

Basque nationalism is a ongoing conflict history essay



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When modern states began to form, political boundaries and ethnolinguistic boundaries largely coincided in the areas along Europe's Atlantic coast.

Liberal nationalism was most apt to emerge in states that already possessed a high degree of ethnic homogeneity. Long before the nineteenth century, countries such as England, France, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden emerged as nation-states in polities where ethnic divisions had been softened by a long history of cultural and social homogenization.

The Basque country in Spain was left aside from the cultural and social homogenization and the Basque people created a strong identity based on their ethnic background. Basque nationalists have been struggling to create an independent country.

I would analyze the Basque nationalism and conflict through a post-positive position. The different theories of nationalism provide general explanations about this. Additionally, the use of empirical data will help to clarify some questions that emerged through this paper.

The aim of this paper work is to try to explain why the Basque country demands its independence and why this situation is one of the present day's most complex conflicts that does not have any effective solution yet. I shall also analyze the role of the radical nationalism of ETA.

All throughout this paper I shall put forth how nationalism affects people's daily lives, and how Basque nationalism is an essential part of the society, which appears in almost every social and cultural sphere (for example, in the football field).

Moreover, historical elections results and various research projects will help me to outline how important national ideas are to the Basque people, their support to ETA, and the creation of an autonomous country.

Historical Sphere

The conflict between the Basque people and Spain is both long and difficult to resolve. It has been developing throughout Spanish history and accordingly, we witness a complex struggle where one populace seemed to be separate from the homogeneous country.

The Basque country does not 'act' like the rest of Spain. Situated in the North coast of Spain; between the " Ebro" river and the Cantabria Mountain range, it has always been a territory where the people had their own habits. Consequently, from time immemorial, Basque country has always been isolated from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula, so much so that the Basque desire for independence even pre-dates Christ.

" As it stands the Basque Country (called País Vasco in Spanish) consists of the three Basque provinces of Guipuzcoa, Biscay and Alava, which together form one of Spain's 17 autonomous regions. The region has its own highly distinctive language, Euskera, which bears no relation to Castilian Spanish or indeed any other language in the world. And it's not just the mysterious language which sets the Basque Country apart from the rest of the Iberian Peninsula. Almost everything about the place - its cuisine, art, music, sport - is highly individual reflecting the special character of a people whose ancient roots span five millennia. Genuine Basques are regarded by anthropologists as the last surviving representatives of the aboriginal tribes which once

populated Europe. Everything from their blood group to their physical features binds them as a unique group and sets them apart from their Spanish neighbors. Those of true Basque blood do not regard themselves as Spanish at all”.

The social structure of the Basque country had been different from other Spanish regions such as Andalusia, where large landowners ruled over peasants and landless laborers. The Basque custom of primogeniture prevented the extreme fragmentation of land holding which dissipated family wealth in other areas. This encouraged younger sons to leave the land and serve the crown as soldiers, sailors or bureaucrats. It also encouraged good educational standards which helped several Basques to occupy high positions in both the court and within the church.

The existence of ancient statutes, the *Fueros*, was the main evidence produced by Basque nationalists that the Basques were once a sovereign people, although the *Fueros* of each province were distinct and the Spanish Crown had never treated the Basque country as a single political unit. The *Fueros* were abolished after the second Carlist War of 1873-74, a move that was unpopular with the Basques. But the real impetus for nationalism came with the development of the Vizcayan iron mines, which brought an influx of immigrants from elsewhere in Spain and produced xenophobic currents in the native populations.

Sabino Arana, who is considered to be the founder of the nationalist movement, formed the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV) - Basque Nationalist Party - in 1895, and although a political party, it was considered by its

adherents as more of a cultural movement. When the Spanish Republic, established on 14th April 1931, granted autonomy to Catalonia, the Basque nationalists inspired by Sabino Arana and led by Jose Antonio de Aguirre, began a large-scale, well-planned campaign for Basque autonomy. Three out of four of the Basque Provinces' assemblies of local councilors voted for autonomy. Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa and Alava voted in favor of forming an autonomous Basque region within the Spanish State, while the delegates from Navarre voted narrowly against. In 1932 a plebiscite in the 3 provinces produced a result of 82% in favor of autonomy. However, the military uprisings that followed divided the Basques in two and when the Government of the Republic granted such autonomy it was only applied to Guipuzcoa and Vizcaya. On 8th October 1936, Aguirre was sworn in as the first president (Lehendakari) whose government's first actions were to pronounce the Basque flag (Ikurrina) as official and to create the Basque army and University.

In this context Radical Nationalism was born. The movement has been dominated continuously since then by the same organization, the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV). The PNV is considered as a Christian and confessional party. It is also a nationalist party with some degree of radicalism. Since its inception, the PNV proposes an anti-españolism and anti-socialism ideology.

However, there exists also a more radical, secessionist stream embodied in the militant group Basque Land and Liberty: ETA - Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (Euskadi Homeland and Freedom). ETA, born as a revolutionary organization, has been defined as a Marxist-Leninist group, agnostic and atheist.

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“ On July 31st, 1959 a group of dissident radical students founded the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna. This is the birth of ETA as an ideological alternative. They had four ideological pillars: the euskara defense, ethnicity, the “ anti-españolismo” and the independence of the territories that they considered belonged to the Euskadi: Alava, Vizcaya, Guipuzcoa, Navarre (in Spain), Lapurdi, Low Navarre and Zuberoa (in France).”

As G. Jauregui says, ETA cannot be understood or explained without two main elements: the Sabinian Nationalism, whose most important idea is the consideration of the fact that Euskadi wanted an occupied country, and Franco’s dictatorship, which made this occupation effective and real.

With the pressure of worker’s organizations, the development of social conflicts under Franco’s order, the need for direction from exile, the ineffectiveness of the national hegemonic party - PNV, and the physical, cultural and ethnic repression, the movement’s ideas were made even more radical. The movement was recruiting ever more people from different social classes; such as the middle class with traditional nationalism roots and the lower class, who were part of the worker’s movement.

ETA achieved what no movement had achieved: unified heterogenic social sectors, and it was the protagonist of a large movement which fought against Franco’s dictatorship, and it promoted a strong social and political mobilization, especially in the final years of Franco’s dictatorship. ETA responded with arms to institutional, physical and symbolic violence. The people who had lived traumatic experiences and could not respond by

themselves began to feel identified with the movement, and violence turned into the means they chose to express themselves.

“ Nothing radicalizes a people faster than the unleashing of undisciplined security forces on its town and villages. The litany of beatings, torture, and unpunished shootings that follows becomes a recruiting catechism for an armed resistance group”.

The consolidation of the organization's basis occurred in 1962 with the First Assembly in Bayonne, France; where they introduced the movement as “ Movimiento Revolucionario Vasco de Liberación Nacional” (“ The Basque Revolutionary Movement of National Liberation” -MLNV). They defined themselves as a revolutionary clandestine organization which defended armed struggle to achieve the Euskadi independence.

The most important characteristics of the MLNV were the subordination of the whole network to ETA, the strategic dependence on armed struggle, the perception of ETA prisoners as heroes, and the belief that legitimacy was acquired through active (and violent) participation in the national struggle against Spain. In other words, the MLNV widened and developed the aims of ETA in both the social and political spheres while providing ETA with new supporters and sources of legitimacy. For ETA, this group of organizations remains the most important source of new recruits and a complementary means of fighting for independence.

With the death of Franco and a Socialist Government in his place, ETA hoped that their demands would be met. But the state government made it clear that it would not cede any further devolution. A failed coup attempt in 1981
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by the rebel Civil Guards strengthened the hand of the Spanish government. After the election of Felipe Gonzales as Prime Minister in December 1982, Defense Minister Narcis Serra quickly pushed through reforms that tightened civilian control of the Armed Forces. Talks were initiated with ETA, but when these collapsed tough anti-terrorist measures were instituted.

The action to suppress separatist violence was undercut by the refusal of France's then Socialist government to root out ETA units attacking Spain from bases in the Basque Southwest. Paris feared reprisals and some French Socialists viewed ETA as "freedom fighters".

These circumstances led to what has been called a "dirty war". A clandestine anti-terrorist Liberation Group (GAL) was formed and started operating in Spain's and France's Basque regions, kidnapping and killing suspected ETA members. But nine of its 27 victims in Southern France in the mid-80s were found to have nothing to do with terrorism. The GAL stopped operations after French authorities began to co-operate seriously with Spanish officials.

Elections to the Spanish Parliament held on 3rd March 1996 gave a victory to the right wing party Partido Popular (the first right wing government since 1982). The PP is however committed to a strong centralized Spanish state and fought the election campaign with the promise to eliminate the Basque problem.

In 2004 the PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party) came back to lead the country, and Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, established a strong anti-terrorist policy which brought large demonstrations against the government.
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Analysis

Why is the Basque case an ethno-national one?

Rather than witnessing an evolution of stable-states or suprastate-communities, the observer of global politics has viewed a succession of situations involving competing allegiances in which people have illustrated that an intuitive bond felt toward an informal an unstructured subdivision of mankind is far more profound and potent than are the ties that bind them to the formal and legalistic state structure in which they find themselves.

The national idea emerges with the sense of identity. We are identified first and foremost with our ' nation' not with our state.

“ Defining and conceptualizing the nation is difficult because the essence of a nation is intangible. This essence is a psychological bond that joins a people and differentiates it, in the subconscious conviction of its members, from all other people in a most vital way. According to a popular dictionary of International Relations the nation is: a social group which shares a common ideology, common institutions and costumes, and a sense of homogeneity. In the nation, there is also present a strong group sense of belonging associated with a particular territory considered to be peculiarly its own”.

Anthony Smith defines a nation as a named human population occupying an historic territory and sharing common myths and memories, a mass public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members.

On the other hand, Walker Connor asserts that most of the groups claiming nationhood, like the Basques, also incorporate several genetic strains. The

Basque talk about a blood relation, believe in the Basque people genes and <https://assignbuster.com/basque-nationalism-is-a-ongoing-conflict-history-essay/>

in archeological proves of their relation. This element is an integral part of the nation and its nationalism; Connor does not think that an ethnic element exists.

He defines ethnonationalism as a “ redundancy, coined in response to the general tendency to misuse the word nationalism to convey loyalty to the state rather than to one’s national group; it is designed to leave no doubt in the reader’s mind that the author is discussing loyalty to the nation”.

It is clear that authors, such as Connor, include the ethnic variant into the definition of the nation, as an integral element for the creation of the nation. Others differentiate nationalism from the ethno-nationalism, giving more importance to the group ethnical characteristics.

All of the approaches of anthropology agree that ethnicity has something to do with the classification of people and group relationships. In social anthropology, ethnicity refers to aspects of relationships between groups which consider themselves, and are regarded by others, as being culturally distinctive.

The distinguishing mark of nationalism is by definition its relationship to the state. A nationalist holds that political boundaries should be coterminous with cultural boundaries, whereas many ethnic groups do not demand command over a state. When the political leaders of an ethnic movement make demands to this effect, the ethnic movement therefore by definition becomes a nationalist movement.

One of the calcifications of ethnic relations is what is known as the Proto-nations (the so-called ethno-nationalist movements). By definition, these groups have political leaders who claim that they are entitled to their own nation-state and should not be 'ruled by others'. These groups, short of having a nation-state, may be said to have more substantial characteristics in common with nations that with either urban minorities or indigenous peoples.

They are always territorially based; they are differentiated according to class and educational achievement, and they are large groups. In accordance with common terminology, these groups may be described as 'nations without a state'.

Authors like Jerry Muller take this definition and claim that in states where there is more than one nation it is possible to find an ethnic element that differentiates between them and it leads them to demand for a national territory. "For those who remain behind in lands where their ancestors have lived for generations, if not centuries, political identities often take ethnic form, producing competing communal claims to political power".

The nationalism combined with a strong ethnic variant produces an ethnonationalism movement. "The ethnonationalism draws much of its emotive power from the notion that the members of a nation are part of an extended family, ultimately united by ties of blood".

In multiethnic societies in which ethnic consciousness remains weak, and even a more strongly developed sense of ethnicity may lead to political

claims short of sovereignty. Sometimes, demands for ethnic autonomy or self-determination can be met within an existing state.

With this theoretical background it is possible to define the Basque people as ethnonational movement. In the Basque case, nationalism depends on and is determinate by an ethnic differentiation and led them to claim for their own State in which it is possible to construct the nation. They are a nation without a state.

“ The Basque nationalism constitutes a symbolic universe, an orientation centre, which becomes a main reference for those who are part of the nation. Nationalism gives to the Basque people institutional and symbolic sense and order, projecting an ‘ us’ in conflict with the dominance centrality of the State”.

The Basque country has strong claims to the Spanish country; Basque people want their independence and this claim has profound national-historical roots.

During the 19th-century, both a ‘ liberal’ and a ‘ conservative-traditionalist’ Spanish nationalist discourse were formulated and these competed against each other for hegemony within the Spanish market of ideas. In the 20th-century, these two discourses continued to be present and became backbones of different political regimes.

However, after the emergence of the Basque and Catalan nationalist movements, Spanish nationalists unified as a counter-force to these regional

sources of identity. In fact, one can see 20th-century Spanish nationalism as a dialectical struggle between the centre and the periphery.

In the beginning of the democratic era, Spain was formed on the basis of an organic catholic nation, a homogeneous nation. This idea and its nationalism were based on the will to be the Spanish nation; a nation under “ the flag of a great and free Spain, the indivisible homeland of the people”.

The 1978 Spanish Constitution also expresses that the national sovereignty resides in the Spanish people from where all the State powers emanate. This Constitution is based on the indissoluble unity of the Spanish Nation. The homeland is common and indivisible to all the Spanish. Moreover, it recognizes and guarantees the right of autonomy to all the nationalities and regions that integrate the nation, and the solidarity between them.

It is possible to conclude that the Spanish constitution has a Spanish national character. However, it also includes a character of “ denial”. Basques, Catalans and the Gallegos are not nations and cannot be compared to the Spanish nation. Those nations have not the right of self-determination, and they are denied the legal capability to shape a nation with the same rights and powers as the Spanish nation.

Sovereignty lies solely and exclusively in the Spanish people; the others have no sovereignty. For this reason, it is fundamental that those nations or peoples would be considered as an inalienable part of the only nation: the Spanish nation.

On the other hand, the Constitution stresses in its Article 3, the concept of the Spanish language unity. " The castellan is the official language of the State. All the Spanish people have the duty to know it and the right to use it". As indicated before, there is an indissoluble Spanish nation and the Spanish language is the sole linguistic component of this indissoluble nationality.

Since there are not actual language units, this concept is not a linguistic one but rather a political one. The Spanish language is presented as the national language and also as a universal language. Spanish is the only inner language that is universal; all others autonomic languages are local or particular. Therefore, the Spanish language is not just the guarantor of the Spanish nation unity inside the State but it is the guarantor of an alleged community or linguistic nation outside the State. This nation is considered more real than other communities that have their own languages, and those other languages do not reach a cohesive or an international level.

It seems that the Spanish Constitution avails the superiority of the Spanish language and reflects not only the use of this as a cohesive tool, but avails the internal differences between languages and more important, the profound conflict between the Spanish nation and other nations inside Spain.

The legal and official Spanish constitutional nationalism is based on the denial of other people to achieve a sovereign nation.

This concept provokes conflicts because the Spanish State did not achieve the subordination of certain ethnical groups; it did not succeed in achieving the homogenization of its population. Thus, the Basques, like the Catalans or <https://assignbuster.com/basque-nationalism-is-a-ongoing-conflict-history-essay/>

the Gallegos, search for their own identity, sovereignty, government and solutions, and they are in a permanent struggle against this Spanish nationalism.

“ The creation of a peaceful regional order of nation-states has usually been the product of a violent process of ethnic separation. In areas where that separation has not yet occurred, politics is apt to remain ugly”.

The Basque case is an example of what William Zartman claims to be the failures or challenges of the nation-building. The Basque identity grew from the failures of the Spanish nation-building.

Spain failed to maintain a supra-ethnic national identity, which was not established even with an authoritarian regime. The most significant failure of Spanish nationalism was the fact that they did not take into account Basque people. For this reason, and because of the abovementioned characteristics of the Basque country, the insurrection movement was born and a violent conflict began. The Basques are unified by an ideology and they request the independence and liberation from their ‘ country’.

Given their absence of interaction with the Spanish national idea, and with their strong self-identity, the Basques were transformed into a powerful minority. They want to redefine Spain and turn it from the so-called nation-State into a multinational State.

It is clear that the case of Spain is complicated because there is a fight against another nation and State, and, as stated above, this struggle is based on an ethnical variant. There are people who have lived for years in

the same territory, who have the same characteristics and a common culture, language and ideas. The Basques have transformed to an ethnicalnationalism movement and “ the ethnonationalism constitutes a major and growing threat to the political stability of most states”; and this case is an example of it.

This nationalism, which is almost 82 years old, is even reflected in the football field. Atletico Bilbao is one of the most important football teams in the Basque country. The club’s success gave the Basques something to be proud of; and supporting the club became a legal way of expressing Basque nationalism during Franco’s dictatorship. What helped the club succeed in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were the strict limits imposed on foreign players. In most cases, clubs could only have three foreign players in their squad, meaning that at least eight local players had to play in every game. While Real Madrid and FC Barcelona circumnavigated these rules by playing dual citizens, Athletic adhered strictly to their youth team policy, showing little or no flexibility.

Despite the lack of on-field success, a majority of the club’s supporters think the club’s identity is more important than winning trophies, and according to a survey published in the newspaper “ El Mundo” in the 1990s, 76% of Athletic fans would rather see the club relegated than give up its policy.

Today, when Atletico Bilbao plays against Real Madrid, the event becomes something more than a football match. The ethnonationalism of the Basques and the conflict with Spain are clearly shown.

The Basque country political organization

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To understand if the self-determination of Basque people has had the same importance for them throughout time, we should analyze elections results. Thus, we can obtain useful information about the development of the national feeling and people's support to the national radicalism movement.

“ The reality of Euskadi is complicated. A good part of the population living in the ‘ historic territories’ does not want to be included in the Basque nation. That is the case of most Basques living in France and, above all, the people of Navarre. But Basque nationalists are convinced, on linguistic and anthropological grounds, that Navarre is the heartland of their nation. The Bascons of Navarre are claimed as the ancestors of the Basque people, as the mountainous north of Navarre is still partly Basque-speaking. And the eleventh-century kingdom of Navarre is the only entity to have exercised political authority over all the territories to which the Basque now laid claim.

The great majority of Navarrese, however, consider their region to be quite distinct from the Basque country. The Union of the People of Navarre (UPN), founded in 1977 to oppose the Basque nationalism, has become the largest political party in the region, winning 36. 8% of the vote in the 1996 elections.

The stubborn determination to unite the ‘ historic territories’ in one nation may seem rather strange in view of the strength of resistance to it. (Even within the Basque country, the province of Alava does not support the nationalist cause). However, the sense of belonging to a single nation was strengthened by the existence of a form of social organization and similar institutions in the various ‘ historic territories’. These institutions, and the

laws which they were responsible for applying, are a basic constituent of Basque nationalist ideology.

Basques can be divided into three national communities: those who call themselves Spaniards, those who think of themselves as French, and those who consider themselves only Basques”.

In Spain, even prior to the promulgation of the new Constitution in 1978, steps were taken to recognize the legitimacy of regional aspirations. Exiled Basques came back to Spain from abroad: all the political parties included plans for devolution in their manifestos for the 1977 elections; and provisional autonomy arrangements were negotiated with some of the regions even before the Constitution was agreed.

The section on the regions in the Constitution proved to be long and controversial. A middle line had to be taken between those who feared the disintegration of the Spain State, and those who were pressing for greater recognition of regional identities in the political system. In the case of the Basque country, the Partido Nacional Vasco (PNV) felt that the Constitution did not go far enough towards granting their historic rights.

From the first elections held in 1977, the Basque nationalist parties grew continuously until they achieved an absolute majority of the vote (over 70%). The spread of nationalism has enveloped all areas of societies.

The Basque Parliament was created in the 1978 Constitution with the recognition of the autonomy of the Basque people as a “ Historical Community”. The Parliament is composed by 76 seats. It has a Legislative

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Power; it passes laws, approves the Basque Autonomy Community budget, elects the President of the Basque Government, and promotes and controls the action of the Executive Power.

In the first election of the Basque Parliament in 1980, as well as in the last one in 2009, the PNV was the party with most votes. In 1980 they received 349. 102 votes, which gave them 25 seats in Parliament (37. 9%); in 1984, 451. 178 votes, reaching 32 seats; in 1986, 271. 208 votes, corresponding to 17 seats; in 1990, 289. 201 votes and 22 seats; in 1994, 304. 346 votes corresponding to 22 seats; in 1998, 350. 322 votes and 21 seats; in 2001, 604. 222 votes and 33 seats; and in 2005 the party got 463. 876 votes and 22 seats. In 2009, the people's participation reached to 65. 88%, the PNV received the higher percentage of votes, 38. 56%, and 30 seats in the Parliament.

The nationalist party has also today, the majority of seats in the Parliament.

The Basques have their own government which represents them; and elections show people's tendency to support the national Basque idea. The message is clear, they want their country's autonomy.

Why this conflict became a violent one?

Jerry Muller offers one explanation for why ethnic identities figure so centrally in political conflict. He argues that ethnonationalism “ is a crucial source of both solidarity and enmity”. This explanation echoes a fairly conventional account of ethnic conflict according to which people tend to

prefer members of their own group and, in some cases have active antipathy toward out-group members, making conflict inevitable result.

At the same time, James Habyarimana claims that recent research points to at least other two explanations. One argument suggests that members of the same group tend to work together to achieve collective ends not because of their discriminatory preferences but because of efficiency: they speak the same language, have access to the same types of information, and share social networks. In environments with scarce resources, they may even choose to work together against other groups, whether or not they care for or even like their peers. Thus, political coalitions form along ethnic lines happen not because people care more for their own but simply because it is easier to collaborate with their ethnic peers to achieve collective ends.

A second account emphasizes the norms that may develop within ethnic groups. Even when people see no efficiency gains from working with their co-ethnics and have no discriminatory preferences, they may still favor their own simply because they expect them to discriminate in their favor as well.

Habyarimana suggests, that if ethnic hatreds are not at work, separating groups may not make much sense as a strategy for mitigating the corrosive effects of ethnic divisions. It might be far more important to invest in creating impartial and credible state institutions that facilitate cooperation across ethnic lines.

Throughout this paper work it becomes clear that ethnonationalism is strongly rooted in the Basque people; it is a historical variant that rules their daily lives and also, their political lives. The Basque people created a united
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nation and it is true that the reasons of this unity are their common language, their common roots, they feel more comfortable between their own people, etc. Those reasons are the reasons of the ethnonationalism movement creation, and this certainly generates divisions in the society, but the question is not why they choose to work and prefer to live with their own ethnic group but why the political and legal measures are not enough and they choose to combat actively and violently for their independence.

It is difficult to relate nationalist expansion to political violence. Certainly, many nationalists from all over the political spectrum believe that ETA still plays a useful role in putting pressure on Madrid. “ Moreover, active logistical support for ETA has been found in many highly regarded sectors, such as law firms, welfare societies for the unemployed, religious orders and so on”.

The influence of ETA could be understood from different perspectives. ETA has a symbolic power in the radical nationalist collective, which is beyond all the social and political transformations and beyond society itself; because ETA is not just the messenger of the principles and vindications, it is the centre; and without it the collective does not exist.

Moreover, the ETA resurrection could be explained through William Zartman’s work “ Mediating Conflicts of need, greed and creed” where he defines the ethnic conflicts as