

ETA after Madrid: the beginning of the end?

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The Madrid bombings on 11 March 2004 are on their way to becoming a turning-point in European history. However, the response to America's "9/11" and Europe's "3/11" (or, as the event is known in Spain, "11-M") differed greatly. While the attacks on New York and Washington provoked - after the initial trauma - a military response and the announcement by leaders in Washington of a "war on terror", the Madrid massacre occasioned the largest civic demonstration in the history of Spanish democracy. As many as 11 million Spaniards peacefully demonstrated and then voted in massive numbers in their general election three days after the [attack](#) [1].

Why the difference? One reason is that Spain, unlike the United States, has had first-hand recent experience of terrorism, in the form of a campaign by the separatist Basque group *Euskadi Ta Askatasuna* ("Basque Homeland and Freedom", [ETA](#) [2]) which since its first killing in 1968 - and at a cost of around 800 lives in total - has sought the full independence of the Basque provinces from the Spanish state. In this light it is not surprising that many Spaniards were ready to believe the government spokesmen who claimed with apparent conviction that ETA was responsible for the Madrid blasts.

The evidence collected by intelligence and security services, added to al-Qaida's claim of responsibility for the attacks, seem to indicate that a section of the Islamist network was responsible instead. If confirmed, such an eventuality will change the political calculations of the incoming government as it apparently helped change the mind of the Spanish electorate in the 14 March general election. Yet the pre-election interception of planned Eta attacks, and continuing political uncertainty about the Basque country's future, mean that the experience and future prospects of ETA will continue to be central in measuring what will happen in Spain after the carnage of Madrid.

ETA: ideology and strategy

ETA was formed in July 1959 by a group of young middle-class nationalists frustrated by the passivity of the historical party of Basque nationalism, the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV), in the face of the Franco dictatorship which had ruled since its victory in the civil war of 1936-39.

ETA had initially been devised as a study group, but its members soon concluded that an authoritarian regime such as Francoism had to be fought "on its own terms". The organisation then came to prominence during the Burgos trials ([1970](#) [3]) when sixteen ETA members, among them two women and two priests, were arraigned before a military tribunal. This trial sparked off huge national and international protests, including pleas for clemency from European governments and the Vatican. Three years later, ETA carried out its first military "spectacular": the assassination by car-bombing of Admiral [Luis Carrero Blanco](#) [4], Franco's hardline prime minister and expected political heir.

ETA's ideology was a combination of traditional Basque nationalism, revolutionary socialism and anti-colonialism. At the strategic level, ETA had adopted (as early as 1964) an approach known as "action-repression-action". The concept was that of a cycle in which every action would be followed by state repression which would, in turn, encourage a larger revolutionary action, restarting the cycle at a higher level at each stage.

After the death of General Franco in 1975 and the beginnings of Spain's transition to democracy, most observers hoped ETA would renounce violence. This did not happen. ETA became a fierce opponent of democratisation, its leaders arguing that Spanish democracy was nothing but a cosmetic change in the authoritarian nature of Spain. The group's use of terrorist tactics increased [5].

Between 1975 and 1980, ETA killed 284 people in its attempt to trigger "action-repression-action". The state's response included authoritarian practices – especially its secret mobilisation of a paramilitary group called GAL *Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación* / Anti-Terrorist Liberation Groups) – that helped boost ETA's legitimacy among its sympathisers in the wider Basque population. From 1983-87, during the government of Spain's ruling socialist party (PSOE), GAL's "dirty war" against ETA killed 28 people – most of them in the French *Pays Basque* territory – including 10 whose connections to ETA were unclear or non-existent [6].

The arrest of top ETA commanders in southern France in 1992 was a severe blow to the group's military capacity; it also marked a fresh stage in the bilateral relationship between France and Spain. ETA's reaction was to launch a new strategy based on the "socialisation of suffering". This particularly targeted its political opponents who questioned the Basque nationalist project, and was to be carried out in "new spaces of struggle" such as street violence (*kale borroka*).

From militarism to repressive politics

One victim of the new strategy was Miguel Angel Blanco – a Basque councillor of the conservative *Partido Popular* (PP), which had come to power in Madrid in 1996 – who was kidnapped and killed by ETA in July 1997 [7]. The event caused popular outrage and massive protests involving 6 million demonstrators throughout Spain.

Spanish civil society was influenced by the peace process in Northern Ireland which culminated in the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998, and called for a similar process to be started in the Basque region. This impacted on the ETA leadership who declared a ceasefire in September 1998; peace talks with the Spanish government began in Zurich in May 1999 [8]. These quickly collapsed when the parties failed to find common ground: the Spanish government was willing to discuss security issues (such as prisoners and refugees), but ETA wanted to enlarge the scope of the negotiations to discuss political issues such as the right to self-determination for the Basque homeland [9] (whose exact definition is a perennial point of controversy).

After this failed experiment in dialogue, the only such direct meeting in the thirty-year conflict, ETA ended its ceasefire in November 2000 and restarted violent actions two months later [10]; the Madrid government increased its repression of ETA and its radical network. Spanish courts banned ETA-related organisations such as newspapers – *Egin* (1998), *Egunkaria* (2003); youth organisations – *Jarrai* (1999), *Haika* (2001), *Segi* (2002); prisoner associations – *Askatasuna* (2002) and *Gestoras Pro-Amnistia* (2003); and even the political parties who represent not only ETA's views but a significant section of the Basque electorate – *Herri Batasuna* (1997) and its successor *Batasuna* (2003).

Some analysts have criticised the banning of political parties, a measure that (for example) Britain never adopted towards Sinn Fein in Northern Ireland. Yet the state's strategy had appeared to be effective in security terms. The last ETA victim was in May 2003, and ETA killed only three people in 2003 – the lowest figure since the early days of its armed campaign.

The much-publicised arrests of ETA militants with large amounts of explosive material in advance of the March 2004 elections seemed to indicate both the continuation of Eta's armed strategy and the ability of the state to contain if not totally suppress it. The *Partido Popular* government of Jose Maria Aznar has now paid the price of its instant [11] (and it seems inaccurate) attribution of responsibility for the Madrid carnage to ETA. But even if its hands are clean on this occasion, ETA is unlikely to benefit: its activities and character will remain associated in people's minds with the irruption of international, mass terrorism on Spanish soil.

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