

Review – Endgame for ETA: Elusive Peace in the Basque Country

Written by Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet

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EMMANUEL-PIERRE GUITTET, SEP 12 2014

Endgame for ETA: Elusive Peace in the Basque Country

By Teresa Whitfield

London: Hurst & Company, 2014

Since its declaration of a definitive end to its armed activity in October 2011 and its declaration of disarmament in March 2014, ETA (Euskadi (e)Ta Askatasuna, *Basque country and Freedom*), a clandestine and separatist organisation that has been at the centre of Spanish political attention and controversy for more than six decades, is no more. A page has been turned on one of the last major armed separatist organisations in Europe. Still, the reasons for such a long period of violence, the subsequent hesitant peace process and the future prospects for the Basque country are phenomena begging for explanation. In her book *Endgame for ETA*, Teresa Whitfield rises to the challenge.

Her book is a journey through the convoluted and complex Basque political landscape. It offers an eloquent description of the intricacies of the secret and open negotiations between Spanish authorities and ETA since the 1970s as well as a solid account of the difficulties, pitfalls, mistakes and lost opportunities over the past decades to put an end to violence. In her book, Teresa Whitfield provides all the elements one needs to understand how the weight of the past, the national and international political contexts, the incredibly complex machinery of Basque nationalism and the Spanish rigidity towards negotiations could explain ETA's slow-moving shift away from violence. There is no abstract theory or academic jargon in this 402 page book (including 82 pages of notes, index and bibliography). *Endgame for ETA* is a rigorous and balanced chronicle in 10 chapters of the pursuit of a seemingly elusive peace for the Basque country.

The core question the book asks could be summarised thus: why did it take so long to bring violence to an end? The origins and evasive motives of ETA, the Spanish reluctance to negotiate and the strained relations within all the components of the Basque nationalist family are inextricably linked together. The first five chapters are dedicated to the period prior to ETA's 2006 cease-fire and the different attempts to engage in dialogue with the clandestine organisation since 1975. The following chapters deal with the post-2006 disconcerting period of ETA's violation of its own truce, the subsequent reorganisation of Basque nationalism and the impact of international intercession in ETA's 2011 declaration of a definitive end to its armed activity.

In the first chapters, Teresa Whitfield reminds readers about the particular context of the genesis of ETA in the 1950s during the Francoist regime, before highlighting how the long and tortuous road towards ETA's end dates back to the aftermath of the death of Franco in 1975, when the separatist organisation was crippled by internal fights about the options of armed activity or political engagement. Whitfield correctly reminds us that "efforts to engage in dialogue were a constant accompaniment to ETA's long history of violence" (p.53). Yet, in the 1980s, initiatives to re-open channels to ETA by the Socialist government (PSOE) of Felipe González (1982-1996) were twinned with a confusing if astute strategy of official enhancement of police and judicial co-operation with France on the one hand and a covert assassination campaign of ETA members on the other – the infamous actions of the state-sponsored *Antiterrorist Liberation Groups*, GAL. During José María Aznar's premiership (1996-2004), any form of contact with ETA was

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largely compromised by a revival of an assertive form of strong Spanish nationalism, an inflexible obduracy about defeating terrorism and a clear demonization of dialogue with “terrorists”. Teresa Whitfield also reviews the series of negotiations carried out under José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, the 2005 Parliamentary endorsement of his opening up of a dialogue with ETA followed by ETA’s 2006 ceasefire. Despite the great expectations at the time of finding a solution to the Basque problem, ETA returned to violence shortly after. Whitfield highlights how the division in ETA’s executive committee regarding the end of violence, an opposition largely and publicly critical of the government’s actions and a Basque nationalist family, ruined every opportunity.

One of the clear arguments that runs through Whitfield’s book is that, since the end of the Francoist regime, the subsequent Spanish governments from left to right mostly responded to ETA’s strategy of “all or nothing” with sheer intransigence, and a persistent desire to look for legal or extra-judicial options to destroy the organisation and to defeat the Basque nationalist left: “*Lurking beneath Spain’s long struggle against ETA was a persistent ambivalence regarding the problem it presented and the benefits that would accrue by bringing it to an end*” (p.301). A second strong point in Whitfield’s book is that, in order to understand the current status of the peace process, one should pay attention to the complexity of conflictual relations within the Basque nationalist family, arising from the intermeshing of different types of political alliances within or outside the Basque country, including with Spanish political parties. In her chapter Four, she offers a detailed account of the conflictual Basque political environment after the May 2001 local elections and the Basque government’s attempt to revive the peace process with the Ibarretxe Plan. The impact of the 2002 amendment to the Spanish Law on political parties and the banning of *Batasuna*, the political wing of Basque left nationalism (*abertzale*) is detailed in chapter seven. In chapter eight, she carefully examines the changing political dynamics within the post-2009 Basque nationalist left that at the time were largely dismissed or misunderstood by most Spanish political actors. The 2010 publication of *Zutik Euskal Herria* (Stand Up Greater Basque Country) was a clear statement of a Basque nationalist left emancipating itself from ETA’s grip, prefiguring the March 2010 “Brussels Declaration” on the one hand and ETA’s declaration of a halt to its “offensive armed actions” in September of the same year. In chapter Nine, Whitfield returns to the role of the international actors who had, to different degrees, been accompanying and encouraging the Basque nationalist left’s internal transition.

Whitfield shows how the violence of the recent past still casts a shadow over modern Spain. While the process of reconciliation in the Basque Country moves on very slowly, the Spanish Government has found itself riven by internal conflicts over this issue. By the end of Whitfield’s book it is abundantly clear that nothing is set in stone and that even minor form of political intransigence or awkward contingency could defeat every step gained so far. A peace process rarely falls in line and despite all the efforts, there is no magical tool-kit to resolve a conflict. Only some forms of “virtual peace-making”, as the author suggests.

Teresa Whitfield definitively met key actors and read an impressive volume of documents to deliver her chronicle. Yet, a slightly different story could be told if one pays more attention to the ETA internal documents and to the former members of ETA, willing to speak and to give their views on the past and current process. The in-depth historical account offered in her chronicle can also induce a general misunderstanding of linearity, whereas a more sociological and political argument would stress deviation, interruption and discontinuity. The many lives of ETA since the 1950s, its ideological divisions and deviations, its compartmentalisation into multiple sub-groups more or less in contact, make it difficult to speak of one actor, born in the 1950s and terminated in the 2000s. One could ask the upsetting yet important question: an endgame for which ETA?

Finally, the legitimate aspiration to a negotiated solution to the Basque conflict is also jeopardised by the consequences of the Spanish political amnesia following the end of the Franco dictatorship. If Whitfield acknowledges the political consequences of that negotiated transition, where the price of a peaceful transition to democracy was to forget the barbarities of the previous regime (“pact of forgetting”), she seems to be hesitant to develop the point further in the context of ETA’s cease-fire. One could wonder if the price for the endgame for ETA might not be to have to re-engage with the troubling images of the Franco Mausoleum, of that pistol-toting Civil Guard Colonel holding prisoner Spain’s cabinet and members of parliament and all the incredible difficulties Spain experienced in the 1980s and 1990s with being viewed as a European democratic regime. The lingering legacy of Franco still hangs over Spain somewhat. At some point, the thorny problem might be revealed to be less about the

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Basque country, ETA and Basque nationalism and much more about contemporary Spain.

A more thematic approach would have clarified many crucial points expressed within Endgame for ETA but is overly hidden within the dense historical account. However, for those who would like to understand the bases of this evolving political situation, Whitfield's book provides a solid and accessible introduction to a complex and still unresolved conflict that had and still is having a profound impact on Basque and Spanish societies.

About the author:

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