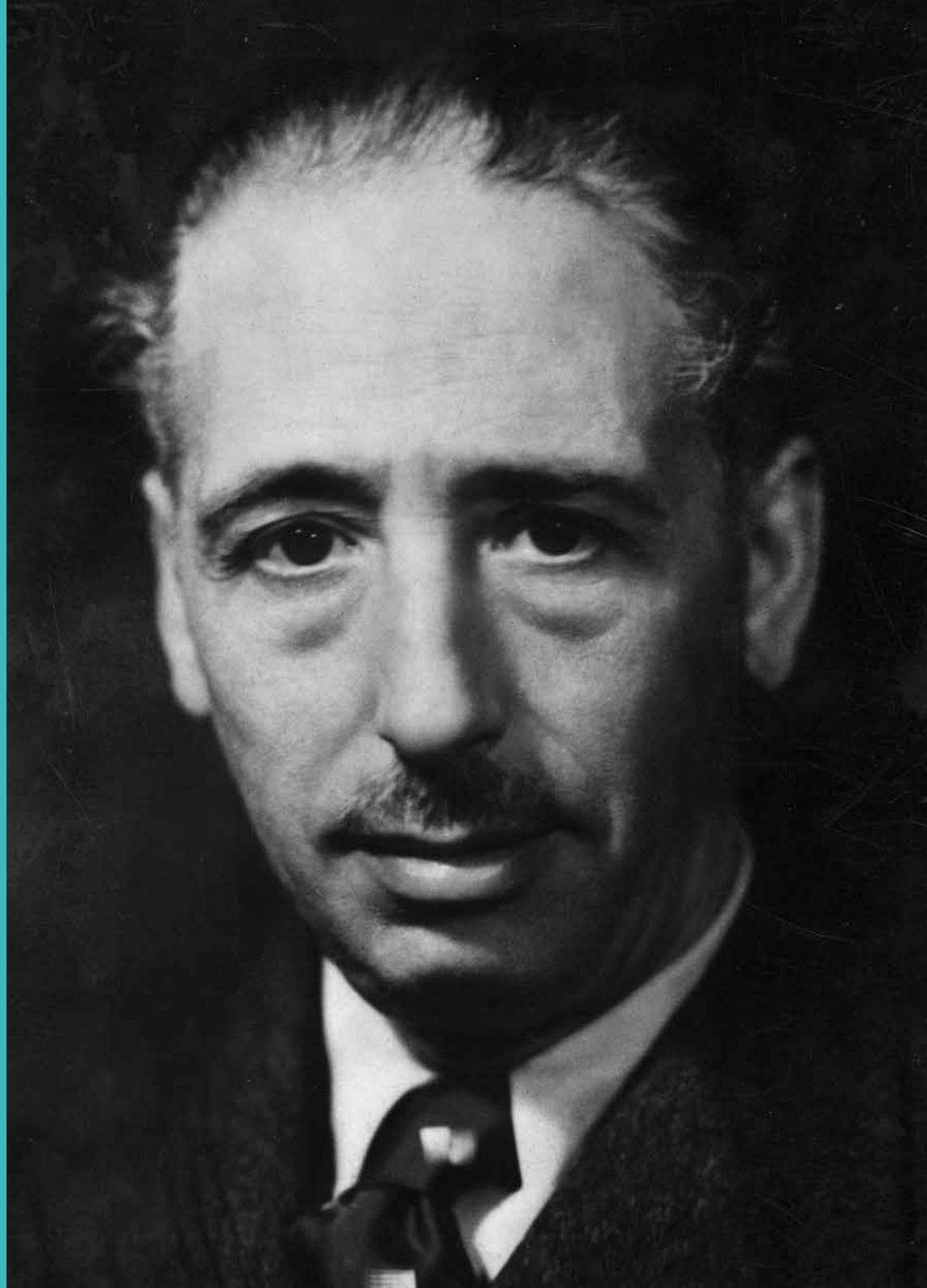


POLITICAL LIVES  
#02

# LLUÍS COMPANYS

1882 · 1940



**Barcelona, March 7th, 1937**

President of Catalonia Lluís Companys at a rally during the Spanish Civil War.

MERLETTI / FUNDACIÓ JOSEP IRLA



# LLUÍS COMPANYS, POLITICALLY ACTIVE TO THE VERY END 1882-1940

This is a **short biography** of Lluís Companys the only democratically elected president to be executed during the Second World War.

The son of a wealthy landowner, Companys would later become a close friend of anarchists and trade unionists at a time of revolutionary upheaval.

He worked as a **journalist, labour lawyer, union organiser**, town councillor and member of parliament (MP) before becoming the **president of Catalonia**.

He survived imprisonment in Madrid and Minorca and **exile in occupied France**, where he was arrested by the German military police, and **deported to Franco's Spain**. There he was given a summary court martial and **shot on the grounds of Barcelona's Montjuïc castle**.

Franco was so concerned that Companys's prestige would turn him into **a Catalan national martyr**, that he and his regime did their utmost to keep his execution secret for nearly four decades.

**EDITOR** JOSEP VALL

**HISTORICAL CONSULTANT** JOSEP MARIA SOLÉ I SABATÉ

**ENGLISH VERSION** MATTHEW TREE



**Circa 1895**

Lluís Companys (far right) with his brother Josep; his sisters Alba and Neus; and his uncle Sebastià, in a studio photograph.

COMPANYS FAMILY

## FORMATIVE YEARS

### 1882-1900

**Lluís Companys was born on June 21st, 1882, in the little village of El Tarròs**, in the canton of Urgell in western Catalonia. He came from a well-off family of landowners. The Urgell canton at the time was going through a period of change, with new irrigation channels being supplied with water from the recently built Urgell canal. This created problems for farmers who until then had been used to cultivating a completely different type of crop, and now had to adapt to the new situation.

**Companys's parents brought their eight children up to believe in liberal, Republican values.** He and his siblings were entitled to inherit the rank of baronet from his mother's family, the "de Jover", who came from the nearby catalan town of Tàrrrega. They relinquished the title, and eliminated the aristocratic 'de' from their names.

**The priest in El Tarròs taught Companys to read and write**, although his very first classes were given by the village schoolteacher, who would go to the Companys's house, where Lluís studied together with the rest of his siblings.

When still a child, **one of his playmates was Salvador Seguí**, the son of tenant farmers who worked on the Companys estate. **Seguí would later become one of the most important trade union leaders** in Cata-

lonia, where his sobriquet "Sugar Boy" (Noi del Sucre) would become a household name.

Lluís Companys, the second oldest child, had a deeply rooted attachment to the land, which would influence him both personally and politically throughout his life, even though when he was as young as nine he was sent to a non-denominational boarding school, **the Polyglot Lycée of Barcelona, where he met and became a lifelong friend of the future labour lawyer Francesc Layret** (also destined to become a household name), who came from the capital's educated and liberal upper middle classes.

In 1897, he began studying to become a notary at the **University of Barcelona**, with a view to eventually becoming a fully-fledged lawyer. **In 1905 he completed his notarial studies, and in 1916 he passed his law exam.**

1906-1917

Headings of the most important publications (some in Catalan, some in Spanish) for which Lluís Companys worked as a journalist.

ARXIU HISTÒRIC DE LA CIUTAT DE BARCELONA



El rey ha encargado a Sanchez Toca la formación de ministerio. Melquiades Alvarez y Cambó le niegan su concurso. -- El país ha negado hace tiempo a todos los hombres de la Monarquía

**Nuestra conducta**  
El grupo de obreros, comunistas de nuevo género, repugnantes por sus ideas e ideales por su espíritu, sus métodos, sus fines, sus aspiraciones revolucionarias.

**Revisado**  
El grupo de obreros, comunistas de nuevo género, repugnantes por sus ideas e ideales por su espíritu, sus métodos, sus fines, sus aspiraciones revolucionarias.

**Del ambiente**  
El ambiente de la ciudad de Barcelona, en estos días, es de una gran actividad política y social.

# A REPUBLICAN JOURNALIST AND POLITICIAN

## 1900-1910

**The Catalan Industrial Revolution**, which began towards the end of the first half of the 19th century, transformed the economy, which until then had been largely agricultural. These changes gave rise to the first **social movements of a progressive and federalist nature, with democratic and republican roots** that were linked, in their turn to the new ideas that were now spreading across Europe.

The same period saw the beginnings of what has come to be known as the **Catalan Cultural Renaissance** ("Renaixença"), which took place at the same time as the Italian Risorgimento and the independence of modern Greece. The Cultural Renaissance would later develop into a **process of national awakening**, whose most important political manifestations were the Congress of Federalist Republicans in 1883, and the 1892 Manresa Guidelines (a kind of road map for achieving Catalan autonomy): the first two events ever that included a defence of Catalonia's political aspirations.

Lluís Companys's first incursion into politics was inspired by the underlying principles of these movements: in 1900 **he founded the Republican Schools Association**—aimed at disseminating culture and republicanism among students and high school pupils— together with his university friends Francesc Layret, the future politician and doctor Humbert Torres, and the future lawyer Josep Maria Espanya (who hailed from the Val

D'Aran, the small Occitan-speaking canton of Catalonia). Together **they published the weekly magazine *La Defensa Escolar*** (In Defence of Schools), in which Companys made **his debut as a journalist**, a profession he would exercise for the next two decades in a variety of left-wing and republican publications.

Once his students days were over, his political convictions brought him into active contact with a number of brand-new left-leaning Catalanist political parties until he finally became a member of the **Republican Nationalist Federal Union** (UFNR in its Catalan acronym), led, among others, by the well-known writer Pere Coromines (who would later be forced into Argentinian exile by Franco). Companys became the **president of the youth section of the UFNR**.

Barcelona, December 8th, 1917

Lluís Companys, Francesc Layret —labour lawyer killed in 1920 by employers' gunmen—  
and others at a homage to the politician and writer —and later a republican minister in Madrid—  
Marcel·lí Domingo, in the Palace of Fine Arts.

BRANGULÍ / ARXIU NACIONAL DE CATALUNYA



# LABOUR LAWYER, TOWN COUNCILLOR, AND MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT

## 1910-1926

In 1914, a conservative-minded Catalanist party called the Regionalist League made a major political breakthrough when it created the **Mancomunitat de Catalunya** (Catalan Provincial Alliance), a **supraprovincial governing body** which, led by the journalist and politician Enric Prat de la Riba, pooled the resources of the four Catalan provincial administrations, thus ushering in a decade of improved social, cultural and territorial infrastructure for the whole of Catalonia (and not just piecemeal reforms in the separate provinces, as had been the case until then).

Lluís Companys, after a short stint with a Spain-wide Republican party, became a member of the Catalan-based **Autonomist Republican Bloc** (founded by his old friend Francesc Layret, among others). After fusing with several other smaller parties, the Bloc evolved into the more prominent **Catalan Republican Party** (Partit Republicà Català, PRC)..

The PRC, in an odd alliance with a Spain-wide populist party which was anything but pro-Catalan, fielded candidates in the 1917 municipal elections. Companys was elected **councillor in Barcelona** for District Five, one of the city's largest **working-class neighbourhoods**.

**Catalonia had by now become a rising industrial power**, but was ridden with major social and econo-

mic conflicts. The Spanish state and **Catalan industrialists hired gunmen to eliminate leading trade unionists**; the trade unions, notably the Anarcho-sindicalist CNT, responded in kind.

h

It was **in this violent climate that Companys, being a labour lawyer, was arrested** together with his childhood friend Salvador Seguí and other trade unionists, and deported to the Mola Castle, in Maó, the capital of Minorca. Not long after **Francesc Layret** (now a lawyer and member of the Spanish parliament) announced he was going to prepare their defence, he **was murdered by hired gunmen** working for a phony trade union association set up by Catalan employers in cahoots with elements of the Spanish military, which was called —with no apparent irony— the "Free Trade Union".

The person who was next in line for the parliamentary seat, which Layret's murder had left vacant, was none other than Lluís Companys. **As an MP in the Spanish parliament, he was granted immunity and released from prison**. In Madrid he denounced the reign of terror recently unleashed by Catalonia's notorious military governor (Severiano Martínez Anido) and its equally notorious police chief (Miguel Arlegui), who had given orders to their subordinates to murder arrested trade union activists and then claim that the latter had been "shot while trying to escape".

# LA TERRA

La fermosa i serena contra tots els embats de la vida és una de les més racionals qualitats de l'home que lluita. La prova ben patent que el nostre Director n'ha donat sempre i particularment en aquesta mençió crítica, el fan dignes de la nostra apreciació i de la distingida consideració dels catalans. Així procedeixen els homes.

Portaveu de la Unió de Rabassaires de Catalunya

DIRECTOR: LLUIS COMPANYS

REDACCIÓ I ADMINISTRACIÓ: CARDERS, 12. 1.ª - BARCELONA - ANY III - NÚM. 65 - BARCELONA, 21 DE JUNY DE 1924 - 15 CÈNTIMS

## Una nova manifestació de simpatia

“La Terra” saluda amb entusiasme la rehabilitació del seu Director i li dedica una plena demostració de la seva adhesió i afecte

Així creu interpretar l'unànim sentiment dels llegidors

### Amb el cap i amb el cor

Fins al moment actual no tenim recordeu col·lectiu de l'Onzèima Pini Casals, hagi inclòs aquest Pini Casals en cap dels seus programes.

L'opinió pública es adonarà de la justícia de l'actiu que hem escampat arreu de Catalunya.

La Unió de Rabassaires es distingeix en mig del respecte i fins de la simplicitat de nosaltres els hauríem de crèdits amb i d'única para. Nostre propaganda de serena, d'argumentació i de tolerància es produïa els seus fruits. La Unió de Rabassaires no és un conglomerat de passions estabides sinó un instrument de dialèctica de treball i de llei al contrari: de força constructiva, afecç i renovadora.

En les coses que els nostres adversaris se les pensen més per tal d'estranyar la nostra i de nostra conducta i la serena i normalitat ferma de la nostra propaganda.

En les coses que amb tota l'afecçió volem catalogar-nos com a valerosos agudats amplexos. Confiam sense dubte que el Poder Públic, per la feua del moment i l'afecç del treball no tindrà ocasió ni temps per a interessar-se com cal i acabarà com és degut: el nostre ideal, nostre procediment a una persecució arbitrària.

Però, tant se val i més potria succeir una volta a l'espasa, a quatre, però a la fi no tindem altre sentit que recombrar que nostres solucions, escampades en un no de escriptors com una veu al bon senty podien haver sigut l'instrument més eficaç de la pau pública si a haguéssim aplicat a temps. Tal veu, quan vulguem fer-ho, no n'hi hem però amb consell i que ara és demana amb tanta menys i tan malament correspona.

Quèten, amics, de conservar la serenitat i no sentir del marge tolerància de les nostres campanyes. Fent-ho així no hi voldrem les malalties de l'adversari. En llibertat o sense llibertat no hem de perdre el desiri de nostre cervell ni de desfer la ferocia de nostre consciència. L'home premsat i honorat de més estabulament és que no pas aquella classe que vivia la premissa. L'home que té consciència plena de la realitat dels seus actes té en el país

### EL NOSTRE DIRECTOR



En Lluís Companys Jover

### L'oportunitat de l'homenatge

El nostre hom a l'Pla, aquest impostor i dilatat d'idees que ens ha donat la para de “La Terra” i amb interpretat tan bé l'actiu i amplexos al gust dels rabassaires, acaba d'estranyar, per a ésser entès a primera vista l'aspecte número, un article retallat el nostre cor amb amplexos.

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de la seva consciència, veu que estiga entre elles, una manifestació un altre que no podem dir els d'única veu que posa de llibertat i de privilegis. Tinguem, amics, plena confiança en que el Poder n'actua més que més justícia no fema.

Moltes mercès als bons rabassaires i al

nos companys que tenen tant la feua que els d'única veu que posa de llibertat i de privilegis. Tinguem, amics, plena confiança en que el Poder n'actua més que més justícia no fema.

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Moltes mercès als bons rabassaires i al

LLUIS COMPANYS

June 21st, 1924

La Terra (The Land)

—founded and edited by Lluís Companys— was the organ of the Catalan Wine Growers' Union.

ARXIU HISTÒRIC

DE LA CIUTAT DE BARCELONA

# AGRARIAN LABOUR LEADER

## 1921-1931

**Wine growers and many other farmworkers** in Catalonia were subject to contracts that limited their use of the land they cultivated, which **was in the hands of wealthy landowners**. This made life precarious for thousands of viticulturists, who formed their own union with the aim of making it possible for them to become the proprietors of their respective parcels of land.

Companys, as MP for the **district of Sabadell, where there was a significant number of wine growers and other farmworkers** subject to the same problematic conditions, threw himself into the fight for their rights, throughout the 1920s.

Which was why Companys **founded and organised the Wine Growers' Union** (Unió de Rabassaires) in 1922, an agrarian trade union, which eventually came to represent farmworkers all over Catalonia who wished to have full ownership of the land they worked on (it is worth mentioning that the Anarcho-Syndicalist trade union, the CNT—which enjoyed huge support in other sectors of the economy in Catalonia—was opposed to the Wine Growers' Union, believing as it did that all arable land had to be collectivised).

Also in 1922, Companys **became a Freemason**, a step taken by many people in republican circles at the time. Freemasonry, however, was to have little overall impact on his life.

Spain's colonial ventures into North Africa met with a serious setback near the Moroccan town of Annual, when **Spanish troops were defeated by the Rif Valley militia of Abd-el-Krim**. The political crisis that followed in the wake of this defeat, dealt a severe blow to **King Alfonso XIII's monarchical regime**. In September of 1923, the King stepped down, but **gave his blessing to a military takeover** led by the far-right general Miguel Primo de Rivera.

**Primo de Rivera's dictatorship suppressed political parties** throughout Spain, and **persecuted Catalanist and left-wing activists**; it also **abolished the regional protogovernment** of the Mancomunitat de Catalunya, **and banned the public use of the Catalan language and even of the Catalan flag**.

Removed from parliament after the coup d'état, Companys concentrated on **his work as editor in chief of the periodical *La Terra***, which was the organ of the Catalan Wine Growers' Union. This publication became vital to their cause, especially after 1926, when the dictatorship, as part of measures taken against trade unions everywhere, suppressed that of the Catalan Wine Growers.

## Barcelona, April 12th, 1931

Lluís Companys together with Francesc Macià (who would soon be the first 20th century president of Catalonia) and Jaume Aiguader (who would soon be mayor of Barcelona).

They are at a polling station in the Barcelona district of Gràcia, where Companys was standing for election.

JOSEP MARIA SAGARRA / ARXIU NACIONAL DE CATALUNYA



# THE FOUNDING OF THE REPUBLICAN LEFT OF CATALONIA 1931

Whatever credibility Primo de Rivera's dictatorship might have enjoyed at home and abroad was soon lost due to the regime's recourse to violent repressive measures. This also affected the prestige of the monarchy, which had ushered in the regime. Companys **confronted the dictatorship** by taking part in several different political projects: these **activities landed him in jail**, not for the first time.

Between the March 17th and 19th, 1931, in the working-class district of Sants in Barcelona, a Catalan left-wing Congress was held, which resulted in **the founding of the Republican Left of Catalonia** (Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya, ERC) which would eventually become by far the most important left-wing party in Catalonia. ERC was a fusion of different parties and tendencies, all left-leaning, some of them represented all over Catalonia and others more local.

**The principles of this new party** were as follows: to achieve the **recognition of national status for Catalonia**; federation with all other Iberian peoples; the **defence of human rights** for all citizens; and the **socialisation of wealth** in a way which would redound to the benefit of the community as a whole. **ERC's social programme promoted the freedom to form trade unions**; the right to strike; a minimum wage; an eight hour working day; compulsory paid holidays; health insurance and pensions after retirement; and the

opening of trade schools. **Francesc Macià** —a highly popular ex-soldier, who had tried to launch a military assault on the Primo de Rivera dictatorship back in the 1920s— **became the leader of ERC.**

**Just three weeks after its formation**, ERC —or Esquerra as it was popularly known— found itself facing **municipal elections**. Concerned that it was not yet consolidated enough to stand alone, it fished around for an ally, eventually finding one in the **Socialist Union of Catalonia**, with which it ran on a joint platform that called for regime change (from a monarchy to a republic); for the attainment of autonomy for Catalonia; and for far-reaching social reforms.

**Barcelona, April 14th, 1931**

Lluís Companys is crowd-surfed into Barcelona Town Hall after a resounding victory in the municipal elections.

JOSEP DOMÍNGUEZ / ARXIU HISTÒRIC DE LA CIUTAT DE BARCELONA



# THREE DAYS IN APRIL: THE REPUBLIC AND THE AUTONOMOUS CATALAN GOVERNMENT 1931

On Sunday April 12th, against all expectations, **workers, artisans and farmworkers voted overwhelmingly for Esquerra**, thanks to its programme promoting radical social reforms, a democratic revival and national freedom. Francesc Macià's charismatic leadership was also an important factor; he had become a symbol for the Catalan people.

**ERC thus became the most important left-wing political party in Catalonia**, enjoying a hegemony which would continue throughout the years of the Republic.

Once the results were known, on Tuesday April 14th, in a daring act inspired by his political intuition, Lluís Companys, from the balcony of Barcelona Town Hall, **declared that the new municipal government was republican**. Not long after, **Francesc Macià announced the creation of the Catalan Republic**, a state which, he affirmed, formed part of the Iberian Federation.

This fait accompli in the Catalan capital was accepted reluctantly by the provisional central government of the new Spanish Republic. Catalonia's future negotiations with Madrid were carried out from a position of strength. **Three days of talks** with the envoys sent by the provisional central government **resulted in the restoration of the Catalan autonomous government**—known as the Generalitat de Catalunya— an institu-

tion which had been suppressed for over 200 years. At its head was the leader of ERC, Francesc Macià.

In the streets, people enthusiastically shouted "Long live Macià, death to Cambó", the latter name referring to the leader of the aforementioned right-wing Regionalist League, a major party which had, however, lost the elections. The **courage and determination shown by the left-wing Catalanists had lost no time in obtaining a degree of political autonomy for Catalonia** which Cambó's conservative faction, despite years of haggling with the Spanish monarchy, had never come close to achieving.

**Barcelona, December 14th, 1932**

Lluís Companys presiding over the Catalan parliament, during the investiture of Francesc Macià as the president of the Generalitat (Catalan Autonomous Government).

LLUÍS TORRENTS / FUNDACIÓ JOSEP IRLA



# CIVIL GOVERNOR, SPEAKER OF THE PARLIAMENT, AND MINISTER FOR THE NAVY

## 1931-1933

Despite the fact that, as leader of the winning electoral roll, **Companys had every right to become Mayor of Barcelona, Macià decided to give that post to another man (Jaume Aiguader)** and appointed Companys civil governor of Barcelona.

**Catalonia still had to negotiate the fine print of its new Statute of Autonomy** (which had been approved with a huge majority in a referendum in August, 1931) with Madrid. Without this Statute, the Generalitat would have had a merely symbolic status. Madrid was expected to drive a hard bargain. ERC thus decided that **Companys, who had acquired a reputation as an efficient negotiator, would be at the head of the electoral roll for the Spanish parliament in June of 1931.** Although the Statute approved by the Catalans was heavily watered down in Madrid, after several debates it was finally approved by the Spanish parliament in September of 1932, and would go on to become a useful tool for developing Catalan autonomy.

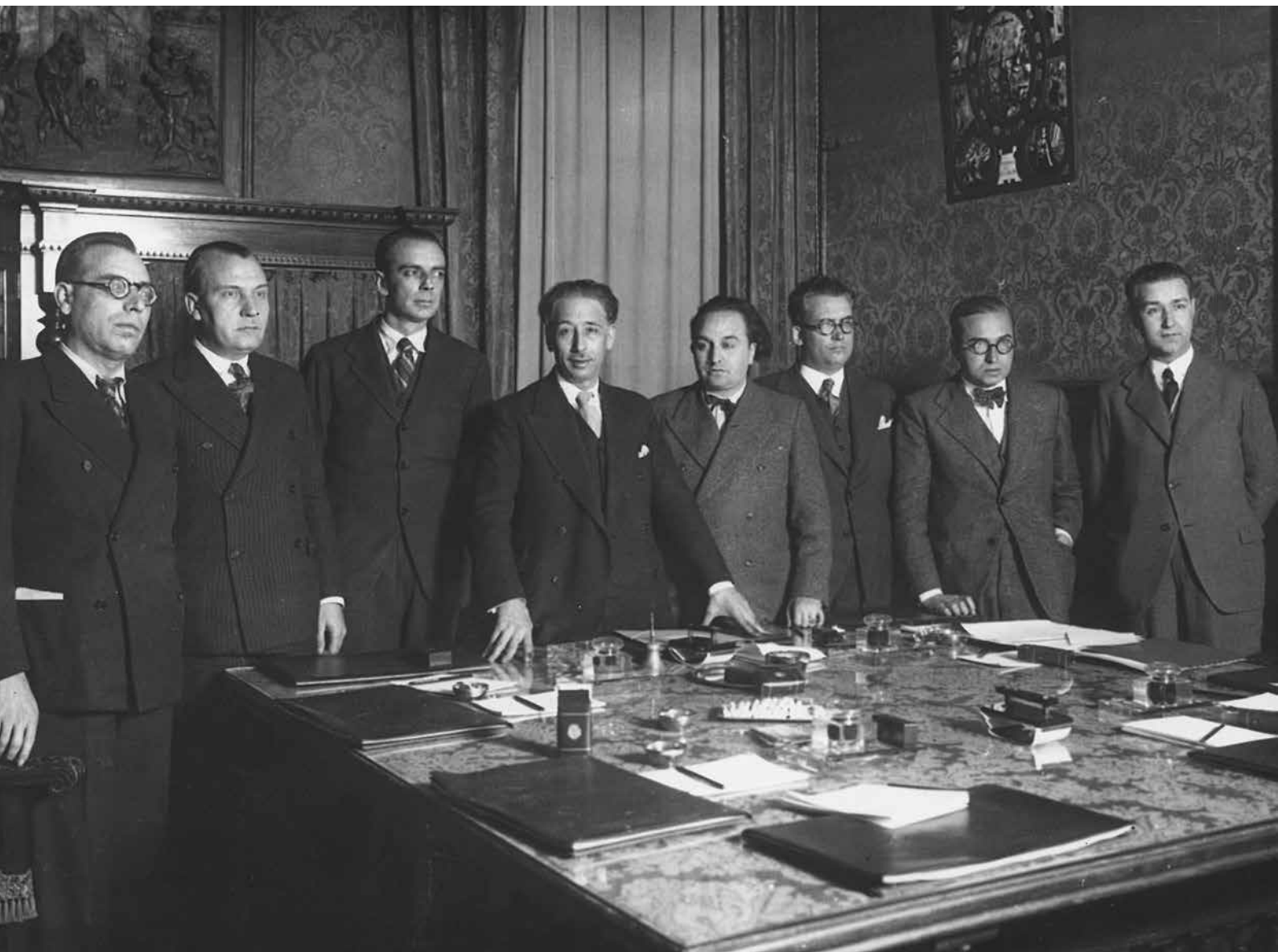
On November 20th, 1932, the **first elections were held for the Catalan parliament.** ERC won them with an absolute majority and Companys became one of the 85 MPs in the new chamber. On December 19th, the new government was constituted, and Companys was chosen to be the **Speaker of the Catalan Parliament.** Francesc Macià was elected president of the Generalitat.

In Madrid, due to the lack of an absolute majority on the part of the Spanish socialists, the left-leaning Catalan parties who had representation in the Spanish Parliament, such as **ERC, played a vital role in governing the Spanish Republic.** When it came to negotiating the transfer of taxes and responsibilities to the Generalitat, Companys's inside knowledge of the Spanish political world proved to be decisive. In June 1933, he was appointed **Minister for the Navy,** an office which didn't result in any advantages for Catalan autonomy, given the uncompromising centralism of the Spanish left. Despite an economic crisis, for example, Catalonia was denied control over employment and public works.

### Barcelona, January 3rd, 1934

The first Catalan government to be headed by Companys including left republicans, socialists and social liberals. From left to right: Joan Comorera, Martí Barrera, Joan Lluhí, Lluís Companys, Ventura Gassol, Joan Selves, Josep Dencàs and Martí Esteve.

LLUÍS TORRENTS / FUNDACIÓ JOSEP IRLA



# PRESIDENT OF THE GENERALITAT AND THE LEADER OF ERC 1933-1934

The unexpected **death of Catalan president Francesc Macià** on Christmas Day, 1933, deeply affected Catalan society. Lluís Companys was considered the only person capable of substituting a high-profile figure like Macià, who had become a national symbol in the Catalan collective imagination. **Companys was surely the best candidate, both because of his close links to the industrial working class and the farmworkers;** and also because of his considerable political experience, something that was appreciated by Catalan republicans of all political colours.

On December 31st, 1933, when **he was sworn in as the president of Catalonia**, Companys declared: *"No matter what the future may bring, I put my life, which is the only thing I can really call my own, at the disposal of Catalonia, of the Republic, of freedom"*.

The political legacy handed down to Companys by Macià was immense. On the one hand **there was an atmosphere of tremendous popular optimism;** on the other, the tangible reality of a Statute of Autonomy; the symbolic recovery and physical refurbishment of the Palace of the Generalitat; a parliament which represented the will of the people; a policy clearly aimed at making the Catalan language official; the return of the Catalan Police Force (known as the "Mossos d'Esquadra"); the Generalitat's control over notaries, civil aviation, the phone network, as well as a full range

of services, responsibilities, and financial resources which Lluís Companys would handle in a reliable and trustworthy fashion.

It should be borne in mind, however, that Companys's mandate as president of the Generalitat coincided with an important political change in Madrid. The Left had lost the elections throughout Spain (outside Catalonia) and **central power had reverted to a right-wing government**, which would stay in power for a further two years, **a period known as the Black Biennium.**

**Madrid, May 28th, 1935**

The government of the Generalitat behind bars, in a cell in the Palace of Justice, during the period of the trial for the Events of October the Sixth.

From left to right: Pere Mestres, Martí Esteve, Lluís Companys, Joan Lluhí, Joan Comorera, Martí Barrera and Ventura Gassol.

FUNDACIÓ JOSEP IRLA



# THE EVENTS OF OCTOBER THE SIXTH 1934-1936

President Companys dealt with a major agricultural crisis in Catalonia at this time, by approving a reform known as the **Farming Contracts Law**, which enabled landless farmworkers to purchase parcels of arable land if they so wished. The law was opposed by rural landowners, and **was denounced by a right-wing Catalan party** (the Lliga Catalana, led by Francesc Cambó) **before the Spanish Court of Constitutional Guarantees, which then declared the law null and void.** The Catalan parliament responded by passing the law for the second time. Finally, an agreement was reached between the Spanish government and the Generalitat, which made possible the approval of a watered-down form of the law.

**Given that the right-wing government in Madrid** clearly had no intention of making any legislative advances regarding social issues, **an important sector of the Spanish Left opted for an insurrectional strategy.** This was triggered on October 4th, when the populist politician Alejandro Lerroux formed a government in Madrid with the ministers from a party called the CEDA, which was not only right-wing but also anti-republican and quasi-fascist. A general strike was declared throughout Spain.

**The government of the Generalitat, presided over by Lluís Companys,** and with the tacit support of the Spanish left-wing parties, confronted the central go-

vernment in the belief that the general strike would be victorious, and **declared —on October 6th, 1934— the existence of a Catalan State within the Spanish Republican Federation,** in a move similar to the one made earlier by Francesc Macià, but which would have more serious consequences.

In Barcelona, the army, led by general Domènec Batet, remained on the side of the central government but avoided a bloodbath, despite orders from Madrid to use violence. Seeing that the insurrection had failed, Companys turned himself in so as to avoid any bloodshed in the future. **The entire government of the Generalitat was placed under arrest,** as were the left-wing city councillors in the Barcelona Town Hall and thousands of republicans all over Catalonia.

**Catalonia's autonomous status was eliminated,** the Catalan parliament was shut down, and Companys and his government, charged with sedition, were sentenced to 30 years of jail.



February 1936

One of the posters from the successful campaign of the Left Front. The poster reads: "For Catalan dignity, vote for the Left Front".

CRISTÓBAL ARTECHE /  
BIBLIOTECA DEL PAVELLÓ  
DE LA REPÚBLICA

# THE LEFT FRONT

## 1936

As the months passed, **Catalan public opinion** was dominated more and more by a **feelings of indignation at the suspension of the autonomous government** and the imprisonment of its most prestigious leaders and of thousands of other republicans.

Companys, a keen observer of political developments in Catalonia, Spain and around the world, **decided — when still in prison— to set up a Left Front**, which would include all Catalan organisations opposed to the current Spanish right-wing government's rejection of democracy. The Left Front thus became the Catalan equivalent of the Popular Fronts, which were springing up all over Europe at the time, with the aim of stemming the emergent forces of fascism.

New general elections were held in Spain **on February 16th, 1936. The Left Front was hugely successful**, with an amnesty for political prisoners and the **recuperation of Catalonia's autonomous institutions** being the key items on its programme. Support also came from the anarcho-syndicalist organisations, who, while theoretically defending abstention, made known their approval of Companys and his political proposals.

**He received a hero's welcome** when he returned to Catalonia. He had now become a well-known **symbol for both Catalanism and republicanism**. From the balcony of the Generalitat he made a speech which

has since become a legendary trope right up to the present day: ***"We will suffer again, we will fight again, we will be victorious again"***.

The Catalan parliament was reopened, and Companys was sworn in as the president of the Generalitat. **Catalonia became autonomous once more and returned to something approaching 'normality'**. Until July 18th, indeed, it was known throughout Spain as the "republican oasis", that is to say, a peaceful area when compared to the rest of Spain, which was affected by increasingly frequent outbreaks of violence.

**Sariñena, July 15th, 1937**

President Companys reviewing Catalan republican troops at the Aragonese front.

LLUÍS TORRENTS / FUNDACIÓ JOSEP IRLA



# CONFRONTING REVOLUTION AND CIVIL WAR

## 1936-1939

On July 18th, 1936, **General Franco led a coup d'état against the Republic.**

Barcelona was the only major city in the Spanish state in which **the rebel forces lost in open combat on the streets**, confronted by the forces of law and order who answered to the Generalitat, together with armed anarchists, whose support proved vital.

**The debacle of the military insurrection in Catalonia paved the way for a period of profound revolutionary change**, one of the most radical in Western European history. The Generalitat's authority was, at first, undermined by that of the armed masses. Companys, however, did his utmost to maintain a balance between the different political forces on the republican side throughout the Civil War by means of the creation of several coalition governments, which eventually gelled into the Government of Unity, whose Speaker was the future post-war (and, later, post-Franco) Catalan president, Josep Tarradellas.

This was a time of tremendous optimism and an outpouring of political and social creativity, but also one of violence, death and destruction. **The Generalitat tried to save as many lives as it could**, while simultaneously putting Catalonia's industrial infrastructure on a war footing.

It was during the war that Companys confessed that his thinking was becoming more "nationalistic". The root cause of this change was the loathing shown by the Francoist camp towards Catalonia's hard-won freedoms, and the suspicions held by the Spanish Republic's central government regarding those same freedoms.

Catalonia went through a period both tragic and dramatic, with the loss of thousands of lives, both at the frontlines and in the rear-guard. Notwithstanding the criticisms it received during this time of upheaval, it cannot be denied that **the Generalitat managed, despite everything, to maintain its position as Catalonia's key institution.**

**Hendaye,  
August 28th, 1940**

A photograph taken  
by the Spanish police  
operative Pedro Urraca  
at the border crossing,  
by way of proof that  
he had brought  
Companys in alive.

ARXIU NACIONAL DE CATALUNYA



# EXILE AND ARREST

## 1939-1940

**The final defeat of the republican forces in the Civil War led to the mass exodus** of 475,000 people across the French border (including Lluís Companys on February 5th, 1939). They had no idea what fate might have in store for them. It was an exceptional, unheard-of event in Catalonia's thousand year history.

**The presidents of Catalonia and the Basque Country, Lluís Companys and José Antonio Aguirre, crossed the frontier** at Lli, in north-eastern Catalonia. They were not accompanied by the former Spanish president, Manuel Azaña, who preferred to make the crossing separately in order to make it clear that he outranked the two "autonomous" presidents: a gesture which foreshadowed the divisions that would mark the republican diaspora in the years to come.

President Companys, heavily criticised at the time in republican circles for his handling of the situation in Catalonia, **was deeply upset by the tragedy that had befallen the Catalan people**, whose country had now been occupied by an army whose principal aim was to wipe out any and all signs of Catalan identity in what would later be known as a 'cultural genocide'.

At this point, Companys rose above the party political differences that had riven Catalonia during the war, and, despite a scarcity of funds, reorganised the Generalitat in Paris. His objective: **to assist the thousands**

**of Catalans trapped in French concentration camps;** to recreate the most essential government departments; and to stimulate cultural activity. However, the German occupation of France in 1940 put an end to this precarious re-creation of the Catalan government.

On August 13th, 1940, **Companys was arrested in Brittany by the German military police**, working in collusion with the Spanish embassy in France. Companys knew he was in danger on French territory, but refused to abandon his son, who was incapacitated by a severe mental illness. He was immediately extradited to Franco's Spain.

Madrid, August 29th, 1940

Police mug shots of Lluís Companys, together with his fingerprints.

ARCHIVO HISTÓRICO NACIONAL



# A SUMMARY COURT MARTIAL

## 1940

On August 29th, Companys was taken to a cell in the State Security Directorate in Madrid, where, for five weeks he was subjected to various forms of humiliation (among other affronts, senior figures from the Franco regime would enter his cell and insult him while throwing coins and crusts of bread at him). **He was also badly tortured** to the extent that months later, when he was executed, his back was still covered in bleeding sores and his feet were swollen: the only footwear that fit him were the beach sandals he had been wearing when he was arrested in France.

On October 3rd, he was transferred to Montjuïc castle in Barcelona, where he was given **a summary court martial** on a charge of rebellion against the military; it took place on the 14th of the same month, in strictest secrecy. Company's request to conduct his own defence was turned down.

Before the court martial was over, the presiding judge asked the accused if he had anything to say. Companys declared that he assumed full responsibility for his public activity, and that as a political leader and president of the Generalitat he also assumed responsibility for the actions of all the people who had worked with him, before, during and after the war. He also said that it was not his person that was being judged, but the president of Catalonia, and added: *"history will be the judge of what each and every one of us attempt-*

*ted to do". His death sentence has historically been regarded as a premeditated state crime.*

On October 15th, 1940, at the burial pit of Santa Eulàlia by the castle of Montjuïc, at 6.30 am, Companys faced his execution with the same courage and firmness that he had shown during his trial. So much so, that he perturbed his own executioners. In front of the firing squad, made up of infantry soldiers, he refused to wear a blindfold and kicked off his sandals so as to die on Catalan soil. **His last, shouted, words, "For Catalonia!"** echoed in the cold morning air for a moment after he had been shot. The officer needed to give him not one but two coups de grâce. Although his execution was kept secret under the Franco regime, it would eventually come to be recognised as a key moment—a turning point—in contemporary Catalan history.

## 1940-2018

Since his death, President Lluís Companys became a political reference for new generations of catalans. His historical interest results in new books every year, that are added to more than eighty already published.

FUNDACIÓ JOSEP IRLA



# A SYMBOL OF A REPRESSED COUNTRY

## 1940-2018

News of his death spread both at home and abroad, despite the strict censorship surrounding his life and execution.

His political testament and those of his private papers which were written during his final days, are compelling evidence of a **steadfastness and bravery, which lend dignity** not only to his person but, by extension, to everything he stood for.

**Lluís Companys was the only democratically elected president to be executed during the Second World War**, in his case by a totalitarian regime similar to those, which had become hegemonic in Europe at the time. His execution would become one stain among many others on the reputation of Franco's dictatorial regime, which intended to wipe out all traces of Catalan culture and identity, of which it regarded Companys as a vexing symbol. To this day, oddly enough, the death sentence passed on Companys has never been posthumously repealed and his court martial remains officially valid.

**For decades, his murder was commemorated annually by the Catalan diaspora**, with a host of activities and publications in Mexico, Montevideo, Perpignan (Perpinyà), Paris and many other places. Also inside Catalonia itself, where clandestine homages were paid

to his niche in Montjuïc cemetery, throughout Franco's dictatorship.

In 1985, once democracy had been restored, as had the Generalitat, his remains were transferred to the more dignified surroundings of the Fossar de la Pedrera, in Barcelona. There, at his final resting place, **on October 15th each year, Companys is honoured and remembered as a man who defended his country** when he was alive and came to symbolically represent many of its values long after his death.

"What they did with  
President of Catalonia, Companys  
is one of the most monstrous crimes  
that records the history of mankind."

**Jawaharlal Nehru**

First Prime Minister of the Republic of India

