

Terrorists or Freedom Fighters: A Case Study of ETA

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ANON, APR 19 2018

Despite being inherently different terms, “freedom fighter” and “terrorism” continue to be interchangeably used in describing armed struggle. This categorisation continues to divide academics over ethno nationalist militant group Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA). This paper will argue that ETA’s armed struggle was a necessary component of retaliating against the Spanish government’s Basque oppression, and therefore are freedom fighters. This paper will discuss ETA’s ideology being rooted in cultural protection, the terrorist stigmatisation to promote Spanish agenda, alongside their legitimacy through peace process involvement. In order to examine this, ETA’s actions will be contrasted to academic definitions and actions of other terrorist groups.

Definitions

Before considering ETA’s actions, it is important to highlight the difference between “freedom fighter” and “terrorist”. Whilst terrorism has been extensively defined, academics have largely left ‘freedom fighter’ open ended. Nonetheless, terrorism definitions remain broad and can consequently incorporate the acts of martyrs or freedom fighters.[1] The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet surmised terrorism to be “the use of violence by groups or individuals pursuing political objectives,” involving indiscriminate attacks.[2] This low threshold could easily include liberation movements or other ‘moral’ violence’.

Academics defend this by arguing that terrorism can be conducted on moral grounds.[3] Whilst Teichman agrees with this, she adds that rebellion remains terrorism if conducted “for a good aim but in a bad way”. [4] This negative connotation suggests that the difference between ‘freedom fighter’ and ‘terrorism’ is their cultural perceptions rather than technical meaning. Carr likens terrorism to “mankind’s most outrageously unacceptable belligerent practices...like genocide”. [5] Lentini adds that terrorists seek to create “state of fear”. [6] Both these explanations are largely different from liberation movements, which instead attract social support. Thus, terrorism is better understood to have an element of moral depravity and incompatibility with society.

Freedom fighters instead uphold societal morals. Netanyahu distinguishes that freedom fighters protect fundamental freedoms, yet terrorists oppress and enslave.[7] However, what constitutes as fundamental freedom is problematically subjective. Consequently, both terms are largely dependent on one’s cultural biases.[8] To resolve this, Nielsen argues that groups are freedom fighters if they can demonstrate that violence was necessary in rapidly advancing their goals with “as little suffering and degradation” as possible.[9] Therefore, this essay will analyse whether ETA’s ideologies upheld genuine freedom, and if the armed struggle was fundamentally necessary in achieving their goals. To balance subjective understandings of the terms, this essay will observe different agendas behind the demonization and glorification of ETA, alongside its contrast actions to other terrorist groups.

Protecting Basque Culture

ETA’s armed struggle was necessary in defending against the government’s repression of Basque identity. The Francoist dictatorship systematically quashed all elements of Basque identity, including language, culture and history, under the guise of a “united Spain” in order to retain control.[10] This underscores how ETA was not simply constructed to push for Basque interests; it was to protect against a very real possibility of cultural extinction. The banning of Basque political parties such as PNV meant diplomatic efforts were also futile against the regime.[11]

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Blackwell further defends violence in this political context. Violence, he argues, is legitimate if the affected group has been blocked from full access to political institutions.[12] This, combined with Franco's repression, meant violence was the only viable option. Bereciartu writes, "it was precisely Francoism, with its repressive violence, which provoked ETA into the choice of violent methods of struggle".[13] Conversi even describes Franco's regime as "terrorism".[14] Both these sentiments evidence the fundamental difference between ETA and terrorism. The Franco government were labelled as terrorists from creating a state of terror through violent and destructive methods of control. ETA, on the other hand, were forced to defend Basque rights militarily as a result of broken democratic institutions and encroaching tyranny. Therefore, ETA remain freedom fighters.

ETA played a key role in consolidating cultural beliefs. Terrorist groups are largely dislocated and socially isolated from society.[15] Consequently, Crenshaw characterises terrorism as "[not] collective violence...but the direct activity of small groups".[16] However, ETA's armed struggle was not self-contained; it instead united a liberation movement throughout region. Hamilton notes how ETA achieved this through basing their violence on key social issues, such as immigration and disintegration of Basque language, to consolidate a national armed struggle against the government.[17] This emphasises how ETA was not simply characterised by violence, but represented a broader Basque identity. This use of armed struggle helped unite public sentiment for Basque sovereignty and resist cultural imposition. The death sentences of 16 ETA militants after the assassination of Meliton Manzanas, a police officer notorious for his torture and abuse of Basque people, became a cultural icon of liberation for Basques.[18] This attracted so much local and international pressure that Franco pardoned their sentences.[19] ETA harnessed this public support to push for sovereignty as the pinnacle of freedom from the Spanish government.[20] The failure for the government to grant this during the democratic transition, and instead only provide partial autonomy, fostered large retaliation against a "fascist and fraudulent democracy".[21] Therefore, ETA played a crucial role in exposing the failures of the government through its armed violence. Unlike the complacency during the Franco era, the region's calls for self-determination was crucial in ensuring its cultural rights were not forgotten. ETA were therefore freedom fighters through its armed struggle underpinning the Basque identity against oppression.

However, Powell argues that ETA were not freedom fighters and instead extremist in their views, referencing the decline of support for Basque sovereignty during the 2000s.[22] Post rebuts this, suggesting the decline was a result of ETA splitting into the branch 'ETA-pm' which pursued a nonviolent struggle.[23] He argues that this lack of violence created the openings for internal division and consequently unravelling support. Therefore, violence was actually the critical factor in harmonising Basque cultural identity to resist repression. Without this, the identity disintegrated. As such, ETA's remain freedom fighters as their armed struggle necessary in protecting cultural identity.

Agenda Behind 'Terrorist' Label

The Spanish government characterised ETA as terrorists to cover their internal flaws. Spanish President Mariano Rajoy recently demonstrated this attitude, stating that "the terrorist band [ETA] must dissolve and disappear from the lives of the Basques and Spaniards, without expecting any kind of consideration." [24] This flat refusal to listen to ETA on the grounds of terrorism has been historically used to marginalise the group. Lerner describes how Spain's economic problems and failed military coup of 1981 was a "sobering lesson" of democracy's vulnerability.[25] As a consequence, ETA was an opportunity for politicians to demonstrate the strength of the system against dissent and violence. This is because, particularly during the 1980s, ETA focused on exposing the government's inability to deal with the Basque conflict through using violence.[26] Clearly, ETA's exposure of government failure would directly threaten the appearance of political stability. The government's labelling of ETA as a terrorist organisation meant it could refuse to listen to its genuine demands for freedom, allowing the government to appear stable and in control.

The Spanish government labelling ETA as terrorists also helped legitimise the government internationally. US President George Bush's 'war on terror' was eagerly received as an opportunity for the government to prove itself.[27] According to Guittet, Prime Minister José María Aznar capitalised on this to demonstrate Spain as an international player, dramatically hardening 'anti-terrorist' laws.[28] Rather than legitimising ETA as freedom fighters, crushing internal revolt solidified Spain's role in the global fight against terror. Spanish media perpetuated this tactic, making ETA appear extremist through one sided violence. Spanish newspaper 'El País' reported that Spain "lived

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crouching on the cruellest year [1980] of the ETA...[ETA] had the criminal response of terrorism".[29] This creates the image of Spain being repressed by ETA's tyranny and violence. However, under the government, the creation of Anti-Terrorist Liberalisation Groups (GAL) sought to completely eradicate ETA, unleashing "indiscriminate violence," systematic human rights abuse and the death of innocent civilians.[30] Governments typically label uprisings within their own territory as terrorism to justify violent repression.[31] Evidently, the government employed this tactic to morally justify this violent repression and demonise ETA's justified armed retaliation in response to this. Therefore, ETA were labelled as terrorists to quell dissent in Basque country and legitimise the government internationally.

The government also used the terrorist label to silence ETA's political party Herri Batasuna in 2003. Spain's admission in to the European Union provided important economic assistance and reinforced their status as a democratic government.[32] As a consequence, banning Batasuna and its promotion of violence symbolised how the government truly transitioned to democracy. It also prevented ETA's crucial outreach to other states that had similarly experienced liberation from oppressive governments.[33] This marginalisation highlights how ETA's armed resistance was necessary for their cause to be heard. This was especially because the government used their political marginalisation to delegitimise its cause. The Basque Observatory on Human Rights notes how the requirement for all political parties to immediately condemn each terrorist attack would create alarmist tendencies.[34] This is highlighted in the false accusation of ETA being responsible for the 2004 Madrid train bombings, where Islamist terrorists were the perpetrators.[35] Moreno writes how then Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar blamed ETA to boost his political position before elections, drawing attention away from his unpopular policies.[36] This again points towards how labelling ETA as terrorists helped legitimise and boost the popularity of democratic government's violent crackdowns.

ETA's necessary armed struggle remained the actions of freedom fighters in order to expose the Spanish government tactics of repression and marginalisation. Conversely, the terrorist label emerged to justify the Spanish government's failure to recognise Basque freedom and boost its approval ratings locally and internationally.

Peace Talks and Legitimacy

ETA's participation in peace processes legitimised their armed struggle for freedom. Since 2010, ETA has complied to an agreed ceasefire with the government.[37] In contrast, terrorists are largely blocked from negotiations. For example, American lawyer and scholar Alan Dershowitz outlined the United States' post 9/11 attitude: "even if [terrorists] have legitimate grievances, if you resort to terrorism we will simply not listen to you...and certainly never change our policies." [38] This attitude led to the criticism of Spanish Prime Minister Jose Luiz Zapatero's decision to negotiate with ETA, with newspaper El claiming ETA would never end its armed struggle.[39] However, ETA's final ceasefire acknowledged their fundamental fight for freedom. Child argues that the long term internal conflict caused by ETA made the Zapatero government "desperate to find a solution".[40] This signifies a critical remarkable shift in attitude after the long term marginalisation of the Basque community. Consequently, ETA's long term armed struggle was critically necessary in achieving greater Basque recognition.

Further, Northern Ireland Secretary Peter Mandelson emphasised how peace processes invariably transitioned terrorists to freedom fighters. He referred to the Irish Republican Army (IRA's) role in negotiations as "[the actions] of freedom fighters, because that stage of development, that attitude to politics...they become resistors, not terrorists." [41] Thus, ETA's willingness to cooperate in talks with the government symbolised their willingness to assimilate into the democratic fray rather than senseless violence. Pruitt discusses how Al Qaeda could never be involved in peace processes because they would never have a role in mainstream politics, and their Islamic ideology was too difficult to rationalise.[42] Unlike Al Qaeda, ETA was already incorporated in mainstream politics. Its ideology of nationalism and separatism were also achievable goals, rather than unachievable aims to justify further violence.

Further, ETA's use of international actors emphasised ETA's legitimacy as freedom fighters. Alonsonso argues that negotiations with ETA were a mistake, as it sends the political message that individuals who "violently defy" the democratic framework will be rewarded.[43] However, the involvement of international actors highlights the legitimacy of the Basque cause in struggling for freedom. ETA specifically mandated for international actors to remain in negotiations to prove legitimacy.[44] European Parliament similarly endorsed the 2006 ceasefire as a

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“peace initiative in Basque country”. This acknowledgement emphasised how ETA and the Spanish government were both legitimate actors in a mutual agreement for, on some level, greater Basque freedom. Consequently, ETA were legitimate freedom fighters, evident by international actors’ willingness to cooperate with ETA. This is ultimately demonstrated in the lasting ceasefire today.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrated how ETA were fundamentally freedom fighters as their armed struggle was necessary in resisting oppression by the Spanish government. It firstly highlighted how ETA played a crucial role in protecting Basque culture. ETA played a critical role during and after the Franco era in uniting the Basque community. Through making violence a key part of Basque identity, the community was able to unite against oppression. Secondly, the Spanish government labelled ETA as terrorists in order to justify their repressive actions. The Spanish government exploited the term to legitimise their role in Bush’s ‘War Against Terror’, and thus cementing their status as an international player. Under the guise of this term, the Spanish government avoided condemnation for its ‘Dirty War’ against the Basque community and democratic marginalisation of Batasuna. Finally, ETA’s involvement in peace processes emphasised the legitimacy of their armed struggle. As a result of such violence, the ensuing negotiations, alongside the support of the international community, highlighted how their armed struggle was fundamentally necessary in furthering Basque freedom. Ultimately, ETA’s struggle demonstrates how freedom of speech is necessary for true liberation.

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