

# Book Review: A People's History of Catalonia by Michael Eaude (Pluto Press, 2022)

Sunday 26 February 2023, by [ANGLO Brian](#) (Date first published: 25 February 2023).

## Contents

- [The Working Class Moves \(...\)](#)
- [Moving on to the more recent](#)

Catalonia is a major international tourist destination with enticing options for almost all tastes and most pockets, so it's likely that quite a few people on the left will have been there already or may go there in the future. If you are one of these, then this book is certain to enrich your experience, but it is also a good introduction for anyone interested in the evolution of this little corner of the Iberian Peninsula, where political developments occasionally have an impact beyond its boundaries.

While supplying the background and context necessary to understand the many movements from below that have helped to shape the country as it is today, Mike\* examines each upswell of discontent and rebellion in its own terms, furnishing insight into the motives and aims of those involved.

At the same time, he does a valuable job debunking "the founding myths and falsifications of the Catalan ruling class" promoted to further current policies, while "rebutting the attacks on Catalonia" by Spanish nationalists. In other words, Mike unashamedly takes the side of the ordinary people - peasants, artisans, workers- against their oppressors whether from near or afar. In this sense, the book, although written with a foreign, essentially English-speaking, readership in mind, intervenes into a range of ongoing debates and would also be of benefit to many Catalans.

When did Catalonia come into existence as a nation is a question that exercises both some of those who seek to base present-day calls for independence on the supposed emergence of such a status a thousand years ago and those who challenge this claim... or do not see it as relevant. Mike rightly traces a gradual, intermittent, non-linear process from the early 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. For instance, he remarks cautiously that with the Usatges (laws formally, if not very effectively, limiting nobles' feudal powers) "a distinct Catalan identity began to form".

Advancing to the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with Catalonia now part of the Crown of Aragon, but with the Count of Barcelona "king in all but name", Mike doesn't shrink from lambasting its merciless expansionism as it drove out the Moorish ruling class of the Balearic Islands and Valencia, killing huge numbers and enslaving the remaining population. With Sicily, Sardinia and Naples, as well as, albeit briefly, Athens, conquered later on, these are seen by some contemporary Catalan nationalists as feats to be proud of, even though, in addition to the destruction wreaked on foreigners, "the death and impoverishment of swathes of the country's inhabitants did not halt Catalonia's rulers' expansionist ambitions".

One of the key events examined is the siege of Barcelona, which began on 15 July 1713 at the tail end of the War of Spanish Succession (Britain and the Netherlands for Charles of Austria versus France for Philip V of Spain). On 3 September 1714, the Duke of Berwick, commander of the

besieging Bourbon forces, offered peace terms. Writing in 1978, a Catalan historian “glorifies the City Government for rejecting the offer”. However, as Mike points out, “[d]espite the population’s extreme physical and numerical weakness” it was “the mass of the city’s inhabitants” who “forced the City Government to resist”, having good reason not to trust the attackers’ promises of clemency. Having been left in the lurch by England, the city was finally overcome by Philip V’s troops on 11 September 1714, the date that is now commemorated as Catalonia’s national day.

The examination of modern-day takes on the meaning of this episode also rejects certain “centralist” (Spanish nationalist) interpretations according to which the Catalans were not fighting for their rights, but for who would be king of Spain (not mutually exclusive); they were divided among themselves (true, but the split was mainly along class lines); the repression has been exaggerated (in fact, it was “thorough, but selective for good political reasons”); and the New Plan decree was not particularly oppressive (even if all of Catalonia’s political institutions and foral laws were abolished). On one point, though, these critics are perhaps not completely wrong: as with many other historical events, most Catalan nationalists, both right and left, tend to over-romanticise it.

## **The Working Class Moves Centre Stage**

This is the title of Part II, which is even more gripping as we are introduced to the successive waves of revolt from below that swept through Barcelona (later christened “the rose of fire”) and other industrial towns from the second third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards.

Besides the drama and the heroics, we are also told of the day-to-day life of the subordinate layers of society. In 1852 a doctor “reported that men women and children worked 12 or 13 hours a day in premises contaminated by dyes and without ventilation”. Catalonia suffered major cholera epidemics in 1833, 1854, 1865 and 1885. In Barcelona, “[l]ife expectancy averaged 36 years for the rich and 23 for the poor, if figures for children who died before the age of six are included” (half those of the poor, a third of those of the rich).

When reserve troops were called up in July 1909 to protect the Spanish ruling class’s interests in northern Morocco, it provoked a riot led by their wives and mothers. “Rejection of conscription was a class question”, since the rich could buy themselves out, but also a national question, “for Catalans did not see why they should fight wars on behalf of the Madrid government”. Not for the first time, nor the last, the intermingling of class and nation made for a powerful mix in what became “a leaderless uprising”, with numerous barricades, the burning of churches, and proclamation of the Republic in several towns.

However, in the end it was class interests that prevailed among the well-to-do. “The Setmana tràgica drove a wedge between the city’s working class and nationalists”, as prominent bourgeois Catalan-nationalist nationalist figures, whose aspirations did not go much beyond obtaining a little more leeway from the Spanish state, “called on the Spanish Prime Minister to crush the revolt with utmost severity”.

The following year the anarcho-syndicalist National Labour Federation, CNT, was founded, and various sections of the book focus on tracing its history as a central, but “grievously anti-political”, actor during the succeeding turbulent years until the traumatic defeat of the Republic by Franco’s army (with more than a little help from his friends).

Many people on the left will have some knowledge of (and opinions about) the Spanish Civil War. The book naturally concentrates on Catalonia, “Cradle of the Spanish Revolution”, as the title of one chapter puts it, where mass armed participation thwarted the attempted coup, self-organisation of

the working class flourished and, in Andreu Nin's words, "crudely posed the problem of power".

Even on complicated subjects, Mike is not afraid to offer clear positions, such as the assertion that "the revolution was over on 26 September, when the CNT and POUM entered the Generalitat government" (headed by the Republican Left of Catalonia, a centre-left, petit-bourgeois nationalist party enjoying mass support). He is quick to add, though: "It didn't feel like that at the time," and seems to allow that the "civil war within the Civil War" in early May 1937 in Barcelona, with the former two organisations resisting attacks by central government forces, was perhaps a last chance to reverse the counter-revolution. Again, a definite view is put forward: "the anarchist ministers [in the central government] intervened decisively to demobilise the resistance." This is just one of the many points that lend themselves to further exploration and debate.

### **Moving on to the more recent past**

A peculiar feature of Catalonia's economic growth in the Franco period was mass immigration from other parts of Spain, particularly the south, to work in industry and construction. In 1970, over a third of the population had been born elsewhere in the Spanish State. Especially striking, beyond the mere numbers involved, was their combativity, alongside the rest of the Catalan working class, and their ready acceptance of slogans such as "Freedom, Amnesty, Statute of Autonomy", both aspects well illustrated by descriptions of various strikes and demonstrations.

As the story evolves towards the present day, it tracks a fresh upsurge of Catalan nationalism, independentism and sovereigntism (not necessarily all the same thing). In 2006, at the initiative of the Catalan Socialist Party, the Catalan parliament overwhelmingly passed a new statute that would give the Autonomous Community appreciably greater powers. Although these were substantially curtailed by the Spanish parliament, the resulting text was nevertheless confirmed by referendum. Four years later, at the behest of the Popular Party, it was further weakened by the Constitutional Court, sparking huge demonstrations then and in subsequent years.

Eventually another referendum was called, this time asking straight out: "Do you want Catalonia to be an independent state in the form of a republic?" Despite the central government's heavy-handed attempts to prevent it, it went ahead on 1 October 2017, "in a triumph of local, non-centralised organisation", not all of whose participants, or even those who voted Yes, regarded themselves as nationalists.

The result was clear, but the Catalan government, made up of right-wing and centre-left nationalists, supported on certain specific issues by the far-left, pro-independence CUP, had made no preparations to go any further and its delayed declaration of independence was unable to withstand the resolute repression with which it was met by the Spanish government. The possibility (however slight) of a break with the regime that emerged from the so-called "transition to democracy" following Franco's death failed to materialise and the effects of this missed opportunity are still acutely felt in Catalan politics and society today.

This is a thoroughly researched, entertainingly written account of a small nation's history, full of little details that light up the big picture, foregrounding the role of "the people", the subordinate classes struggling not just to get by from one day to the next, but every so often rebelling openly against their exploitation and oppression up to, and including, the modern interplay of the workers' and pro-independence movements.

To sum up: not just politically informative and stimulating, but also highly enjoyable.

## **Brian Anglo**

*A People's History of Catalonia* by Michael Eaude (Pluto Press) can be purchased here:

<https://www.plutobooks.com/9780745342139/a-peoples-history-of-catalonia/>

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## **P.S.**

- Anti\*Capitalist Resistance. 25 Feb 2023.

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/a-peoples-history-of-catalonia-by-michael-eaude-pluto-press-2022/>

- Declaration of interest: The book's author and this reviewer have known each other for several decades since we were both on the Iberian Commission of the International Marxist Group in Britain in the 1970s. Today, after slightly divergent political paths, we are together again as members of Anticapitalistes, the organisation of the Fourth International in Catalonia.