

# A COUNTRY IN SPAIN

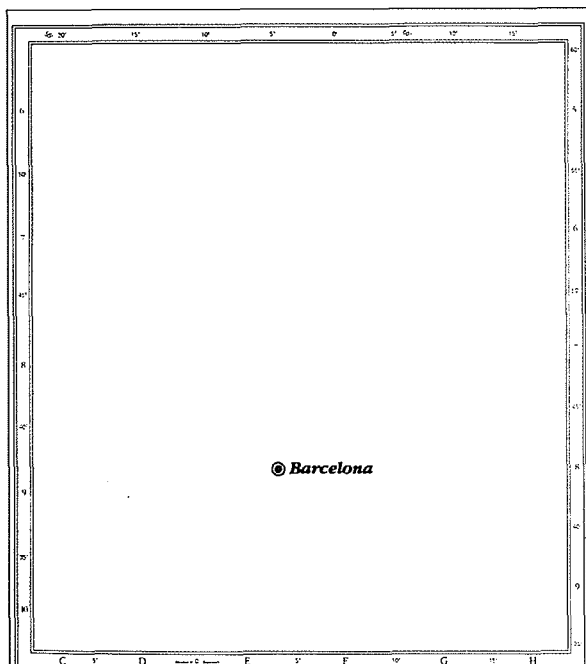
BY DAVID T. GIES

At their outset at least, the 1992 Summer Olympics in Barcelona appeared to be organized by people who had nationalism, not sports, foremost in mind. Consider the curious fact that the three official languages of the games were English, French, and Catalan. Why Catalan and not Spanish? Because Olympic Committee rules allow for the use of English, French, and the language of the country hosting the games. More to the point, the organizers had no doubt that Catalan was the language of their country.

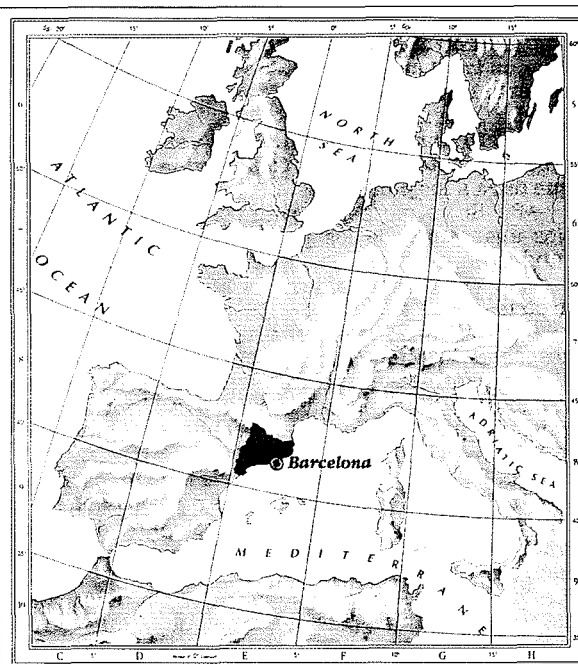
But Catalonia a *country*? Yes, if one be-

lieved an advertisement, designed and paid for by the Generalitat, the governing body of Catalonia, that appeared in several international magazines. This provocative piece of self-promotion located Barcelona in Catalonia, "a country in Spain," the copy read, "with its own culture, language, and identity." In case readers missed the point, the advertisement depicted the "country" of Catalonia in sharply colored relief on an otherwise borderless map of Europe.

The advertisement was only part of a campaign by the Catalan organizers of the Olympic Games to inform the world of their



**IN WHICH COUNTRY WOULD YOU PLACE THIS POINT?**



**IN CATALONIA, OF COURSE.**

This is where Barcelona is, in Catalonia, a country in Spain with its own culture, language and identity.

A country with a population of only six million people, which has experienced a growth which has made it one of the richest of Europe.

A country in which many foreign enterprises - European, North American, Japanese - have invested and are still heavily investing.

A country which has understood and embraced the genius of Picasso, the force of Miró, the imagination of Dalí, the visionary approach of Tàpies, the work of Montserri Caballé and Jordi Canyamà, the mastery of Pau Casals, the Gaudí of Gaudí.

A country which is visited every year by 16 million people from all over the world for its climate and its unique natural, sports and cultural facilities.

A country with the know-how to get the

Olympic Games for its capital, Barcelona. Now you know where Barcelona is, in Catalonia, of course.

**GENERALITAT DE CATALUNYA**  
AUTONOMOUS GOVERNMENT OF CATALONIA

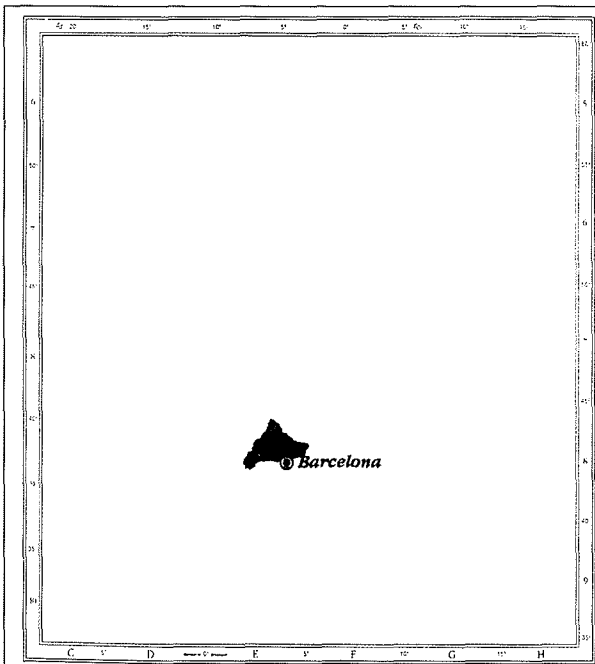
independence from the Spanish state—the very state that had contributed nearly 70 percent of the funding for the games. To be sure, the Spanish language was heard throughout the games, but the Catalan national anthem played before the Spanish anthem as the games got under way each day.

Even the timing of the advertisement was provocative, appearing as it did just two days before King Juan Carlos's scheduled mid-July visit to the Olympic Village. Jordi Pujol, the president of the Generalitat, did little to smooth matters when he proclaimed, "We are a small country, but we are moving forward." And when tourists finally arrived in Barcelona for the games, they were greeted with signs that read, "Catalonia: A Country in Europe."

Madrid reacted with official indignation—and a smattering of unofficial humor. *Cambio 16*, Spain's leading newsweekly magazine, published a parody of the Generalitat advertisements by two well-known political

cartoonists. In the first block of the cartoon, the question, "In which country would you place this point," was reproduced as in the original. In the second block, the point, Barcelona, is revealed to be a livid boil on the backside of Spain's president, Felipe González. Less imaginative responses simply wrote the ad off as an imbecilic mistake, a betrayal, the latest idiotic effort by the Generalitat to fan the flames of an old and often bitter controversy.

**A**t the center of the controversy is the autonomous region of Catalonia, which lies in the northeast corner of the Iberian Peninsula. Occupying some 32,000 square kilometers, it is roughly the size of Belgium, and consists of the provinces of Barcelona, Tarragona, Lérida (Lleida in Catalan), and Gerona (Girona). It looks, in writer Ian Gibson's words, somewhat like a fan opening upward toward France, with its base perched southward near



**IN WHICH COUNTRY WOULD YOU PLACE CATALONIA?**



**IN SPAIN, OF COURSE**

This is where Catalonia is, in Spain, one of the oldest nations in Europe, proud of its rich identity based on the several languages and cultures of its peoples.

A country which encompasses in a varied and fascinating culture peoples like the Catalans, Basques and Galicians, each with their own tradition, history and language,

with their own identities which are inextricably linked to Spain.

A country that has made available all its resources so that Catalonia and Barcelona can show themselves to the world as being the best possible venue for the Olympic Games.

A country that has proved itself generous with Catalonia and Barcelona because their worldwide success is the triumph of all Spaniards.

A country with the know-how to get the Olympic Games for its beloved Catalonia and its capital, Barcelona.

Now you know where Catalonia is. In Spain, of course.

---

Valencia. Its six million inhabitants constitute about 16 percent of Spain's population, and many of them carry in their heads a rich and complicated history of their region.

**I**nvasion by the Arabs in A.D. 717 and recovered for Christianity in A.D. 801 with the help of Charlemagne, the area became first the County of Barcelona and eventually an independent kingdom. In the 11th century, an expansionist Barcelona conquered territories south and west of the city. In the 12th century, allied through marriage to the daughter of the King of Aragon, the Count of Barcelona (Ramón Berenguer IV) became the King of Aragon and Catalonia. Further conquests in Valencia, Mallorca, Sardinia, and Sicily strengthened the power of the kingdom and extended the influence of the Catalan language. By the 13th century, the local powers (mostly the aristocratic elite) had created a parliament whose main function was to dictate laws, defend local rights and privileges, and check the powers of the king. This parliament eventually gave way to what is now the local government, called the Generalitat. When the kingdoms of Castile and Aragon fused shortly after the marriage of Ferdinand and Isabella, in 1469, and later, when their daughter Juana married the son of the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian, Catalonia came increasingly under the will of the Hapsburg rulers. While the central government, soon to be permanently located in Madrid, outwardly respected the area's local rights, it refused to grant it permission, for example, to trade with the New World. The cession of the French side of the Catalan area in 1659 in the so-called Treaty of the Pyrenees and the loss of central-government support following the War of the Spanish Succession reduced Catalonia to the status of a mere province in the larger nation-state.

That Catalonia today should wish to dis-

tance itself from the central government should come as no surprise to those who know the record of Madrid's past dealings with the region. Felipe V, the first Bourbon king in Spain (reigned 1700–46), was so incensed at Catalonia's support of the Hapsburgs during the War of the Spanish Succession that he organized a campaign against the ancient kingdom that included the elimination of the Generalitat, the suppression of the Catalan language, and the closing of the University of Barcelona in 1714. But this and subsequent attacks over the centuries only stiffened the backbone of Catalonians and fed enthusiasm for separatism. Catalonia has always had individuals eager to rally support for independence, the most articulate of these in the 20th century being E. Prat de la Riba, who published his *La Nacionalitat Catalana* in 1917, re-energizing the debate over regional rights. The fall of the Bourbon monarchy in 1931 and the proclamation of the Second Republic, whose Parliament approved the Statutes of Autonomy for the region in 1932, seemed to bring full autonomy closer to reality.

**B**ut Francisco Franco, for reasons similar to those acted upon by Felipe V (the Catalans sided with the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War), squashed those hopes of autonomy in 1939. As Robert Hughes observes in his hugely entertaining *Barcelona*, the civil war had been more than a class struggle. Franco saw clearly that the Catalans were also animated by strong feelings of local nationalism and that these were bound up with the preservation and use of their language. The repression was extreme, if uneven. A Barcelona student in his early thirties recently related to me an incident from the mid-1960s, one that had decisively marked his attitude toward the Francoist state. One day he and his grandfather were having a chat

---

*David T. Gies, Commonwealth Professor of Spanish and chairman of the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese at the University of Virginia, has written or edited six books and numerous articles on Spanish literature and culture. His latest book, The Theatre in Nineteenth-Century Spain, will be published by Cambridge University Press this year. Copyright © 1994 by David T. Gies.*

---

on the street in downtown Barcelona. A policeman happened to overhear them and promptly slapped the young man's grandfather with a stiff fine. The crime was "deviant activity"—speaking Catalan, a language that Franco had banished from all public discourse, from the public schools, and from the media for years following the Nationalist victory in the civil war. Everyone was supposed to speak in Christian, that is, in Spanish. Thousands of books were burned, and even the Catalan national dance, the *sardana*, was formally banned (although the fiercely independent Catalans danced it frequently and defiantly in spite of the ban). Inconsistently, by the mid-1960s, Catalan was tolerated in the universities and in private secondary schools. However unevenly applied, though, repression inevitably backfires, and today the reclaiming of Catalan rights and privileges forms the background of a game of political cat-and-mouse played between the politicians in Catalonia and those in Madrid.

The idea that Spain is synonymous with Castile is one that the Franco regime repeated ad nauseam during the first decades of the dictatorship, but it was never as deeply embedded in Iberian history as Francoist historians would have had people believe. In fact, it was developed a mere century ago by a generation of writers struggling to find an identity in a world that was changing more rapidly than they might have wished. The Spanish Empire in America finally crumbled by 1898, and intellectuals began to propagate the belief that the essence of Spain, its soul, was to be found in the dour, self-negating, stoical Castilian farmer. Even philosopher José Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) thought that Castile had made Spain what it was in his day.

Residents of Catalonia, where nationalist sentiment was on the rise, had a decidedly different view. Their resistance to the idea that Castile somehow meant Spain ran deep, and it encouraged them to turn their eyes away from the center. Many residents of Barcelona considered themselves to be more European than Spanish—and many still do. To them, the

axis of Barcelona's economic and cultural life turns to Paris rather than to Madrid. "Well, Barcelona is Europe," announces one of the characters in Manuel Vázquez Montalbán's 1977 novel, *The Manager's Solitude*, and that statement reflects a broad-based popular sentiment. Many of Europe's major philosophical and political movements entered the Iberian Peninsula via Barcelona in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (republicanism, anarchism, federalism, communism). And Catalonians point with pride to their great artists, including Antonio Gaudí, Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, and Pau Casals. Of course, such pride can sometimes get the better of a people. With little real justice, many residents of Barcelona claim to be culturally superior to their counterparts in Madrid, whom they view as distant, slightly less sophisticated relatives.

Such feelings are not discouraged by Jordi Pujol, the undisputed leader of Catalan regionalism today. "Regionalism is not something which is anachronistic or romantic or pure folklore," he declared to the press in January 1993. "It is a modern movement and a movement of progress."

Pujol has been the president of the Generalitat since 1980, and his popularity still runs high, even though his political organization, *Convergència i Unió* (CiU), has faced competition from other groups championing independence. (*Terra Lliure*, a terrorist group active in the 1970s and '80s, disbanded in 1991, but *Esquerra Republicana*, the *Partit Socialista Catalán*, and the *Partit Socialista Unificat de Catalunya* still push hard for independence.) To underscore Catalonia's semi-autonomous status, Pujol's Generalitat has set up quasi-diplomatic offices in many large cities outside Spain, and Pujol himself often travels in the manner of a head of state, giving lavish dinners to which the Spanish ambassador in the host country is pointedly not invited. When Pujol speaks of the federal government, he more frequently refers to it as the Spanish state rather than as Spain to underscore his convic-

---

tion that Spain is merely an administrative structure, a political entity, an invention.

**B**ut finally, these are minor provocations, skirmishes in a war of words, because neither Pujol nor his party really believes in Catalonia's full independence from Spain. *Convergència i Unió* is a minority party that controls only the Generalitat, not the Barcelona mayor's office. In fact, it does not even speak for the majority of Socialist-leaning residents of Catalonia, who vote for Pujol on local matters but for the representatives of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party in national elections. "Catalanism does not necessarily mean separatism," Jordi Solé-Tura, a Catalan law professor who rose to become Spain's minister of culture in 1990, wrote in 1970. Pujol agrees in principle but plays what writer David Rosenthal once called "a perpetual game of chicken with Madrid."

Money and language are the two keys to Catalan politics. Catalonia is the strongest economic region on the Iberian Peninsula. While it occupies just six percent of the landmass, it produces 19 percent of the gross national product and ships 23 percent of Spain's exports. Twenty-three percent of Spanish banking is controlled by Catalan interests, and nearly one-quarter of foreign investments in Spain are made in Catalonia. Pujol himself rose to prominence by founding the *Banca Catalana* in the 1960s and enjoyed enormous success with it until the mid-1980s, when huge losses and suggestions of financial mismanagement forced it into restructuring. The *Banco de Sabadell*, Catalonia's oldest bank (founded in 1891), is one of Spain's more profitable financial institutions, and *La Caixa* savings bank is the second largest in Europe. Per capita income in Catalonia is 20 percent higher than the national average.

Catalans save more than their Spanish counterparts (not a difficult achievement, given that most Spaniards save nothing at all), which gives them a reputation as money-conscious and tight. According to one local joke, wire was invented by two Catalans pulling on

a penny. Despite such frugality, per capita consumption is higher in Catalonia than in any other region of Spain. Some people contend, not entirely unjustifiably, that the industrial area around Barcelona, which produces 25 percent of the peninsula's total industrial employment (in textiles, electronics, plastics, automotive products, and chemicals), has more in common with Germany's Ruhr Valley than it does with any other part of Spain.

Spain's loose federal arrangement, established in the post-Franco Constitution of 1978, gives Catalonia and other autonomous regions significant latitude in making laws and spending funds for culture, infrastructure, and government services. The central government collects all tax monies and redistributes them based not on who gave and how much, but according to other formulas that are more geographic than economic and more in keeping with the philosophy of the main national party, the Socialists. The result is that Catalonians feel that they receive less than their fair share and that their region subsidizes poorer areas (particularly Andalusia). Pujol's harping on this issue creates tension not only between his Generalitat and the central government of Felipe González but between the Generalitat and the mayor's office of Barcelona, which is held by a member of the Catalan Socialist Party, Pasqual Margall.

**L**anguage is at least as much an issue as the wallet, for Catalan, unlike Basque, has a long and distinguished literary history completely separate from Castilian language and literature. In fact, nothing was more irritating to Catalans than the Francoists' insistence that Catalan was a mere dialect of Castilian. The first book printed on the Iberian Peninsula, *Tirant lo Blanc*, a chivalric romance by Joanot Martorell, was published in Catalan in Valencia in 1490, but well before that great thinkers and writers from Catalonia had expressed themselves eloquently in their native language. In the early 13th century, the kings of Catalonia were ordering the production of

---

chronicles in Catalan. Ramon Llull (1235–1316), known as Doctor Illuminat throughout the medieval world, used Catalan brilliantly in his encyclopedic works of science, philosophy, religion, and literature. His *Blanquerna* has been called one of the first modern European novels. Other writers, including the pre-Renaissance humanist Bernat Metge (1343–1413), and the poets Anselm Turmeda (1352–1430), Jordi de Sant Jordi (1400–24), and Ausiàs March (1397–1459) created a tradition of contemplative lyric in the Catalan language which, however, seemed to fall into disfavor as Castilian language and politics grew to dominate the Iberian Peninsula. All were fully conscious of themselves as Catalans, not Spaniards.

Not until the mid-19th century, during what has become known as the *Renaixença* of Catalan letters, did the use of Catalan as a means of literary expression come back into favor. Bonaventura Carles Aribau (1798–1862) initiated a new wave of nationalist sentiment with his tendentious but stirring poem “Oda a la Pàtria” (1859), “To the Fatherland,” and poet and essayist Jacint Verdaguer i Santaló (1845–1902) led the rebirth of Catalan literature, behind which pulsed the recognition of Catalonia as a separate state. Other poets, philologists, dramatists, and novelists followed the lead of Verdaguer i Santaló and created an important flowering of Catalan letters that has lasted to this day. Among the most widely read Catalan authors today are J. V. Foix (1893–1987), Joan Salvat-Papasseit (1894–1924), Tomàs Garcés (1902– ), Mercè Rodoreda (1909–83), and Salvador Espriu (1913–85).

However, while Catalonia dominates the publishing industry in both Spanish and Catalan, only 5,806 of the 51,000 titles edited on the peninsula last year were published in Catalan. Still, it must be recognized that many of the peninsula’s best-selling novelists (such as Eduardo Mendoza, Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, Juan Goytisolo, Juan Marsé, and Esther Tusquets), although born and raised in Catalonia, write in Spanish rather than in Catalan because the former was the language of their

education and also because Spanish is where the market is. (Some 600 million people speak Spanish throughout the world; six million speak Catalan.)

**T**he language issue still provokes heated debate. Although the Law of Linguistic Normalization of 1983 stipulates that Catalan is the dominant language of instruction in the region, it also provides for Spanish to be used in the classroom. In the autumn of 1993, however, the department of education of the Generalitat decreed that Catalan would be used exclusively in all public schools for children ages three through eight. This touched off howls of protest from a small group of parents who insisted on their right to have their children educated in Spanish. The parents’ association adopted the unfortunate tactic of comparing Pujol’s “repression” of Spanish to Franco’s attempted extermination of Catalan. This comparison in turn roused *El País* to denounce the ultra-Right for ignoring the more than 10 years of civil peace and social consensus built up in the country.

The Generalitat’s move underscores the reality that Catalan has not yet reached equal status in Spain. The recently published *Dictionary of Spanish and Spanish-American Literature* (1993) never mentions Catalan language or literature, and last summer’s opening of Madrid’s first Catalan bookshop and cultural center—called *Blanquerna*, after Llull’s novel—was cause for widespread comment in the Spanish-language newspapers. The bookshop bills itself as a bridge of dialogue between the two cultures, underscoring just how different they are considered to be both by proponents of Castilian and by defenders of Catalan. (Anyone interested in seeing how these differences play out in fiction should read Juan Marsé’s riotous recent novel, *El amante bilingüe*.) In attendance at the ribbon-cutting ceremony was a who’s who of the cultural and political elite, including Pujol himself, Pere Gimferrer (who began his career in poetry writing in Spanish, but who now writes exclusively in

---

Catalan), the mayor of Madrid, the Catalan cultural attaché, a representative of the Autonomous Community of Madrid, and the president of the Spanish Royal Academy, who proclaimed that Blaquerna would "help us get to know Catalan cultural reality better."

Just why this creative tension between the center and the periphery seems to be working in contemporary Spain is difficult to establish. While Pujol's views on Catalonia as a separate "country" are immensely popular in his region, they are, when all is said and done, mere chin music. He does not want real independence for Catalonia. Nor does he attempt to maneuver the political structure toward that goal. In fact, he has recently agreed to collaborate informally with Felipe González's minority government in Madrid, guaranteeing not only stability in the central government but also the continuation of the Socialist lock on power. (González and the Socialists have ruled Spain since 1982.) Because of his long and intelligent leadership—no Spanish politician has ever served in elective office longer than Pujol—Catalonia has settled into a relaxed stand-off with the federal government.

It has been able to do so because many of its immediate objectives—the teaching of Catalan language and history in the schools, the use of the language in print, on TV, and in official government business (the Generalitat drafts its documents and makes requests in Catalan, and the central government answers in Spanish)—were achieved without the armed conflicts that have marked dealings between Madrid and some extreme separatist movements within Spain, notably that of the Basques. Observers credit this levelheadedness to what the Catalans call *seny*, that is, a sense of balance, perspective, and common wisdom which they claim has always ruled their lives. For all intents and purposes, cen-

trists and separatists alike have bought into the ideal of consensus and cooperation that was outlined by the king in his very first post-Franco speech in 1975 and subsequently written into law by the Constitution of 1978.

Juan Tomás de Salas, editor of *Cambio 16*, probably reflected the entire country's mood when he noted that at the Olympic Games "Catalan and Castilian fused together harmoniously as a symbol of the fact that both peoples have lived together for over 500 years. The great mayor of Barcelona, Pasqual Margall, symbolized better than anyone the Catalan who is as Spanish as he is Catalan, or who is Spanish precisely because he is Catalan." He challenged his country's new generation to ensure that such harmony continue and that Spain not fragment itself into what he called a "bicephalic, cuatriligual Mediterranean and Atlantic" state.

Spain seems to have learned how to balance the obligations of a modern nation-state with the requirements of regional rights. The federal system of autonomous regions is working nicely in post-Franco, post-Constitution Spain, although each year brings new tensions to test the resolve of frequently disparate interest groups. But now at least those tensions can be expressed in Catalan as well as in Spanish. Amusingly, the Olympic Games as conceived by Pujol—that is, as a glorification of Catalan autonomy—became a worldwide celebration of Spain, with Spain winning an unexpected number of gold medals. By the time the closing ceremony was broadcast to millions of viewers around the world, more Spanish flags were in evidence than Catalan flags, and the real hero turned out to be none other than King Juan Carlos, king not of that country, Catalonia, but of all of Spain.