A People’s History of Catalonia

‘Catalonia’s aspiration to cut loose from the Spanish state is often dismissed as the whim of a self-interested merchant class. The truth is more complicated. As Michael Eaude’s sharp, engrossing, and comprehensive historical narrative makes clear, the centuries-long push for Catalan independence is closely entwined with the peasant- and working-class struggle for social justice and democratic government.’

—Sebastiaan Faber, author of Exhuming Franco

‘This well-written study takes us on a much-needed historical journey from below, eloquently capturing the rebellious traditions of Catalonia’s assertive and proudly defiant popular classes from medieval times to today. By combining broad strokes and intricate detail, he establishes crucial connections between past and contemporary struggles to produce a vivid picture of the class war in a fractured and divided society that produced, in many respects, the most far-reaching social revolution in European history.’

—Chris Ealham, author of Anarchism and the City

‘This timely and impressive book not only dispels the myths and prejudices about the Catalan people’s struggles, so prevalent in Spain and elsewhere, but demonstrates the constant intertwining of the battles for national rights with peasant and working-class revolt “from below”. A thoroughly recommended read.’

—Andy Durgan, historian and author of Voluntarios por la revolución

‘Gives a voice to one of the most rebellious people in Europe whose insurgency reached a pinnacle in 1936 with working-class revolution in Catalonia and continued through the ending of the Franco dictatorship through to today’s fight to gain independence in the face of Spanish repression and nationalism. Michael does the Catalan people proud.’

—Chris Bambery, author of Catalonia Reborn and Public Point of Enquiry for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Catalonia
People’s History

History tends to be viewed from the perspective of the rich and powerful, where the actions of small numbers are seen to dictate the course of world affairs. But this perspective conceals the role of ordinary women and men, as individuals or as parts of collective organisations, in shaping the course of history. The People’s History series puts ordinary people and mass movements centre stage and looks at the great moments of the past from the bottom up.

The People’s History series was founded and edited by William A. Pelz (1951–2017).

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A People’s History of Catalonia

Michael Eaude

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Introduction

People who live outside the Spanish state are often astounded when they learn of the anti-Catalan vitriol poisoning Spanish social media, television and press. This book aims to explore the background to this alarming hostility, fostered today by the Spanish ruling class to oppose the Catalan struggle for independence. This anti-Catalanism is not some new reaction to troublesome secessionists, but has roots deep in history. The notorious Spanish police assault on Catalans voting in a referendum on 1 October 2017 (see Chapter 12), which hit headlines all round the world, was only the latest incident in a centuries-old conflict.

The conflict can be traced right back to the fifteenth century when, in 1412, a Castilian king acceded to the throne of the Crown of Aragon after the line of the Counts of Barcelona died out. Conquering and trading along the Mediterranean coast and across the sea, Catalonia had evolved differently from landlocked Castile. The former developed a tradition of internal ‘pacting’ and negotiation between the Count of Barcelona and his upper-class subjects in a quite different political system from Castile’s, where absolutist kings reigned.

The book gives a chronological account of the centuries-long and successful struggle of Catalonia to survive as a nation. Chapter 1 explains how it began to form as an entity in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. What some historians call the ‘aristocratic revolution’ to impose feudalism on a land-owning peasantry from about 1000 CE was answered forcefully by the Church-led movement of Sanctuary and Truce. This led, in the following decades, to legislation ordering the relationships between monarch, peasants and nobles. A series of laws and practices – in particular a parliament (Corts) of the three ruling estates, or ‘arms’, (church, nobles and military, and ‘honourable’ merchants in the cities) – meant that the Count of Barcelona was controlled in part by the Corts.

As Chapter 1 focuses on Catalonia’s medieval development as a Mediterranean power, so Chapter 2 focuses on three great class conflicts of the fifteenth century. These were the Civil War between the king and
the new Catalan government, known as the Generalitat, flexing its muscles against absolutist desires; a city uprising of lesser merchants, artisan workshops and liberal professions against the wealthy ‘honourable citizens’; and third, a peasants’ revolt that shook the country to its foundations and broke the back of feudal oppression.

In the diabolical year 1492, the Spanish state came into being under Ferdinand of Aragon and Isabella of Castile. The last Moorish kingdom, in Granada, was defeated, the Jews were expelled or forced to convert and Columbus reached Hispaniola. There was no room for an independent Catalonia in this new Spain, which in the sixteenth century built – through military conquest – the greatest empire Europe had yet seen, extending from America to Flanders, Italy and the Philippines. Yet, paradox that has exercised generations of historians, the Spanish Empire under the Hapsburgs was unable to unite the peoples of Iberia. Though part of the new Spain, Catalonia continued to raise its own taxes and be governed by its own parliament. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, Spain’s first Hapsburg king (1516–1556), crushed brutally the Spanish Cortes (parliament) but did not attempt to suppress the rights of Catalonia. He had to negotiate with Catalans if he wanted to raise cash from them.

This underlying tension between an absolutist monarchy and a nation within its state that practised negotiation between the monarch and the estates could not rest in an eternally stable relationship. Chapters 3 and 4 deal with the two wars waged by the Spanish monarchs against Catalonia.

When Olivares came to power in Madrid in 1621, he began to press hard for a unified administration, army and taxation throughout Spain. His pressure led to the Catalan revolution of 1640–1641, when Catalonia came close to winning an independence that Portugal, on the other side of the Iberian Peninsula, did achieve at that time.

Chapter 4 discusses the year-long siege of Barcelona in 1714. After promising support to Catalonia in the War of the Spanish Succession, England (‘perfidious Albion’) abandoned it. Catalonia was reduced to a province of Spain, with all its distinctive characteristics suppressed: laws, governing bodies, language, university etc. This defeat is a scar that has failed to heal. The day that the Bourbon Felipe V’s forces took Barcelona, 11 September, is Catalonia’s national day, when those who died in the siege are honoured. In recent years of rising independence
struggle, 11 September demonstrations have mobilised over a million people – some 14 per cent of the country’s population.

Chapter 5 focuses on another devastating war: Napoleon’s occupation of Spain in 1808–1814, including Catalonia’s integration into the French state for two years. Catalan popular resistance was widespread and Catalan intellectuals played a leading part in drafting Spain’s 1812 liberal constitution. This generation of enlightened Catalans aspired to lead Spain out of its backwardness to become a capitalist democracy, but their hopes were dashed by the return of the absolutist Fernando VII.

These first five chapters chart the medieval glory of Catalonia and its long decline. Part II of the book is dominated by working-class struggle. In the nineteenth century, Barcelona developed a justified reputation as the most militant city of Western Europe. Chapter 6 describes the constant, fierce rebellions against poverty and wage slavery of the 1830s and 1840s, as capitalism’s cotton mills were built on the basis of the profits from trade and from slave plantations in Cuba. At the same time as these first working-class revolts, the Carlists, who wanted a return to absolute monarchy, were fighting the Spanish army in the Catalan countryside. To add to the complexity, the Catalan rebirth (renaixença) of national spirit was recovering the memory of its glorious past, first in culture and language and then, towards the end of the nineteenth century, in political organisation. Catalonia’s modern history is best understood through the intertwining of national and class demands, or often their failure to intertwine. There was a serious fault-line between the political capital in Madrid and the economic centres on the northern and eastern coasts, between military and semi-feudal agricultural interests and the needs of industrial capitalism.

Chapter 7 explains the overthrow of the Bourbon Queen Isabel in 1868 and the explosion of freedom that led to the 1873 First Republic. Anarchism began to organise in these brief years of free expression, but its strategies of boycottng political action and arguing for immediate revolution meant it had little impact on the working and middle classes fighting for a Republic. In 1874, the Republic was overthrown and the Bourbons restored. The greatness of the anarchist movement was seen in the following decades in its educational work among an ignorant peasantry and proletariat and in its efforts to build militant, non-bureaucratic unions oriented towards revolutionary general strikes.
Chapter 8 explains the founding of the mass, anarchist-led union, the CNT, in 1910 and its great victory in the six-week Canadenca strike in 1919. The bosses responded to the strength of the revolutionary movement by organising squads that murdered hundreds of CNT activists. Chapter 9 focuses on the Second Republic, proclaimed on 14 April 1931, opening a pre-revolutionary period in which Catalonia recovered its self-government. The Spanish Revolution erupted in response to the military coup of 18 July 1936. Chapter 10 discusses this revolution, the counter-revolution led by the Communist Party and the Civil War defeat in 1939. Of the three great European workers’ revolutions, the Paris Commune of 1871 and Russian Revolution in 1917 being the other two, the Spanish Revolution took place in the most advanced country. And it was in Catalonia where the most far-reaching and profound social changes took place. Many readers will know of the revolution’s defeat through *Homage to Catalonia*, George Orwell’s report on his months fighting with the POUM militia and the 1937 May Days. Ironically, it shows little understanding of Catalonia, fine book though it is.

Chapter 11 discusses the terrible years of the Franco dictatorship (1939–1977), which treated Catalonia as occupied territory, disbanded all Catalan institutions and banned the language in an even more ferocious rerun of 1714. Resistance to Franco was long, up-and-down and hard. In the 1970s, a new working class organised in the factories and neighbourhoods forced the ruling class to dismantle the dictatorship. The chapter suggests how the mass mobilisations of this ‘Transition’ could have achieved a better deal for the working class.

Chapter 12 concentrates on the nature of the post-Franco democracy and the independence movement that flowered after 2009 to challenge an immobile Spanish state. Spanish centralists deny that Catalonia is a nation. This is the basic justification for the refusal of Spain’s main political parties to permit a referendum on independence, or even to discuss the possibility of one. They defend this intransigence with a number of distortions of history. The most obvious sleight of hand is to insist that Catalonia never was an independent state, as medieval Catalonia was part of the Crown of Aragon and thus the conquests of the Mediterranean and trading successes were Aragonese, not Catalan.

Such arguments may seem recondite. One cannot base today’s fight for independence on ancient history, we are told. Yet, history is a live presence in the mind, especially for those who suffer its hammer-blows.
The years 1641, 1714 and 1939 are dates engraved in blood on Catalan brains, when the Spanish state slaughtered tens or hundreds of thousands and wrecked Catalan aspirations to freedom.

* * *

The French historian Pierre Vilar (1906–2003) is much loved by Catalan nationalists today for his authoritative 2,000-page *La Catalogne dans l’Espagne modern*, which includes this quote:

Between 1250 and 1350 the Principality of Catalonia may be the European country to which it would be least incorrect and least dangerous to apply the apparently anachronic terms of political and economic imperialism and nation state ... This creation is remarkable, therefore, especially on account of its precociousness. Language, territory, economic life, the shaping of a mentality, a cultural community – the fundamental conditions of a nation – are already fully present as early as the 13th century.

Such sentences drive Spanish nationalists up the wall. Note Vilar’s caution: ‘least incorrect’ and ‘least dangerous’. Like any serious historian, he is well aware that to talk of nation-states in the thirteenth century is anachronistic.

The nation only became a political concept in the nineteenth century, following the Enlightenment and the Romantic movements, and at much the same time as the Industrial Revolution. The relation between nation and class is thorny and complex. Though Marx and Engels did not develop a full theory of the national question, the later, great European revolutionary generation of activist-theorists did. Stalin was commissioned by the Bolshevik Party in 1912 to compose theses on the national question. Rosa Luxemburg opposed Stalin’s rather schematic definition. She believed that the right to self-determination of a nation had little to do with working-class struggle: nationalist movements merely reflected the economic requirements of the bourgeoisie.

Lenin built on Stalin’s theses and his was the classic position followed in the 1930s by the POUM (Workers’ Party of Marxist Unification): that revolutionaries should support the self-determination, though not necessarily the independence, of oppressed nations. The Marxist Joaquín Maurín, leader of the BOC (Workers’ and Peasants’ Bloc), took this a
step further and argued at the start of the 1930s that the working class should support the independence struggles of all the oppressed nations of the Spanish state and that the national independence of these would help smash the state, a position close to that of the CUP (Popular Unity Candidacies) – the anti-capitalist formation that is driving forward the struggles for independence and social justice in Catalonia today.

The demand today for a referendum on Catalonia’s independence from the Spanish state is a quite simple democratic one, supported by 70–80 per cent of Catalonia’s population. Independence supporters and many opposed to independence want a referendum to settle the issue. Spanish nationalist politicians block this, bound by their own centralist history and terrified of the effects of Catalan independence on Spain’s economy (Catalonia, with about 16 per cent of Spain’s population, contributes about 20 per cent of Spain’s GDP) and international influence.

While explaining Spanish nationalists’ arguments and rebutting their attacks on Catalonia, this book also challenges the founding myths and falsifications of the Catalan ruling class. When you read Catalan nationalist histories, the glories of the past are often exaggerated while the sins are skipped over lightly. You would not know that Catalonia was once ‘the lord and terror of the Mediterranean’, as the nineteenth-century traveller Richard Ford put it. Nationalist historians prefer to highlight the pacts between the various Catalan estates in medieval times, that is, negotiation instead of fighting, democracy in embryo, and tend to gloss over the ‘terror’ of imperialism. A good example is the conquest of Mallorca in 1229–1232, presented by Ferran Soldevila as ‘the expansion of Catalonia’s national territory and the start of its Mediterranean expansion. Populated by Catalans, it was an extension of Catalonia through blood, language and culture’. True enough, but the account omits the slaughter, enslavement or expulsion of the previous Moorish population (see Chapter 2). No democratic ‘pacting’ in the invasion of Mallorca! This said, modern Catalan nationalism is not an imperialist, ultra-right nationalism. It is a reactive nationalism, in defence of Catalan rights and identity against a more powerful Spanish state. And the modern independence movement is a coming together of sections of a bourgeoisie fed up with the lack of political influence consonant with its economic strength and a working-class/petit bourgeois movement fighting for socialism or, at least, a more just state.
The Spanish state is in a deep crisis of legitimacy today. All its institutions are questioned, in a context of multiple crises: of the economy (mass unemployment and poverty); of the monarchy (the former king in exile fleeing corruption investigations); of political efficacy; of the judiciary; of corruption, without mentioning the failure to tackle climate change and how COVID-19 exposed the murderous consequences of neoliberalism, that is, cut-backs, precarious jobs, privatisation and low wages, old people’s homes run for profit etc. The crises are most likely to deepen, which means that poverty, injustice and insecurity will intensify Catalan desire to leave this sinking ship.

But would independence bring serious progressive change or just a neoliberal reshuffle? The big question has no sure answer. One thing we can be sure of, though, is that an independence movement driven from below radicalises wide sections of the population. The intertwining of the class and national questions is dynamite.

* * *

Perry Anderson wrote nearly 50 years ago:

History writing in the proper sense is inseparable from direct research into the original records of the past — archival, epigraphic or archaeological. The studies below have no claim to this dignity.\(^3\)

The two sentences apply precisely to this book. I have done no direct research into original records. Though I have striven to get the facts right, this is a book of interpretation. I have relied on others, real historians, with the exception of the last two chapters on the 1970s Transition and the 40-plus years since of parliamentary democracy. For these I have both talked extensively with activists and participated in the struggles: against NATO in 1985–1986, in the anti-globalisation rebellions of the 2000s and in the independence movement of recent years.

It is a truism that a people’s history should rescue from oblivion the silenced voices of the oppressed. For the most part, this has not been possible, as for many centuries the lives of women, peasants or workers were unrecorded. Only occasionally do we get a flash of feeling, of focus, as in the case of the peasant rebellion led by Pere Joan Sala or in the trials of women accused of witchcraft. The nearest I have come is in the accounts of the Napoleonic invasion and the Spanish Civil War,
thanks in both cases to the monumental work of Ronald Fraser (1930–2015), who wrote histories based on detailed local research in the former and extensive interviews in the latter.

When writing about the French, Russian or Portuguese Revolutions, a ‘history from below’ is more obvious, as history speeds up: the masses are in ferment and propel events forward throughout the brief period under scrutiny. Writing about the thousand-year history of a country is different. My first impulse was to scour history books for accounts of revolts and rebellions. Luckily, in Catalonia, there are many turning points when the weight of mass struggle on events was felt. A ‘People’s History’, though, is not just a list of revolts. These result in political decisions and it is the Counts of Barcelona, the monarchs of the Spanish state or the Catalan Generalitat that took these decisions. Here’s a clear example: in the fifteenth century (see Chapter 2), at the end of the long struggle of the remença peasants to loosen their bonds, some 400–500 men and women led by Pere Joan Sala rose in an armed onslaught on feudal power. The desperate and brave peasant fighters were defeated and their leaders executed in 1485 but, in 1486, King Ferran (Ferdinand in English), in the famous ‘Sentence of Guadalupe’, stopped the mals usos (bad practices). His decision, which ended or reduced feudalism in Catalonia (interpretations vary), is not fully understandable without the long history of peasant organisation and struggle of 1448–1485, culminating in Sala’s uprising. The decisions of kings are best understood when the struggles of the poor are included.
Introduction

Map 1 Map of Catalan-Speaking Lands (Marisa Asensio)
PART I

From Empire to Province

Figure 1  Abat Oliba’s monastery at Ripoll (Dámaso Martín)
Rise and Fall of the Crown of Aragon

On 24 October 1971, the world’s most famous cellist Pau Casals addressed the United Nations General Assembly. Casals, aged 94, had been awarded the UN Peace Medal in recognition of his lifelong commitment ‘to truth, to beauty and to peace’. The award was a slap in the face for the Franco dictatorship (1939–1977), which had driven Casals into exile. The cellist opened by saying that he loved peace and continued:

…I am a Catalan, today a province of Spain, but what has been Catalonia? Catalonia has been the greatest nation in the world … I will tell you why. Catalonia has had the first Parliament, much before England. Catalonia had the beginning of the United Nations. All the authorities of Catalonia in the eleventh century met in a city of France, at that time Catalonia, to speak about peace, in the eleventh century, peace in the world and against, against, against wars.

In his moving speech, Casals was quite right that Catalonia had been reduced from its former glory to a mere province of Spain, but, Catalan nationalist as he was, he exaggerated his country’s status as the first democracy. This chapter attempts to explain what Casals was referring to. It describes the period when the area known in the eighth–tenth centuries as the Hispanic March developed into the feudal state of Catalonia, a name whose earliest surviving written use was in 1198, somewhat later than Casals’ date.

The Hispanic March extended from just south of Barcelona to what is now the Roussillon in southern France. It had been established by Char-
lemagne after his troops had expelled the Moors in 801 as a buffer zone between al-Andalus, the Muslim Moorish kingdom based in Cordoba that controlled most of the Iberian Peninsula, and the Christian Carolingian Empire to the north. Charlemagne and his descendants offered military protection against possible Moorish invasion to the counts of this area, of which the Count of Barcelona was the first among equals. The brevity of the Moorish occupation left the Hispanic March much less affected by Islamic culture than most of the Iberian Peninsula.

In the ninth and tenth centuries, the peasants in the Hispanic March were mostly free men and women who lived off the land’s produce, as in many parts of Europe. Peasants made their own clothing and ate bread and gruel. They might hunt rabbits, wild boar or even a bear. These were self-sufficient societies. Pre-feudal peasants were ‘free’ only in the sense that they were not slaves or serfs and that they held their land in freehold. Though Moorish invasion and Christian ‘reconquest’ had not ravaged the Hispanic March, the peasants were not free from hunger, disease or the abuse of local nobles. Historians calculate that famine was constant: crops failed at least once a decade.

For 200 years, the Hispanic March was the southernmost outpost of the Carolingian Empire, which was based on the Roman idea of state: rights and justice were dispensed in exchange for taxes. In the Hispanic March, authority was invested in the counts and local magistrates appointed from Aachen by the Empire.

In the Pyrenees, on both sides of today’s border between Spain and France – a frontier at that time non-existent and not even thought of – a series of Romanesque churches and monasteries were constructed in the ninth and tenth centuries. The Church built in these remote mountain valleys because they were of difficult access to potential Arab invaders, the land was fertile and stone was plentiful.

The most powerful of these magnificent Pyrenean monasteries was at Ripoll, founded in 880 by Guifré el Pilós or Wilfred the Hairy. Guifré is a bit like King Arthur in Britain, a semi-mythical founding father of the nation. Guifré was a real enough historical figure, but his deeds merge into legend. Count of Ripoll, Guifré was created Count of Barcelona by Charlemagne’s grandson, Charles the Bald, in 874. By conquest, marriage and inheritance, Guifré managed to combine several Pyrenean counties, and his will left the counties of Barcelona, Girona and Vic undivided, making Guifré’s descendants the dominant counts
in the Hispanic March and laying the basis for a united country. The legendary bit is that, when he died in battle in 897 on a raid against the Moors, the Carolingian general dipped his fingers in Wilfred the Hairy’s blood and traced four red lines on his golden shield. These lines became the four red stripes on the yellow flag of Catalonia, which today flies over every public building. This official flag is known as the *senyera*; the independence supporters’ flag is the *estelada*, with a star on a blue triangle added.

In 985, Al-Mansur’s army sacked Barcelona. The Arabs did not have the resources to occupy the area and withdrew, though not without slaughtering many and bearing off others as slaves. The last Carolingian king, Louis V, was too weak to react and, in 988, Count Borrell of Barcelona withdrew the tribute paid to the Frankish kingdom and did not renew his oath of allegiance. More or less from this point, one can begin to talk of the independence of the area, though it was not yet Catalonia, but a mosaic of small baronies, religious communities and free peasants, dominated by the Counts of Barcelona.

*Feudalism and Sanctuary Assemblies*

Round about the turn of the millennium, a feudal revolution overthrew the existing legal framework, altering class relations. The end of Carolingian control meant that local counts no longer paid allegiance and tributes to Aachen. These and the officials appointed by the empire were able to become owners of the goods and lands. They were no longer appointees governing on behalf of the emperor. In this ‘aristocratic revolution’, nobles began to appropriate free peasants’ land and create serfs. The free peasants who had paid taxes to the empire were now obliged to pay half of their crops to local nobles. Over time, they were squeezed more and more. The strings of the corset of poverty in which they lived were drawn tighter.

It is in this context that a social movement to halt the nobles’ violence led to the *Assemblees de Pau i Treva*, Sanctuary and Truce Assemblies. In 1027, a conference was organised by Oliba, a great-grandson of Guifré and Abbot of Ripoll and Bishop of Vic, to protect ecclesiastical property, agriculture and clergy against attacks. The Church’s main weapon was the threat of excommunication. Even evil nobles believed in Heaven and Hell, so excommunication was a serious business.