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Irish Realpolitik versus Catalan Idealism: The Propaganda Campaign of Terence MacSwiney's Hunger Strike

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Abstract

In the autumn of 1920, Dáil Éireann leveraged the hunger strike and subsequent death of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, to launch a propaganda campaign aimed at advancing the Irish independence cause in the context of the Anglo-Irish War. One of the principal countries targeted by this campaign was Spain. There, Sinn Féin received significant support from the various branches of the Catalan nationalist movement. However, this support was met with unease by Irish republicans, whose primary objective was to win over broader Spanish public opinion and Spanish political elites. This article examines how the Dáil crafted its propaganda strategy in Spain based on the principles of realpolitik, in contrast to a Catalan nationalism that offered its backing from a position of idealism, and situates that response within a broader context and contrasts it with the reception it received from the Irish delegates led by Éamon de Valera.

Keywords: Irish nationalism; Catalan nationalism; Terence MacSwiney; diplomacy; Wilsonism

“Real progress is much more to be estimated by what is thought abroad than by what is thought at home,” advised Michael Collins, the Dáil Éireann’s Minister for Finance, to George Gavan Duffy, the Dáil’s representative in Rome, in June 1921 (Hart 2005, 274). Diplomacy and propaganda abroad were fundamental premises of the policy pursued by Sinn Féin once the revolutionary government was established at the beginning of 1919 in the struggle to achieve an independent state (Walsh 2008, 108). The essential aim was to focus global attention on the conflict with the British government and to garner international support for the cause.

The Irish question had sparked interest worldwide virtually since the early nineteenth century. The Easter Rising of 1916 gave it an explicitly global dimension (Mannion and McGarry, 2022; O'Donnell, 2008). But with the Anglo-Irish War (1919–1921), the events unfolding on the island transcended the boundaries of the British Empire and generated interest in the most disparate corners of the world, largely due to the Dáil government’s strategic efforts (Keown 2016, 37; Mitchell 1995, 334). The leaders of the post-1916 Sinn Féin movement were very modern in their appreciation of the value of diplomacy and propaganda. The new world order that emerged from the Paris Peace Conference, with the fall of many monarchies, provided a favorable ground for doing so (Gerwarth and Manela, 2014; Macmillan 2001, 29–45).

Spain was one of the countries where the Dáil focused its efforts. Mainly for three reasons: it was one of the traditional strongholds of Catholicism, which allowed for synergies with the Irish nationalist movement, even if the latter’s goals were not religious in nature; the fragile relationship between Spain and the British Empire, stemming from the long-standing dispute over Gibraltar and

British interests in the Balearic Islands; and the view of Spain as a gateway to and means of influencing Latin American republics.

The Dáil also assumed Spain as one of the countries in which “garbled versions of events in Ireland,” usually provided by English news agencies, could be countered.¹ Even though that was an optimistic outlook. In Spain, interest in the Irish question was limited. Beyond the sympathy it elicited in certain political circles, it was in the two regions with nascent and increasingly strong nationalist movements — Catalonia and the Basque Country — where the issue was followed most closely. There, local nationalists expressed strong sympathy for the Irish cause and drew parallels between their own struggle and that taking place on the island (Ferrer, 2007; Cullen, 2024).

In the spring of 1914, Catalan nationalism achieved a degree of semi-autonomous power. The *Mancomunitat de Catalunya* was the institutional union of the four Catalan provinces, though it lacked both a parliament and an independent budget, aside from the combined resources of those provinces (Balcells et al. 1996). The Mancomunitat was led by conservative Catalanism, represented by the *Lliga Regionalista* [Regionalist League]. Since August 1917, the architect and art historian Josep Puig i Cadafalch held the presidency (Ucelay-Da Cal 2019).

During this period, Catalan politics — within the Catalanist sphere — was dominated by the Lliga Regionalista, a conservative party. It was followed by the left-wing republican forces of the *Unió Federal Nacionalista Republicana*, and, in a still embryonic form, by various separatist groups. From the autumn of 1918 onwards, Francesc Macià, a former Spanish army officer who had adopted increasingly radical positions, would emerge as the leading figure within this separatist current, drawing particular support from the younger activists associated with the *Centre Autonomista de Dependents del Comerç i de la Indústria* (CADCI). The CADCI trained white-collar workers — such as clerks and shop assistants — (Esculies 2014).

Unlike the Dáil, where Sinn Féin held complete dominance, the Mancomunitat’s assembly of deputies required the regionalists to negotiate with other parties, such as the nationalist republicans, the liberals, or the conservatives, and to a lesser extent, with other groups. This was a fundamental difference between the Irish revolutionary government, unrecognized by the British, and the Catalan authority, which had been legally approved by the Spanish parliament.

Irish nationalists demanded Home Rule for years without success. During the First World War period, the Catalans, through the establishment of the Mancomunitat, could be considered one step ahead in the direction of self-government (Colomines and Madaula 2014). And they were still while the Irish fought in the Anglo-Irish War. During this period, the Irish Republicans had a clear objective — the establishment of an independent state — even if they did not fully achieve it.

By contrast, the Catalan Regionalists sought to secure autonomous power within Spain (Ucelay-Da Cal 2003, 174–80). With an approach like that of nationalists within the British Empire who were mobilized by Wilsonian rhetoric on self-determination, aiming for a reform of the empire and the attainment of greater rights, freedoms, and a certain degree of autonomy — but not full Independence (Jones 2022; Dalle and Bieling 2023).

In the autumn of 1918 and the winter of 1919, Catalans promoted a campaign for Home Rule, without success (Balcells 2010). This new point of divergence between the Irish —particularly the Sinn Féin movement — and the Catalanists — especially the Regionalists — had a significant impact on how they conducted their respective paradiplomacies, since formal diplomacy was reserved for states (Carroll 2016).

Using the Irish propaganda campaign surrounding the hunger strike and death of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, as a case study, this article analyses how the Irish republicans employed realpolitik to advance their goal of garnering Spanish sympathy for their cause, while Catalan nationalism engaged in an intense campaign in support of MacSwiney, driven by idealistic empathy, yet with no gains and no clear political objectives.

Initial attempts

The government of Dáil Éireann was not recognised by any state. Neither did it have the tradition nor experienced personnel to play the roles of diplomats and propagandists. But the Dáil set up two crucial departments of Foreign Affairs and Propaganda (Tonra et al. 2010; De Wiel 2008). In January 1919, Count George Plunkett was named Minister of Foreign Affairs. He would hold the post until June 1920, when he was named Associate Minister of Foreign Affairs. Arthur Griffith, acting as President of Dáil Éireann from May 1919 until December 1920 — during Éamon de Valera's mission to the United States — took an interest in foreign policy, supervising the Plunkett portfolio. When Griffith was in prison from November 1919 until July 1921, De Valera returned to Ireland and regained control over foreign affairs (Kenny 2020; Keogh 1990, 5–10).

In parallel, the Dáil set up a Propaganda or Publicity Department with considerable duplication of personnel and functions with the FA Department. So, during the Anglo-Irish War, it was not always easy to clarify the distinction between the two units. Lawrence Ginnell was named the first director of the Publicity Department. As he was imprisoned in June 1919, the journalist and philosopher Desmond FitzGerald took his place. In March 1921, when FitzGerald was in turn also imprisoned, he would be replaced by Robert Brennan — who had overseen Sinn Féin propaganda — and Erskine Childers (Brennan 1950). This Department produced the *Irish Bulletin*, a weekly issue between November 1919 and July 1921.

The Dáil established a diplomatic service mainly in the United States, but also in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, South Africa, Chile, and Argentina (Fanning et al. 1998). In London, Art O'Brien was appointed from October 1919 to April 1922 (MacDiarmada 2020, 83–86). During 1919, due to the WWI Peace Conference, Paris became the base from which all the Dáil's external propaganda began to pivot (McGarry, 2022, 74). The speakers of the Dáil, Seán T. O'Kelly and George Gavan Duffy, were sent there (Whelan 2019, 35). The delegates to London, Berlin, Copenhagen, Brussels, and other parts of the continent reported to O'Kelly and Gavan Duffy, alternatively.² After some months in Paris in Spring 1920, Gavan Duffy was sent to Rome, where his propaganda was very effective.

Meanwhile, in Catalonia, during World War I, the regionalists had aligned themselves with initiatives such as the *Union des Nationalités*, which aimed to raise the visibility of stateless nations and achieve mutual recognition that could help them secure some degree of autonomy within their respective states or even full independence (Núñez Seixas 2010, 57–62; Esculies and Petronis 2016). Through this initiative and their minority participation in others — such as the promotion of Catalan volunteers for the French Foreign Legion — the Lliga, as the dominant force in Catalan nationalism at the time, demonstrated a capacity for international engagement. However, the ultimate political purpose of these efforts, apart from their symbolic role in mobilizing domestic audiences, remains unclear (Esculies 2022).

In late November 1919, Joan Estelrich addressed a letter to the Sinn Féin Press Bureau. A member of the Lliga, the journalist and writer led the project of the *Oficina d'Expansió Catalana* [Catalan Expansion Office], which aimed to raise international awareness of the Catalanist cause and its political demands. Founded that year, with offices in Barcelona and Paris, the project had the aim of internationalizing Catalonia and Catalan nationalism by promoting its distinctive features and, in a way, centralizing and organizing all such propaganda activity. The journalist was under the patronage of Francesc Cambó, the Lliga's leading figure in the Spanish parliament, a wealthy and well-travelled man (Revelles 2022).

Estelrich would soon publish *For the International Recognition of Catalonia*, a lecture that presented a framework for advancing this issue. In his view, Catalans should attend all kinds of international congresses, assemblies, and conferences; Catalan cooperation was needed in foreign literary journals; propaganda exchanges with nationalities like Catalonia should be increased; and sympathy should be sought from prominent communities and individuals. What remained unclear, however, was the concrete ultimate political purpose of all this (Estelrich 1920).

In his letter to the Sinn Féin Press Bureau, Estelrich informed the Irish that Catalans were aware of their struggle against the British Empire. He stated that “your brave example, has in the Catalanian patriots, the most fervent and warmly sympathy.” Estelrich pointed out that this was not solely a matter of political interest, but also one of justice.³ The journalist enclosed several articles on Ireland published in *La Veu de Catalunya*, the Lliga’s newspaper. At the same time, he proposed a *quid pro quo*: the Catalans could continue publishing information about the Irish struggle, but in return, he requested Sinn Féin’s publications and articles.

Furthermore, Estelrich offered access to his contacts in Spain and Latin America. “In the Iberic peninsula and Central and Southern America, we count with good elements to intensify the outcry of justice in favor of Ireland. Also please say if we can’t do something to annoy England — as boycotting her goods, interfering with any future Alliance, anything you may think useful to your cause, and in our power.”⁴

In return, he requested that Sinn Féin give visibility to the Catalanist demands and asked for contact addresses in the United States to send them propaganda.⁵ Wilsonian ideas — albeit vague — on the right of stateless peoples and nations to self-determination had caused a sensation across the entire spectrum of Catalanism. Since the dissemination of his famous Fourteen Points, the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson, had become an admired figure of Catalan nationalists (Manela 2007; Ucelay-Da Cal 1978).

Without receiving a response in the following month, the Catalan journalist assumed that the British authorities had confiscated his letter. At the end of December, Estelrich followed up and addressed Art O’Brien in London. The Irish delegate had sent him Sinn Féin propaganda a few months earlier following a request made by Josep M. Batista i Roca, a Catalan separatist who was researching at Oxford University. Estelrich sent O’Brien Catalanist propaganda and a copy of the letter previously addressed to the Press Bureau. The journalist reiterated his request for a *quid pro quo*, made his Barcelona office available to the Irish, and insisted on requesting the Irish contacts in the USA.⁶

O’Brien replied he would discuss his willingness to exchange publicity and offer mutual support with the Sinn Féin Press Bureau, and that he would consult Desmond FitzGerald and Robert Brennan. Art did so, but from the beginning he considered to his colleagues that the acceptance of the offer “would introduce complications into anything we might wish to do in Spain.”⁷ So, O’Brien did not recommend it. He was fully aware that Dáil’s engagement in Spain could — and ought to — serve as a gateway to the Latin American republics. To do so, however, Irish republicans had to proceed with extreme caution so as not to alienate the Spanish government, the monarchical regime, or public opinion, thereby safeguarding support for the Catalanist cause. Estelrich’s proposal, therefore, ultimately failed to materialise.

It is worth noting that throughout 1919, the Spanish government — both in Madrid and through its embassy in London — received repeated petitions from the so-called Irish Government Delegation requesting formal recognition of the Dáil and of Ireland’s claim to independence and sovereignty. As Ambassador Alfonso Merry del Val reported in June of that year, these démarches reflected a sustained diplomatic effort by Dublin to secure legitimisation abroad. Within certain sectors of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, there appears to have been at least some interest in exploring whether a cautious acknowledgment of the Irish request might serve Spain’s strategic interests. Particularly, in view of reports from the USA stressing the political weight of the Irish-American vote and the possibility that such a gesture could win President Wilson’s favor at a moment when Spain sought to reposition itself within the emerging post-war international order (Jaspe 2008).

However, Merry del Val’s markedly pro-British outlook significantly shaped Madrid’s response and ultimately constrained any inclination toward recognition. His perception of Britain as Spain’s natural historical partner led him to discourage any movement that could be interpreted as unfriendly by London, thereby limiting the Irish delegation’s prospects of establishing diplomatic ties with a country they believed to be a sympathetic interlocutor. At the domestic level, Spanish

political parties across the ideological spectrum — conservatives, liberals, the right and the left alike — were generally unwilling to recognise the Dáil, viewing the Irish revolutionary government as an unstable or potentially problematic precedent (Jaspe 2008).

The Catalan reaction to MacSwiney's hunger strike

On August 12, 1920, British authorities arrested Terence MacSwiney. Having been elected as a Sinn Féin MP in the 1918 general election following the assassination of his friend Tomás Mac Curtain, Mayor of Cork, MacSwiney succeeded him in office. He was soon arrested by British police on charges of possessing seditious documents and a cipher code (Costello 1995).

News of his arrest reached Catalonia on August 15 via the French news agency Havas. The Catalanist press also reported the mayor two years' imprisonment in Brixton Prison, London. Upon his arrest, MacSwiney initiated a hunger strike — already undertaken by some of his imprisoned comrades in Cork — which he continued following his transfer to England. The Catalan press relayed the response of British Prime Minister David Lloyd George, who declared that Britain was confronting a separatist movement and that exceptional concessions could not be made.⁸

The first columnist to take an interest in the case and give it public visibility was Antoni Rovira i Virgili.⁹ A historian and journalist associated with the centre-left, he contributed regularly to *La Veu de Catalunya* and *La Publicidad* and worked in the press office of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya. He was one of the leading intellectuals of early twentieth-century Catalonia, particularly committed to the dissemination of stateless nationalisms. Even before the First World War, he had already devoted a celebrated trilogy to the subject — including Ireland — along with numerous press articles (Rovira 2008).

Rovira i Virgili stated that MacSwiney evoked the heroes of classical antiquity. He warned that, should the British government refuse to yield and MacSwiney die, this would signal “the beginning of grave new events on the tragic island.” According to the historian, the mayor spoke in the name of democratic and nationalist principles.¹⁰

Rovira i Virgili was the clearest voice in framing the mayor's gesture as an act of idealism.¹¹ He compared it to the mistake of having executed the prisoners of the Easter Rising. This view was also shared by republicans such as the lawyer, journalist, and politician Àngel Samblancat.¹² However, the hunger strike provided material for Catalan satirists to mock Catalanist politicians, claiming that, rather than refusing food, they would indulge in several courses.¹³

During the second half of August, despite the clear Catalanist sympathy, a journalistic debate emerged regarding the appropriateness of the hunger strike as a form of political struggle.¹⁴ Even within political parties, consensus was lacking. In *La Publicidad*, which leaned towards Catalanist republicanism, the journalist Carles Soldevila expressed his support.¹⁵ Others did with reservations, as the leader of the *Unió Federal Nacionalista Republicana* [Republican Nationalist Federal Union], Pere Coromines.¹⁶

At the beginning of September, acts of solidarity with MacSwiney began to take place.¹⁷ A Catalan Committee for Ireland was established in Barcelona and issued a manifesto supporting the independence of the Republic of Ireland, protesting the imprisonment of the mayor of Cork, and calling for the unification of small nations to resist the dominance of Europe's major powers.¹⁸

To emphasize the parallel between Ireland and Catalonia, both nations were portrayed as victims of English oppression. “England is the same as in 1714, when, in the presence of Catalan representatives in Utrecht, it promised to support the Catalans. But when the nationalist movement erupted in Catalonia, England rendered the Treaty of Utrecht void.”¹⁹ The text referred to England's abandonment of the Austriacist cause, which sealed its defeat in the War of the Spanish Succession (1705–1715) and paved the way for the French Bourbon dynasty. The Committee was composed, among others, by the separatist activist Domènec Latorre (Benet 2003).

The president of the *Unió Catalanista*, Joan Solé i Pla, and the organisation's secretary, Vicenç Ballester, sent a letter to Lloyd George requesting the release of the mayor.²⁰ When it was founded

in 1891, the *Unió Catalanista* had been conceived as a cross-sectional platform aimed at bringing together all strands of Catalanism. However, with the emergence of parties such as the *Lliga* and the *UFNR*, it had been reduced to a kind of small group of idealists. From the *Unió*'s centres and community clubs, the first separatist organisations — and especially youth groups — had begun to emerge during the First World War (Esculies 2013). Catalan Separatism sought an independent Catalonia, or a Catalan State confederated with the rest of Spain and even Portugal. Ballester, in fact, was the creator of the design of the Catalan separatist flag, “*Estelada*” — the Catalan flag with a blue triangle and a white star in the middle, following the Cuban model (Muray and Rubiralta 2015, 208–210).

In line with the previous initiatives, the propaganda section of the *Centre Autonomista de Dependents del Comerç i de la Indústria* also sent a letter to Lloyd George (Hannigan, 2010, 91). The *CADCI* was at that time a major source of young separatists active in the youth movements linked to the *Unió*.²¹ Gradually, some municipalities also joined the campaign.²² The president of the *Diputació de Barcelona* [Barcelona Provincial Council], the regionalist leader Joan Vallès Pujals, also sent a telegram to Lloyd George, urging the British Prime Minister to release the mayor of Cork and grant freedom to Ireland.²³ From that moment on, other entities and institutions sent telegrams to the Welsh politician along the same lines. Among others, the Catalan Association of Nationalist Students, the City Councils of Badalona and Sitges, the Committee of International Studies of Barcelona, the *Masnou* Nationalist Association, and the *Ateneu Democràtic Regionalista del Poble Nou* in Barcelona.²⁴

The Barcelona City Council also debated the issue. There was an intense discussion, which led to the final proposal being voted on paragraph by paragraph, as not all groups agreed with its full content. Unanimously, all groups expressed condolences for the situation of MacSwiney. However, monarchist groups distanced themselves, disagreeing with the establishment of a parallel between the Mayor of Cork and Rafael Casanova, the head councillor — the highest authority — of Barcelona during the siege of the city in 1714. All in all, the majority also approved the second paragraph.

The nationalist and republican councillors wanted to make full use of the opportunity, even though Casanova had only been wounded during the siege, not killed.²⁵ Moreover, the adversaries in 1714 were the troops of Philip V, Castilian and French, not English. To reinforce the parallel, on September 11 — Catalonia's national day (not yet official at the time), which commemorated the fall of Barcelona in 1714 — the comparison was emphasized, and bouquets were thrown into the sea in honor of the Mayor of Cork.²⁶ *La Cònsola*, a biweekly newspaper from the Barcelona district of Sarrià, published a portrait of the mayor titled “Chief Councillor of Cork,” once again emphasizing the parallel.²⁷

By October, separatist circles were fervently engaged with the issue.²⁸ One of the main separatist youth organizations, *La Falç* Nationalist Youth, organized a tribute event to the Irish Republic at its headquarters, which was decorated with both Catalan and Irish flags and presented a portrait of MacSwiney.²⁹ *L'Intransigent*, the leading separatist youth newspaper promoted by Domènec Latorre, featured on its front page a drawing of the mayor in prison and stated that they demanded his release but, if unsuccessful, hoped that there would be a boycott of English products.³⁰

Mary O'Brien's Arrival in Barcelona

At that time, Mary O'Brien arrived in Catalonia. The Irish had learned Spanish on the island of Mallorca before the First World War during a vacation trip. When the Easter Rising broke out, she was casually in Barcelona. Affected by the news, she began collecting press clippings. O'Brien returned to Ireland the following year. In August 1920, she offered her services to the Dáil Publicity Department.³¹ By then, a cousin of hers, Henry O'Brien, lived in London and was a friend of Father Dominic, who kept them informed with news about MacSwiney, as the Capuchin friar visited him daily (Hannigan 2010, 40). Thus, she was aware of the situation.

The Dáil accepted her proposal, and she recalled in Barcelona as a press agent. At her arrival, Joan Estelrich hosted her and made available to O'Brien the office of *Expansió Catalana* in Barcelona's city centre. From there, the Irish began distributing propaganda to the Catalan press.³² The Irish republicans did not want to commit to Estelrich's proposal for mutual collaboration or allow him to make use of his contacts in the United States. However, they did take advantage of his goodwill to assist them.

Upon arriving in the Catalan capital, O'Brien immediately noted that "in Barcelona and in Catalonia generally there was the deepest sympathy for Ireland and when Terence died the papers were full of articles about him and masses were offered for him in many churches which were crowded to the doors. The University students and shop assistants all wore green ribbons in their buttonholes."³³ It soon became clear that the enthusiasm with which the Catalans embraced the MacSwiney case was far greater than in other parts of the world (Hannigan 2010, 278–281).

In fact, the evening edition of *La Veu de Catalunya* on 25 October 1920 already announced the mayor's death. It included a portrait and two columns outlining his profile. This biographical sketch was reportedly based on "information provided by the Irish government delegation in Paris."³⁴ What is to say that it came from O'Brien herself?

La Publicidad described the mayor as a "civil hero" and stated that his conduct pointed the way forward for the Irish youth.³⁵ Once again, the Catalan Association of Nationalist Students and the *Pau Claris* Nationalist Youth from Barcelona sent telegrams to Lloyd George, stating that he had "definitively consolidated the independence of Ireland."³⁶

The Worker Nationalist Youth *Pàtria Nova* from Barcelona, one of the groups led by Domènec Latorre, also wrote a letter of support and condolences to Éamon de Valera in New York. The letter was written in Catalan, with an Irish translation (Esculies 2013).³⁷ Nevertheless, this letter took some time to arrive. It would not be delivered till the beginning of 1921 by Josep Gelabert, who was the correspondent for *L'Intransigent* in New York and the founder of the Catalan Nationalist Centre in the city.³⁸

Soon after, nationalist organizations and parties lowered their Catalan flags to half-mast with a black ribbon.³⁹ From that moment on, the nationalist entities organized memorial masses for MacSwiney, not only in churches in Barcelona but also in other towns across Catalonia, such as Vilafranca del Penedès, Igualada, Sant Boi de Llobregat, and many others.⁴⁰

On October 27 in Barcelona, a commission of Catalan and Basque students from various faculties at the University of Barcelona organized a demonstration of around 300 youths toward the British consulate, protesting with shouts of support for Ireland and Catalonia, and against England. Some participants threw stones, breaking windows on balconies. The consulate alerted the police. A pair of mounted security guards intercepted and dispersed the crowd. The protesters later regrouped, and a delegation requested to meet with the consul, who refused to receive them (Hannigan 2010, 282).⁴¹

The following day, the Catalan Association of Nationalist Students organized a mass at the Pompeia church, in the centre of Barcelona, at the intersection of Diagonal Avenue and Passeig de Gràcia. Security was heavy, with both police and civil guards present. The event was attended by the Mayor of Barcelona, Antoni Martínez Domingo, the President of the Provincial Council, Joan Vallès Pujals, the First Deputy Mayor, Carles Jordà, and members of the Spanish Parliament for Barcelona, Albert Rusiñol and Pere Rahola. All of them were members of the Lliga Regionalista.⁴²

O'Brien notified the Paris delegation: "There has been an extraordinary display of feeling over Terence Mac Swiney's death, including a Solemn Requiem, organised by the University students at the Capuchin Church yesterday. The church was packed, many prominent public men being present."⁴³

The Nationalist Youth of Badalona, the Nationalist Youth of Sant Andreu de Palomar in Barcelona, and the Regionalist League of Gràcia in Barcelona also organized memorial masses. The number of entities and towns that took part in commemorative acts was considerable, ranging from popular gatherings to more intimate ceremonies. In Juneda, in the province of Lleida, a

convent school held a rosary prayer. The Nationalist Centre of Castelló d'Empúries and the Barcelona City Council sent a message to MacSwiney's widow.⁴⁴ In Mataró, the cultural Foment de la Sardana dedicated an evening event in his honor.⁴⁵ Numerous general and local publications wrote commemorative poems and articles insisting that the mayor was an example for Catalan nationalists.⁴⁶

But above all, the CADCI organized a patriotic evening on November 1, All Saints' Day, with the presence of representatives from the Provincial Council and the City Council of Barcelona (Folley 1984). That day, the organizers gave prominence to Mary O'Brien (Hannigan 2010, 283). According to her, "there was a huge meeting in the beautiful club hall of the shop assistants, with the tricolor at the end of the hall facing the platform." O'Brien sat at the head of the table and gave a brief speech in French, which was translated into Catalan. She added: "The Catalans always cherish the desire for separation from Spain and their aspiration for independence is the bond of sympathy between them and us. All the speeches that evening [were] in praise of Ireland and expressed sympathy for our objects in our fight for freedom."⁴⁷

Coincidentally, on that very same day, the young Kevin Barry was executed in Dublin. A medical student involved in an attack on a British Army truck that resulted in the deaths of three soldiers, Barry's execution came amid the emotional wave caused by MacSwiney's death. His youth — 18 years old — made him particularly relatable. The Catalan Association of Nationalist Students sent a message to the University of Dublin, expressing their sorrow that, after the First World War, the expected liberation of nations like Ireland, Catalonia, and Flanders, suppressed by artificial states, had not materialized.⁴⁸

As it happened, one of Barry's sisters, Madge, was in Barcelona at the time, also distributing propaganda for the Irish Republic through newspapers mostly and on their own initiative.⁴⁹ This led her and Mary O'Brien to also mobilize to raise awareness about this death. They met with Albert Rusiñol, a brother of the famous modernist painter Santiago Rusiñol, who gave them his visiting cards to call on all his friends and supporters.⁵⁰

Meanwhile, the necrological vigils and masses for MacSwiney continued also outside Barcelona, in small and medium-sized towns such as Mataró, Reus, Sabadell, Vic, Sant Vicens dels Horts, Porrera, Taradell, Vilafranca del Penedès, Vilanova i la Geltrú, El Prat de Llobregat, and Tarragona.⁵¹ The intensity of the commemorative acts was such that one of the most prominent writers of the time, the modernist Prudenci Bertrana, called for restraint, warning against organizing banquets to honor MacSwiney's death and urging people to remember the days of his hunger strike and to be cautious with the fervor.⁵²

In fact, November was filled with daily commemorations as noted by O'Brien: "Masses are still being offered here for Terence MacSwiney in Barcelona and throughout the city."⁵³ From Paris, Gavan Duffy sent her a note of appreciation for the Catalan press for the attention they had given to the MacSwiney case. Shortly thereafter, Duffy visited Madrid, Salamanca, and Barcelona.⁵⁴ Witnessing O'Brien's extensive work, he asked her if she would be willing to go to Madrid. She accepted immediately.⁵⁵

The Irish Republic's delegation in Paris was also aware of the Catalan nationalist support.⁵⁶ Seán T. O'Kelly informed key figures in its diplomatic network about "the great demonstrations of sympathy towards Ireland and the family of the deceased."⁵⁷ Art O'Brien, in London, also collected numerous clippings from the Catalan and Spanish press about the Mayor of Cork while he provided support to MacSwiney's family and helped in the propaganda (MacDiarmada 2020, 102–3).⁵⁸

Despite the expressions of gratitude to Catalan nationalists, the unequal nature of the mutual interest was evident in the fact that, three months after Mary O'Brien had requested Gavan Duffy to send some books for Estelrich, he had still not done so.⁵⁹ The Irish republicans remained consistently focused on their primary objective: securing the support — or at the very least, avoiding the hostility — of as many states as possible, not nationalistic movements outside the British Empire. Moreover, the Irish, through President Griffith, advocated for cooperating, for

instance, with anti-British Egyptian or Indian nationalists, but not forming alliances with them (Mitchell 1995, 106).

O'Brien's willingness to relocate to Madrid was aligned with this strategic outlook, even though she was fully aware that the level of mobilization in the Spanish capital did not match that of Catalonia. "I do not believe — assumed her — that anywhere outside Ireland, except perhaps in America, there can have been such an extraordinary display of feeling. I wish Madrid were as sound. There are evidently strong counter influences at work there."⁶⁰

In the meantime, O'Brien, still in Barcelona, established contact with several journalists in Madrid, especially Ricardo Baeza of *El Sol* and with the magazine *Euzkadi* in the Basque Country and even with nationalists from Valencia (Núñez Seixas 2017; Hannigan 2010, 107, 141, 158).⁶¹ Baeza's wife was Irish, and he had been *El Sol* correspondent in London between September and November 1920. In this period, he travelled around Ireland, from where he reported on the Sinn Féin cause and was shot by the British police as his bus returned from a sightseeing tour of Dublin. Thus, contact with O'Brien came naturally. Also, due to his role as a translator, Baeza maintained a relationship with Desmond FitzGerald (Baeza 2010).

The Doll, the Journey of a Gift

The intensity of commemorations and masses diminished in December, although such events continued to take place, especially in Barcelona. Occasionally, they would still be held throughout the next months in various parts of Catalonia.⁶² Of all the initiatives, however, the one that would be most remembered over time, due to its implicit emotional value, was the decision to gift a doll to the daughter of the Mayor of Cork.

The Unió Catalanista commissioned its women's group to create the traditional dress of Catalan peasant women for the doll. It was completed by mid-December and, at the end of the month, the doll was displayed in the shop window of Frederic Ribera's confectionery, located at 13 Ferran Street — the main road leading to Sant Jaume Square, where both the Barcelona City Hall and the Palace of the Diputació (now the Government of Catalonia) are located.⁶³ A few days later, the doll was also showcased in the window of the famous Enric Miracle patisserie in Mataró, a coastal city.

"The ladies of Barcelona dressed in the greatest care and artistic finish a beautiful doll in the Catalan costume and sent it to Terence MacSwiney's widow for their little daughter," certified Mary O'Brien.⁶⁴ In May 1921, the Unió Catalanista, now under the presidency of Vicenç Ballester, agreed to deliver the doll to MacSwiney's daughter. At the time, the press published images of the initiative. Since the widow was on a propaganda campaign through America at that moment, it was decided that a member of the Nationalist Centre of Mataró who lived in New York would personally deliver it (MacSwiney, 2005, 22).⁶⁵

Despite all these Catalanist efforts, the Irish republicans' interest was focused on Madrid. In January 1921, Diarmuid O'Hegarty wrote to George Gavan Duffy in Rome. "The President [Eamon de Valera] says Catalonia in Spain [is] very sympathetic through fellow-feeling. He does not know how Castille feels, but he would like to know."⁶⁶ De Valera had just returned from his American mission (Fanning 2015, 89).

By then Count George Plunkett wrote a Dáil Éireann Report on Foreign Affairs related to the situation in Spain: "In the capital the good feeling for Ireland is maintained on general principles. In Catalonia however our movement is supported mainly by those who desire to secure a distinctive government for the Catalans. Hence the press of Barcelona is strongly pro-Irish. The friendship for Ireland extends over a very large area."⁶⁷

Kevin R. O'Sheil, journalist and politician, argued that other displays of support were "very far indeed from being as strong as was, for example, [...] the feeling of the Catalans for us on the death of Lord Mayor MacSwiney."⁶⁸ Otherwise, in Madrid, there was even press campaigning in favor of the British (Hannigan 2010, 285).

As De Valera did not rely on Count George Plunkett, the president appointed Brennan as the Under-Secretary of Foreign Affairs in February, to act as the Minister *in pectore* (McCullagh 2017, 196). Thus, Gavan Duffy wrote to Brennan in March regarding Spain. “I do not think there is a country in Europe where we are held in such high honour and affection although the Madrid people are outdone in zeal for Ireland by the Catalans in Barcelona.”⁶⁹

Gavan assumed the *Irish Bulletin* should be translated into Spanish and sent it from Paris to Spanish and Catalan newspapers “in order to avoid raising Catalan susceptibilities by a Spanish translation published in Madrid, for the Barcelona people will take material in Spanish coming from abroad, without difficulty.” Even though Mary O’Brien, still in Barcelona, told him that disseminating the *Bulletin* in Spanish from Madrid would not be a problem as “the Catalan devotion” to the Irish “would make them generally overlook the annoyance of getting their Irish news from Madrid.”⁷⁰

Gavan Duffy had proposed Mary as the press agent in Madrid in the autumn, but he kept in mind that the more suitable candidate to be the Irish envoy in Madrid would be Art O’Brien. According to the delegate in Rome, “the effect would be excellent, for the field is a splendid one, and Spain has a big influence in South America. The Dominicans who are very powerful in Spain are very enthusiastic for Ireland. I found people very receptive.” And he added that: “Many newspapers [are] friendly towards Ireland — some absolutely pro-Irish. We stand very high in Spain, but there is a big field open and untilled.”⁷¹ The Latin American republics’ support was a major target for Irish Republicans (Kennedy 2000). Although, as acknowledged by the Irish delegate in Argentina, “our friends are representatives of small nations here (Basques, etc.) and strongly Argentine nationalists and priests.”⁷²

Gavan Duffy insisted to Brennan a few days later. “As to Spain, there is a big field open and untilled. [...] This is a big asset, and we stand very high. I believe our most sincere friends in Europe are here and if A[r]t O’Brien could go out for 6 months or 12 months, you would reap a big harvest. I need not say that enemy propaganda is very active and quite unchecked. The appointment of Miss [Mary] O’Brien for press work for Madrid would be a good step anyway.”⁷³

The argument that Gavan Duffy had put on the table during his stay in Spain with his various interlocutors was that, on the one hand, England would not grant Spain control over Gibraltar. On the other hand, an Irish state could serve as a link between Spain and the United States, improving relations between North and South America, which could in turn positively impact the Spanish economy. He also raised the religious issue, presenting the Catholic connection between the Irish and the Spanish in contrast to English Protestantism.⁷⁴

De Valera was fully in tune with these ideas. Just a few weeks earlier, the British Chief Secretary for Ireland, Thomas Hamar Greenwood, had stated — referring to Éamon’s Spanish paternal origin — that he belonged to a “race of treacherous murderers.” To exploit this for propaganda purposes, De Valera asked Art O’Brien to send a copy of the statement to the Spanish ambassador in London (McCullagh 2017, 200). Moreover, at the beginning of April, De Valera himself asked Art to become the Irish envoy to Madrid, but he declined. Despite the political significance of the destination, Art O’Brien believed that remaining in London was more important for him. Otherwise, due to his poor relationship with Brennan, he was not willing to distance himself from one of the decision-making centres to go to an interesting but uncertain post (MacDiarmada 2020, 132).

All in all, then, Mary O’Brien moved to Madrid around April of 1921.⁷⁵ She rented a small apartment and worked with a team of volunteer workers, many of them university students, to translate the *Irish Bulletin* into Spanish and prepare extracts that were sent to the press and distributed the addresses of Irish representatives to Spanish and Latin American parliamentarians.⁷⁶

Robert Brennan travelled to Barcelona, where “a watchmaker who repaired my watch [] refused to accept any payment when he learned I was from Ireland.”⁷⁷ And then to Madrid. According to him, Mary O’Brien “she worked tirelessly.”⁷⁸ Brennan requested that Mary direct all her communications to his department, from where they would be forwarded to the Paris delegation. In a way, being based in Madrid linked her more directly to Dublin, without relying on Paris, as she was in

Barcelona. “It is not necessary to impress on you the importance of counteracting enemy propaganda in Spain as elsewhere,” he told her.⁷⁹

Even from Madrid, O’Brien tried to be aware of the developments in Barcelona. In September, she noticed the publication that month of lawyer Raimond Negre Balet’s *Irlanda, el batlle de Cork i Catalunya* [Ireland, the Mayor of Cork and Catalonia] with an introduction by Antoni Rovira i Virgili. The author sent it to Art O’Brien in London.⁸⁰

It was a thirty-page pamphlet that included several images of MacSwiney, his wife, and De Valera. Two editions were produced: one with a simple cover featuring only the title, and another with color images of the mayor and of De Valera. The pamphlet reviewed the history of the Irish nationalist movement, provided a biography of MacSwiney, offered economic statistics in Ireland, and reproduced propagandistic texts that the Paris delegation had sent to the Catalans through Mary O’Brien.

Significantly, however, a footnote expressed regret over certain remarks De Valera had made in America. To garner support from southern US states, during his American tour, the President of the Dáil had claimed that the Irish were the only white race deprived of freedom (McCullagh 2017, 179). Negre i Balet noted that, in making such a statement, De Valera appeared to have overlooked the Catalan case (Negre 1921, 27).

By that time, although the doll was supposed to have been sent in April, its whereabouts were unknown. Mary MacSwiney returned to Europe and visited Art O’Brien in London in September and stated she had not received the doll yet. They feared the British troops had taken the parcel, “as it was a valuable article,” noted Art.⁸¹ But that was not the case, as it had not been sent to Ireland. Mary O’Brien found out that it had been sent to America, “apparently to be shown round,” and the Catalan delegate in NY would contact the Irish one.⁸²

The story of the doll serves as a clear example of the many difficulties faced by Catalan separatism — represented by the *Unió Catalanista* and the nationalist youth groups — in achieving its goals. Their press took it upon itself to magnify their political endeavors, yet their actual accomplishments were modest. As on previous occasions, their actions were more symbolic, idealistic, and emotional than politically effective. For this reason, it is significant that, from the entire MacSwiney campaign, what was still remembered a century later was the gift of this doll.⁸³ This stood in stark contrast to the Irish republicans, who expressed gratitude for the support but simultaneously maintained their distance from the Catalan nationalists.

At that time, Mary O’Brien was entirely focused on circulating a portrait of MacSwiney painted by a Spanish artist, which was intended to help raise funds.⁸⁴ In addition to distributing propaganda, O’Brien translated into Spanish several articles by Erskine Childers and Darrell Figgis and compiled them in the book *La tragedia de Irlanda* [The Tragedy of Ireland].⁸⁵ After nearly half a year in Madrid, she realized that making friends there was proving more difficult. “I find the Catalans much more satisfactory to deal with in every way than the Castilians.”⁸⁶ One of the matters, in her view, was not being a man as “in Spain (of all countries) it is a disadvantage to be represented by a woman, for girls and women are treated as dolls and, if they claim to be taken seriously, are thought disagreeable.”⁸⁷

By the time, the Dáil’s department of Propaganda considered that Mary O’Brien did not have sufficient funds to rent a space that would make a better impression. And that the fact she was a woman hindered her ability to achieve greater results, even though she was “exceptionally clever and devoted.” Therefore, Robert Brennan agreed with Gavan Duffy that although she should remain at the office, it was necessary to appoint a man as “Representative or Consul.” Mary also needed staff under her supervision.⁸⁸

The department’s analysis was that “Spain is very important and promising as a field for Irish Propaganda, a rich country, a rising country, probably with a future before it; the mother country of South America and Mexico, which borrow their ideas largely from Spain.” Moreover, “Spain is the natural ally of Ireland. The people of all classes seem to have a strong traditional sympathy and

friendship for Ireland; although owing to English propaganda and intimation to the activity, English Consuls, etc., this friendship remains largely non-vocal.”

The department assumed “this sympathy may be founded partly on the traditional kinship of the people, and the existence of very many Irish and exiled noble families in Spain from the 16th to the 17th centuries, but its strength is, I think, due principally to the fact that catholicity is a dominating factor in the life of both countries, and that both are hostile to and are wronged by England. The sympathy for Ireland seems to be especially strong among the clergy and the nobility.” However, “Irish history, even [the] geography of Ireland[,] is almost completely unknown.”⁸⁹

Religion was also another key element. “The fact that the Irish question, although not a religious question, very great Catholic issues are involved. For instance, ours is a fight between a Masonry and a Catholic nation. The fact that the Irish Catholic Nation is the source and centre and largely the spiritual support of the Catholic Church over the whole English-speaking world. This fact I say if well put forward would have great weight.”

The pursuit of Spanish recognition and support was carried out, although Spain was a monarchy, overlooking that the Irish independence movement was largely anti-monarchist (Jones 2022, 262–88). Conversely, it capitalized on Spain’s neutrality during the First World War — a neutral ally, as De Valera would have intended Ireland to be, had the decision been in his hands.

Regarding Catalan nationalism, there had been an “attempt made and with certain success to confound Irish case and Irish movement with that of Viscaya [Basque nationalism, using the name of one of the Basque provinces] and Catalonia, and even to represent the I.R.A. as akin to the Socialist and Anarchical party of Barcelona, this is a factor that works on prejudices with the Church and Catholic Party.” Hence although the great popularity of the Irish movement in Catalonia and the Basque Country was “an impediment” to the Irish interests in Madrid, “it could nevertheless probably be utilised for commercial purposes.”⁹⁰ But, again, the aim was not to promote those other nationalisms. All in all, then, the goal was to establish “a strong centre in Madrid; for Madrid is the place that counts, and the Madrid papers carry principal weight,” and would be “positive” to have consuls in Barcelona and Bilbao.⁹¹

On October 25, 1921, *La Veu de Catalunya* commemorated the first anniversary of MacSwiney’s death. The publication used a fragment of Rovira’s introduction to Negre Balet’s pamphlet. It also included an article where the lawyer recounted that the mayor’s widow sent him a letter in which she expressed his aim to visit Catalonia to personally thank the Catalan people for their expressions of affection. That letter has not been found.⁹²

Once again, during the months of October and November, commemorative events were held.⁹³ For instance, Els Nets dels Almogàvers Nationalist Youth unveiled portraits of the national poet Jacint Verdaguer and of MacSwiney.⁹⁴ At the initiative of the activist Domènec Latorre, 23 organizations petitioned the Barcelona City Council to name a street in the city after the deceased.⁹⁵ One month later, the council approved renaming *Negrevernís* Street in the Sant Gervasi district to “Mayor of Cork,” but the change was never implemented.⁹⁶

Discussion

The events of the last year, and especially the autumn of 1920, were primarily driven by nationalist entities and organizations. Some were affiliated with the Lliga Regionalista and the UFNR, and to a lesser extent with non-nationalist republicanism. However, the ones who truly mobilized and spearheaded the MacSwiney campaign were the Catalan separatists. The youth nationalist groups associated mostly with the Unió Catalanista were particularly active.

Nevertheless, despite the media impact of their actions, the number of separatist youth activists was small. Moreover, they lacked institutional power or influence in major organizations, except for CADCI. As a result, the campaign in support of the Mayor of Cork took on an idealistic and emotional tone but lacked a clear strategic objective. That is, by aligning Catalan nationalism with the Irish cause, the intent was to signal participation in a broader anti-imperial struggle — Spain

viewed by the separatists as an oppressive empire like the British. Yet, this propaganda was largely for domestic consumption within Catalonia and had minimal potential for international outreach. The separatist delegates stationed in European or American capitals were few and operated with very limited resources.

However, the regionalist movement, which governed the Mancomunitat under the presidency of Josep Puig i Cadafalch, lacked a clear diplomatic policy toward foreign powers. The goal of conservative Catalanism was not to break away from Spain, nor even to overthrow King Alfonso XIII, but rather to reform the existing regime to achieve a greater degree of autonomy — an autonomy statute being the optimal aim. This had been attempted at the end of World War I, during the autumn of 1918 and the winter of 1919, but without success. Subsequently, the push for autonomy was placed in the background to focus instead on controlling and repressing the labor movement and anarcho-syndicalism, in alignment with successive Spanish governments.

Thus, the regionalists participated in the main events dedicated to MacSwiney, but the parallels they drew between the Catalan and Irish nationalist movements were aimed at strengthening their position within Spain and emphasizing that Catalonia was a nation deserving of self-government. The stance of the Lliga's leaders within the Mancomunitat was therefore very different from that of the Sinn Féin leaders in the Dáil Éireann.

These latter acted with a clear political purpose. Despite the shortcomings of their diplomacy in terms of experience and resources, their efforts were significantly more professional than those of the Catalan nationalists. When discussing the global impact of MacSwiney's hunger strike and death, much emphasis is placed on the Catalan campaign. However, as this article demonstrates, that was not truly the objective of De Valera's men.

After the Dáil approved the Anglo-Irish Treaty, the situation changed. Mary O'Brien sided with De Valera and joined the anti-Treaty ranks, leaving Madrid to return to Ireland.⁹⁷ As a result, the Dáil was left without a representative in the Spanish capital. Even though, from the early 1920s, sectors of Spanish Catholic opinion had started to view Ireland more favorably, emphasising religious affinity as a basis for closer relations (Jaspe 2008). This gradual shift facilitated the first, albeit limited, diplomatic contacts in 1924 and culminated in the formal establishment of a Spanish consulate in Dublin in 1927. Otherwise, the Irish Free State appointed Leopold Kearney as its representative in Spain in the early 1930s (Whelan 2019, 103–10; Jaspe 2011).

In Catalonia, the Mancomunitat sent a message to the Irish representatives congratulating them on the achievement of the Anglo-Irish Treaty (Fanning 2013, 247–57).⁹⁸ But the Irish Civil War disrupted the frameworks of all branches of Catalan nationalism. The perception of Ireland was no longer as clear as it had been (Esculies, 2024). In September 1923, Spain (and therefore Catalonia) entered the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera, and over the following seven years, its political landscape also shifted. By the time the 1930s began, the mirror game, the political interests, and the dynamics had changed.

As this article has shown, Irish propaganda efforts in Spain, together with the diplomatic initiatives undertaken around the hunger strike of the Lord Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney, contributed to advancing Ireland's cause and to sowing the first seeds of a stable diplomatic relationship between the British dominion and Spain. Nevertheless, the immediate benefits — at least insofar as the existing documentation reveals — were limited. It was not until the second half of the 1920s that the first tangible results began to emerge.

The article has also demonstrated that Sinn Féin benefited from the overt sympathy and mobilisation of various currents within Catalan nationalism. Yet this support generated a degree of discomfort among Irish republicans, whose strategic priority was to shape Spanish public opinion at large and to influence the attitudes of the country's political elites. In future articles, the continuity of this relationship between the various branches of Irish and Catalan nationalism, as well as the broader British and Spanish imperial context in which it unfolded, will be examined.

Disclosure. None.

Notes

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- 9 Antoni Rovira i Virgili, “La lluita anglo-irlandesa,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 20 August 1920, 9.
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- 14 *La Publicidad*, “La huelga de hambre,” 2 September 1920, 1.
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- 25 *La Veu de Catalunya*, “La millor ofrena,” 16 September 1920, 6; “Per la llibertat d’Irlanda,” 16 September 1920, 9.
- 26 Blai, “Els dos rams,” *La Veu de Catalunya*, 10 September 1920, 8; “Polítiques,” 15 November 1920, 6. X [sic]; “Els patriotes,” *El Baix Penedès*, 11 September 1920, 1; “Els màrtirs de la patria,” *La Campana de Gràcia*, 11 September 1920, 2.
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