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# JOURNAL OF STRATEGIC SECURITY

## BOOK REVIEW

### Ending ETA's Armed Campaign: How and Why the Basque Armed Group Abandoned Violence

**IMANOL MURUA**

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The terrorist group Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) was one of Europe's most innovative and vicious terrorist groups for many decades. Seeking Basque independence from Spain and France, it employed a socialist political ideology to further its political aims. In 2011, ETA ceased carrying out acts of political violence even though its political goals remained unfulfilled. After 50 years and over 800 casualties, ETA gave up its armed struggle due to lack of popular support for armed struggle and a paucity of political leverage within Basque society.

Basque journalist and professor of journalism Imanol Murua (Ph.D.) explains the myriad nuances that only a seasoned insider can provide to guide the reader through how ETA went from one of the most feared terrorist groups in Europe to a non-violent (since 2011) political organization nearly bereft of political power in its own homeland. Murua interviewed ETA members, Basque political leaders, Spanish judges, former Spanish government officials, and international mediators to spin a fascinating tapestry of ETA's history and politics within Spanish (and to a much lesser degree French) society, with an eye on how all of these factors were woven together.

Murua displays a brilliant command of his topic and with consummate skill outlines the at times byzantine interplay between ETA, Basque political factions, the Spanish government, Spanish political parties, and Spanish leaders. On the one hand, as a Basque, he wears his ethnicity on his sleeve as he often highlights what he refers to as Spanish government abuse of power such as torture, anti-Basque death squads, unlawful arrests and detention, murder, and other human rights violations. On the other hand, he acknowledges that ETA carried out numerous terrorist acts over multiple decades, but mentions them almost as an afterthought. In so doing, he seemingly downplays the outright barbarity and ingenuity with which ETA conducted a terror campaign in search of their desired political solution. The political aims are well chronicled and masterfully outlined. However, the sheer acumen and formidable creativity of ETA as a terrorist group only garner a passing mention.

ETA came into being during the regime of Generalissimo Francisco Franco (1936-1975). During these years, ETA cultivated an image as "freedom fighters" that gained widespread traction in Basque circles, as well as in some of the more politically liberal Spanish political circles due to its anti-Franco stance and embrace of Socialist dogma. While outlining the political strategic political significance of ETA's assassination of Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco in 1973, Murua does not describe the operation, which is a classic terrorism case study widely respected for its brilliance and economic simplicity.

After Franco's death, ETA continued on as before due in part to the fact that although Spain was evolving into a fledgling democracy, the political and judicial structures in place were leftovers of the Franco era and continued his policies towards ETA and factions advocating Basque nationalism. Murua states that this continuation of anti-ETA and anti-Basque Francoist policies included widespread political repression, death squads, police abuses, and torture even into the tenure of Socialist Felipe Gonzalez. He further alleges that the Spanish media and political structure turned a blind eye to these events.

ETA followed a strategy of action-repression-action in the 1970s. ETA would conduct a terrorist attack (action), which would in turn provoke an indiscriminant action by the Spanish government (repression), that would then cause the Basque populace to rise up against Spain (action). That would then grant ETA more credibility. In the short term, it worked well, but in the long term it failed.

In the 1980s, ETA switched to a strategy of attrition. The thinking was that violence would eventually lead the Spanish government to realize the need for a political end and negotiate with ETA. While the Spanish government conducted many negotiations over the years with ETA, the end result was eventually no forward movement for Basque autonomy.

Spanish-French cross-border collaboration beginning in the 1980s, including Spanish Civil Guard ability to pursue Basque terrorists into France, weakened ETA. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Spanish authorities leveraged this international sentiment to further marginalize ETA politically.

Over the years, as ETA was socially delegitimized, Spanish political leaders used this serendipitous opportunity as leverage to delegitimize Basque nationalism, which in turn led to ETA's loss of influence in Basque politics. As the political backing decreased, ETA's options narrowed. Murua explains that ETA's campaign of violence eventually led to loss of support within the very Basque political structure they claimed to represent and defined "the end of ETA's violent campaign as a failure rather than as a defeat" (150). Seeing that they could not win a military conflict, ETA began to seek a political solution.

ETA realized that violence in pursuit of its political aims had failed. After decades of a political-military strategy of attrition that brought no results, attempts at negotiation failed as well. Despite many attempts over a multi-year period to negotiate with the Spanish government, each failure weakened ETA's political footing while strengthening that of Madrid. The French government refused to negotiate, claiming that ETA

was an external issue. The Spanish government refused to negotiate, understanding that proceeding from a position of strength, ETA's political capital would eventually evaporate.

*"When ETA decided to lay down its arms in October 2011, it had the capacity to carry on a military campaign. It had a leadership, cells, a network, money, and guns. The Basque group had not been entirely crushed by police force and judicial persecution. It had not been defeated by repression. However, repression weakened ETA and gradually diminished its capacity to commit attack. For a group not fond of acknowledging the effectiveness of state repression, this was a telling testimony. ETA itself recognized that it was suffering a crisis in military and operational terms" (167).*

While Murua's work is a history of sorts, he laces his work heavily with political science theories (Martha Crenshaw, Martin Libicki, David Rapoport), incorporating miniature comparisons with other European terrorist groups such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Italian Red Brigades, and the German Red Army Faction. Like many European terrorist groups advocating socialism, they lost varying degrees of impetus after the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and the implosion of the Soviet empire (1991) since the ideological drivers in Moscow had turned their attention to governance issues in a newly established Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and the challenges and opportunities of a post-Cold War environment.

In spite of the flaws mentioned above, this book is a must read for analysts and students alike. Murua's masterpiece stands out as one of the best definitive works on ETA and rightly deserves a prominent place on the bookshelf or syllabus for seeking to better understand the intersection of terrorism, history, sociology, political science, psychology, and anthropology.