exploratory talks for possible negotiations between Catalan

⁷⁰ ASMAE Rapporti Politici, R. P., 1930-1945, Spagna, busta n. 11 (1936), Barcellona, Telegrammi e Varie, "Situazione Catalogna" (Consolato Barcellona, 17-VIII-1936, T. 8080 R.). G. Mir, *Aturar la guerra. Les gestions secretes de Lluís Companys davant el Govern britànic* (Barcelona 2006), 48-51.

⁷¹ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 11 (1936), Movimento consolare e diplomatico, (Roma, 2-IX-1936, T. 4031).

⁷² ASMAE, Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923-1943, Gab. 785, Governo di Burgos, b. 1102, "Atteggiamento francesi in caso di vittoria dei nazionalisti spagnuoli" (Ambasciata Berlino, 2-X-1936, T. 9799 R.).

⁷³ G. Mir, p. 60.

⁷⁴ G. Ciano, *L'Europa verso la catastrofe*, (Roma 1948), 89.

⁷⁵ R. Cantalupo, *Embajada en España* (Barcelona 1951), 69.

nationalists and Franco's Spain, the priority was to prevent any success in this regard.⁷⁶ As a result, in November 1936 there was an exchange of telegrams via Rome between the Catalan nationalist jurist (and the Catalan representative at the increasingly irrelevant Congress of European Nationalities between 1926 and 1935) Francesc Maspons i Anglasesell, and general Franco regarding the possibility of respecting Catalan autonomy.⁷⁷ In April 1938, a supposedly pro-Catalan and anti-fascist Italian journalist, “G. Ruggiero” (Giuseppe Torre Caprara), sent a series of private letters to the Italian dictator, in which he asked for Italian help in achieving independence for Catalonia in exchange for the establishment of submarine bases on the Catalan coast.⁷⁸ Neither initiative was by then of interest to the Italian dictator.

What did attract the attention of the Italians were the attempted negotiations in late October 1938 between the Republican and “catalanist” ex-councillor, Lluís Nicolau d’Olwer, and the Norwegian Foreign Minister, Havlan Koht. All the Italian delegations in Europe attempted to monitor these discussions, which finally led nowhere in political terms, three months before the fall of Catalonia to Franco's forces in early 1939. Nonetheless, they highlighted the fear of international intervention in Catalan affairs.⁷⁹

The new Francoist Catalonia and the loss of Italian influence (1939-1943)

Catalan autonomy ended when Franco's troops entered Barcelona on 26 January 1939. While Franco had decreed the abolition of the 1932 Statute of Catalan Autonomy the year before (decree of April 1938), after occupying a part of Catalonia, the conquest of the whole country led to the suppression of its entire political, cultural and associative life. This process involved the imposition of the Spanish language and the eradication of Catalan culture and language and the Catalan nationalist working-class political movement.

With this outcome, fascist Italy's political and strategic objectives, such as they had come to be, were achieved. From this point on, after the Barcelona Consulate re-opened in early 1939, Italian diplomats were concerned with Catalan economic and political developments, the state of opinion with regard to the Francoist regime and the propaganda spread by allied forces in Catalonia, as well as trying to maintain and consolidate Francoist Spain as a

⁷⁶ ASMAE, Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923-1943, Gab. 785, Anfuso (Com.) Misione in Spagna, b. 1102 (26-XI-1936).

⁷⁷ ASMAE, Gabinetto del Ministro e Segreteria Generale 1923-1943, Gab. 785, Anfuso (Com.) Misione in Spagna, b. 1102 (26-XI-1936).

⁷⁸ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 32 (1938), 5-IV-1938; 28-IV-1938; 1-X-1938 (Parigi).

⁷⁹ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 34, Koht-contatti con separatisti catalani, “Separatismo catalano”. G. Ciano, *Diario 1937-1943* (Milano 2005), 235.

satellite of Italian Fascism, without a great deal of success.⁸⁰ This was apart from categorically avoiding any contact with Catalan nationalism, in which there were still some italianophile sectors.⁸¹

As a result, despite being in broad agreement with the Francoist policy of repression towards Catalan nationalism, on a date near the end of the war, on 15 November 1939, the Barcelona Consulate reported the Catalan people's loss of faith in Franco.⁸² According to another report dated two days later, police repression of the black market in Catalonia had led to the arrest of leading industrialists and members of the bourgeoisie, who were accused of separatism. According to the Italian Consulate, this situation was considered by public opinion to be an "'anti-Catalan' campaign by Franco's government" which also affected Catalan industry and therefore most of the country's industrial working class. This campaign led to the population as a whole being "completely in agreement with defending 'the spirit of Catalonia' which skilful manoeuvres - perhaps from beyond the Pyrenees - tend to present as being oppressed by 'Madrid-based centralism'. It is the eternal problem reappearing." The Italian report gave an example of this disenchantment with Franco's regime when it said that "Catalan is once again spoken everywhere, when a few months ago everyone was flaunting their Castilian [Spanish]."⁸³ This swift confirmation of popular feeling against Franco's regime increased as the Second World War progressed. Despite Italy undertaking various propaganda initiatives such as donating food to the Barcelona municipal government in May 1939, and financing the reconstruction of the hospital in Tarragona in April 1941, reports from the Consulate in Barcelona in 1942 mentioned the anti-fascist tone of some social protests.⁸⁴

However, Italian diplomacy also mediated between the Francoist authorities and the archbishop of Tarragona, Cardinal Francesc Vidal i Barraquer, who, having fled for his life in 1936 has nevertheless but having kept his distance from Franco, wanted to return to Catalonia. This request was rejected by the Francoist government due to the archbishop's well-known Catalan nationalism. At the beginning of the Civil War, unlike other leading members of the Spanish Catholic hierarchy, he had refused to support the generals.⁸⁵ As a result, despite the Italian reports showing the Catalan

⁸⁰ G. Carotenuto, *Franco e Mussolini. La guerra mondiale vista del Mediterraneo: i diversi destini di due dittatori* (Milano 2005) 29.

⁸¹ J. M. López-Picó, *Dietari 1929-1959* (Barcelona 1999), 151, 175, 211.

⁸² ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 52 (1939), II Tri., 15-XI-1939 (Consolato di Barcellona).

⁸³ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 52 (1939), I Tri., 1; 13; 15 i 28-III-1939 (Consolato di Barcellona).

⁸⁴ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 61 (1942), Parte generales, 3-VIII-1942 (Consolato di Barcellona).

⁸⁵ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 52 (1939), II Tri., 17-XI-1939 (Consolato di Barcellona).

cardinal's gratitude to Italian Fascism, Franco's reticence to his return came into conflict with the Vatican itself.⁸⁶

As well as these issues, the Consulate provided information on two new factors of extraordinary interest for Italian foreign policy in Spain: the various plans for a monarchical coup d'état which were especially prevalent in Catalonia, and Allied propaganda. As regards the former, Italian reports in 1942 and 1943 reflected the growing support for attempts to restore the Bourbon monarchy in Catalan circles of various political orientations.⁸⁷ This could be partially dismissed: reports mentioned that the Barcelona press was "subsidised" by British money to defend its interests.⁸⁸ However, it was also thought that Anglo-American propaganda was much stronger than publicity favourable the Italian and German side.⁸⁹

As well as these questions, after the Anglo-American landings in French North Africa in October 1942, Barcelona was visited by Sir Samuel Hoare, the British ambassador in Madrid, in December. According to the report by the Italian Consulate in Barcelona, this visit showed the strong anglophile feeling among the Catalan *haute bourgeoisie* that had taken refuge from anarchist revolutionary repression in Fascist Italy just a few years before:⁹⁰

The self-interest of the Catalan aristocrats [sic] who are mostly shareholders in a textile industry which was completely dominated by the English market is well-known, but this is the first time that such a high level of cynicism has been displayed, especially by those who found refuge in Italy during the Civil War and who owe the saving of their lives and the rescue of their possessions to the Consulate.⁹¹

Finally, the arrest and fall of Mussolini in July 1943, which meant the end of the fascist regime in part of Italy, had a strong impact in Barcelona and Catalonia, where the Italian diplomatic authorities were reassigned to the regime created after Marshal Badoglio's armistice with the Anglo-American

⁸⁶ A. Marquina Barrio, *La diplomacia vaticana y la España de Franco (1936-1945)* (Madrid 1983), 300-303, 322-323.

⁸⁷ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 64 (1942), 8-I-1943; 11-II-1943; 23-II-1943; 6-III-1943 (Consolato di Barcellona). J. Tusell and G. G. Queipo de Llano, *Franco y Mussolini. La política española durante la segunda guerra mundial* (Barcelona 2006), 239-303.

⁸⁸ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 61 (1942), 27-XI-1942, (Consolato di Barcellona).

⁸⁹ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 61 (1942), 20-XI-1942, (Consolato di Barcellona).

⁹⁰ R. Doll-Petit, *Els "Catalans de Gènova": història de l'èxode i l'adhesió d'una classe dirigent en temps de guerra*, 109-183.

⁹¹ ASMAE, R. P. 1931-1945, Spagna, busta n. 61 (1942), 18-XII-1942 (Consolato di Barcellona).

forces.⁹² Despite this, for a few months there were two rival Italian consulates in Barcelona, one representing Badoglio's monarchist government, and the other the fascist Salò Republic.

Conclusions

During the period 1931-1943, Italian fascist diplomacy constantly monitored political developments in Catalonia. It did so due to the area's economic importance (within Spain and due to Italian interests) and due to the importance that a Catalan separatist movement would have on the balance of power in the western Mediterranean. The changes in the Italian interest in Catalonia vary with the developments in the analysis of Spanish international relations, i.e., between 1931 and 1936, when from Rome's point of view Republican Spain was under the influence of France, Catalonia was seen as potential competition. After 18 July 1936, and the outbreak of the Civil War, opportunities for Catalan separatism were linked to the alliance with France and therefore the weakening of Francoist Spain allied to Italy. This view continued until 1943, after the end of the war and the establishment of general Franco's regime.

However, regardless of this division of periods of Italian interest in Catalonia, the contacts established between Italian diplomats and various sectors of Catalan nationalism and separatism did not lead to specific help in the construction of a fascist movement in Catalonia. This was firstly because contacts with the nascent sectors of Spanish Fascism were considered more feasible and logical in Rome, despite ambassador Guariglia's argument that *falangistas* and their like failed to understand the true nature of the movement led by Mussolini. Secondly, despite the temptation to help and encourage the creation of an independent Catalonia allied to Italy, authorities in Rome never looked kindly on the possibility of Spanish territorial dismemberment. As a result, in response to the question posed by some historians, notably Stanley G. Payne, concerning the opportunities for Fascism in Catalonia arising from the study of Italian sources, one can answer that while it is true that, outside the revolutionary lefts, Fascism was not criticised *per se* in Catalonia in the 1930s until the Italian attack on Abyssinia in 1935, at least among supporters of Catalan autonomy, it is no less true that no small niche of opportunity appeared in which a "Catalan fascist" movement could take root.⁹³

⁹² F. Vilanova, *La Barcelona franquista i l'Europa totalitària (1939-1946)* (Barcelona 2005), 259-328.

⁹³ S. G. Payne, 'Existió un Fascismo catalán?', *La Vanguardia*, 2 October 1998, 6-7.