

EUROPA COUNTRY PERSPECTIVES



The Basque Contention

Ethnicity, Politics, Violence

Ludger Mees

ROUTLEDGE

The Basque Contention

To the outside world, for some half a century, the words ‘Basque Country’ have provoked an almost instant association with the Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, Basque Homeland and Liberty) separatist group and violent conflict. *The Basque Contention: Ethnicity, Politics, Violence* attempts to undo this simplistic correlation and, for the first time, provide a definitive history of the wider political issues at the heart of the Basque Country.

Drawing on three decades of research on Basque nationalism, Ludger Mees weaves together the various historical and contemporary strands of this contention: from the late medieval kingdoms of Spain and France and the first articulations of a Basque ethno-particularism, to the dissolution of ETA in 2018, and all manner of dictatorships, conflict, peace, civil war, political intrigue, hope and failure in-between.

For anyone who has ever wanted to gain an insight into the Basque Country beyond the headlines of ETA and grasp the complexity of its relationship with Spain, France and indeed itself, this volume provides a detailed, yet digestible, basis for such an understanding.

Ludger Mees completed his PhD in History at the University of Bielefeld, Germany and was Assistant Professor at the same institution before taking up a lectureship at the University of the Basque Country, Bilbao in 1991. Since 2004 he has been Professor of Contemporary History at the University of the Basque Country and between 2004 and 2009 he was also Vice-Chancellor. He is author, co-author or editor of 17 books and about 120 articles and book chapters in the fields of nationalism, social movements, historiography and agrarian history.

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The Basque Contention: Ethnicity, Politics, Violence

Ludger Mees

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The Basque Contention

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Ludger Mees

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Acknowledgments

This book on the past, present and future of the Basque contention is a new intellectual proposal aimed at decoding the key elements of one of Europe's most intricate political conflicts. It comes after now more than 30 years of talking, writing and asking questions about nationalism in general, and Basque nationalism in particular. It is also the result of a broader research project carried out thanks to the financial support provided by the University of the Basque Country (GIU 17/005), the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness and the European Regional Development Fund (HAR2015-64920-P, MINECO/FEDER).

The basic premise of this book has greatly benefited from two central and indispensable conditions. The first is the end of ETA violence and the shape of a new more relaxed atmosphere within which an academic account of the Basque contention would no longer suffer the pernicious impact of threat or emotional partisan criticism from one side or the other. The second condition is the critical feedback that I have received over the last three decades from my students, colleagues and friends who have been enormously helpful in “correcting” and “completing” the results of my research in John Stuart Mill's terms: “The steady habit of correcting and completing his own opinion by collating it with those of others, so far from causing doubt and hesitation in carrying it into practice, is the only stable foundation for a just reliance on it.”¹

While this critical dialogue has been a fortunate constant over the years, it was particularly stimulating throughout the preparation of this book owing to the intrinsic difficulty of summarizing the history of several centuries on a limited number of pages. At the risk of unfairness, I would like to single out some of the many people to whom I feel especially indebted. Niall Cullen has not only made a Herculean effort to fine-tune my written English and to hide as far as possible my evident limitations in this respect, but his thoughtful comments have also made me reconsider some of my arguments. Hans-Jürgen Puhle, Santiago de Pablo, Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, Andreas Hess and Aritz Farwell have undertaken the time-consuming task of reading the manuscript, which has greatly benefited from their comments and suggestions. I would also like to acknowledge my gratitude to the publisher, and especially to Cathy Hartley, for giving me the opportunity to launch and disseminate this

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Earlier in this section I cited John Stuart Mill. Let me finish it with another quote taken from the same publication where he insists on the necessity of submitting our knowledge to permanent external criticism. His example can hardly be more convincing: “The most intolerant of churches, the Roman Catholic Church, even at the canonization of a saint, admits, and listens patiently to, a ‘devil’s advocate’. The holiest of men, it appears, cannot be admitted to posthumous honors, until all that the devil could say against him is known and weighed.” I am not seriously considering a future as a saint. Nor am I looking to score points for my posthumous honors. Yet I do share Mill’s conclusion, which is essentially an open invitation for the reader to participate in the resulting dialogue, the essential fundament of any progress in our knowledge: “The beliefs which we have most warrant for, have no safeguard to rest on, but a standing invitation to the whole world to prove them unfounded.”

Note

- 1 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, 7th ed. (Boston, MA: James R. Osgood and Cía, 1871), 42.

1 Introduction

Retrieving the pirates

On 7 June 1968, the same year in which the Basque student Joxe Azurmendi, aged 26, published his melancholic poem “Manifestu atzeratua”, another Basque youngster, 23 years old, was driving a stolen Seat 850 on the road that connects Irún on the Spanish–French border with the capital Madrid. Txabi Etxebarrieta, born into a middle-class family of Bilbao and with a degree in economics from the Jesuit University of Deusto, Bilbao, was under the influence of amphetamines as he set off on an important and risky mission to the town of Beasain, where he was supposed to receive a consignment of explosives from a comrade. For this mission he was to be accompanied by his friend Iñaki Sarasketa. The three youngsters were members of the underground organization Euzkadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA, Basque Country and Freedom) that had been founded in 1959. Before reaching their destination, two Guardia Civil officers who were regulating the traffic ordered the driver of the Seat to stop. While checking the documentation and the license plate, one of the two policemen noticed that something was wrong. According to the testimony of Sarasketa, at the very moment the policeman, who was still checking the number of the car and comparing it with the one in the fake documentation, murmured something like “this does not coincide”, Etxebarrieta drew his gun and shot the policeman dead. José Antonio Pardines, age 25, son and nephew of a Guardia Civil, became ETA’s first victim.

Etxebarrieta and Sarasketa managed to flee to the town of Tolosa, hiding in the flat of a friend. After two hours, the two men decided to leave the refuge with their comrade and try to escape from danger in the car of the latter. In the meantime, the police had organized numerous traffic controls across the most important roads in the region. It was foreseeable that in such a situation a successful escape of the three young men was less than unlikely. Indeed, minutes after leaving the refuge, the trio were stopped by the Guardia Civil. Sarasketa started firing around him and succeeded in running away. The last image he saw of his friend Txabi, was of him lying on the ground in a semi-conscious state, surrounded by several policemen who were hitting him. Seconds later, he heard the two shots that put an end to Etxebarrieta’s life.¹

2 Introduction

Overlapping in time with these fatal clashes, Joxe Azurmendi drafted his “Delayed Manifest”. A part of this poem reads as follows:

Gure herriak ez dauka kondairarik.
Pobrea da. Ez dauka
Pirate koxkor pare bat,
Langile sofritu batzuk,
Muga zentzuzgabeko asko,
Mila zorigaizto
Besterik. Ez da gutxi.
Euri gortina batek ixten du
Gure kalendarioa.
Ez, ba, bilatu kondaira unibertsalen
Liburu handietan gure inperiorik.

Our people does not have a history.
It is poor.
It does not have anything other than a couple of little pirates,
Some long-suffering workers,
Many senseless borders,
And thousands of misfortunes.
This is no small matter.
A curtain of rain envelops our calendar.
So do not search for any empire of ours
In the great books of world history.²

After these two violent and fatal clashes in the late spring of 1968, Azurmendi's poem became outdated at least in one sense: from the late 1960s onwards, the Basques apparently started to have a history. They were emerging out of the dark tunnel of historical insignificance, appearing in the international media and attracting the interest of academic scholars and intellectuals all over the world. Azurmendi's “little pirates” mutated into underground activists who became admired protagonists of the struggle against the Francoist dictatorship, under which many of the ETA paramilitaries were enveloped in a Che Guevara-like aureole as fearless and unselfish freedom fighters. ETA's blows against representatives and symbols of the regime were particularly celebrated by the European left who no longer remembered Friedrich Engels' stinging criticism against the Basques as obsolete “residual fragments of peoples” and “fanatical standard-bearers of counter-revolution”, and whose unavoidable destiny was their “complete extirpation or loss of their national character”. According to the German philosopher, the revolutionary war would make not only reactionary classes and dynasties disappear, “but also entire reactionary peoples” such as the Basques.³ After 1968, however, the appeal of ETA's particular ideological blend of radical nationalism, anti-colonialism, Marxism-Leninism and/or Maoism transformed Engels' reactionary relicts of the past into

revolutionaries engaged in a double struggle: for their national freedom and for the emancipation of the working class. Nobody seemed too concerned about the potential inconsistencies of this ideological blend and its contradictions. The point was that Franco's dictatorship and its repression made it appear plausible and realistic.

Soon, however, the Basques' place in history changed again. Franco died in 1975 and a brief period of negotiated transition gave birth to a new Spanish democracy. Far from ending its military activity, throughout the years of transition and democracy ETA intensified its "armed struggle" and broadened radically the scope of its victims. Those who had been celebrated as anti-Francoist freedom fighters by the international media were now labeled as dangerous and fanatic terrorists who constituted one of the most serious challenges to Spanish (and European) democracy. The Basques continued on the stage of history, but most would probably now have preferred to recover Azurmendi's "historical invisibility". Journalists, academics and intellectuals engaged in discussions and scholarly analysis about the "Basque problem", which, according to the mainstream understanding, was limited to the problem of political violence. At the same time, millions of European TV newscast viewers learned to associate the word "Basque" with at least two bad news items: the first when they were told that, as nearly always, a bad weather front was approaching from the Bay of Biscay, and the second when they were informed that the Basque ETA had once again killed somebody. Thus, Basque participation in world history and politics became stereotyped and reduced to the phenomenon of political violence. The "Basque conflict" became a synonym for "Basque violence" and when somebody engaged in a discussion about how to resolve the "Basque problem", what really was at stake was the question of how to put an end to political violence. Even for academic scholars it was not easy to escape this rather reductionist perspective. The daily presence of violence caused a strong emotional impact and contributed to an extreme polarization of society, politics and scholars, whose work was frequently conditioned by the emotions generated by ETA's activities.

One personal experience may suffice to illustrate this dilemma. Years ago, when in the late 1990s I started preparing and writing my book titled *Nationalism, Violence and Democracy: The Basque Clash of Identities*, I had come to the conclusion that ETA and its political wing were "ripe" for a peaceful settlement and that the evolution towards an abandonment of the armed struggle would be pushed and strengthened by the influence of the Northern Irish Peace Process and the Good Friday Agreement. When in 1998 ETA declared the group's first unconditional and indefinite ceasefire in the same year the Good Friday Agreement was signed, I found my hypothesis elevated to the status of an academic certainty.

However, this certainty was blown to pieces when in the winter of 1999 ETA broke off its ceasefire and in January of 2000 resumed its armed struggle. What followed was not a simple return to the paramilitaries' prior

4 *Introduction*

strategy, but a historically new intensification of violence through a radical extension of its range of targets. This took me (and many others) completely by surprise and I became aware that some of the arguments in the chapters of the book that I had already drafted needed a thorough revision. I sensed that some of the (unduly optimistic) points I had made might have been less the result of rigorous research and more as a result of wishful thinking. Yet this revision of the manuscript came to an abrupt end when in August 2000 ETA killed the Basque businessman Joxe Mari Korta. I knew Korta very well since I had interviewed him for my book and then, when we discovered our common hobby of cycling, we met on many occasions to practice our favorite sport and incidentally chat about politics. Joxe Mari was a Basque nationalist, a great sponsor of Basque culture and a person who felt more comfortable speaking in Basque than in Spanish. He was *sentenced to death* because he refused to pay the revolutionary tax demanded by the paramilitaries. The particular mix of enormous pain and deep aversion to the perpetrators I felt inside left me unable to continue with any serious academic work on the Basque issue. Only many months later was I able to overcome this intellectual and emotional block, recover a certain emotional distance to my object of research and to resume the work on the book, which was not published until 2003.⁴

In the end, it still took more than a decade for Basque history to arrive at the point that I had erroneously wished for and predicted at the end of the 1990s. In October 2011, three hooded paramilitaries declared in a video sent to the media the permanent cessation of ETA's armed activity. Years later, unlike on so many previous occasions, this announcement has turned out to be true. The last doubts vanished when in April 2017 the disarmament of the group was carried out in the French part of the Basque Country, followed by ETA's final dissolution in May 2018.

This definitive end of political violence has created a new scenario in which a thorough revision of the mainstream narrative on the Basque problem with its all-absorbing focus on political violence seems to be not only convenient but also necessary. To recall Azurmendi's poem, time has come to undo the replacement of the unpretentious "little pirates" by the spectacular paramilitaries and to recover the times in which Basque history and politics were not reduced to a scientific or journalistic account of political violence. The aim of this book is precisely to take advantage of the new situation and restore a more multi-faceted, convincing and intellectually satisfying view on the evolution of the Basque problem from its origins to the present day. This does not at all suppose a trivialization of the role political violence has played in recent Basque, Spanish and European politics; nor does it come with any kind of disregard for the existing literature on ETA violence. On the contrary, the topic of political violence will also have a prominent place in this book, which would not have been possible without a large number of interesting and occasionally brilliant publications on political violence in the Basque Country. These will be cited in detail, as well as the rest of the relevant literature, in the notes of the following chapters. But, again, the core premise of this work

is the rejection of the aforementioned one-dimensional interpretation and its substitution by a multi-faceted understanding of a *longue-durée* conflict with, at least, three overlapping, but not identical dimensions. The first is the political dimension regarding the politico-administrative relation between the Basque Country and the Spanish and French nation state(s); the second consists of the ethical dimension concerned with the use of violence for the achievement of political goals; and, finally, the social one related to the complicated search for an inner-Basque consensus on the desirable scope and pattern of self-government (Spanish province; regional autonomy; federalism; co-sovereignty; independent state; etc.). In a nutshell, while dedicating attention to the analysis of ETA and nationalist violence (as well as the state's response), this book aims at the same time to discredit the quite popular conception of nationalist violence as a direct, almost "natural" consequence of the political conflict. Although political conflict (under a dictatorship and in a democracy) may, but does not necessarily trigger violence, the long continuity of Basque nationalist violence over more than four decades and in two different political settings requires the exploration of other arguments beyond a mere reference to the political conflict. Such a multi-layered analysis of the Basque contention will hopefully contribute in placing this case study in the appropriate historical context, connect it to other cases with similar problems and contribute to the scholarly debate about highly complex issues such as the relationship between state and nation building in Europe.

In line with this broader analytical scope, an important methodological and conceptual decision was made. The use of the term "contention" for the description of the object of study, i.e. the rise of the Basque demand for self-determination, its mobilizing effects and its disruptive consequences since the mid-19th century, allows us to overcome the excessive focus on political violence by inserting this analysis into the larger field of political process and social movement studies as articulated and developed by social scientists such as Charles Tilly, Sidney Tarrow and Doug McAdam, among others.⁵ It was Charles Tilly who coined the concept of "contention" ("contentious collective action"; "contentious politics") in his early publications of the late 1970s. Later, in 2001, in co-authorship with Tarrow and McAdam, the three scholars presented their much discussed "Dynamics of Contention" as a conceptual and methodological culmination of their prior work on the topic. In this canonical publication, contentious politics was labeled as "episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants". The authors distinguished between two variants of contention: "contained" and "transgressive", referring the first to "cases of contention in which all parties are previously established actors employing well established means of claim making", in contrast to the latter in which "at least some parties to the conflict are newly self-identified political actors, and/or ... at least some parties employ innovative collective action".⁶

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The debate on contentious politics and social movements did not vanish in 2008 with Tilly's death. On the contrary, McAdam, Tarrow and others made important efforts to develop the concept by incorporating some of the arguments that had been raised by critical voices. One of the consequences of this debate over the last three decades has been a broadening of the conceptual scope. Initially, Tilly had created the concept to refer to "the discontinuous making of claims that bear on other people's interests" and to distinguish it from "continuous claim making" such as "parliamentary representation, routine activities of trade unions, day-to-day operation of friendship networks and similar unceasing exertions of influence". In his book on the popular contention in Great Britain during the period that gave rise to modern democracy, Tilly defined his object of study as "the world of conflict, of contradictory interests, of claims, threats, and promises, of coercion, coalition, and co-optation, of negotiation, of politics". In this world, contention generated a specific repertoire of collective action such as "mutinies, meetings, marches, petition drives, demonstrations, turnouts, window-breaking, street battles, attacks on informers, and other forms of contention".⁷ This conceptual differentiation between "continuous claim-making" and "discontinuous, contentious collective action" – labeled also as *episodic* collective action – was to be revised, as scholars of collective action and social movements started to complement Tilly's view on early modern Europe with studies on contentious politics in the 19th and 20th centuries. In the context of the new liberal, capitalist and constitutional society, claim makers had access to a new repertoire of mobilization that included opportunities of "continuous claim-making" such as party politics, electoral campaigns and institutional presence. In fact, and against the opinion of many early collective-behavior theorists, one of the essential features of modern social movements is not the members' more or less relatively spontaneous mobilizations and the complete lack of organization, but rather a combination of both patterns of mobilization. In their early phases, all contemporary social movements are popular expressions of grievances, felt by a certain social collective, channeled through activities that require a low organizational input and directed against the existing social, political and/or institutional status quo. This, however, tends to change in the case of social movements with a long life-cycle, because these movements are unlikely to survive without a certain level of structural organization and institutional presence that helps to bridge periods of decreasing popular mobilization. In correspondence to this alteration of the context in which modern social movements act, the notion of contention or contentious politics has abandoned the original, nearly exclusive focus on discontinuous claim making to be substituted by a more balanced understanding of the particular oscillation between continuous and discontinuous elements in the repertoire of mobilization.⁸

This wider and more flexible perspective allows for a more dynamic analysis of social movements that is also able to cope with the evolution of contentious politics over different historical periods. In this sense, we can argue with Tarrow's view that collective action

becomes contentious when it is used by people who lack regular access to institutions, act in the name of new or unaccepted claims and behave in ways that fundamentally challenge others. It produces social movements when social actors concert their actions around common claims in sustained sequences of interaction with opponents or authorities.⁹

This accepted, one could add that once a social movement enters the institutions, contentious politics do not cease as the grievances have not disappeared and the claims are still pretty “new” and “unaccepted”. As Tarrow argues, “movements frequently give rise to parties when movement activists *transfer their activism* to institutional politics”. Instead of a complete *transfer* to institutional politics, in other cases of *longue-durée* movements what happens is a sort of cohabitation within the movement between extra-institutional, more disruptive and even violent mobilization and institutional pressure giving birth to a “party-movement hybrid”.¹⁰ This analytical focus on the struggle between these two movement factions – between moderates and radicals – as well as their strategy of claim making towards the state opens the door to a better understanding of the complex dynamics of contentious politics for at least two reasons: first, it avoids a simplistic and Manichean approach to contentious politics by considering the inner heterogeneity of social movements and the tensions and clashes over strategies and goals. And second, it permits a solid and multi-faceted grasp of the dynamics of contention over different historical periods through an examination of issues such as the “interaction among claim-makers, their allies, their opponents, the government, the media, and the mass public” as well as the “trajectory of mobilization and demobilization”.¹¹

This renewed approach to *contentious politics* is the conceptual background of this book. It challenges more traditional views on Basque politics and their excessive (and sometimes exclusive) focus on political violence and terrorism by inserting the problem of violence into the broader frame of contentious politics as described above. The key issue at stake in the Basque contention is the claim of significant sectors of Basque society to be bearers of, and united by, certain ethnic, cultural and historical characteristics different from the Spanish and French, and that in accordance to this national identity they have the right to self-determination and national sovereignty. The Basque contention was to emerge in the late 19th century, when a (Basque) ethnic particularism was harnessed and transformed into a political claim-making platform by a nationalist movement which from its very beginnings evolved as a party-movement hybrid.

This general conceptual approach to the Basque contention can be broken down into four major hypotheses that will serve as guidelines for this book.¹² First, the Basque contention was not the result of ETA’s foundation in 1959 or the group’s 1968 decision to initiate armed struggle, nor did it end in 2011 when the paramilitaries announced the permanent cessation of their armed activities.

8 Introduction

Second, Basque nationalism as one of the central actors in the Basque contention was not a creation *ex nihilo*. One of the self-criticisms formulated by the promoters of the contentious politics approach conceded that “by focusing on the mechanisms in episodes of contention, the program failed to provide thorough accounts of movement origins and outcomes”.¹³ Consequently, even though the Basque contention *strictu sensu* emerged during the last two decades of the 19th century, it was preceded by a long period of ethnic particularism that had already surfaced during the 17th century. Two centuries later, and in lineage with this previous stage of pre-national ethnic self-awareness, the Basque contention was triggered by the confluence of a number of different factors within a new favorable opportunity structure.

Third, when nationalism was finally established as a social movement, it evolved over various stages with different levels of mobilization that oscillated between the extremes of institutional routine and extra-parliamentary contention (demonstrations, warfare, paramilitary violence). From its very beginnings, it combined the protagonism of party politics with a daily individual grassroots’ commitment to, and within, a broad organizational network (cultural groups and initiatives; women and youth; labor unions).

And fourth, as a key player in the Basque contention, Basque nationalism shares a fundamental feature with many other modern social movements in that it is usually characterized by a great inner heterogeneity and the cohabitation of (or confrontation among) different currents and factions. Despite its enormous presence in the media, ETA and its political wing was but one of those wings, and not even the majority one. This assumption also permits a more realistic grasp on the complex architecture of the Basque contention, which – as already mentioned above – was (and still is) not simply a clash between the Basque people and the Spanish (and French) state(s), but also an inner-Basque struggle about the desirable political status (independence, regional autonomy, federalism, more centralism) as well as an ethical dispute over the means of the fight for self-government (violence or democratic politics).

In what follows, these hypotheses and conceptual guidelines will be developed over nine different sections. As already indicated above, in processes of contentious politics, and especially in those in which the issues of identity and sovereignty are at stake, states are directly involved as central actors. In the Basque case, the state (the Spanish, but also the French) is not simply the target of the demands expressed by the nationalist movement. On the contrary, the state is also central to the context that conditioned the rise and evolution of Basque nationalism as a powerful social movement in Spain in contrast to a weaker presence in France. Why did Basque nationalism emerge in Spain, when it is mostly in the works of French-Basque writers of the 16th and 17th centuries that we find the first testimonies of a Basque proto-national consciousness? These are some of the questions to be tackled in Chapters 2 and 3, where the long prehistory of the Basque contention will be discussed. These sections highlight the peculiarities of the Spanish process of

state and nation building, as well as the shape of a Basque ethnic particularism. Chapters 4 to 9 follow a chronological structure and analyze the most important periods in the evolution of the Basque contention, i.e. the rise and development of nationalism until the Civil War; the Francoist dictatorship; the transition to democracy; the shape of regional autonomy; the shift to radical nationalist politics; and the path towards the end of political violence. In a final concluding chapter, some ideas on nations and states in our global age will be outlined.

It is impossible to write anything about the Basque Country without some terminological explanations. Indeed, owing to the fact that the Basque territories on both sides of the Pyrenees have never shared a common modern state, there are plenty of different names and doubts about what is actually meant when the notion of the “Basque Country” is mentioned.¹⁴ In this book the notion “Basque Country” refers to a region on either side of the Franco-Spanish border that historically has never formed a politico-administrative unit but shares a certain sense of ethnic particularism with the outstanding marker of this being its own language, Euskara – a language completely different to the Romance languages of French and Spanish.

This region consists of seven territories, four on the Spanish side (Gipuzkoa, Biscay, Álava, Navarre) and three on the French side (Labourd, Basque: Lapurdi; Lower Navarre, Basque: Nafarroa Beherea; Soule, Basque: Zuberoa; Figure 1.1). Basque nationalists consider the inhabitants of these territories members of the Basque nation, whose unification they seek.

Currently about 2,650,000 inhabitants of the Basque Country live divided between two different states with different levels of self-government (Table 1.1). The core of this region is the Basque Autonomous Community *Euskadi*, composed of three of the four provinces on Spanish soil (Álava, Gipuzkoa, Biscay). It is the homeland for about 70 percent of the total Basque population. Navarre, the fourth province, has its own regional autonomy and a disputed history, over which the disagreement about whether Navarre belongs to the Basque nation or not has become a central element of contentious politics in the Basque Country. The three territories on French soil constitute, together with the non-Basque region of Béarn, the *Département des Pyrénées Atlantiques*. Only very recently in January 2017 have the three Basque territories managed to join in a rudimentary official administrative organism of cooperation (*Communauté d'agglomération du Pays Basque*).

Even though nationalists have celebrated the foundation of the *Communauté* as a first step towards the territorial unification of the Basques on the French side of the border, its foundation followed the logic of administrative decentralization carried out by the French government in other regions of the country. The competences of this new organism fall very short of the level of self-government that the Basques on Spanish soil have acquired through their Statutes of Autonomy in Euskadi and in Navarre. One of the reasons for this difference has to do with the historical strength of Basque nationalism in Spain, in contrast to its weakness in France. A look at the history of Spanish state and



Figure 1.1 The Basque Country and its seven territories

Source: based on an image courtesy of Shutterstock

Table 1.1 Population of the Basque Country in 2016 (above the age of 16)

Total Basque Country	Basque Autonomous Community	Navarre	French Basque Country
2,647,000	1,864,000	534,000	249,000

Source: VIème Enquête Sociolinguistique Pays basque 2016, www.mintzaira.fr/fileadmin/documents/Aktualitateak/015_VI_ENQUETE_PB_Fr.pdf, accessed September 5, 2017

nation building is therefore necessary to understand why nationalism, as the key actor in Basque contentious politics, emerged in Spain and not in France.

Notes

- 1 Jesús Casquete, “Txabi Etxebarrieta”, in Santiago de Pablo, José Luis de la Granja, Ludger Mees and Jesús Casquete (eds.), *Diccionario ilustrado de símbolos del nacionalismo vasco* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2012), 270–281; Gaizka Fernández Soldevilla and Florencio Domínguez Iribarren (eds.), *Pardines. Cuando ETA empezó a matar* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2018).
- 2 For the complete text see <http://basquepoetry.eus/?i=poemak&b=454>, accessed January 9, 2019; author’s translation, as are the other translations from Basque, Spanish or German that will follow in the text, if not indicated otherwise.

- 3 Friedrich Engels, “Der magyarische Kampf”, *Neue Rheinische Zeitung*, 194 (January 13, 1849), [www.mlwerke.de/me/me06_165.htm](http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me06/me06_165.htm); English: www.marxistsf.org/archive/marx/works/1849/01/13.htm, accessed December 12, 2017.
- 4 Ludger Mees, *Nationalism, Violence and Democracy: The Basque Clash of Identities* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
- 5 Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1978); Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain, 1758–1834* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publisher, 2005 [1995]); Charles Tilly, *Contentious Performances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011 [1994]); Sidney Tarrow, *The Language of Contention: Revolutions in Words, 1688–2012* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Doug McAdam, Sidney Tarrow and Charles Tilly, *Dynamics of Contention* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Doug McAdam and Sidney Tarrow, “Dynamics of Contention: Ten Years On”, *Mobilization*, 16 (1) (March 2011): 1–10.
- 6 McAdam et al., *Dynamics*, 5–8.
- 7 Tilly, *Popular Contention*, 16–17.
- 8 In a self-critical balance, ten years after the publication of the crucial “Dynamics of Contention”, McAdam and Tarrow admit as one example of their “failures” or deficits in the conceptual shape of “contentious politics” the greater necessity to “link elections and social movements”. McAdam and Tarrow, “Dynamics of Contention”, 6.
- 9 Tarrow, *Power in Movement*, 2.
- 10 Sidney Tarrow, “Contentious Politics”, in Donatella della Porta and Mario Dianio (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Social Movements* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 86–107, quotations 94, 95.
- 11 Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow, *Contentious Politics* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2007), 92; Sidney Tarrow, *Strangers at the Gates: Movements and States in Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 6–26.
- 12 Some preliminary ideas in Ludger Mees, “Politics, Economy, or Culture? The Rise and Development of Basque Nationalism in the Light of Social Movement Theory”, *Theory and Society*, 33 (2004): 311–331.
- 13 Tarrow, “Contentious Politics”, 92.
- 14 Ludger Mees, “A Nation in Search of a Name: Cultural Realities, Political Projects, and Terminological Struggles in the Basque Country”, in Pello Salaburu (ed.), *The Challenge of a Bilingual Society in the Basque Country* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2012), 11–32.

2 The context

Problems of state and nation building in France and Spain

Notwithstanding the remarkable differences in time, context and geographic location, all state-seeking nationalisms around the world share one basic argument to explain their *raison d'être*: the oppression and exploitation of their nation by a powerful foreign state or empire. According to this nationalist discourse, the only means of overcoming this situation of colonialist exploitation and dependence is by way of massive social mobilization against the perpetrators of the oppressive state and its laws, aimed at the achievement of independence (or other sorts of home rule). This struggle against the almighty central state and for home rule is indispensable if the true (cultural, economic, political) virtues of the stateless nation are to be recovered and peaceful coexistence in freedom and democracy granted.

Basque nationalism was no exception to this discursive habitus. Sabino Arana, the founder of the movement, was to suffer the oppression of the Spanish state firsthand. One year after the public confession of his “hatred” for Spain he was sentenced and put into prison for the first time:

We hate Spain with all our soul, as long as it oppresses our Fatherland with the chains of that vindictive slavery.

In the year 39 [1839] Biscay fell definitively under the power of Spain. Our Fatherland Biscay, from the independent nation that it was, with her own power and rights, became on that date a Spanish province, a part of the most degraded and abject nation of Europe.¹

The journal where he had published this confession was banned, the first nationalist society outlawed and ten members of its directing council were brought before the courts, sentenced and imprisoned. Four months later, Arana was released, but in 1902, he was returned to the Larrinaga prison in Bilbao for daring to send a congratulatory telegram to the American president Theodore Roosevelt for the liberation of Cuba from the Spanish yoke. This affront to Spanish national pride earned him another five months of imprisonment. This juridical and political persecution of Sabino Arana and his first followers – an issue that we shall discuss again with more detail in Chapter 4 – seemed to corroborate the narrative of Basque nationalism as a

reactive response to the Spanish state and its colonial subjugation of the Basque nation.

Since the 1990s, the core element of this narrative, i.e. the coercive strength of the Spanish state and its capacity in implementing a process of Spanish nation building even in regions with alternative national projects such as the Basque Country or Catalonia, has increasingly been challenged by a significant number of historians and social scientists. In fact, the Yale-based German-Spanish sociologist Juan Linz first forwarded an argument some 20 years earlier in 1973 that would become prominent among scholars interested in the history of Spain and peripheral nationalisms. In his long contribution to Stein Rokkan's edited book titled *Building States and Nations*, and in line with the classical American theory of state building,² Linz distinguished between a successful early state-building process in Spain and a failed nation-building process. This failure was due to the incapacity of the Spanish ruling elite of the 19th century to incorporate Basques and Catalans into the project of a Spanish nation state. Following Linz's logic, the oppression-reaction narrative was turned on its head: the rise of peripheral alternative nationalisms against the state was not the result of strong Spanish colonialist rule in Catalonia and the Basque Country. It was rather the consequence of a weak Spanish nationalism and its failure to impose its national project on the non-Spanish periphery of the state by assimilating autochthonous cultures and their people and merging them into the common Spanish national project. The weakness of the Spanish process of nationalization made Spanish history different from the history of other countries where strong states had implemented from above the process of nation building in all or most of the regions of the country. Linz mentioned explicitly the examples of France, Germany and Italy in contrast to that of the Spanish:

The Spanish state never achieved what French kings and ultimately the Revolution did: to create a fully unified state and a nation-state with its linguistic-cultural and emotional integration ... Spain, born in the era of state-building, could not undergo the deep emotional process of democratic nation-building that the Italians underwent and Germany experienced since political unification.³

Ever since scholars rediscovered and developed Linz's thesis in the 1990s, the debate over the alleged weakness of the Spanish nation-building process has evolved into an authentic Spanish "Historikerstreit",⁴ a polemical quarrel among – mostly – Madrid-based and Catalan historians regarding the particular features of the Spanish state, its nation building during the 19th and 20th centuries and the country's specific and different path to modernity. According to the theses of some historians, this weakness climaxed in 1898 with the loss of the last colonies of the once powerful Spanish empire. The German historian Jürgen Osterhammel has supported this point of view in

his monumental transnational *History of the 19th Century* by labeling Spain “the real imperial loser of the 19th century”.⁵

This debate, frequently inspired not only by scientific reasoning but also by – undeclared and underlying – political and identitarian ascriptions, is essential for any examination of the factors that triggered nationalist mobilization in the Basque Country. Was Basque nationalism the reactive rebellion against a strong Spanish state and the coercive imposition of the Spanish national project, or was it rather the product of a weak central state and its incapacity to assimilate the non-Spanish cultures? In what follows, I shall discuss some of the most prominent pros and cons of the thesis regarding the weak Spanish process of nationalization in order to explore possible answers to this question.

At the beginning, the history of modern Spain was not associated with the notion of “weakness”. On the contrary, historians have traditionally considered Spain as one of the oldest and most powerful nation states in Europe. In his very influential study on *State and Nation in European History*, the German historian Hagen Schulze held that already by the 16th century Spain had achieved a similarly high level of stately and cultural nationalization as its enemy England. According to Schulze, this was due to both the country’s geographically isolated location and to the population’s strong militarization during the era of the Reconquista.⁶ In 1469, the marriage between Isabel and Ferdinand had prepared the unification of the two most powerful kingdoms of the Iberian Peninsula. Later, in 1516, the merger of Aragon and Castile was confirmed *de jure* by the first Habsburg king, Charles I. The construction of the new empire was to be accompanied by important measures of internal cultural homogenization such as the withdrawal of the Muslims after the fall of their last stronghold in Granada (1492), the expulsion of the Jews in the same year, and in 1501 the compulsory Catholic baptism for all Muslims who opted to remain in Spain after the end of the Reconquista. The winner in this process of homogenization was the Catholic Church, which became, also as a result of the efficient instrument of coercion and repression that was the Inquisition, one of the most powerful and influential pillars of the kingdom.

Inner cultural and religious homogenization was to be accompanied by a strategy of “peninsularization” on the exterior, i.e. an increasing abandonment of geopolitical interests in other parts of Europe (except in America) through the establishment of fixed borders and the organization of centralized monarchic rule within the Iberian Peninsula.⁷ These policies were the new political leitmotiv of the Bourbon monarchs after Philip V had succeeded the last Habsburg King Charles II in the wake of the War of Succession (1702–1714). Once on the throne, Philip punished his former wartime enemies by abolishing the structures of regional self-government in Aragon, Valencia, Catalonia and Mallorca. These territories of the former Kingdom of Aragon were now completely incorporated into the Castilian kingdom and governed under Castilian rules and laws. Historians have interpreted this early policy of consequent homogenization and centralization as a successful culmination of

the long process of state and nation building that had already been initiated by the Habsburgs. According to this perspective, Philip V's "hurricane of unification" (Jover Zamora) was a new landmark in this process because it transformed the Spanish kingdom of the early 18th century definitively into a modern European nation state *avant la lettre*.⁸ Even during the 19th century, this successful development of the Spanish monarchy seemed to continue, at least within the economic realm. Between 1800 and 1900, the population grew from 10 million to 18 million while progress in agriculture helped to eliminate the chronic famine crises that had in earlier times provoked high mortality rates in rural areas. In some regions of the country the first initiatives of capitalist industrial growth were also taking place.⁹

This, then, concludes the optimistic narrative of Spanish state and nation building. So far, so good. As already mentioned, and picking up on some of the ideas forwarded by Juan Linz two decades earlier, some historians started to frame a new interpretation of modern Spanish history that undermined many of the basic assumptions defended by historians close to the mainstream theorem. The first to do so was the Catalan historian Borja de Riquer in 1990. A few years later, the Spanish historian and political scientist José Álvarez Junco presented what at the time was probably the most sophisticated attempt at offering a new paradigm for the analysis of Spanish modern history. In his best-selling book "Mater Dolorosa", published in its first edition in 2001, Álvarez Junco developed some of Riquer's arguments, submitted them to empirical scrutiny and eventually ended up supporting and completing them, although with some exceptions. What were the benchmarks of this new narrative?¹⁰

Behind the image of a Spanish state and all its attributes as a product of successful early formation, compact, solid in terms of national identity and a privileged part of the European power center, a very different and complex reality was concealed. Instead, the reality was that of a relatively weak process of nationalization that over the course of time had relegated the Spanish Empire from the international power center to the periphery. Already by the 18th century, this perception of the Spanish kingdom as an increasingly decadent state, untouched by the virtues of modernity and progress, surfaced in the testimonies of foreign observers who described the country as a victim of a specific mixture of laziness, aristocratic pride, work-shyness, clericalism and superstition that had elevated an unsurmountable wall of protection against any kind of innovation or modernization. Montesquieu was one of those observers. In one of his famous statements on what he considered as Spanish reactionary backwardness, he held that in Spain "people who manage to remain seated for ten hours will be honored more than those who only reach five".¹¹

The war against Napoleon and the liberal interregnum of Cádiz, where in 1812 the besieged parliament had adopted one of the first liberal constitutions in the world,¹² did not alter this international perception of Spanish backwardness. Instead, the loss of most of the American colonies as well as the

restoration of absolutist rule under Ferdinand VII reinforced this image. The problem was that this reduction in standing went hand in hand with the increasing isolation of the formerly powerful kingdom in Europe. The records of the Congress of Vienna (1814–1815) provide the first evidence of this new situation. At this crucial event, where the European monarchs met to restore absolutism and reorganize the balance of power on the continent after Napoleon's defeat, Spain was completely sidelined. Pedro Gómez Labrador, Ferdinand's personal delegate, was unable to get even one of the Spanish demands accepted.¹³

Thus, for Spain, the 19th century, the era of nations, nationalisms and imperialism, began with a sort of "Sonderweg", a very distinct and particular path towards the future. While in large parts of Europe the national idea was gaining strength first as a powerful ideological tool for the popular mobilization against the structures of absolutist power, and then, after 1871, as a narrative adopted by the new ruling elites for the legitimation of imperialist politics, the situation in Spain was quite different. Spanish liberal nationalism proved unable to take advantage of the nationalist mobilization during the War of Independence against Napoleon and to forge a strong nation state. Instead, Napoleon's successful expulsion was followed by a long period of political and social unrest, a series of military coups and several civil wars – a period that was to last until 1936–1939. At the end of the century, when the world had already been divided among the imperialist powers, Spain lost her last three colonies of Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. What the Congress of Vienna had insinuated would be confirmed by the painful experience of 1898: the Spanish kingdom that had once been the strongest and most admired colonial empire in the world had definitively been reduced to the role of an insignificant bystander in world politics. This *disaster* threw many Spanish intellectuals into an enduring crisis of melancholy with endless debates about the reasons behind the spectacular decay of their nation, followed by hazy proposals for an overall "regeneration" of the Spanish nation. The scope of proposals for the Spanish *regeneration* ranged from the conservative idea of simply recovering the real and authentic national values of the nation, to a more critical and progressive call to modernize the obsolete political, social and economic structures of the monarchy.¹⁴

One prominent reason for this structural weakness in the Spanish state during the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th was the deep legitimation crisis of the political elites. From 1812 to Generalísimo Franco's death in 1975, not one of the different subsequent governance systems (absolutism; various sub-types of liberal constitutional monarchy; two republics; two military authoritarian and, in the second case, initially pro-fascist dictatorships) was able to establish a sufficiently broad and democratic basis of legitimation that could put an end to the long period of social and political instability. Hence, while Spain continued being internally disrupted by periodic military clashes, the country withdrew from the great international conflicts. While under the Habsburgs and the first Bourbon regimes the kingdom

had been involved at the forefront of every European war, it remained neutral in World Wars I and II.

Another reason for the structural crisis was the weakness of 19th-century Spanish liberal nationalism. Due to the general economic backwardness, the liberal urban middle classes as potential social bearers of liberal nationalism remained underdeveloped and divided in regional fractions. Consequently, the impulses throughout the 19th century towards the “nationalization of the masses”¹⁵ and the narrowing of regional disparities and particularisms had only a very limited impact. A significant example of these problems are the polemics that would accompany each attempt to select and institutionalize different Spanish national symbols (flag, anthem, national holiday).¹⁶ Furthermore, the chronic public debt that yearly consumed about a third of the entire budget¹⁷ was a serious obstacle to the development of public services such as the educational system, which remained a stronghold of the powerful Catholic Church,¹⁸ while up until the 20th century the military service was far from approaching the ideal of the “citizen in uniform”. Owing to the possibility of buying an exemption, in the Spanish capitalist class-society the military service became a useful coercive vehicle for disciplining the lower classes. Another obstacle on the way towards national cohesion was the lack of a serious external enemy who – as in other countries after traumatic war experiences – could be imagined and remembered through the cult of national heroes, the soldiers who had sacrificed their lives for their motherland.¹⁹ If all this were not enough, there were further problems on the list of obstacles to national cohesion in modern Spain, i.e. insufficient infrastructural connections between the different regions of the country as well as the particular character of its capital Madrid, which despite being the political center was unable to produce any significant impetus to socio-economic modernization well into the 20th century. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset described this circumstance with his famous statements that the reality of Spain was the province and that the influence of Madrid extended only 6 kilometers beyond the capital’s borders.²⁰

This, of course, was one of Ortega’s typical exaggerations, owed in part to his inclination for memorable statements that would help disseminate his ideas. The political influence of Madrid reached far beyond those 6 kilometers because, to a great extent, politics both in the state and in its regions were centralized and determined in the capital. This was especially true for the Bourbon Restoration that was established after the end of the last Carlist War in 1876 and which put an end to the previous periods of military coups and warfare brought on by the War of Independence against the French occupiers. The constitutional monarchy, however, failed to seize the opportunity of giving a new impulse to the process of Spanish nation building that the situation of relative political stability had provided. The implementation of universal male suffrage by the liberal Sagasta administration in 1890 – earlier than in most European countries – might have provided a useful tool for the legitimation of the regime and the incorporation of Spanish citizens into the

constitutional consensus. The reality however was quite different, as the political participation of the population was greatly hampered by the particular characteristics of the governance system during the Restoration Monarchy. This system was to be essentially based on an agreement between the two (conservative and liberal) monarchic parties to alternate in government (“*turno pacífico*”). According to the constitution, the king had the right to dissolve parliament and nominate a new president. Only after this nomination were the voters called to cast their vote in elections to the congress. Prior to this step, the desired electoral results from different districts were conceived in the Ministry for the Interior with the aim of facilitating the new government with a comfortable majority in parliament. Afterwards, these decisions were then implemented through a top-down network from the minister to the governors in the provinces, and from there to the regional and local elites who, in exchange for certain favors, endeavored to produce the desired results through corruption and vote buying. These practices of nepotism and corruption were not exclusively a Spanish phenomenon. They also existed in one form or another in other European countries at the end of the 19th century. Yet, as the Spanish political scientist Antonio Elorza puts it, what made the Spanish political system of the Restoration Monarchy different from other systems was the fact that in Spain it wasn’t just the case that there was corruption in the system, but rather, corruption *was* the system. Accordingly, the Spanish Restoration Monarchy has been labeled as an enlightened despotism under a liberal camouflage.²¹ Obviously, in a political system that fabricated election outcomes in the Ministry of Interior and categorically excluded important actors at the political periphery such as socialists, republicans, anarchists and nationalists from the exercise of power, little progress towards greater societal integration and cohesion could be expected. The mechanisms of patronage diluted the integrating effects of parliamentarism such that under the umbrella of regal protection politics became the exclusive business of local, regional and national power elites. During the last third of the 19th century, this structural crisis of participation and legitimization was the matrix for the rise of alternative national projects that would challenge the Spanish one.

Historians have identified yet another element in the context of the discussion about the particular features of the structural crisis in modern Spain, i.e. the continued unbroken social, cultural and political influence of the Catholic Church even after the abolition of the Inquisition by the government of the Liberal Triennium (1820–1823), which put an end to more than three and a half centuries of religious, social and political persecution. One of the most remarkable effects of this enduring privileged position of the Catholic Church was the fact that, despite the abolishment of the Inquisition, the tradition of defining the Spanish nation by religious and confessional criteria remained unchallenged. The idea of a “real” and “authentic” Catholic Spain was used to oppose and reject the competing concept of the modern nation. Grounded in the principle of popular sovereignty and defended by the minority