

SPANISH REFUGEES FROM THE CIVIL WAR ARRIVING IN FRANCE IN JUNE 1939. PICTURE: PHOTO 12 / ALAMY



SHOW IMAGE

EUROPE 3 DECEMBER 2017

The scars of Catalonia

How a century of mistrust and political incompetence fuelled a secession crisis that could lead to the break-up of Spain.

BY PAUL PRESTON

Spain is more divided than at any time since its first democratic elections after Franco, held in 1977. Even in the run-up to the failed military coup of 1981, which provoked huge waves of support for democracy, there was greater harmony. Now, there are bitter divisions between Catalonia and the rest of Spain, a long time in the making, and deep splits within Catalonia that are of much more recent creation. To the delight of many in Spain, some of whom applauded the violent efforts of the police and civil guard to prevent the independence referendum on 1 October, Catalan autonomy has been rescinded. This has turned many moderate Catalans against the radical nationalists who tried to push through independence. So how did we get here?

Privacy

Towards the end of the 19th century, Catalan nationalism among the middle classes grew based on a sense of separate identity, deriving from a unique culture, including language, literature, architecture and music. Spain's humiliating defeat by the United States in 1898 and the consequent loss of the last remnants of empire – Puerto Rico, the Philippines and Cuba, which was a major market for Catalan exports – led to a well-financed political movement in Catalonia. The Madrid government responded to Catalan demands for greater political recognition and a more liberal tax regime by fostering the rabble-rousing Radical Republican Party in Barcelona.

Like their counterparts in the Basque Country, the Catalan elites were reacting to the failure of the central state to respond to their economic needs. However, unlike the Basque industrialists who faced a relatively moderate socialist working class, the Catalan industrialists and bankers were inhibited by their frequent recourse to the apparatus of the central state to repress a militant, particularly anarchist, working class.



Hungry for more ESG? Our ESG coverage just grew 200%.

Learn how.

Prudential

Sponsored by [dianomi](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

Great hopes were placed in the *coup d'état* of 13 September 1923, led by Miguel Primo de Rivera, the captain-general of Barcelona. A personal friend of many Catalan oligarchs and harsh in his response to anarchist subversion, Primo de Rivera, an Andalusian aristocratic landowner, was seen as a champion of the Catalan business elite. To their dismay, however, he quickly initiated a harshly anti-Catalan policy. The use of the language was prohibited in schools and even on the streets. Catalan institutions were closed down.

Although the early years of Primo de Rivera's dictatorship coincided with an economic boom, there was an inevitable resurgence of Catalanism. Overwhelmed by numerous failures, Primo de Rivera resigned in January 1930. King Alfonso XIII replaced him with an equally unsuccessful (if slightly less authoritarian) general and, from February 1931, an admiral. A new party, the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, (the Catalan Republican

Left) enjoyed success in the municipal elections that swept away the monarchy and led to the establishment of the Second Republic on 14 April 1931. Colonel Francesc Macià, the party leader, immediately made a unilateral declaration of independence. The new Republican–Socialist coalition in Madrid managed to talk him out of it by promising a wide-ranging autonomy statute for Catalonia, which became law the following year.

With the significant drift to the right following the elections of November 1933, many of the social reforms introduced during the previous two years were dismantled. Tensions came to a head in October 1934. The inclusion in the cabinet of a deeply reactionary Catholic party provoked a sporadic general strike in Madrid and the declaration of a miners' commune in the northern region of Asturias. Meanwhile, Lluís Companys, Macià's successor as president of the *generalitat*, or government, of Catalonia, declared a short-lived independent Catalan state.

What are the tax rules when investing in cryptoassets? **eToro**

Birmingham v Manchester – Which is the UK's Second City for Investment
One Touch Investment

Sponsored by **dianomi**

ADVERTISEMENT

Companys was imprisoned and, accused of military rebellion, was tried by the ultra-conservative constitutional court. Although the prosecutor demanded the death penalty, he was sentenced to 30 years' imprisonment – the same sentence that is now being demanded for the present incumbent, Carles Puigdemont. After the victory of the left-wing Popular Front coalition in the Spanish elections of February 1936, however, Companys was restored to the presidency of the *generalitat*.

Along with destroying the reforms of the republic, hostility to regional nationalism was one of the main motivations behind the military coup of 18 July 1936. Its declared intention was to eliminate “without scruple or hesitation those who do not think as we do”. When General Francisco Franco's military rebels reached the burned-out remnants

of Guernica in the Basque Country on 29 April 1937, a senior officer was asked: “Was it necessary to do this?” He replied that the same thing had to be done with the entire Basque Country and all of Catalonia.



Go a different direction with QMA’s active, multi-factor approach.

Prudential

Sponsored by [dianomi](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

As area after area was conquered by Franco’s forces, the repression of civilians was considerable and Catalonia was no exception. After the occupation of Tarragona on 15 January 1939, at a Mass in the cathedral, the Spanish priest got so carried away that, during his sermon, he shouted: “Catalan dogs! You are not worthy of the sun that shines on you!”

Franco’s victory parade in Barcelona in January 1939 was headed by the army corps of Navarre, given this honour, according to a British officer attached to Franco’s headquarters, “not because they have fought better, but because they hate better – that is to say, when the object of this hate is Catalonia or a Catalan”.

One of the first acts of the occupying forces was to ban the use of Catalan in public. Ramón Serrano Suñer, Franco’s brother-in-law and minister of the interior, told the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter* that the Catalan population was “morally and politically sick”. There were systematic property confiscations. Tens of thousands of Catalans were held in concentration camps, and many thousands more were forced into exile. In an act of gratuitous malice, Franco’s government requested the Gestapo, on 13 August 1940, to arrest Companys, exiled in France, and hand him over to the Spanish authorities. For five weeks, he was kept in solitary confinement and tortured. Again accused of military rebellion, he was tried in a court martial on 14 October lasting less than one hour and sentenced to death. Rather than leave him to grow old in obscure exile, Franco turned him into a martyr of the Catalanist cause.

— ADVERTISEMENT —

Privacy



Over the subsequent decades of dictatorship, Franco referred to two Spains – the “authentic” and the “anti-Spain” – that is to say the victors and the vanquished in the civil war. For some years after Franco’s death in 1975, things were different under the monarchy of Juan Carlos, who made a virtue of trying to be “the king of all Spaniards”. His canny prime minister, Adolfo Suárez, established a special relationship with the then 77-year-old exiled president of the *generalitat de Catalunya*, Josep Tarradellas, and carried off a spectacular political coup. While not so militantly separatist as the Basque Country with its deadly terrorist group ETA, Catalonia constituted a significant problem for the government. On the one hand, there were growing nationalist aspirations and, on the other, there was the entrenched hostility of the armed forces to regional autonomy.

In the event, Tarradellas was the key to a peaceful resolution of the Catalan question. The majority of Catalans accepted him as the legitimate embodiment of Catalanism after his decades as president of the exiled government. His position was strengthened in the Spanish elections of June 1977 by the triumph in Catalonia of local branches of the Socialist and the Communist parties. Within two weeks, negotiations between Tarradellas and Suárez led to the re-establishment of the *generalitat*, with an adaptation of the 1932 statute in return for pledges of Catalan loyalty to the monarchy, acceptance of the unity of Spain and respect for the armed forces. To the chagrin of many on the Spanish right, Tarradellas was received in Madrid by Juan Carlos and given full military honours when he returned in triumph to Barcelona in October that year.

Thereafter, Suárez sought to render Basque and Catalan self-government innocuous by swamping them with autonomous regions with far fewer historic traditions. The Spanish right and most army officers remained obsessively tied to rigid centralism while, in the political ferment of 1977, autonomy demands were emerging from the most unlikely parts of Spain. It was an inevitable reaction to the corruption and inefficiency of local government under Franco. From October 1977 to October 1978, a two-tier system was created. The three historic nationalities – Catalonia, the Basque Country and Galicia – were permitted autonomy statutes. Thirteen other regions were subjected to vaguer autonomy arrangements.



Conservative rebels defeat Johnson's Brexit strategy

Financial Times

Sponsored by [dianomi](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

It was a solution that satisfied no one. In 1979, the Catalan statute was approved by a referendum and became law. The following year, the first elections to the 135-member Catalan parliament were held. They were won by the centre-right nationalists *Convergència i Unió* (Convergence and Union), led by Jordi Pujol, who remained president of the *generalitat* for the next 23 years.

The reluctant and painfully slow transfer of powers from Madrid to Barcelona fuelled the growing dissatisfaction in Catalonia. At the same time, the development of an autonomous education system and Catalan-language radio and television fed support for independence. Though only around 14 per cent of Catalans favoured independence by 2005, there was a growing appetite for a resolution of the deficiencies, as perceived in Barcelona, of both the 1978 Spanish constitution and the 1979 Catalan statute.



Hungry for more ESG? Our ESG coverage just grew 200%.

Learn how.

Prudential

Sponsored by [dianomi](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

A revised text was drafted, with great care taken to abide by the procedural niceties defined by Spanish law. It was debated in – and approved by – the Catalan parliament before being submitted for approval to the Spanish legislature, where the Socialist Party held the majority. After difficult negotiations, the new Catalan statute was approved by parliament in Madrid in June 2006. Though their financial demands were not met, the principal Catalan parties accepted the text because it recognised that Catalonia was a nation. It was then endorsed by the Catalans in a referendum.

Even this watered-down statute for Catalonia received bitter criticism from the right-wing press in much of Spain. There was a boycott of Catalan products and, in some media – including on the Spanish Episcopal Conference’s highly popular radio station, COPE – there were expressions of often ethnically charged hostility.

At the point of becoming law, the statute was challenged on constitutional grounds by the Partido Popular (PP), the then main opposition party of the right, which has consistently refused to declare illegal the military coup of 1936 and the subsequent dictatorship. The PP leader, Mariano Rajoy, said in December 2005: “There is only one nation, the Spanish one.”

The case was referred to the constitutional court. Opponents of the revised statute argued that it would lead to the Balkanisation of Spain. Since the statute was supported by even the least independence-minded political groups in Catalonia – the Socialists and Convergència – the consequent delay fomented hard-line independence sentiment.

In November 2009, 12 Catalan newspapers, including *La Vanguardia*, *El Periódico* and *Avui*, published a joint editorial entitled “The dignity of Catalonia” in support of the statute. Finally, on 28 June 2010, the constitutional court revoked several clauses giving Catalonia

control over its tax revenue. The original text's definition of Catalonia as a nation was replaced with the word "nationality" and eight references to the "indissoluble unity of the Spanish nation" were inserted. That judgement coincided with the onset of austerity, imposed by the government in Madrid because of the global financial crash.

It was a major affront for the Catalan Socialists and other moderates who had hoped for a mutually beneficial arrangement with Spain. It also incited the radical nationalists. Between 2003 and 2010, Catalonia had been governed by the so-called *tripartit*, a coalition made up of the Catalan Socialist Party, the Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya and the Iniciativa per Catalunya Verds (itself a coalition of the Communists and Greens).

The start of the economic crisis together with the constitutional court decision resulted in the support for full independence increasing to 25 per cent and the return to power of *Convergència* in the elections of November 2010, now under the leadership of the suave economist Artur Mas. By 2011, that figure had risen to 46 per cent, although it had begun to drop as talk of outright secession increased. The fall in support for independence was reversed when the PP won a landslide victory in the Spanish general election of November 2011.

Under pressure from younger radical nationalists, Mas held an independence referendum in November 2014. Madrid declared the process illegal but did not take the kind of violent measures it later took in 2017. The turnout was 37 per cent. Although the vote in favour of independence was 81 per cent, the low turnout hardly justified Mas's claim that it opened the way to a process of full independence.

In the rest of Spain, the Catalan desire for greater autonomy or even full independence has been denounced as the selfishness of a rich region trying to keep its wealth to itself. This is not entirely true. Indeed, it could be argued that the greatest beneficiary of Spain's economic development over the past 25 years has been Madrid. In 1983, Catalonia had the second-highest GDP of Spanish regions; by 2010, it had dropped to fourth place. With 16 per cent of the Spanish population, Catalonia provides 21 per cent of the national tax revenue. Catalonia receives around 66 per cent of the national average of state funding to the regions, and only 8 per cent of overall government investment.

This imbalance especially hit health, public transport and education, which have been subject to increasing demand because of the arrival of more than a million immigrants, the highest level of any autonomous region. Thus, financial as well as cultural issues have fed the growing resentments between Barcelona and Madrid.

Tensions intensified as a result of the snap Catalan elections called for September 2015 by Artur Mas, to build on the result of the previous year's referendum. Parties that opposed independence and wanted a federalist solution or sought a reform of the autonomy statute took 48 per cent of the vote. The pro-independence coalition known as Junts pel Sí (Together for Yes) won a 40 per cent share, with the ultra-nationalist and fiercely anti-capitalist Candidatura d'Unitat Popular (CUP) getting 8 per cent. However, even together, these two groupings lacked sufficient support to sustain a declaration of independence.

Nevertheless, Artur Mas announced that he would hold a definitive referendum, declaring to enthusiastic supporters that he had a mandate to proceed towards the creation of an independent Catalan state. That was far from being the case. Writing in the *Guardian*, Mas repeated that the campaign promise of the pro-independence groups was, if elected, "that they would follow a 'roadmap' towards Catalan independence". Such rhetoric was aimed at pressurising Madrid to permit a legally recognised referendum.

Mas's gamble failed when he was not re-elected as president of the *generalitat*. Opposed by the CUP, in revenge for his implementation of austerity, he was replaced in January 2016 by the one-time mayor of Girona, the amiable Carles Puigdemont. Mas's party, *Convergència*, had already been damaged by revelations in 2014 that its founder, Jordi Pujol, was embroiled in a corruption scandal, with a fortune hidden in various tax havens. *Convergència* changed its name in September 2016 to *Partit Demòcrata Europeu Català*. For Spain's prime minister, Mariano Rajoy, whose *Partido Popular* was also mired in corruption, *Convergència*'s problems were a welcome distraction.

In punishment for calling the November 2014 referendum, Mas was put on trial on 13 March 2017 and sentenced to exclusion from political activity for two years. Pushed by the CUP, Puigdemont's new nationalist coalition announced it would hold a definitive referendum on Catalan independence. The government in Madrid refused to enter into negotiations over this and, when the Catalan secessionists affirmed that they would press ahead, vowed to stop it by all means.

The disaster that ensued could so easily have been avoided. Although Rajoy legitimately insisted that the constitution did not permit a referendum on autonomy, he spoke as if the constitution were carved in stone rather than written on paper and open to amendment. Instead, he might have suggested that a consultative procedure, if it got a certain majority (say, 60 per cent) on a turnout of at least 70 per cent, could open the way to serious talks about the original 2006 autonomy statute. This would almost certainly have boosted the large numbers of citizens of Catalonia, already a majority, who do not want separation from Spain. They, unlike the supporters of the CUP who look forward to the collapse of capitalism, are concerned that a new, sovereign Catalan state would be confronted with huge economic problems as well as the virtual impossibility of reintegrating into the EU, where it would face the certain veto of Spain and probably of France, Italy and Belgium, too.

Yet, happy to draw attention away from his party's difficulties, Rajoy chose to combat the independence referendum of 1 October with the brutal intervention of the 10,000 officers of the Spanish police and civil guard sent to Catalonia from other parts of Spain, cheered off in some places by locals waving Spanish flags and, on occasion, chanting, "Go get them!" The firing of rubber bullets, the smashing up of polling stations and the violent mistreatment of women and old people evoked memories of the Franco dictatorship. The assertions by Rajoy and others of his government that these violations of human rights were "proportionate" – claims echoed by Juan Carlos's son, King Felipe VI – have marked a return to the past. Hundreds of Catalans were beaten, including several who had intended to vote to remain in Spain. It is as if Rajoy was unaware of a pattern in the past century of Spain's history: Catalan separatism feeds off Madrid's centralist intransigence.

However, given the extent that a generalised anti-Catalanism has been nurtured in Spain over the past 40 years, Rajoy gambled that there was significant electoral gain to be had from a hard line. In the short term, he has gambled correctly. This is because – in part as a result of the obstruction by the security services – the referendum turnout was only 43 per cent, with a 92 per cent vote for independence. That was far from the mandate claimed by Puigdemont for his unilateral declaration of independence on 27 October.

Rajoy's triggering of Article 155 of the constitution to suspend regional autonomy has led to the arrest of Catalan politicians and the prospect of them being put on trial for sedition, rebellion and the misuse of public funds. They face prosecution calls for 30-year prison sentences. Puigdemont fled to Belgium, where he remains.

The functionaries who have come into Catalonia as a result of Article 155 are already insisting that the language of ministerial administration be Spanish. The regional elections called for 21 December may result in a reduction of the pro-independence vote but they are unlikely to diminish the legacy of bitterness and division left by the events of recent weeks.

Why political uncertainty continues to hamper business confidence **Janus Henderson Investors**

Hungry for more ESG? Our ESG coverage just grew 200%. Learn how. **Prudential**

Sponsored by [dianomi](#)

ADVERTISEMENT

A reform of the Spanish constitution and the opening of negotiations on a revised Catalan statute might heal the wounds, but there is little sign that Prime Minister Rajoy would embrace such a happy ending. His hints that he might do so have been, at best, ambiguous. His statement that Article 155 would be withdrawn provided that the forthcoming elections do not produce a majority in favour of independence do not suggest respect for the wishes of the Catalans.

There has also been talk of giving Catalonia greater control of its tax revenue, if approved by a nationwide referendum. Given the scale of anti-Catalan feeling elsewhere in Spain, it is not much of a promise.

Paul Preston is the director of the Cañada Blanch Centre for Contemporary Spanish Studies at the London School of Economics. His books include "The Spanish Holocaust" (HarperPress)
