The Familiar Path of ETA

Turned in on
November 20, 2017
by
Daniel G. Leonard
for the class
PS 300 Terrorism
at
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
taught by
Dr. John A. Lynn

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or ETA, was a Basque separatist group that engaged in armed insurrection against the Spanish state until its disarmament in 2017. In its armed lifetime, ETA militants killed hundreds of Spanish security forces and civilians alike. ETA's persistence and ferocity, not seen elsewhere within Spain, has echoes of and often directly mimicked the strategies and philosophies within the various forms of the Irish Republican Army. ETA and the IRA saw both formed in response to imperialism, represented a disaffected agrarian society, employed cellular guerilla warfare, and had strong left-wing goals for a future independent state.

While ETA was formed in 1959, the roots of Basque nationalism run much deeper. The Basque people, while residents of France and Spain, are entirely unrelated to Indo-European peoples linguistically and genetically. A 2015 study was able to identify an independent lineage tracing back at least to Neolithic farmers and hunter-gatherers inhabiting the same region 5,500 years ago (Günther et al., 2015, 38). Basque nationalism was thus understood by its early adherents within a racial context, distinct from other European independence movements against an ethnically related state such as in Catalonia or Ireland.

While the Basque region had been part of empires and kingdoms since Roman conquest circa 50 BCE, the rural social organization consisting of farmers and fishermen allowed Basques to stay quiet and self-sufficient underneath the kingdoms of the middle ages (Watson, 2007, p. 31). The kingdoms of Castile and Navarre codified the relationships with their respective Basque regions under a system of fueros, charters allowing independent, autonomous regional councils that could tax and mobilize soldiers in return for their recognition of the respective Crown. This historic and ancient ideal of autonomy, and especially the well-documented fueros, would be a driving force for Basque nationalism.

The rise of economic liberalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was tied to a growing merchant class across the Iberian Peninsula. Moneyed liberals who sought to centralize their power over commerce opposed the system of fueros that gave Basques autonomy over much of their trade. Carlism emerged as a reactionary ideology against secularism and capitalism, and Basques overwhelmingly fought during the Carlist Wars to maintain the previous political system. Following liberal victory, the new Spanish state proceeded to abolish the fueros in 1876 and centralized all administration in Madrid.

In Restoration Spain following the last Carlist War, Basque nationalism was thus a very reactionary and traditionalist movement. Sabio Arana emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and remains the father of modern Basque nationalism. He is credited with the creation of a flag and name for a unified Basque region and formed a political party, the PNV, which remains a major force in regional politics. Arana viewed independence along the lines of Catholicism and Basque racial superiority over Indo-Europeans. Even with his prolific writings, Arana had little success achieving any Basque autonomy in his lifetime. However, the PNV and its use of racial identity was the root of nationalism in the Basque region until the emergence of ETA.

The PNV fought with Republicans during the Spanish Civil War, conceding their Catholicism to a primacy of regional autonomy and out of fear of Francisco Franco. It was this war that altered the trajectory of Basque nationalism and caused it to take a left-wing course for the remainder of its existence. General Franco and the German Nazis saw the Basque region as a hotbed for communism, and razed the historically significant yet strategically unimportant Basque city of Guernica on its traditional market day as a "test [of the] young Luftwaffe" ("Testimony of Göring," 1946). While the Basque militias were decimated and quickly lost to Franco's advance, the thousands who perished in Guernica became martyrs for Basque nationalism and Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* remains an international symbol of the horrors of war.

Francoist Spain saw centralization of economic prosperity in Madrid at the expense of the rest of the country, especially rural areas. Fixed price controls implemented early on cut agricultural wages 40% over the first ten years of the dictatorship, especially impactful in the primarily-rural Basque regions (Watson, 2007, p. 169). An economic insecurity not previously seen gripped the Basque Country as agricultural workers swarmed to the cities in search of work.

Simultaneously, General Franco prohibited the use of regional and foreign languages, punishable by imprisonment and often death. The suppression of language was so strong that many Basque parents opted to cease speaking the language in their own homes, resulting in a generation without the ability to speak the native language of their parents. Between 1930 and 1970, the percentage of Euskara speakers in the Basque Country dropped from 41.7% to 19.8% (Clark, 1981, 1). It was this generation of Basques, who had lost their traditional language growing up in a climate of oppression, who would begin the clandestine movements against Franco.

ETA was formed in 1959 by leftist students who had been active throughout the 1950s. In a stark turn from previous Basque movements that had been reactionary and Catholic, ETA's ideology was staunchly Marxist in response to General Franco's religious-nationalist dictatorship. Instead of Basque identity originating from race, the students saw the Basque language as the primary point of their identity, and its preservation as crucial to the establishment of their autonomy (Muroa, 2017, p. 15). ETA rejected the PNV's goal of peaceful resistance, stating from the beginning their intent to use armed insurrection where necessary. Their first attack occurred in 1961, where ETA attempted to derail a train. They did not intend to nor actually kill anyone, yet the Franco regime tortured over a hundred people in response.

The early years of ETA produced martyrs and significant popular support. The organization's first killing was in 1968 of a police officer who had initiated a traffic stop on ETA member Txabi Etxebarrieta. Etxebarrieta shot and killed the officer, but was himself shot by police within hours (Muroa, 2017, p. 17). ETA almost immediately transitioned to planned violence against the state, and became the major force of Basque separatism.

The next killing was a planned assassination: that of ruthlessly brutal police commander Melitón Manzanas. The state responded with a significant crackdown. That year, 1,953 Basques were detained (Whitfield, 2014, p. 43) and factions soon arose within ETA. Precipitating future intra-organization conflict, and reflecting many divisions within past groups, some in ETA wanted to focus exclusively on military action and others felt it better to turn towards worker's rights in an age of right-wing corporatism. The leftists became known as ETA (VI) while the nationalist minority became ETA (V) (Muroa, 2017, p. 18). At the same time, the Irish Republican Army was suffering its own divisions. The Provisional IRA and the Official IRA broke apart, the former criticizing the latter's Marxist view of a working-class fight against the state, instead seeking a return to the sectarian Catholic/Protestant fight that had defined previous eras in Ireland. And just as the militant Provos became the more well-known in Ireland, ETA (V) quickly became the primary faction as ETA (IV) split further and dissolved into Marxist political parties.

In 1970, ETA (V)'s leadership was arrested and sentenced to death, which provoked Pope Paul IV's condemnation and international sympathy, leading to commutation of the death sentences. Within this international blowback towards Franco, ETA was able to grow significantly in power. Three years later, ETA managed to execute the assassination of Prime Minister Luis Carrero Blanco. As Generalissimo Franco's health was in decline, Carrero was seen as an impending successor to the dictator. The attack sent the government into crisis, and solidified ETA's reputation within the Basque Country and elsewhere in Spain as the strongest opposition to the regime; however, this led to much more violent government repression (Whitfield, 2014, p. 44). Franco expanded capital punishment in response, and the final use of the death penalty in Spain included two ETA members.

1974 saw yet another split in ETA, an intra-organizational conflict bubbling up from years previously.

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The majority sought political participation to accompany armed struggle as a means to independence, and was known as ETA-pm (politico-militar). Others favored continuing a solely militaristic fight against the government as ETA-m (militar) and eschewing political processes, again reflecting a long-standing division in both ETA and its Irish analogue. Around the same time, Sinn Féin, the political equivalent of the IRA, debated whether to end their parliamentary abstentionism and Official Sinn Féin split off to engage in politics.

Francisco Franco died in his bed in 1975, and Spain soon began its transition to democracy. ETA – in both its factions – was actually most violent during this period, countering expectations that the end of Francoism would satiate the separatists. In fact, the transition saw political centralization across ethnic divides. The Spanish Socialist Workers' Party (PSOE), which had in 1974 supported self-determination for ethnic regions, dropped all calls for regional independence as it sought power in the new republic. The Basque Socialist Party similarly dropped its calls for independence in 1978 (Whitfield, 2014, p. 47). As the PSOE went on to form the government in the early 1980s, it is readily seen how many Basque nationalists viewed these moves as cynical attempts to gain political power at the expense of ideology. Further hurting the Basque cause, the Spanish state did not – and still refuses to – reflect on the crimes committed during the Francoist era, a standard procedure in countries abolishing dictatorships. Just after the first election, Spain passed the 1977 Amnesty Law, exonerating all crimes committed during Franco's regime. The United Nations continues to argue the Law constitutes a violation of international human rights law, as "the main obstacle in the way of opening investigations and criminal proceedings with respect to serious human rights and humanitarian law violations" (de Greiff, 2014). For a people who were criminalized for speaking their mother tongue, it is not difficult to imagine frustration at the awarding of amnesty to their oppressors. In the preceding referendum proposed to initiate the transition to democracy, all opposition political parties called for abstention as the vote was seen as a ploy by the authoritarian successor to Franco. While only a quarter of Spaniards abstained, almost half of Basques refused to vote, regarding the referendum as simply a part of the colonial Spanish state. This is distinctly similar to an early era of Irish Republicanism, during the creation of the Irish Free State. Although it was afforded a parliament with home rule, Republicans opposed to the Anglo-Irish Treaty objected to the absence of Ulster and the status as a dominion of the British Empire. Sinn Féin thus took an abstentionist policy, and refused participation in both the Irish Dáil and the British Parliament.

From democratization onward, ETA adopted a "long war" strategy, and a majority of its victims were claimed under democracy. It is this period that is strikingly similar to the Provisional IRA, in that both used the same strategy and types of attack – notably car bombs. For ETA members, prison became a regular facet of life, and banners calling for amnesty flew across the Basque Country just as murals of H-Block prisoners did in Ireland. But ETA was not simply mimicking the IRA; rather, the two organizations maintained clandestine links and discussion over decades. While neither organization has confirmed, it is suspected that the IRA was a significant source of ETA's weaponry, especially following the former's disarmament. Whitfield (2014) interviewed a former Basque nationalist Member of the European Parliament, who described the Provisionals' war as a "brother conflict" and, ironically, saw the Basque issue as easier to solve compared to the sectarianism in the Irish Troubles.

The IRA's most visible and direct communication with ETA, however, came after the Good Friday Agreement and the end of the Provisionals. ETA's political wing and Sinn Féin equivalent, Herri Batasuna, maintained contact with its Irish counterpart for the duration of the peace talks. Following the Good Friday Agreement, Batasuna held a 1998 conference to discuss what of the Irish cessation of violence could be applied to the Basques (Muroa, 2017, p. 45). Even though disarmament wouldn't come for two decades, the Good Friday Agreement was a major turning point towards peace in the Basque Country. While ETA would renege on ceasefires declared in 1998 and 2006, they also held many peace talks with Spain mediated by the United Kingdom and prominent members of Sinn Féin Gerry Adams and Gerry Kelly during this same period (Whitfield, 2014, p. 162). In 2010, peace was once again on the agenda and Gerry Adams wrote in an editorial in the Guardian "this is an important development that creates an opportunity for an end to conflict in the Basque country and for real political progress ... Sinn Féin will promote conflict resolution and assist in whatever way we can" (Adams, 2010). In September of that year, ETA declared what was to be their final ceasefire. After nearly 58 years, ETA fully disarmed on April 8th, 2017.

It's clear that ETA and the IRA are uniquely bound by strategies, ideologies, and histories. However, the cause of Basque nationalism ended with a different result than Irish republicanism. With no treaty as in the Good Friday Agreement, the disarmament of ETA came with little concession from the Spanish state

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and many of ETA's main goals have not been achieved. For one, there remains no independent Basque state, while the Republic of Ireland existed throughout decades of Irish violence. The 1977 Amnesty Law still protects Franco-era crimes against the Basque people, including torture and extrajudicial killings, from being prosecuted. While the Basque language has seen a resurgence, Franco's criminalization of its speakers remains in a generation who speak it secondhand to their native-speaking children. The Basque problem hardly solved and will likely remain for years to come, but it would be worthwhile to look towards Ireland for advice.

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