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After Eta: Spain's history of violence

How should the Basque country tackle its past and remember decades of strife?



A mural in Hernani honouring jailed Eta operatives from the town: prisoner release remains a highly controversial issue © Alfredo Caliz

JANUARY 27, 2017 by: **Tobias Buck**

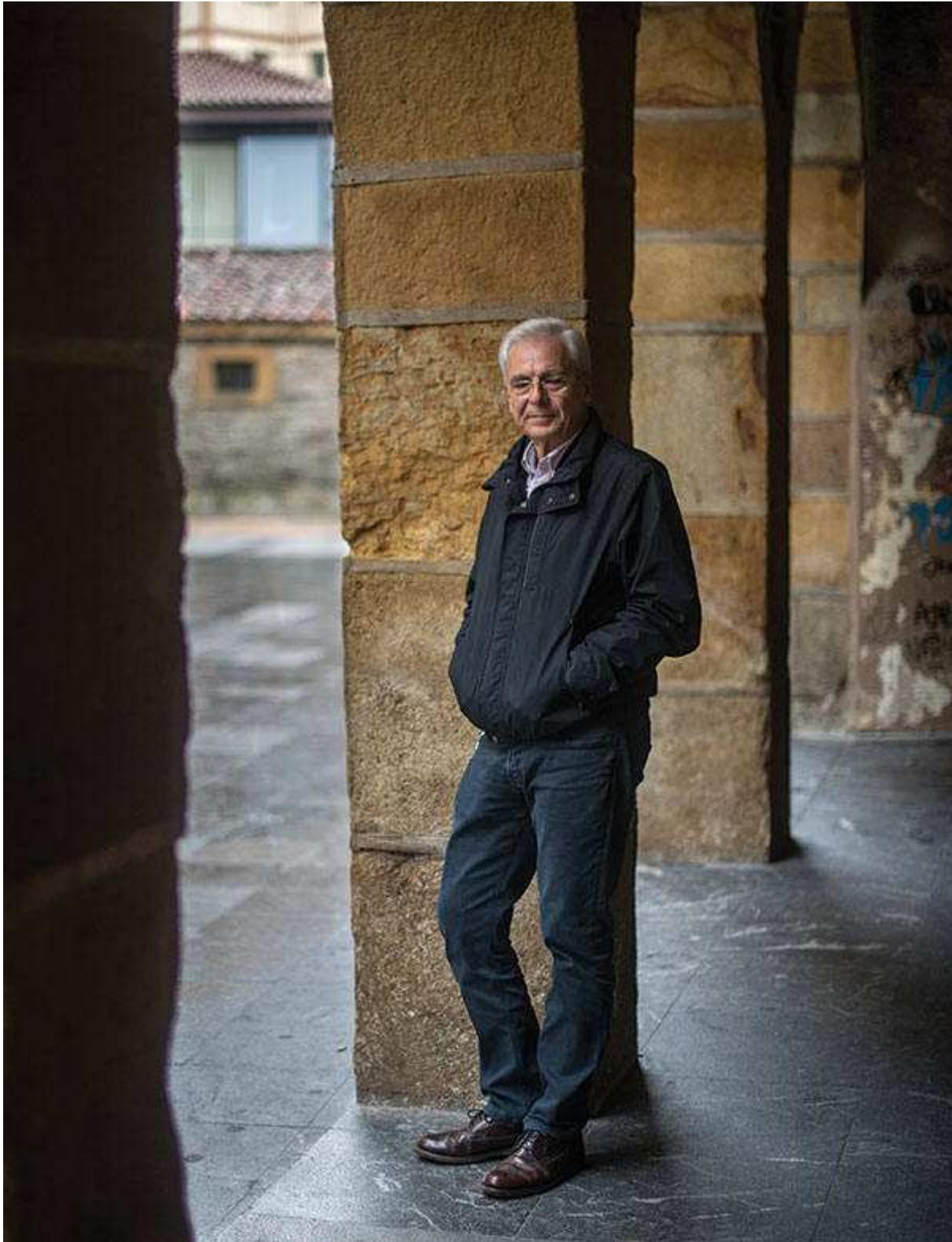
If you want to understand what is happening in the Basque country, says Carlos Totorika, you have to look into people's eyes. "You notice it in the eyes if someone hates you or not. You see it in an instant, even if they don't speak a word," he says. "And the eyes look different now. People are leaving the hate behind."

Totorika was a young man when he was first elected mayor of Ermua, a small town in the Spanish Basque country, back in 1991. He has been mayor ever since. Now a silver-haired man of 60, he has learnt everything there is to know about hate, and what it does to people. He has buried comrades killed by an assassin's bullet, and seen his own name, address and car licence plate on a kill list. He spent 15 years being

shadowed by armed bodyguards.

Then, suddenly, everything changed. After five decades of violence and murder, the Basque separatist group Eta decided to abandon what it called its “armed activity”. The announcement came on October 20 2011, sparking relief across Spain. It brought an end to a bloody campaign that started when Eta killed its first victim, a police officer, in 1968. It went on to murder 845 people, most of them in the small sliver of land it claimed to be fighting for. Now, finally, the killing was over. Politicians, prosecutors, judges and journalists stopped looking over their shoulders and under their cars. Hundreds were relieved of their bodyguards.

“I am a free man. I live without fear. I can go out with my wife. I can go to the cinema,” Totorika tells me. We are in his office, on the first floor of Ermua’s imposing Baroque town hall. It is a gloomy rain-lashed day, not untypical for the region. But the mayor’s eyes light up as he reflects on his new life. “It is wonderful. There is no other word for it. To live freely and without fear is wonderful.”



Carlos Totorika, mayor of Ermua: 'Eta's victims are tired. They want to close this chapter. But we can't close it just like this' © Alfredo Cáliz

The sense of wonder is evident across the Basque country. There is talk of a return to normality, and an effort to bolster what Spaniards call *convivencia* — living together. Many see a bright new future for what is already one of the richest regions in Spain, an industrial powerhouse and a magnet for tourists and foreign investors alike. The leaden atmosphere of terror has given way to a lighter mood: Basques today are

counting Michelin stars, not bodies.

But amid the newfound tranquillity, there is still unfinished business. On one side of the political divide, there is bitterness that Eta's announcement did not prompt conciliatory steps from the Spanish government. On the other, there is exasperation that Eta has yet to give up its weapons, or to formally disband.

Eta was founded in 1959, during the dictatorship of Francisco Franco. Its mission was to fight for the independence of the greater Basque country, a region straddling the Franco-Spanish border. The group went on to assassinate Luis Carrero Blanco, Franco's chosen successor in 1973, a killing that had profound political repercussions. Since 2011 though, Eta has made news only sporadically, mostly when another of its dwindling band of members is arrested. The group inhabits a strange netherworld, neither dead nor alive, as it waits for a grand political settlement that will probably never come.



But there is another source of tension, which shows up in the words that people use to describe the recent past, in the way they count the victims, and the starting point they choose to tell their tale. It has to do with the struggle to fit a million memories of fear and loss into a broader narrative — and find a version of history that is generous enough to unite a people torn by trauma, yet true enough to sort victims from perpetrators. It is about who gets to tell the Basque history of violence, and how.

This is the struggle that breaks out every time a cruel regime falls, a campaign of terror ends or a civil war draws to a close. Who was right and who was wrong? What must we do so the killing does not happen again? And why did we start shooting in the first place? The questions now being asked in the Basque country are the same ones that haunted South Africa and Bosnia a generation ago — and that surfaced in Spain after the end of the Franco regime. Many prefer not to ask them. But those who do are well aware that defining the past means shaping the future, in the Basque country and beyond. And, according to some leading combatants, it is a struggle that neither side dares to lose.

The Basque country is tiny — just a quarter of the size of Belgium. But it packs an awful lot into that small area, from the rough Atlantic coast to the peaks of the Basque Mountains and a patchwork of steep, narrow valleys in between. Land is so scarce — and so much is taken up by industry — that even small towns have been forced to build high-rise buildings. Wherever one looks, one sees bridges, railway lines, factories, apartment blocks and ancient churches jostling for space.



Miguel Angel Blanco: his killing provoked revulsion

The drive from Ermua to Lasarte, just outside San Sebastián, takes less than an hour. There was no one to talk to here, just a place to find: the scene of a notorious crime that was committed two decades ago — the murder of Miguel Angel Blanco.

I am told that locals are normally reluctant to speak about the killing, but the new era seems to have made people more relaxed. Within minutes of my ordering *pintxos* in a local bar, the waiter has tracked down one of the ambulance drivers who recovered the body. We set off along the river in his ancient Volvo, until the car comes to an abrupt halt. “It was here,” our guide says.

There is nothing except trees and undergrowth. The ground rises steeply on both sides but there is a flat section by the fast-flowing stream that is just big enough to stage an execution. What happened here changed the course of recent Basque history.

A 29-year-old from Ermua, Blanco had served on the same council as Carlos Totorika. He was a member of the conservative Popular party, while Totorika was a life-long Socialist. But the mayor liked the young councillor, and admired his courage. He remembers Blanco telling the mother of an Eta prisoner in a public meeting that her son was a criminal, not a hero. Such plain-speaking was rare in the Basque country at the time. Still, Blanco thought he had no reason to be afraid. He always told his family and friends that he was not important enough to be an Eta target.

He was wrong. Blanco was abducted by an Eta commando in July 1997, held for 48 hours while Eta demanded that all its prisoners be transferred to the Basque country, and finally taken to this forest. His killers forced him to kneel on the ground, before firing two bullets into his head.



The woods where Miguel Angel Blanco was murdered by Eta in 1997 © Alfredo Caliz

Eta had killed hundreds of people before, and would kill dozens more. But this time was different. Perhaps it was because of Blanco himself, a small-time politician who looked even younger than his years. Or the psychological torture inflicted on his family and friends, who knew that the government would never fulfil Eta's demands. In the two days between his abduction and his killing, some six million people took part in rallies and vigils to demand his release. In the Basque country, too, ordinary

citizens decided it was time to stand up to Eta. The revulsion was universal, and would follow the group all the way to 2011. Eta killed a man, but it dug a grave for its own ambitions along the way.

“When they killed my brother, no one came up with the slightest justification. It took people until 1997 to realise that the victim of terrorism is innocent,” says Mari Mar Blanco, who was 23 at the time. The sense of loss is still raw; her voice breaks as she recalls the last day she saw him alive. But she also sees the murder as a rare moment of moral clarity for Basque society. “People realised that the victims are always the innocent ones, and the perpetrators are always the guilty ones.”



Mari Mar Blanco, MP and victim advocate: 'When they killed my brother... people realised that the victims are always the innocent ones' © Alfredo Cáliz

The country took the death of Miguel Angel Blanco in a way it had never done before, she adds. "I remember people saying: he is only 29. Not that the killing would have

been any more justified if he had been 40, but people looked at him and saw a son, a brother, a boyfriend. People would say: I have a picture of your brother in my living room, next to the photo of my family. Everyone in that moment saw him as part of their family.”

Today, Blanco is a member of parliament for the ruling Popular party and a prominent advocate for Spanish victims of terror. She appears regularly on the pages of the conservative media but has a much lower profile in her native Basque country. The PP is a mere splinter party there, where the main conservative force is the moderately nationalist Basque National Party. Many Basques view Spain's ruling party much like Blanco regards the region's radical secessionists: as hardliners, extreme and divisive.

“They know that they lost,” Blanco says, referring to Eta and its sympathisers. “They will never admit it in public but they know they were defeated. And they know they cannot afford to lose the other battle — the battle for the historical narrative.” She adds: “We cannot afford to lose this battle.”

One key combatant in that struggle is Florencio Domínguez, a former journalist who now presides over the Foundation for the Memory of Victims of Terror. His office in the Basque capital of Vitoria is as bare as a monk's cell — but it offers a view to the site across the road that will one day house a museum dedicated to the history of terror here. One of his tasks is to fill the building with objects, pictures, words — and a coherent narrative. He also oversees a well-funded research effort, involving many of the region's most prominent historians.



José Antonio Pérez, professor of history: 'Eta lost the military battle. But there is still the battle for the historical narrative' © Alfredo Cáliz

“We are in a paradoxical situation. Younger people who are now in their twenties have little direct experience of terrorism. They are not well-informed, and this all seems like a distant thing to them. And then we have the grown-up generation that knows from experience what terrorism is. But they often just want to turn the page,” Domínguez says. “We want to reach as many people as possible, make them aware of what terrorism is and make clear that there is no justification for terrorism.”

That educational impulse, he admits, runs into two serious obstacles. One is the desire, shared by many Basques, to simply forget about the past. The other is a

powerful counter-narrative that views the region's history differently: as one of conflict between two sides, in which both Eta and the Spanish government committed their share of abuses, and in which both sides suffered trauma, death and injustice.

“They are trying to win one battle because they lost the other,” says José Antonio Pérez, a professor of history at the University of the Basque Country, who leads the terrorism research group. “If you convince, you win. The story they are trying to establish is that there was a political conflict that is both origin and justification for the violence [of Eta] . . . As Hannah Arendt once said, where everyone is guilty, no one is.”

“They” are the members of the so-called Izquierda Abertzale, the pro-independence radical left in the Basque country. This was the movement that provided the political part in Eta's “politico-military strategy”. Over the years, it gave birth to a variety of parties, some of which — like Herri Batasuna — were banned by Spanish courts for their close ties to Eta. Over the years, more and more members of the Izquierda Abertzale turned against Eta's violence. But in the battle for narrative, they insist that the recent history of the Basque country is no simple tale of darkness and light.



Arnaldo Otegi, former Eta member: 'We need to construct a history that is inclusive. What we don't need is victors and vanquished' © Alfredo Cáliz

“We need to construct a history that is inclusive — a history of histories. What we don't need is a history of victors and vanquished.” So says Arnaldo Otegi, the leader of EH Bildu, a party that is the latest — and probably permanent — incarnation of the Izquierda Abertzale. A former member of Eta, Otegi spent long years in jail, both for his Eta activities and, most recently, for his role in trying to re-establish the banned

Herri Batasuna party. He was released just in time for the Basque regional election last September, though a Spanish court subsequently banned him from running as a candidate.

In the rest of Spain, he is loathed as an apologist for terror by all but a small minority. In the Basque country, however, things are different. EH Bildu won 21 per cent of the regional vote, making it the second-largest bloc in parliament. Otegi himself, meanwhile, wins praise even from some of his political opponents for helping to push Eta towards its 2011 declaration.

Otegi insists that the era of violence is over. But he also warns against a version of history that presents Eta's deeds in isolation. "If you look at the history of this country, you will see that in the last three or four centuries there is not one generation that hasn't known armed conflict," he tells me. "Evidently, there is a political reason why this is happening. That is not to justify what happened. But to hide it is absurd."



Police at the aftermath of the Eta bomb attack in Madrid on December 20 1973 that killed prime minister Luis Carrero Blanco © Getty

To understand the abyss in perception that looms in any discussion of Basque history and politics, I headed to the small town of Hernani, a short drive from San Sebastián. This is Abertzale territory. For many decades, Hernani and the towns and villages around it served as a source of manpower, funding and political support for Eta. No fewer than 23 of the 400 or so Eta prisoners still in jail come from tiny Hernani.

Here, too, it used to be hard for journalists to find people to talk to. But the recent political thawing has opened both minds and doors. One leads to the small, tidy apartment of Ricardo Mendiola, a life-long Abertzale, who served as mayor of Hernani from 1983 to 1987. It was a period that brought violence and death on a terrible scale. “There was fear and there was hatred. Visceral hatred,” he recalls.

For Mendiola and many of his voters, the fear and the hate were not directed at Eta but at the Spanish police and security forces — and at mercenary death squads such as the notorious Gal [Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación]. Financed and supported by members of the Socialist government, the Gal murdered 27 Eta operatives and suspects between 1983 and 1987, often burying them in anonymous quicklime graves. In total, far-right and paramilitary groups murdered 62 people.

The so-called *guerra sucia* (dirty war) forms the darkest chapter in the history of modern democratic Spain. The interior minister at the time of the Gal killings was one of several top officials later convicted for his links to the group. But it was also the security apparatus itself that stretched the limits of state authority to breaking point and beyond. A study released by the Basque regional government last year found that more than 4,000 detainees were tortured by Spanish security officers between 1960 and 2013. UN reports detailed cases of torture as recently as 2004 (strongly denied in Madrid, where officials argue that Eta invents torture claims to blacken the government's name abroad).



Luis Intxauspe, mayor of Hernani: 'The problem and the conflict did not start when Eta was founded and didn't stop with the end of Eta' © Alfredo Cáliz

These are the memories that resonate in towns such as Hernani. They also loom large in the thick set of ringbinders that contain the official town history, and that now sit on the table in the mayor's office. Luis Intxauspe, who hails from the same party as Otegi, emphasises from the outset that the local history project has nothing to do with the version being written by the professors in Vitoria.

“When we talk about historical memory our view goes back to 1936 and the start of Francoism. That is where we begin the narrative,” he says. Eta, he adds, cannot be understood in isolation. “The problem and the conflict did not start when Eta was founded and didn't stop with the end of Eta.”

Historians such as Pérez are deeply wary of this kind of thinking. There is, he argues, no simple line that links the Franco dictatorship to the Eta killings to the Gal murders and to the situation of Eta prisoners today. “For them, context means justification,” he tells me. Whatever the crimes of the Franco regime, they cannot be taken as an excuse for a wave of killings that ended 36 years after the death of Franco. Indeed, more than 90 per cent of Eta victims were killed after Spain's transition from dictatorship to democracy. The Gal, meanwhile, killed its last victim in 1987 — a decade before the murder of Miguel Angel Blanco, and 24 years before Eta announced the end of the “armed struggle”.

The issue of Eta prisoners, meanwhile, remains intensely controversial. In places such as Hernani, they are awarded a status that approaches martyrdom: the narrow lanes of the old town are plastered with banners showing their faces and names. There is a black-and-white mural near the town hall with portraits of all the Eta prisoners from Hernani (including Mendiola's nephew). Every time one is released, his or her portrait is struck off. Abertzale leaders such as Otegi insist that all the prisoners have to be released, as would happen in a normal post-conflict agreement. At the very least, they say, the Spanish government should allow them to complete their sentences in Basque jails.

In Madrid, however, such pleas cut little ice. As long as Eta has not handed over its weapons and formally disbanded, the government refuses to contemplate a change in its prison policy. As for the notion of a normal post-conflict settlement, the response is equally clear: there was no conflict. Eta killers are murderers and will be treated as

such.

The real outrage, says Mari Mar Blanco, is the hero's welcome that released Eta prisoners continue to receive in places such as Hernani. Like many Spanish politicians who experienced the sharp end of Eta terror, she insists that there can be no negotiation with the group and its sympathisers. "The younger generation needs to know that to kill, as Eta did, achieves nothing. Eta achieved nothing in any of the causes that it claimed to kill for: it didn't achieve the independence of the Basque country, and it did not bring home the prisoners. They achieved nothing, except to cause terrible pain."



Pili Zabala, leader of Podemos: 'We knew that the very enemy that took my brother was governing us... we felt terrible impotence' © Alfredo Cáliz

While in Vitoria, I meet another prominent sister with a story of grief and loss. Pili Zabala entered politics only last year, when she emerged as the leader of the anti-establishment Podemos party in the Basque country. Before that, her surname was known to Basques and Spaniards alike mainly in connection with one of the most notorious crimes of the Gal: the abduction, torture and killing of José Ignacio Zabala

in 1983.

Zabala was 14 when her older brother disappeared, together with another Eta suspect from the same village. Year after year, the families pleaded with the Spanish authorities to reveal the whereabouts of the two men's remains. But it was only in 1995 that a forensic examination was able to confirm that two bodies discovered a decade earlier in a quicklime grave near Alicante were those of Zabala and his friend, José Antonio Lasa.

"Eleven years, five months and five days," Zabala says. "You always cheat yourself. I always dreamt that my brother was alive. It was a dream but it was also a defence mechanism, a survival mechanism." A slight woman of 48, her voice is reduced to a whisper as she recalls that time. "You are lost in the world. I used to have moral and ethical references, religious references. They all broke. Justice doesn't exist. Because of my own experience, I can say: there is no justice in the Spanish state."

For more than a decade, the family had no grave to go to, and no help from the authorities. "We were aware that the very enemy that took my brother was governing us . . . We felt a terrible impotence." Even today, Zabala says, she cannot bear the sight of Felipe González, prime minister from 1982 to 1996 ("I have to turn the television off"). Her view of Spain is tinged by bitterness and doubt. The murder of her brother — and the lack of serious punishment meted out to the perpetrators — suggests to her that the nation still has a long way to go before it can call itself a true democracy.

Looking back at the decades of bloodshed and violence, however, what strikes Zabala is the sheer absence of empathy. "People felt the pain of the victims on their side, but not on the other. There was no compassion, and no solidarity."



On the road between San Sebastián and Vitoria: the already rich region is finally experiencing peace after 50 years of violence © Alfredo Caliz

It is difficult to convey, through the veil of time, how hard it was to escape from the terror that stalked the Basque country — how all-engulfing it was. So many deaths, so much fear, in so little space. Victims and perpetrators, running into each other in those narrow village lanes over and over again. As Iñaki Soto, the editor of *Gara*, an Abertzale newspaper based in San Sebastián, told me: “This was an untypical conflict in the sense that there was no social segregation. We lived in the same buildings. We took our kids to the same schools.”

There were years in which the killing came at a rate of one every three days. And while Eta initially targeted policemen and state representatives, the circle of death would widen ever further as the years went by: run your finger down the list of victims and you find taxi drivers, bakers, the owners of bars and restaurants, housewives, a couple of migrants from Ecuador caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. In 1987, an Eta bomb exploded in a Barcelona supermarket, killing 21 men, women and children who never had the slightest reason to fear the group's wrath. It was Eta's deadliest attack.

The suffering of the victims and their families went on long after the dead were buried. In a cruel inversion of normal human behaviour, it was often Eta's victims

who were isolated and stigmatised, while the perpetrators received shelter from their community. According to historians such as Pérez, this twisted social dynamic helps explain why Eta could carry on killing for so long.

“For decades, when Eta killed someone, people would say that the victim must have done something. The burden of proof fell on the victim. Eta was given the benefit of the belief that if they killed someone, it must have been for a reason. The killer was given solidarity when he was arrested. The day after an Eta commando was arrested there would be demonstrations and so on. But it took until the late 1980s and early 1990s for there to be demonstrations in solidarity with the victims.”

The balance finally tipped irrevocably in those fraught July days of 1997, as Spain waited for the death of Miguel Angel Blanco. “Terrorism needs social paralysis, it needs to create a spiral where every killing creates more fear. That spiral was broken in Ermua,” recalls Totorika, the mayor.

Looking back, he says he feels pride in the rallies and protests that started in his village and spread across the nation. But that was a long time ago. Today, he says, “we are tired of Eta and talking about Eta. Even the victims are tired. They want to close this chapter. But we can't close it just like that.”

History matters, he says. It always does. “What is history today becomes social reality a generation from now,” he says. “And, what's more, the victims have a right to the truth.”

Tobias Buck is the FT's Madrid bureau chief

Photographs: Alfredo Cáliz / Panos Pictures

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