

# Their country, right or wrong

Eta is arguably the last active nationalist terrorist group in Europe. As Spain recovers from a month marked by terrible violence, does the Basque separatist cause have a future?

**T**HE SPANIARDS NOW HAVE 11/3 AS A BLEAK SHORTHAND for carnage. Like 9/11, 11/3 will mark a radical break in life and consciousness: a “where were you when...?” time and a “what now?” anxiety rolled together. The execution of some 200 people within a 10-minute period on the 11th of this month was a horror beyond the blood spilled. It was a horror because no matter which of the obvious suspects committed it, terrorism had taken on a new dimension.

If the perpetrators were linked to al-Qaeda, the sense of growing confidence that the organisation had been too fragmented and suppressed to perpetrate such an atrocity will be shattered. If the separatist terrorist group Eta (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or Basque Homeland and Freedom) proves to have been responsible, then the scale of the carnage denotes a new phase in its activities, a new confidence in its invulnerability and a new ruthlessness in its tactics. If, as some experts speculated soon after the event, the two collaborated, then a new possibility looms – a coincidence of interests leading to a sharing of the means of causing chaos. As this magazine goes to press, it isn't clear: only the awfulness of every option is.

The first instincts – of government, of Spaniards, of foreign observers – were to blame Eta. No surprise: Eta has been the most vicious, unyielding and non-negotiable terrorist group in Europe, the one to whose position of separate nationalism most concessions have been made, with least effect. To understand Europe is to understand that terrorism has been and is still a part of its politics. Eta is at the heart of that darkness.

The fight against Eta had hitherto been seen as one of José María Aznar's greatest successes during his time as the Spanish prime minister. Herri Batasuna, Eta's political wing, had been banned, and bars, language schools and newspapers alleged to be Eta fundraising businesses shut down. Last year, Eta killed three people – the lowest count in 30 years – after more than 800 deaths from terrorist bombs in Spain since 1969. Although outside Spain it appeared that the March 11 atrocity revived the question of Basque separatism, in fact the issue has been simmering in the shadows of

Spanish political life over many years. Some had even accused Aznar of exaggerating the threat in order to clamp down on Basque terrorism and nationalism alike – a factor that has polarised Basque politics for years.

The confusion and fear surrounding the relationship between the increasingly determined, but non-violent, Basque nationalists on the one hand and the Eta terrorist movement on the other is at the heart of the problem in northern Spain's Basque country. Officially, the Basque nationalist party (Partido Nacionalista Vasco, or PNV) condemns Eta unreservedly – but some of its representatives have been known to make comments along the lines of, “while I condemn their actions, I understand their frustration”. Equally, while Eta has never aimed its violence at the PNV, it frequently murders both socialists and members of the Popular Party (Partido Popular, or PP), the right-of-centre party that has governed Spain for the past eight years but remains in opposition in the Basque region's autonomous parliament.

Basque nationalism is often compared with other regional nationalist movements in Europe, but it is one of the most virulent of such causes. Its vicious recent history is all the more curious because it is debatable whether the Basque country ever existed as a separate entity from Castilla (the heart of the Spanish state), unlike, for instance, Scotland, Ireland or Wales in relation to England. Memories of Franco's attempts to unify Spain, and to quash regional languages and diversity, have cast a long shadow; others suggest that those memories have sometimes been artificially preserved to propel the nationalist momentum onwards. Even the bombing, during the civil war, of Guernica by the Germans – an act which killed many civilians in a hallowed square where Basque assemblies were once traditionally held – has been mythologised as one of the symbols of Basque identity and suffering at the hands of outsiders in league with Madrid.

Basque terrorists are often thought to have been inspired to some extent by the strategy of the IRA. However, Eta's violence is politically, rather than ethnically or religiously, motivated. And far more has been ceded to the Basques in terms of local government than to today's Northern Ireland, leaving much less room for negotiation. >>

BY ISABELLA THOMAS

The Basque government collects taxes and there is a Basque police force, Basque education, a Basque health service, and a Basque government – one Spanish newspaper estimated that Northern Ireland has only 5 per cent of the self-government of the Basques.

But these arrangements, established in Spain's democratic era, have failed to satisfy Eta in its quest for outright independence. The irony is that, although the movement was formed in 1959, largely to oppose Franco's policies, it has done the majority of its killing since the advent of democracy in 1975.

Campaigning for this month's elections showed how much the Basque issue permeates Spanish politics – and events since the train bombings have further highlighted its central role. Aznar, the outgoing conservative prime minister, won considerable popular support for his policy on the Basque country. In 2002, his government passed a law allowing the banning of the Herri Batasuna party, widely accepted as the political arm of Eta; his position was tough on terrorists and non-violent nationalists alike. Since, he said, they are both motivated by the same goal – independence – they are cut from the same cloth and inevitably inter-reliant. Aznar was also determined to resist the PNV's calls for a referendum on self-determination. His PP party said a referendum was illegal and non-negotiable. But Juan José Ibarretxe, the Basque regional premier, threatened to go ahead with a referendum. Relations between Madrid and the Basque capital, Vitoria, have never been worse.

There has been a flurry of books recently bolstering Aznar's case and highlighting what their authors say is Basque nationalism's selective manicuring of history. They argue that, while every nation puts a gloss on the past, particularly when struggling to achieve its own birth, the Basque case is more invented than most. Moreover, it depends on the assumption that Madrid is still run by fascists.

Jon Juaristi is a Basque born and bred, and one of the founders of the recent anti-Eta movement known as Basta Ya (Spanish for "that's enough"). In 2002 he published *The Troubled Tribe: Basque Nationalism Explained to My Father*. Its form – a letter to Juaristi's nationalist parent – is a ruse for addressing an entire generation whose dreams Juaristi considers both misplaced and dangerous.

His tract criticises in no uncertain terms the "rubbish elevated to the level of official doctrine by the nationalism which is taught in the Basque schools... as if the Basques had for 800 miserable years been trying to assert their identity and ethno-Basquery". It is his contention that Basque nationalism is itself fascist and racist when distilled to its essence. "The best way to create a Basque race has been relatively simple: to debrain a couple of generations," he writes bleakly. Although Juaristi himself was once an activist for Eta, he is (unsurprisingly) reviled by Basque nationalists, and he knows it.

Eduarne Uriarte, a Basque professor of political science, has also caused unease with her book *Spain: Patriotism and Nation* (Espasa Calpe, 2003). (Not that this anti-separatist was a stranger to controversy before its publication. In 2000, she escaped an attempt on her life when her bodyguard spotted an

Eta bomb planted in her university's lift.) In it, she talks of how Spanish democracy is threatened by "the ulcer" of separatist nationalism, an ulcer that is continually aggravated by Eta. Her blunt message is that Spain gave away too much, too quickly, at the time of the drawing up of its 1978 Constitution – the document that finally dismantled Franco's system and recreated Spain as a democratic nation. While it may be unsurprising that Spain, tainted by years of dictatorship, went through what now seems a self-effacing period and allowed its new constitution to channel power to the regions, the result is that, 25 years later, the numbers of civil servants working for the regional governments is twice as many as those working for central government. (In 2002, the figures were 1,101,999 as opposed to 563,989.)

Uriarte's book, which calls for a reaffirmation of the powers of central government, is almost an intellectual underpinning of Aznar's dogged posture on the Basque country. Aznar's uncompromising language was comforting to those in Spain exhausted



The aftermath of Madrid's March 11 bombing

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by the Eta problem. It provided a contrast, too, to the wily ways of his immediate predecessor as prime minister, Felipe González, whose government involved itself in a clandestine "dirty war", using a group of mercenaries to attack Eta while on the face of it co-operating with the PNV. Where González fought what he felt was a nuanced political battle on several fronts, Aznar wanted to be seen to be playing with a straight bat.

When one considers the lack of freedom in those parts of the Basque country that are Eta strongholds, Aznar's rationale becomes more understandable. The fear of violence in many cases prohibits the freedom of speech. A woman from a village near San Sebastian works as a cleaner for the local bank and is also a councillor for the PP in her spare time. Because of this, she is an Eta target and must go to work in the bank every day accompanied by two bodyguards, who watch over her with rifles as she mops the floor. Similarly, a Basque priest, Father Jaime Larrinaga, who condemned Eta in his sermons, used to have armed bodyguards in the church where he preached in the village of Maruri, near Bilbao. The local Basque nationalist council mounted a campaign against him and he was forced to quit last summer.

Aznar and the PP may have had good reason to speak out forcefully, but it has not, up to now, helped them gain stature amongst the Basques. Aznar never wanted to make any concessions to nationalists, but in the long run it is possible that :

> he alienated more moderate Basques, who found him one-dimensional. By suggesting that there is “no Basque problem”, only a question of exerting the rule of law, he quickened the nationalist impulse – this in spite of his very real concerns over civil liberties and the constraints on freedom of speech that bedevil some Basque communities. This approach did undoubtedly carry some risks, but for Aznar, the alternative would have been to usher in the splintering of the Spanish state. And he was right to think of that as an alarming proposition.

If the Basque country is so rich and has such a vigorous non-violent nationalist movement, why does Eta bother? One argument, put forward by Juaristi and Uriarte, is that nationalist fervour has poisoned the minds of the emerging generation. Yet there are other factors. Eta’s magnetism may have something to do with nostalgia for a time, in Spain’s not-too-distant history, when politics was literally a matter of life and death. During the Franco era, militant opposition was a heroic act. Many establishment figures in Spain claim (sometimes disingenuously) to have been Eta activists when it was the only palpable opposition to the fascists; in some Socialist circles it is chic to have been thus associated.

Yet the large majority of the perpetrators of Eta’s more recent attacks were born after Franco’s death in 1975. The sins of the grandfathers appear to have been visited upon the grandchildren – albeit sifted through a chaotic medley of 1970s youth

culture, unreconstructed Marxist-Leninism and a nationalist liberation ideology that draws inspiration from unlikely role models such as Libya.

It is perhaps not surprising to find young Eta activists in balaclavas on the streets of Genoa, campaigning against globalisation – anything central to which they can be centrifugal fits the brief. What is peculiar is the lack of the usual rebellion against what has come before. The radical Basque rock scene, for instance, which is avowedly separatist and pro-Eta, throbs with lyrics about the burdens of past generations. Eta gives youthful alienation a structure. In the UK, these young terrorists might have been football hooligans. In Spain they are putting dynamite in a car in Madrid to avenge the horrors of Guernica. Some people are simply mesmerised by crescendos in their history – and defeat, as Juaristi alleges, is the lifeblood of Basque nationalism.

Basque history has intense political importance. Not for nothing does Madrid complain that the Basque government controls the history taught to its schoolchildren. The opposing positions retreat to their favourite emblematic storylines. Nationalists emphasise the *fueros* (ancestral rights granted by medieval kings of Castille), the Basque struggle to maintain these historic rights and the way the Romans were never able to subdue the Basques. *The Basque History of the World* by Mark Kurlansky (Jonathan Cape, 1999), which has had an astonishing success worldwide since its publication in 1999, unashamedly cherry-picks snippets of Basque history that emphasise separateness.

For others the reconquest of Spain by the Christians over the Moors takes precedence over notions of separatism. Since the campaign was led from the Basque country (where the Moors never got a foothold), this line of argument sees Spain itself as essentially a Basque project and the struggle between the Basques and the Spanish as one between rebellious grandparents and their controlling grandchildren. Certainly there are Basques and Basque influences all over Spain, and there have been many important Basque figures in Spanish history, from the 19th-century essayist Unamuno onwards.

Those who prefer to emphasise the unity of Spain point to the invention of the Basque nation at the end of the 19th century, by Sabino Arana, the founder of the PNV. They argue that the language now known as modern "Basque" is actually Arana's artificial amalgamation of hundreds of different languages spoken in the 19th century in the foothills of the Pyrenees and that this linguistic engineering spearheaded the movement for a Basque nation. In fact it may well be that the inspiration to nationalism is little more than a localised version of anti-globalisation. It is certainly partially fuelled by the perception that creeping homogeneity is threatening local cultures. Basque nationalists have resuscitated an obsessive interest in all things local. The bandsmen assembling in a small town on a Sunday refuse to play any tune that could be conceived of as Spanish. Smart Bilbainos arrange parties where guests must dress only in the Basque national colours. There is recognisable Basque lettering, Basque food and even a Basque Santa Claus, Olentzero.

Some Basque activists seem to live in a world where the boulevards of San Sebastian are still occupied by fascist tanks, and control from Madrid is overwhelming – both of which are equally false. The vitriol they have in the past directed against Aznar had to do with the insult – as they see it – of equating their ideals with those of the terrorists. But their unadulterated love of all things Basque makes one want to exhort them to get out a little more.

**T**here are those who wonder why Spain doesn't simply agree to an amicable divorce, as happened, for example, in Czechoslovakia. But the ties between Spain and the Basque country are far deeper and more complex than those between the Czechs and the Slovaks. First, even though about half of voters in the Basque country vote PNV, not all PNV supporters want independence. Moreover, it is unlikely a Spanish government could agree to a process leading towards Basque independence without unleashing separatist instincts throughout the rest of Spain that could well be violent or at least inflammatory.

Aznar is also right to have drawn attention to grave infringements of civil liberties in the region. Those in the Basque country who reject nationalism, and are prepared to say so, have to live in perpetual fear for their lives and their livelihood, or leave the region altogether. In the past 12 years, Eta's targets have changed to include a wider public – "civil society", as the group puts it. The police and the army were once its main victims. Nowadays, the threat of violence touches the lives of far more people.

Nationalists live in no such fear because they are not (usually) targeted by Eta. They may believe their true identity is still thwarted by Madrid, but their lives are generally not in jeopardy, and their grievances are somewhat psychosomatic by comparison. That distinction should not be lost when appraising the hostility that pervades those green valleys and the scenes of devastation on the streets of Madrid. ■

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