

Basques show the way to forgiveness

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Nalina Eggert (17) and Connor Scullion (16) of Children's Express, Belfast received an NIVT Millennium Award to travel to a peace conference in Gernika in Spain. On the 67th anniversary of the destruction of Gernika in the Spanish Civil War, they reflect on how the past resonates with recent events in Madrid ON MARCH 11 2004 terrorists struck at the heart of the Spanish state when bombs killed 191 people on trains travelling to Madrid's Atocha station.

The bombing, on the eve of the Spanish election, was a direct attack on the capital and the government of Jose Marie Aznar.

It was to have deep and far-reaching consequences in the days that followed. As the nation mourned its dead, and people gathered to lay wreaths and flowers at the scene, the Partido Popular (PP) government moved quickly to point the finger at the Basque terrorist group ETA. In the previous year more than 100 suspected ETA activists were captured and imprisoned by the state and in December 2003 a team on its way to bomb a Madrid station was intercepted. In the week before the bombing the Partido Popular had a six per cent leads over its Socialist rivals.

The Socialists (PSOE) had supported PP in its hardline policy of non-negotiation with ETA or its representatives despite an 18-month ceasefire which ended in 1999.

With a recent history of violence particularly against PP politicians, ETA was a convenient suspect. As late as Friday March 12 the Spanish foreign minister was instructing his embassies around the world to continue briefing the world's media that ETA was to blame despite evidence discovered at the scene of the bombing that implicated Moroccan Islamic terrorists. Left-wing parties accused the PP of manipulating the events for political gain. In the election that followed, the PP suffered a reversal of fortune losing its majority to the PSOE.

Civil War Echoes On April 26 1937, the Condor Legion, a flag of Convenience for the German Luftwaffe flying for Franco's insurgent army, levelled the town of Gernika, the historical seat of Basque democracy and independence, to the ground.

For over three hours it strafed the town and its citizens in a series of bombing raids that would later become the pattern for the blitzkrieg (lightening war). It was market day in Gernika and the town was inundated with refugees fleeing west from Franco's Moroccan army.

It was estimated that more than 1,800 people were killed during the air raid. German and Italian fascism had joined with the insurgent Spanish army against the elected republican government, a coalition of socialists, communists, anarchists and regional nationalists Catalans and Basques. When they captured the town, the Falangists insisted that retreating Basque nationalist forces had destroyed the town before they arrived - the 'big lie'.

In the outside world this story was discredited by the British war correspondent George Steer. He entered Gernika 20 hours after the bombing and interviewed survivors and eye-witnesses. Steer's report made front-page headlines in the London Times and around the world. After winning the civil war in 1939, executing his enemies and banning all forms of Basque nationalism and culture, Franco and his followers persisted with the 'big lie'.

Johann Galtung, the father of conflict resolution studies, gave a speech at the annual peace conference in Gernika on April 24 2003. He spoke on the theme of 'deep culture' within Spain. He argued that ancient themes, although not always explicit in modern culture and politics, could from time to time insinuate themselves into current events and political culture. He identified a number of recurrent and opposing themes: monarchism versus republicanism; centralism versus regionalism; authoritarianism versus anarchism. He also gave 'trinitarianism' as an example citing a number of historical precedents and then the Bush, Blair and Aznar summit in the Azores in March 2003. Post the Madrid bombing, we can't help thinking that 'deep culture' has once again inserted itself into the present fundamentally changing the axis of Spanish politics.

A remarkable peace process Think of the Basque country and most people think of ETA and the intractable conflict between Spain and Basque nationalism. Few people know about the remarkable peace process between Germany and Gernika. In 1987, visiting German Green politician Petra Kelly suggested Germany should pay reparations to the Basque country for the bombing of Gernika. In 1998 local people formed Gernika Gorgoratuz - Gernika Remembers, a peace and research institute dedicated to learning lessons from the past and exploring reconciliation with Germany.

In the 15 years since its formation much progress has been made. An annual conference brings peace campaigners from troubled countries around the world to Gernika to share their experiences. On the 60th anniversary of the bombing, a letter from the president of Germany apologising on behalf of the German people for the 1937 atrocity was

read out in front of a group of survivors and the local populace. In 2000 a peace museum was opened in Gernika to document the bombing and the reconciliation process. It is internationally now acclaimed. Iratxe Momoitio, director of the Museum of Peace in Gernika, said: "The Gernika Peace Museum provides education in conflict resolution and the different types of conflict. School children are invited to see the displays we have and hopefully, they will learn much. They are our hope for the future, our future peace campaigners."

While the 'big lie' has haunted Spanish/Basque relations for generations the people of Gernika - many of them survivors of the 1937 atrocity – have been reconciled with Germany whose air force devastated their town. It is a remarkable testament to the restorative power of reconciliation.

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