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from

Dirty War, Clean Hands: ETA, the GAL and Spanish Democracy
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GAL ATTACKS IN THE FRENCH BASQUE COUNTRY

Headlines: José María Larrebrea kidnapping; Segundo Marey kidnapping; Ángel Gurrindo Izarraga (Escopetas / Stein) and Eburante Perurana Tellebrea (Peru) killed; Jean-Pierre Laska killed; Juan Carlos García Goena killed.

Biarritz: Christian Olaskoaga killed; Claude Olaskoaga wounded.

Ciboure: Emile Weiss and Claude Doerr killed; Bar Bittor attack (Ramón Basáñez wounded).

St-Jean-de-Luz: Mikael Goikobrea Eorriaga (Txapele) killed; Javier Gaideano killed; Bar La Consolation attacks (Ramón Basáñez wounded in 1988 attack).

Biarritz: Xabier Pérez de Arenaza killed; Tomás Pérez Revilla killed; Román Orbe injured; Robert Caplanne killed.

Anglet: Attacks on Fernando Egileor.

Bayonne: See Map of Attacks in Bayonne.

St-Etienne de Baïe: Rafael Goikobrea killed; Jesús Zugarramurdi (Kokur) wounded.

St-Jean-Pied-de-Port: Eugenio Gutiérrez Salazar (Tigre) killed.

Aasarat: Juan Mari Otegi Elizegi (Txato) killed.

Biarritz: Christophe Mebikotte and Catherine Brion killed.

Prologue:
the view from a Basque balcony

This is a political story- but it has personal roots. Since its subject, political violence, is bitterly contentious, it may be helpful to try to expose those roots at this stage, so that the reader will have some idea where this writer is coming from.

As far as I can tell, the roots of this book began to grow in a taxi in Barcelona in 1995, when I heard on the radio how the broken, tortured bones of two young Basque radicals had been identified in Alicante. They had been unearthed from a quicklime grave ten years earlier, and had lain in a mortuary ever since, until a bright policeman linked them to a 'disappearance' in the Basque Country. The dirty war of the 1980s, waged by a shadowy group known as the GAL, suddenly became a story I felt compelled to find out about, and write about.

If that was when the roots of the book began to sprout in my mind, the seeds had been sown well before the GAL death squads began to make their grim mark on Spanish politics. I remember in particular one grey afternoon in the Basque city of Bilbao, in the early spring of 1976.

That afternoon, fires had been lit on the bridge leading into central Bilbao from the student quarter of Deusto. I was teaching English there at the time, and sharing a flat with half a dozen student revolutionaries of one kind or another. They belonged to rival but friendly groups - communists, Maoists, socialists and anarcho-hippies. Such domestic alliances were quite common among Spanish students at that time. I had only just graduated from a left-wing student background in Dublin, and I felt pretty much at home in this company.

I was aware, however, that one key element of the anti-France opposition was missing from our little fraternity: there were no Basque nationalists among us. And there were no supporters of ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna - Basque Homeland and Liberty), the best known and most controversial of all the organizations fighting the dictatorship.

A chasm divided Basque leftists into *españolistas* ('pro-Spanish', those who saw Madrid as their capital) and *abertzales* ('patriots', who saw the Basque Country as a completely separate entity). This divide was not easily bridged, even in the flexible camaraderie of a student flat.

On 3 March, a few days before the afternoon in question, Spanish police had shot dead five striking workers in Vitoria, another Basque provincial capital. They had first used tear-gas and rubber bullets to flush the strikers out of the church where they had peacefully assembled, and finished the job with lead bullets on the church steps. The first post-Franco government was showing itself to be as contemptuous of elementary democratic principles as the old dictator, who had died the previous November.

The fires in Bilbao were part of a countrywide effort by demonstrators to draw the heat from Vitoria, which had been under a virtual state of siege by the police since the massacre. Our fourth-floor flat was less than five minutes' walk from the bridge, and though the bridge itself was out of sight, the black smoke from burning tires was clearly visible from our balcony. I was standing out there, watching the smoke with a flat mate called Julián, when we noticed that some youths were attempting to build a barricade in the street almost directly

below us. They were laboriously dragging parked cars into position to break the wave of riot police which, sooner rather than later, would come surging through the *barrio*.

A hundred yards away, a municipal policeman also saw what the youths were up to. He began to amble towards them, tugging rather hesitantly at his clumsy white pistol holster. The municipal police were not usually directly involved in the maintenance of what the regime called public order. The democratic opposition called it repression. Generally speaking, the municipal police, with their absurd white Keystone Kops helmets, were only concerned with minor theft and parking fines.

This man, however, clearly felt he could not stand idly by while barricades were being built. Yet his reluctance to intervene was palpable from his start-stop approach. The demonstrators ignored his warning shouts, and continued to lug, lever and bounce the stationary cars across the road. The policeman continued his shuffling advance, and would soon be directly under our feet. At this point my flatmate did something which put the heart across me.

For some reason, the heavy steel hub of a car wheel was among the items on our balcony. To my amazement, Julián picked it up and raised it above his head, making as if to throw it down on the hapless policeman's head. When I tried to dissuade him — or at least persuade him not to decapitate the unfortunate man until I had had a chance to escape from the flat — he melodramatically declared: 'If he shoots, I'll give it to him.' 'Julián,' I said, 'he's not going to shoot. He can hardly get his gun out, for God's sake. He's only bluffing...'

Happily, at about this point the demonstrators opted for discretion over valour, and conflict was averted. Oblivious to the threat from above his head, the policeman buttoned up his holster and headed off to quieter streets, no doubt relieved that words had sufficed to uphold public order on this occasion. Julián put the hub back down, while I berated him for putting all of us at risk for the sake of a futile and potentially lethal gesture.

This anticlimax made the incident appear less dramatic, and a lot less frightening, than a number of other encounters I had with street violence during those turbulent years. Yet it nagged at the back of my mind for long afterwards, precisely because it made so little sense. Of all the student revolutionaries I knew, Julián was the least overtly militant. He was some sort of bright spark in the local Socialist Party but they were the least violently inclined left-wingers around.

The radical Basque nationalists of ETA were demonstrably and efficiently committed to armed struggle. I had little doubt that one or two of our Maoist friends would crack a policeman's skull happily enough in the heat of a street battle. Even a mainstream Communist might forget his party's national reconciliation policy under pressure, and throw a brick with the best of them. But neither Julián nor his Socialist Party colleagues had much reputation as heroes of the barricades. He was, then, the last person I would have expected to see ready to maim or kill. It would take me a long time to learn how wrong I was, to learn that terror can come from many directions, for many reasons.

Over the years, as I learned more about Julián's real loyalties, I began to wonder whether his

behaviour that afternoon reflected the suspicions that some of our friends had quietly expressed about him. One or two people had whispered to me that, on the rare occasions when the police raided Socialist Party meetings locally, Julian always seemed to have left a few minutes earlier. Was it possible that Julián was that mythical beast, the *agent provocateur*, testing the presence of violent inclinations in his Irish flatmate? It seemed far-fetched; it still does. It would take a series of much more far-fetched and terrible incidents, at which I was fortunate enough *not* to be present, to put that scene on the balcony into context.

I returned to Ireland that summer, and Julian and his girlfriend paid me a visit. I remember very little about their stay except that my parents surprised me by according the couple a remarkable privilege, which neither I nor my Irish friends would have dreamed of asking for at the time. They were allowed to share a room. Even for my relatively liberal parents, any whiff of unmarried cohabitation, at least under their own roof, was sulphurous. But they spontaneously applied different criteria to Julián. Was it because Julián was foreign, and therefore not subject to our customs, or was it because he was simply so good at getting away with things? He had an easy charm which exuded innocence and sincerity I imagine my parents simply assumed that he and his girlfriend would sleep chastely in separate beds.

In 1978 I moved back to Spain or, more precisely, to the Spanish Basque Country I taught English in Fuenterrabía, a fishing and holiday village on the mouth of the Bidasoa estuary. This river separates - or unites, depending on one's point of view — the French and Spanish Basque Countries. I also began to report for *The Irish Times* on the tense and volatile Basque conflict.

At the time, Spain as a whole was going through a remarkable transition, more by consensus than conflict, from dictatorship to democracy. A new Constitution had been painstakingly drawn up. It somehow encompassed both the conservative concerns of France's political heirs and the democratic aspirations of his enemies, including Spain's remarkably moderate Communist Party. The right to private property was safeguarded, there would be 'co-operation' with the Catholic Church, and the state would take the form of a monarchy. It would be a parliamentary monarchy, however, with an unequivocal commitment to popular sovereignty, democracy and what the Spanish call the *Estado de Derecho* -roughly translatable as 'the rule of law'.¹ This last concept was the touchstone of the transition: after forty years of capricious and arbitrary government, the Spanish wanted the same laws to apply to their rulers as applied to ordinary citizens. This book is an examination of how that admirable dream panned out against reality over the next twenty years.

Vexed questions were carefully balanced in this Constitution. For the consensus to work - with the unthinkable prospect of a replay of the Civil War if it didn't — it was often necessary to have it both ways. Thus, the sentence which proclaimed 'the unity of the Spanish Nation' was qualified by the recognition of minority 'nationalities' (like the Basques and Catalans). These peoples were guaranteed the right to form autonomous governments with extensive regional powers. Ominously, however, in the view of many, the armed forces retained a 'mission' to defend the territorial integrity of Spain, defined in the Constitution as 'indissoluble' and 'indivisible'. At first sight that might seem innocuous, even axiomatic. What else do armed forces do, after all? To Basque nationalists, though, it had the smell of giving the army the role of a government in the shadows, not directed at external enemies, but a last bastion to prevent regional self-government going too far. The autonomy

promised to the Basques under this Constitution was anathema to the Right generally, and to the army in particular, but it fell short of what most Basques wanted: the right to self-determination, with an option on full independence.

The crucial referendum on the new Constitution took place on 6 December 1978. The Spanish people as a whole approved it by a significant majority, almost two-thirds of the electoral census. In sharp contrast, less than one-third of Basques voted 'Yes'. Abstention, actively campaigned for by most Basque nationalist groups, was 55 per cent among the Basques, close to twice the national average. The Basque 'No' vote, as a percentage of participants, was triple the overall 'No' result.

Among *the* minority of Basques who did turn out to vote, the 'Yes' option still had a comfortable three-to-one majority, but the massive level of abstention cast a heavy shadow over the legitimacy of the new Constitution in the Basque Country. A fissure had opened up between Basque nationalists and the rest of the Spanish state at the dawn of the new democracy. This fissure has had consequences for that democracy's healthy development, which are still unresolved.

Basque radicals could argue — as they do to this day — that the Constitution has not been endorsed by the majority of their people. In their view, therefore, ETA's violent campaign is a legitimate, even necessary form of resistance to the 'undemocratic' imposition of an alien state structure. Meanwhile, the vast majority of Spanish democrats, including many Basques, hold that the Basques should abide by the decision of the overall majority within the existing state borders. Moreover, abstention being a double-edged weapon, they point out that only a quarter of the Basques who did go to the polls actually cast their vote *against* the Constitution. They also argue that, since a majority of Basques voted in favour of a Statute of Autonomy based on this Constitution in another referendum only ten months later, the 1978

Constitution has been retrospectively ratified in the Basque Country. Far-Right elements in the armed forces, their political power flow stripped away, found the intransigent Basques a convenient excuse for continuing in their old ways. It was not just that Basque demonstrators would continue to be treated with an iron fist more appropriate to the fascist past than the democratic future. Rightist die-hards also waged a full-scale dirty war against ETA's escalating terrorist campaign. Only fifteen days after the constitutional referendum, José Miguel Beñarán Ordeñana (*Argala*), an ETA leader living in the French Basque Country, switched on his car and blew himself to bits. The explosive charge wired to his ignition allegedly came courtesy of the Spanish security forces, acting through a death squad made up of right-wing foreign mercenaries. Five years earlier, almost to the day, Beñarán Ordeñana had personally wired the bomb which blew Franco's hard-line Prime Minister and designated successor, Carrero Blanco, over an apartment block. France's most loyal supporters were carrying a legacy of vengeful memories, and a potent paramilitary infrastructure, into the new democracy.

In 1974, within a year of Carrero Blanco's assassination, a split occurred in ETA. One group, the 'political military' faction of ETA, or ETA(p-m), accepted that the basic conditions of democracy had been created. Its leaders embarked on policies which would, by the early 1980s, bring most of its members home from underground, exile or prison, and into normal politics. The other group, the 'military' faction of ETA, or ETA(m), insisted that ETA was

involved in a justified war of independence against Spanish occupation. Its response to a hard won amnesty which finally emptied every Spanish jail of Basque prisoners in December 1977 was the killing of a municipal councillor.⁷ Needless to say, the jails soon filled up again. In pursuit of the withdrawal of the 'occupation forces', and a referendum on self-determination, ETA(m) dramatically stepped up the rhythm of its attacks. Its hat of 'legitimate targets' grew longer and longer, including many civilian 'agents of the state' as well as the security forces. All the elements of a long and continuing political tragedy were in place.

As I covered these developments, I occasionally wondered what had happened to Julián. I had heard that he was, with many of his contemporaries, racing up the fast track of the Socialist Party bureaucracy, but no one I knew seemed to see him any more.

The only time I saw him again myself for many years was at a funeral in October 1979. A young Socialist welder and trade unionist, German Gonzalez López, had been killed by a splinter group from ETA, the Comandos Autónomos. They accused him of being a police informer. He was the first victim of terrorism after the referendum in which the Basques had approved the Statute of Autonomy, and the Comandos Autónomos attacked all the parties that had supported the statute in the communiqué which claimed the killing.

Aware that this attack on a party member - and on the political process itself - was a potentially dangerous escalation from the targeting of the security forces, all the democratic political parties active in the Basque Country turned out for the ceremony. The funeral Mass in the fishing village of Zumaia, with anthems in the ancient and mysterious Basque language, was conducted in a baroque cavern of a church meshed in candlelight and shadow. It was deeply moving, as was the subsequent demonstration. The mourners marched around the village to the victim's home, and sang both the *Internationale* and the Basque Civil War song *Eusko Gudariak* in heart-breaking harmonies, before dispersing in silence into the night. I turned away into a narrow street, and there was Julián. Stouter than I remembered him, dressed in a sober gabardine and accompanied by big men in similar garb, he looked prosperous and somehow *serious*, a man already at home in the grown-up world of power. He had moved on, I had heard, from being private secretary to the Basque Socialist leader to becoming the mayor of an industrial town. He greeted me solemnly, as befitted the occasion, about which we exchanged polite banalities, and he moved on, with his entourage.

Many years later I would learn that his stewardship as mayor had been a stormy one, on at least two counts. These were allegations never substantiated, that he had been, at the very least, careless with the municipal cash register, whose contents had slipped into his pockets in greater quantities than the amounts agreed on his pay slips. And he had been indiscreet, to the point of recklessness, in making belligerent comments about ETA. 'I would sort [ETA] out in four days, practicing "two for one";' he used to say. His fellow councillors understood this to mean killing two ETA members for every one of ETA's victims.⁹ He made it clear to his intimates that he wasn't talking about upping the conviction rate for terrorism. He was contemplating fighting fire with fire.

That decision would indeed be his to take, and sooner than most people expected. On 28 October 1982, the Socialist Party led by the forty-year-old Felipe Gonzalez, swept away the disintegrating coalition of reconstructed Francoists and Christian Democrats which had ruled Spain since 1977. It was a landslide victory, and a landmark: the long-haired generation

of the Sixties had come in from the streets and taken over the national parliament. This was the youngest government Spain had ever had, and one of the youngest in Europe. Not one of its members could be tarred with the ugly brush of the dictatorship. This was to be a real new start.

Julián Sancristóbal seemed to fit this mould perfectly, and the election victory catapulted him up a dizzying number of rungs in the state administration. On 28 December, before his thirtieth birthday, he was appointed Civil Governor of Vizcaya, the richest and most populous of the Basque provinces, whose capital is Bilbao. His inaugural reception, contemporary accounts tell us, shocked the police on duty on the doors. Many of the guests, it was said, had only previously been in the governor's imposing headquarters through another entrance, to pay political fines. They included the author of a savagely accurate biography of Franco which the new governor's predecessors would have burned in the street.

It may have been more significant, however, in terms of the sinister reputation that Sancristóbal was soon to acquire, that Luis Olarra was also on the guest list. Olarra was a leading member of the Bilbao business community who had prospered famously under Franco, and who now made no secret of his view that ETA's violence should be repaid in kind by the state. If the state would not get its hands dirty, he used to boast, there were private individuals who would.'

This was not the only contrast evident to a keen observer that evening. For the first time, the Basque national flag, the *ikurrina*, the object of fetishistic persecution by the police less than a decade earlier, flew alongside the Spanish flag outside the building. This seemed like welcome progress to many of the moderate Basque nationalists present. But some of them could not help asking themselves why they had to have a Civil Governor at all.

Along with the parallel figure of Military Governor, the position was redolent of a centralist and authoritarian administration. Its incumbents had been generally loathed under the previous regime, and especially so in areas like the Basque Country. The control of the police and the enforcement of the central government's wishes, both highly contentious matters in Vizcaya, figured high among the Civil Governor's responsibilities. The local nationalists, moderate and radical, did not have long to wait until they found out how the young Socialist wine would taste when poured from the old conservative cask.

Sancristóbal came to the job with a reputation as a skilful negotiator, a man of dialogue, but these qualities were not much in evidence in the thirteen months before he was called to even higher service. His concept of authority seemed rigid, in major and minor matters. He ordered the removal from a Bilbao plaza of a commemorative plaque to the ETA leader and early death squad victim - Beñarán Ordeñana. He imperiously overruled Bilbao city council's democratic decision not to fly any flags during the city's fiestas. This decision had been taken to avoid conflict in what had become an annual 'battle of the flags', in which radicals tried to tear down Spanish flags which, according to the Constitution, should fly alongside Basque flags in public places. It seemed that the new Julián preferred conflict to compromise.

It was said that he was deeply influenced by certain police officers in making these unpopular decisions. In retrospect that is not surprising: it now seems probable that, behind

the scenes, he was already at the heart of a security forces conspiracy to launch a dirty war against ETA, which would involve kidnapping, misuse of public funds, torture and murder. This conspiracy called itself the GAL (Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación - the Anti-terrorist Liberation Groups). Over the next four years, the GAL would claim twenty-seven mortal victims, nine of whom had no connection whatsoever with ETA. As many again would be injured, including very young children. Three months after the campaign started, Julián Sancristóbal was appointed Director of State Security, in charge of all the Spanish police forces, with special responsibility for anti-terrorist strategy. Eight months after the GAL campaign was wound down, he would be removed from this position. But, with a little help from his Socialist colleagues, he would become almost immediately a very wealthy director of private financial enterprises.

He would soon fall much further than he had risen. His nemesis would be a former police officer with whom he had had a long and obscure relationship. According to some accounts, Sancristóbal was already a paid informer for this officer on that strange afternoon I had spent with him many years earlier, on that balcony in Bilbao. Superintendent José Amedo had been a flamboyant scourge of student revolutionaries in the 1970s, but when Julián became his boss in the 1980s, he found a role he really savoured, running some of the GAL death squads. In 1991 he and his deputy were sentenced to 108 years in prison for GAL operations. At first, he confidently expected a state pardon and maintained a wall of denial and silence. When he realised he had been scapegoated, he began to spill the beans on his superiors. The GAL cases were reopened, and after initial outraged denials, several successive links in the chain of command cracked, up to the former Director of State Security.

Nearly twenty years after Julián Sancristóbal had made as if to kill a municipal policeman from a balcony in Bilbao, he confessed to having organised the first action acknowledged by the GAL, the kidnapping of a middle aged, terrified and completely innocent man. He told a judge that, knowing that his mercenaries had seized the wrong target from France, he decided to keep holding their unfortunate victim in miserable conditions, for reasons of political expediency. More sensationally, he said that he had asked for — and received — the blessing of the Minister for the Interior for this decision. And he added that such a blessing could not have been given without the knowledge and approval of the Spanish Prime Minister, Felipe Gonzalez. The spectre of state terrorism was returning to haunt the most successful democratic government in Spanish history.

A few months before Sancristóbal confessed, I was attending a cultural conference in Barcelona. That was the moment when I heard, on the taxi radio, the news that two bodies had been identified in Alicante as those of Joxean Lasa and Joxi Zabala. These were two young ETA members who had disappeared or, as the Latin Americans tellingly put it, 'had been disappeared' in Bayonne some weeks before the GAL's first acknowledged kidnapping. No one had ever been charged with this crime, but the quality of the GAL's subsequent intelligence led their comrades to suspect that Lasa and Zabala had been interrogated by a GAL death squad, and then killed.

Unknown to their families, their bodies had been found, buried in quicklime, in the Alicante countryside, only two years later. The local coroner had never bothered to check missing persons outside his own province, 800 kilometres from the Basque Country, and decided

that the bodies were the result of a shoot-out between international drug gangs. He wanted them buried in a common grave. The local pathologist, however, insisted that the remains be kept refrigerated. He was uneasy: the victims had not only been shot; there was strong forensic evidence that they had been brutally tortured, and that this torture had been accompanied by the use of psychoactive drugs. Ten years later, an Alicante policeman was reading newspaper reports of the reopening of the GAL and made a startling connection. Dental records were checked, and they matched up. The first victims of the GAL's dirty war had finally come to light.

I could not help wondering what my charming student friend Julián knew about this sort of operation. I decided to see what sense I could make of death squads operating under a democracy. The nature and consequences of those operations are the subject of this book.

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Since we will be venturing into fiercely contested territory, where I do not believe that complete neutrality is either possible or desirable, I should first make my personal position clear on some of the main issues involved.

I accept that the Basques have the right to constitute themselves as a nation. The political form which that nation takes - autonomy or total independence — should, I believe, be decided democratically by the people who live in the Basque Country (This, as usual in Basque politics, is far less simple than it sounds. If we are talking about a referendum, would it include Navarre and the French Basque provinces, or should they hold separate referenda? Basque nationalists themselves are often ambiguous, perhaps deliberately so, on this issue.)

I am opposed to the aggressive Spanish and French nationalisms which attempt to portray the Basque Country as just one more region of a greater nation, and which denigrate Basque culture as inferior to their own. The existence and shape of the Spanish and French nations are not eternal verities, any more than the existence and shape of the Basque nation are. MI nation-states are constructed politically by their inhabitants over time, and can legitimately be reconstructed (or even deconstructed) by their inhabitants, over time, through democratic means.

However, I am also opposed to the exclusive Basque nationalism which attempts to define citizenship on the basis of race, language or, more recently, political allegiance. All citizens of the Basque Country, regardless of ethnic origin or political views, have a democratic right to be considered Basque, or Spanish, or both, and to participate fully in Basque democracy.

Terrorism is a term which will crop up on almost every page of this book. It is a very highly charged word, but I think it can be defined quite simply. I understand terrorism as the use of violence for political ends, in a situation where the essential democratic liberties - the rule of law and the freedoms of speech, association and representation - are in operation. I believe that the use of violence can be justified when such liberties are suppressed by the state, as was the case in apartheid South Africa. The violence of the African National Congress (ANC) under those conditions can no more be properly called terrorism than could the actions of the Resistance in Nazi-occupied France.

Some commentators, and much popular opinion, add a further criterion, even under circumstances where violence is held to be justified. This is the distinction between legitimate and terrorist targets. Thus a selective ANC attack on South African security personnel would not be termed terrorism, but an indiscriminate bomb attack by the same organisation on a bar crowded with civilians would. I accept this point, but feel it does recall the ironic observation made by the Irish writer (and 1940s IRA bomber) Brendan Behan: the man with a big bomb is a statesman, while the man with a small bomb is a terrorist. There is a degree to which *all* weapons of mass destruction, great and small, could be called terrorist.

On the other hand, there is undoubtedly a case for not using the word 'terrorism' at all: 'If all sorts of murders, kidnappings, threats, civil wars, government crimes, killings by secret or underground ~ paramilitary executions, and so on, were simply called by those names, without ever using the word "terrorism", would there be something missing in the description of the real world?' This question is asked by Joseba Zulaika and William A. Douglass in *Terror and Taboo*. It is provocatively put, but the answer may lie in the fact that these authors use the word repeatedly, though always with careful qualifications, throughout their own book."

Grant Wardlaw, an Australian academic specialist in terrorism theory argues that writers should 'apply the term terrorism even-handedly to governments, groups and individuals.'" This point is crucial to the thesis of this book, where 'terrorism' will be used to describe not only violence by revolutionary movements within a democracy, but also the illegitimate use of violence by the servants of the democratic state.

In the particular case of Franco's dictatorship, I once believed that ETA's revolutionary violence was justifiable as long as the dictatorship existed. With the benefit of hindsight, I am now increasingly inclined to the view that ETA's venture into armed struggle was a strategic error, which has resulted in a perilous 'sacramentalisation' of violence in Basque politics. But it was not easy to see that at the time. With the transition to democracy, I saw no justification for ETA's violence, which became clearly terrorist under the definition I have suggested. It lacked -and lacks - any democratic mandate. But, to complicate matters, it does enjoy the support of a significant minority of Basques who think of themselves *as* democrats.

Reprehensible as ETA's terrorism has been, I do not believe that the democratic state has any mandate to use terror against terrorism, however much it has been provoked. The state which launches a dirty war undermines its own legitimacy, and becomes the very thing which it claims to abhor. I believe that the dirty war against ETA was repugnant in principle, and disastrous in practice. It has revealed that Spain's transition to democracy, fêted as exemplary *in* many quarters, and certainly admirable in many respects, had a very dark side, which has still not been entirely exorcised. I agreed with the assessment made by Gabriel Jackson, writing in *El País* at the beginning of 1997: 'Between ETA and the legacy of the GAL, Spanish democracy is in serious danger for the first time since the end of France's dictatorship. Things do not look quite so bleak in 2000, with many senior GAL leaders brought to justice. Many questions, however, remain to be answered.

It is still too early to say whether the massive, and scrupulously democratic, response to ETA's killing of a young town councillor, Miguel Angel Blanco, in the summer of 1997 marked a truly

significant break in The corrosive dynamic of terror and counter-terror. ETA's renewed terrorist campaign in 2000 suggests otherwise.

It was striking that the dominant visual symbol of those great civic expressions of revulsion against ETA was 'clean hands:' thousands of demonstrators painted their palms white and raised them in a gesture innocence. On the positive side, the refusal of the centre-Right Partido Popular government to be drawn into a dirty war response to ETA's relentless campaign against its local councillors over the ensuing twelve months strongly suggests that a lesson has been learned from the GAL debacle.

On the other hand, it was depressing to note that, while peaceful anti-ETA street demonstrations in the wake of the Blanco killing were still going on, Felipe González was using the crisis to publicly thank some of the discredited former colleagues from the Interior Ministry for their 'services to Spain.' These were men who, in several cases, faced very airless charges for GAL crimes, and would subsequently be convicted. Their hands were far from clean, and Felipe Gonzalez has often appeared to raise them for being prepared to get their hands dirty in the name of 'Spain'. The PSOE's response to these court rulings indicates that many party leaders are still 'in demand' as it were on the issue The unfinished business of the GAL trials continues to fracture and corrode Spanish democratic institutions.

Within these parameters I have tried to expose the complex narrative if these obscure events as clearly as possible through a survey of the extensive documentary evidence now available. I have also tried to give this narrative a human voice, or rather human voices, through speaking directly to the GAL's surviving victims and to the relatives and friends of those who were less fortunate For the same reason I have talked to those involved in the subsequent political, legal and media battles, as well as to those GAL protagonists who were willing to talk to me.

The *GAL's* war is a small entry in the annals of contemporary atrocities, but it is not a minor one. In terms of scale, it does not compare to the dirty wars in Latin America or Algeria. The GAL's twenty-seven mortal victims, and thirty-odd wounded, represent only about a quarter of the casualties caused by ETA over the same period, and a much smaller fraction of the eight hundred or so people killed by ETA since 1968. But each victim is a victim too many, and the victims of the GAL, we are now reasonably sure, vein killed or injured by those from whom they should have been able to expect all the protection of the democratic rule of law. That it is possible to name moat of the protagonists and all the victims, and to speak to many of them face to face, may make it possible to comprehend the significance of this black episode in Spanish democracy.

I hope that the story which follows goes some way to explaining why one of the most charismatic and talented political leaders in recent European history, the former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez, may yet be best remembered for either tolerating or masterminding a network of death squads. And I hope it explains how and why large sections of Spanish political and public opinion, only recently liberated from a dictatorship which had systematically used torture, murder and terror against democrats, came to justify the use of terror, murder and torture in the name of democracy.

This political culture, apparently mature and sophisticated, often seemed to have only two responses to state terrorism. Some people outspokenly espoused the dirty war, explicitly

endorsing vengeance and reprisal as preferable to the rule of law. Others, probably a majority of Spanish public opinion at the time, believed a blind eye should be turned to the activities of the death squads, on the principle that the end would justify the means. Both groups would modify or reverse their positions only as evidence emerged that the state's chosen counter-terrorists were sometimes inefficient and usually corrupt.

The Spanish/Basque experience shows, I believe, that when democracies break their own best rules to fight terrorism, democracies always lose, and lose badly, in principle and in practice. This is the position always defended by a small but coherent and honourable minority in Spain and in the Basque Country. But perhaps what is most remarkable in this story is how that minority, through extraordinary integrity, courage and persistence, have persuaded the institutions of democracy to apply the rule of law to the highest in the land. The dirty war was a blight on Spain's democracy, but, in bringing its protagonists to the courts, Spain is teaching the world a lesson in democratic practice.
