

Constructing Identities:
*Paramilitary Disarmament and Ceasefire in
Northern Ireland and the Basque Country*

Katie Winstanley
PhD Candidate, McMaster University

Presented at the Canadian Political Science
Association Conference
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada
May 30-June 1, 2007

Abstract

Spain and Northern Ireland have remained as anomalies in the democratic world given the failure to contain the violence that has been associated with nationalist movements in these areas. However, recent events have dramatically altered the extent to which systemic violence will continue to characterize these areas. Given that the Irish Republican Army (IRA), has recently disarmed, and that Euskadi ta Askatasuna (ETA) has declared a permanent (albeit precarious) ceasefire, the prospects for change in these areas is greater than it has been arguably at anytime in history. The people associated with nationalist movements in both places appear to have come to the understanding that violence can not have the impact that meaningful participation in the democratic process can. This paper will explore the conditions which lead to the disarmament and ceasefire declarations of these paramilitary groups. This will be done through an analysis of the ways in which national and ethnic identities are constructed, maintained and reinforced. I will explore how the traditional narratives associated with violence may now be disregarded or altered in order to construct identities which are more in line with the current trajectory of the peace process in these areas. I will argue that the disarmament and ceasefire declaration is a symptom of a wider movement toward the peaceful reconciliation of ethnic and national conflict in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country.

Introduction

The relatively recent disarmament of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the declaration of a permanent ceasefire by Euskadi ta Askatsuna (ETA) have provided much fodder for scholars of peace brokering, most especially those concerned with peace within a nationalist conflict. These two cases have remained the topic of much debate for a few reasons. First, nationalist claims in this area have not waned in the ways that other movements have. Despite international condemnation of violence as a means of achieving a nationalist-inspired goal, both the Basque Region and Northern Ireland, until recently of course, have remained areas characterized by pervasive violence. Secondly, these two cases remain interesting for scholars of nationalism because they are democratic. Unlike other Western, industrialized democracies such as Canada, Belgium, and even the United Kingdom in regards to Scotland and Wales, who have seen relatively minor and infrequent eruptions of violence, the Basque Country and Northern Ireland have been the opposite. While these other countries have been able to successfully co-opt nationalist movements into the democratic process, this task has proven difficult in the cases to be discussed here.¹ While nationalist

¹ This, of course, is not to argue that Canada, Belgium or the UK in the context of Scotland and Wales, can all be said to have 'solved' their nationalist problems. Obviously these countries still have to content with the claims of nationalist groups. The point I am making here is that they have been successful in attempts to institutionalize the conflicts. Rather than fighting in the streets, these countries sort out conflict, for the most

groups in both areas have been involved in the democratic process, their previous successes have been hampered by their connections to violent, radical and anti-democratic paramilitary movements. ETA's connection to the shadowy and outlawed Herri Batasuna political party, and the IRA's connection to Sinn Féin have made it difficult for these political parties to make meaningful inroads into the democratic arena, and therefore their ability to negotiate within it is also compromised.

While ceasefires and negotiations have are nothing new to these two groups, the current changes are, arguably, the most important in the history of the conflict between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, and Basques and Spaniards in Spain. What makes these two cases most interesting is that both conflicts were marked by an unflinching allegiance to the cause from both sides, which was most often characterized by a refusal to negotiate. Indeed, the most common refrain heard from nationalist groups in these areas was, "Never Surrender". The question that is now raised, of course, is: why now? What does the disarmament and ceasefire declaration mean for the resolution of conflict and the peace process in these areas? Most interesting, for the purposes of this paper, is whether or not these events represent a fundamental shift in the ways in which ethnonationalist identities are constructed. It appears that these events represent a shift away from a nationalism that is associated with violence and towards an identity that is concerned with achieving recognition through the utilization of a democratic process. It should be noted that my thoughts on this a very preliminary, however. Little has been published thus far on this topic. Despite a lack of information from the academic world on this issue, however, it is reasonable to argue that the real outcome of these events remains to be seen, and my purpose here is not to predict the future, but merely to raise some questions about the meaning of the disarmament.

Northern Ireland, Spain and Ethnonationalism

Before continuing, I should briefly define here what it is I mean when I use the terms nationalism and ethnonationalism. First of all, I must make it clear that I do not use the word 'nation' to connote something that is interchangeable with the word 'state'. In fact, I see these two concepts as fundamentally different, and am therefore concerned that they are often used together as 'nation-state'. Let me clarify further. Nationalism is often a confusing and convoluted concept which can refer to anything from the flag-waving patriotism of post-9/11 Americans to the fight of Newfoundlanders to protect off-shore oil revenues. For my purposes, however, I refer to the definition offered by André Lecours. Ethnonationalism, Lecours argues, refers to, "...the action of a group that claims some degree of self-government on the grounds that it is united by a special sense of solidarity emanating from one or more shared features and therefore forms a 'nation'."² My definition of nationalism therefore, for the purposes of the argument that is being presented here, is that nationalism and nations are things that exist often incongruent to the state. In other words, the aims of ethnonationalist groups often do not correspond to the overarching goals of the state. A nation, therefore, is a group of people, often a minority group, that are connected in some unique way, whether this connection is 'real' or merely 'perceived' by the members matters

part, within the confines of a democratic structure. Northern Ireland and Spain have not been successful in this endeavor.

² André Lecours, "Ethnonationalism in the West: A theoretical exploration", Nationalism & Ethnic Politics, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2000 p. 105

little. The ties that bind these connections, however, exist often in opposition to the state and therefore there exists an often tenuous and uneasy relationship between the nation in question and the state.

A Brief History of the IRA

Fundamental to the use of violence as a means to achieve a nationalist claim is the rejection on the part of those who commit the violence upon the notion that the state has the legitimate authority to have a monopoly on the use of force. The corollary to this, of course, is that by rejecting the state's monopoly on the use of violence, the nationalist group in question is also rejecting the legitimacy and authority state itself. In Ireland, by the latter half of the twentieth century, the sectarian state system that all but ignored Catholic rights was nothing short of a complete failure. The failure meant that the British state was no longer capable of undermining ethnic identities, and, of course, these identities were merely reinforced under these conditions. The result of this full scale collapse also led to the emergence of a violent paramilitary response.³

The IRA, and their political wing Sinn Féin, have been a part of the political and national landscape since the Republic of Ireland was granted Home Rule in 1920. Indeed, it could be argued that the IRA has given the North of Ireland more international publicity than any other organization in the area.⁴ During the 1920s the IRA established itself as a group not only committed to achieving an independent Irish nation, but also as a group representative of the interests and concerns of the Irish-Catholic working class. In a 1929 declaration its objectives included the organization and consolidation of the Republic of Ireland, "...the achievement of 'an independent revolutionary leadership for the working class and working farmers' aiming at 'the overthrow in Ireland of British imperialism and its ally, Irish capitalism'."⁵ It was also during this era that the IRA boasted a membership that fluctuated between 15,000 and 30,000 members, though it remained an armed and essentially secret organization. Throughout the next few decades membership numbers in the IRA fluctuated dramatically, and by 1952 there were only 1,000 members.⁶

However, smaller numbers did not necessarily mean that the IRA was not operational. It spent much of the 1950s acquiring arms through raids and smuggling. They also spent much of the time fundraising, with large sums of money coming from Irish-American sympathizers whose ancestors were members of the Irish Diaspora that came out of the Irish potato famine. Tactics changed during this period as well. By 1953 the IRA officially stated that its campaign would be directed, "solely against 'the British occupation in the North'."⁷ This meant that the campaign would focus exclusively on the six counties in the North, and all activity in the Republic of Ireland would cease. By 1956 a full scale border war was underway. There were two reasons for the increased radicalism of the 1950s. First, the IRA had new leadership, they were a second generation of men of militant Republicanism, and they were determined not to let their fathers' fight die in vain. Secondly, the coalition

³ John Loughlin, "New contexts for political solutions: Redefining minority nationalisms in Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and Corsica", in John Darby and Roger MacGuinity, eds., Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003 p. 39

⁴ T.P. Coogan, Ireland Since the Rising, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966 p. 255

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 259, 276

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 279

government in the Republic of Ireland was finding it extremely difficult to deal with the IRA, owing in part to the breakdown of cross-border police communications. Of this, Coogan writes, "...any Irish government, whatever its party complexion, in dealing with the IRA is engaged in damping down a fire in a smoke-filled room in which, somewhere, there is an open can of petrol: a wrong step and the whole lot goes up in the spreading flames of martyrdom."⁸

By the end of the 1950s the IRA had worn itself too thin. The plans for a massive campaign of sabotage on roads, bridges, BBC transmitting stations, Royal Ulster Constabulary offices, etc., had seriously weakened the military capability of the IRA and by 1962 one of many ceasefires was declared. The emphasis on guerilla tactics throughout this period was long on theory and short on realistic application. The use of Maoist teachings and strategic thought were difficult to translate into the Irish context.⁹ This was coupled with an increasing distaste for the border war from many in the North. The IRA, to these people, seemed to be too engaged in espousing lofty rhetoric about the, "...'great brotherhood of heroes and martyrs that mark 700 years of struggle to drive British forces out of Ireland'"¹⁰, than in actually producing any tangible results.

The 1962 ceasefire, it should be noted, came with the statement that, "'The Irish Republican Army remains intact, and it is in a position to continue its campaign for the occupied area indefinitely'."¹¹ In addition, it is important to note here that public, or otherwise outwardly apparent signs of weakness in an organization like the IRA or ETA does not necessarily mean that they are any less dangerous. In fact, like ETA, the IRA proved that by pushing movements to the fringes of society, one is manufacturing the ingredients required for their increasingly violent and terrifying resurgence. Indeed, the IRA spent most of the 1960s rethinking their methods and tweaking their leadership. They began to look increasingly to Marxist theory for inspiration, and also began to view the British situation through a neo-colonialist lens with less focus on a view of it as a situation of outright conquest and occupation.

It was not until the time of the infamous 'Troubles', however, that the IRA really came out of the woodwork. Not only was support for their cause growing, but they also began relying upon increasingly violent tactics. These tactics were based on three areas of action: defence, retaliation, and offence.¹² The IRA also became more political in its aims, relying more and more on Marxist revolutionary theory than they had previously. It should, of course, be noted here that Protestant paramilitary groups were also very active in this era, responding to their perception that Protestant hegemony was under threat from the actions of the IRA and the Republican nationalist movement. The most notorious of these groups were the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). The UDA was founded in 1971 and over the next five years claimed responsibility for four hundred Catholic deaths.¹³ Likewise, the response to the Catholic civil rights movement from the UVF was the

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 280

⁹ M.L.R. Smith, Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement, New York: Routledge, 1995 p. 68

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 70

¹¹ Coogan, Ireland Since the Rising, p. 283

¹² T.P. Coogan, The I.R.A., Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1980 p. 461

¹³ Katherine O'Sullivan See, First World Nationalisms: Class and Ethnic Politics in Northern Ireland and Quebec, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986 p. 122

launching of a campaign aimed against the Catholic community, targeting Catholic shops, homes and schools with such crude devices as petrol bombs. The ultimate goal was a full scale campaign against the IRA and all of its associated splinter groups.

The Catholic civil rights movement, which began in the 1920s as a peaceful movement, was met with such ferocity by the Protestant loyalist members of Northern Ireland that 'peaceful', or at the very least containable or manageable sectarianism soon boiled over into serious violent conflict. McGarry and O'Leary write that, "Political violence after 1969 is explained by the fact that peaceful campaigns for civil rights in the 1960s were met with violence and repression, and the burning of homes of nationalists in West Belfast – a vivid memory amongst the leaders of Sinn Féin who were young people in the late 1960s."¹⁴

In response to the violence the British army was called into Northern Ireland on the 14th of August, 1969. This would prove to be a pivotal event for Northern Ireland. The Catholic minority in the North originally believed that the army was there to protect them from the retaliation against the civil rights movement that was being carried out by Protestant paramilitary groups like the UDA and UVF. What they soon came to realize, however, was that the army's purpose in the North was to protect Protestant hegemony and status quo. The IRA played a pivotal role in perpetuating this notion, doing its "...utmost to make pariahs of the soldiers and to turn the population against them."¹⁵

It was under these conditions that the 'old' IRA split, giving rise to the 'Provisional' IRA, a group that began a violent bombing campaign aimed at Protestant targets. "Despite the use of brutal bombings as its primary political weapon, many within the Catholic community gave open or tacit support to the 'provos' for defending Catholic neighborhoods against continuing attack."¹⁶ The violence and counter-violence continued to escalate throughout this time, and the IRA positioned itself as a group that was meeting oppression with aggression, considered to be the only option left for Catholics in the North. In 1972 the British abolished the Stormont parliament in Northern Ireland, leaving only the army and paramilitary forces to attempt to find a solution to the bloodshed, having moved all political control back to Westminster in London. The withdrawal was the result of a lack of comprehension from the British government about the intricacies of the Irish conflict. The shift in political control was therefore the result of a serious mismanagement of the Irish situation from the British government. The violence perpetrated by the paramilitary groups only increased under these conditions.

What is important to point out here is that the IRA was not the military wing of a political movement; rather, Sinn Féin is the political arm of a paramilitary organization.¹⁷ The same can be said for the Spanish case. The paramilitary group ETA came first, the political group Herri Batasuna second. Sinn Féin regularly contested elections both in the North and in the Republic, but recent success has been hampered by its continued connection to the IRA. Voters in the North voiced concern that Sinn Féin platforms are too 'republican',

¹⁴ John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995 pp. 32-33

¹⁵ Coogan, The I.R.A., p. 435

¹⁶ Saul Newman, Ethnoregional Conflict in Democracies: Mostly Ballots, Rarely Bullets, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996 p. 164

¹⁷ Thomas G. Mitchell, Native vs. Settler: Ethnic Conflict in Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland and South Africa, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000 p. 43

with little concern for local issues. In addition, support for Sinn Féin in the Republic continued to wane. Tom Garvin, for example, argues that,

The Republic has no stomach for war; it is one of the most demilitarized societies in Europe, partly in reaction to the exaggerated militarism of its founding fathers and partly a reflection of the popular revulsion to the brutality of the IRA. This brutality has done more to render the partition of Ireland popular in the Republic than anything else. Ironically, the IRA, by alienating so many southern Irish, may end up in the history books as the force that made Irish partition permanent.¹⁸

There can be no doubt that sentiments such as these had an impact on the disarmament of the IRA in late 2005. There were undoubtedly divisions within the Republican nationalist movement regarding the legitimacy of the use of violence as a method of political action. Furthermore, while IRA violence continued, it was unlikely that Dublin or mainstream America would sympathize with, much less cooperate with, the Republican cause. This is a theme I will return to later on, but for now let us consider a brief historical account of the paramilitary actions of ETA, before focusing on the wider question surrounding the implications of disarmament on ethnonationalist identity.

A Brief History of ETA

The most recognizable symbol of the violence that is associated with Basque nationalism is the organization Euzkadi ta Askatasuna (ETA), which roughly translates into ‘Basque Homeland and Freedom’. In many ways ETA has followed a similar tactical path as the IRA, and there has been some discussion that the two organizations are indeed, linked.¹⁹ However, in some key ways the two movements are very different. In Northern Ireland the violence was much more communal in nature. It was about two communities fighting one another. In the Basque case, however, the violence was about a group fighting against the state. The IRA rarely targeted government officials, choosing instead to target pubs or shops frequented by Protestants. They also focused their attention to a large degree upon targeting the British Army. ETA, on the other hand was quite different. There was never any attempt to fight against the Spanish military, rather, it was a psychological war aimed at converting the minds of moderate Basques against the dominance of Castilian culture and language. It should also be noted here that the IRA has been responsible for more than three times the number of deaths that ETA has claimed responsibility for.

The ETA organization was born on the 31st of July, 1959. Clark notes,

In a short time its initials ETA began to appear spray-painted on walls in the larger Basque cities. In a few more years, ETA would have a major impact on Basque and Spanish politics. Observers inclined to look for symbolism saw much in the choice of a date for the founding of the new organization. July 31,

¹⁸ Tom Garvin, “Hibernian endgame? Nationalism in divided Ireland”, in John Caplan and Richard Feffer, eds., Europe’s New Nationalism: States and Minorities in Conflict, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996 p. 191

¹⁹ William S. Shepard, “The ETA: Fighting Europe’s last active terrorist group”, Mediterranean Quarterly, Winter 2002, Vol. 13, Issue 4, p. 55

1959 was the sixty-fourth anniversary of the founding of the Basque Nationalist Party by Sabino de Arana y Giori.²⁰

Sabino Arana is widely considered to be the ‘father of Basque nationalism’. In the years since his death in 1903 at the young age of 38, Arana's work has become very popular among Basque nationalists, with his writings serving as a quasi-manifesto for the Basque cause. He had spent a considerable amount of his short life in jail, having been convicted of treason for attempting to send a telegram to American President Theodore Roosevelt to praise him for helping Cuba to gain independence from Spain following the 1898 Spanish-American War. Before Arana, the concept of a Basque nation simply did not exist. Payne points out that, “Since the Basque area in toto never formed a single discrete political unit and did not even have a name, Arana had to invent one. His original usage of *Euskaterria* was soon shortened to *Euskadi*, and Aranist neologism that meant approximately ‘Basque Land’.”²¹ Arana was convinced that because the Basque people were unique that they must be given the right to self-determination and should have ultimate and autonomous control over the Basque region.

It was taking these lessons from Sabino Arana that ETA was born. When the organization first began, however, it was not particularly violent or revolutionary. The members of ETA were predominantly working-class, making the organization a product of the industrialization boom that had characterized the Basque region for most of the 20th century. Early actions included the distribution of leaflets and the hanging of the flag of Euskadi, called the *Ikurriña*. It was, as mentioned above, a war waged on Spanish public opinion, rather than a war waged against the Spanish state. The early years were spent convincing the Basque people that their cause was just. It was not until the 1960s during the Franco era, that the group came to identify itself with revolutionary socialism. The group spent most of that decade building support through the generation of propaganda, and acquiring monetary funds (usually through bank robberies) and arms. On the 18th of July, 1961, ETA made its first of many upcoming attempts at sabotage. The group enacted a plan to derail a train full of supporters of the President Francisco Franco. The retaliation from the government was swift and harsh.

It should be noted here that the attempted train derailment was to be done without causing any civilian casualties. Only cars not carrying passengers were to be targeted. This has continued to be an important aspect of ETA’s *modus operandi*. They have always tried to be conscientious in choosing targets that will create the lowest level of civilian danger possible. They have also been known for ‘calling in’ bomb threats, allowing authorities ample time to evacuate people in the area to safety.

Despite concern for civilian safety, however, ETA, like the IRA was influenced by Marxist-Leninist theory. This shift to Marxist-Leninism occurred mostly during the Franco-era when the Basque nationalist movement was forced underground. ETA was the preeminent group supporting independence and autonomy for the Basque region. Like the IRA, there was a prolonged period of time where they received support from Basque society at large. Many viewed them as patriots fighting for the protection and preservation of the Basque language, culture and identity. ETA, unlike the IRA however, was careful to target only those who had been close to the Franco regime, or who otherwise seemed to typify or

²⁰ Robert P. Clark, The Basque Insurgents: ETA 1952-1980, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984, p. 27

²¹ Stanley G. Payne, Basque Nationalism, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1975 p. 147

represent the oppressive Castilian regime in Madrid. The casualties that were perpetrated by ETA were far fewer than those in other, similar nationalist struggles, such as Northern Ireland, which was characterized by a much more indiscriminate form of terrorism. Clark, for example, goes so far as to say that, "If there was terrorism in the Basque Country in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was practiced by the Spanish state."²² Indeed, the trials, imprisonments and executions of suspected ETA members and supporters attracted condemnation from all over Europe and the world, including the Vatican. Much like the situation in Northern Ireland with the British army, many people in the Basque region saw the violence more as a response to the repressive actions against the Basque nationalist movement from the Spanish state. Most often, the violence was the result of over-zealous police and security forces.²³

This, however, is not to say that ETA was not responsible for spectacular acts of violence. In 1973 they killed the Prime Minister Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco when 165 pounds of explosives were detonated from beneath his car. The blast was so powerful that the car was rocketed through the sky over a multi-story apartment building, landing precariously on a balcony on the building's opposite side. The assassination was the result of months of meticulous planning which included the digging of a tunnel that ran from a rented ground floor apartment, under the road, to the place where Blanco's car was parked every morning as he attended mass before going to work. This is only one of the more high profile acts of violence that has been committed by ETA. They have also targeted British and American tourists, and have attempted to kill King Juan Carlos several times. While the organization had not become totally indiscriminate with its targets, as the decades passed, an increasing distaste for violence as a means of political action was growing in the region. Support for ETA actions generally came from those who support outright independence for the Basque Country from the rest of Spain. The majority of Basques, however, simply favour greater levels of autonomy from Madrid.

Despite this, ETA maintained a significant enough level of support that their actions, while varying in frequency and scale, continued. Sullivan points out that, "The romantic appeal of belonging to an organization which combined the glamour of armed struggle with the rejection of conservative social attitudes..."²⁴ had given ETA great advantage over traditional political parties like the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV, or Basque Nationalist Party). Like the IRA, however, ETA has seen its support wane over the past few years. Many argue that their tactics have gone beyond what can be considered 'just' redemption for the oppression experienced during the Franco years. In addition, the actions of ETA have not brought independence to the Basque Country. Furthermore, current President Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero has proven himself to be willing to negotiate the terms of autonomy with those in power in the Basque region, despite strong opposition from some of the more conservative and right-wing members of Spanish political society.

By 1998 a ceasefire was declared. The declaration came as a major surprise to the people of the Basque region. Although there had been pressure on ETA to cease with its violent activities, there was little hope that the message of peace would actually get through.

²² Robert P. Clark, The Basques: The Franco Years and Beyond, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1979 p. 169

²³ John Sullivan, ETA and Basque Nationalism: The Fight for Euskadi 1890-1986, New York: Routledge, 1988 p. 161

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131

Mees notes that, “For the first time in about thirty years, a real opportunity of democratic accommodation seemed to take shape. The ceasefire served as a reminder, probably against the intentions of its announcers, that violence was not an ontological, inherent feature of Basque society, but rather an unnatural, collateral by-product.”²⁵ Unfortunately, however, the ceasefire lasted a mere fourteen months and ended when ETA complained that little democratic negotiation was actually being done with the Spanish government.

Since the failure of the 1998 ceasefire, ETA has been blamed for small eruptions of violence, but nothing to the scale that was apparent during the 1970s and 1980s. They were designated a terrorist group by the European Union in 2001, however, and the group was still on the radar enough to be the original suspect in the Madrid train bombing on March 11, 2004 that killed 191 people and wounded well over two thousand, an event later blamed on a group affiliated with Al-Qaeda.

In 2005 President Zapatero was given parliamentary approval to begin talks with Basque nationalist groups, some affiliated with ETA. The negotiations were meant to be centred upon giving the Basque Country more autonomy, and provisions were made for a referendum on independence if the PNV were able to gain a mandate for it in regional elections. In March, 2006, a permanent ceasefire was declared. It is important to note, however, that ETA has not been disarmed. The group wants further negotiations about the release of ETA prisoners, and the provisions for Basque independence to be spelled out before a disarmament process can begin. As mentioned earlier, however, the number of people in the Basque region who favour independence from Spain is relatively small. The data measuring support for independence has been hard to come by, however, in 1996 39% of survey respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed with the desire to have an independent Basque state.²⁶

What does seem clear is that only the most radical nationalists, those who support the violence tactics of ETA, are the ones most likely to support independence, as are those who support the PNV. Others generally seem to favour increased autonomy and rights for the region. Basque Premier Juan José Ibarraetxe held an election in April of 2005 hoping that strong electoral support would provide him with a mandate to hold a referendum on the separation of the Basque Country from the rest of Spain. Unfortunately for Premier Ibarraetxe, his PNV party lost four seats, putting them below the majority required to call a referendum. For now, therefore, it would appear that questions about Basque independence will have to wait.

Furthermore, recently the permanent ceasefire that was declared by ETA has been called into question. The group claimed responsibility for a car bomb that exploded at the Barajas airport in Madrid on December 30, 2006. The group is also being held responsible for the death of Miguel Angel Blanco, a hostage who was being held as a negotiating tool for the release of ETA prisoners. Prognostications on the future of the nationalist movement in Spain are therefore less clear, but it is without a doubt true that the ten month ‘permanent’ ceasefire did represent a watershed in the Basque peace process.

²⁵ Luger Mees, “Between votes and bullets. Conflicting ethnic identities in the Basque country”, Ethnic and Racial Studies, Vol. 24, No. 5, September 2001 p. 799

²⁶ see Hank Dekker, Darina Malová and Sander Hoogendorn, “Nationalism and its explanations”, Political Psychology, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2003, pp. 359-362

Ethnonational Identity Construction and Violence

What the background I have provided here about the IRA and ETA should demonstrate is that the presence of violence has played a major role in the ways in which ethnonational identities in these areas are constructed because violence has become the only method by which nationalist grievances can be heard. Because of the level of oppression that has faced Basques and Irish-Catholics, historically, violence has emerged as the only available option. This historical overview should also demonstrate that cooperation between the opposing sides of both conflicts has often been tenuous or otherwise non-existent. The major question now, of course, is: why has violence ceased now? What does the disarmament of the IRA and the ceasefire proclaimed by ETA mean for the ways in which nationalism and identity are played out?

The discourse on identity generally assumes that identities are malleable, and in constant flux, so therefore change is possible. This does not mean, however, that change is inevitable or easy. Rather, change only occurs when the right combination of outside or external forces are present at precisely the right time and at precisely the right levels. The literature, in general, also rejects the notion that assimilation is the probable outcome for minorities in multi-ethnic societies. Indeed, the two cases examined here demonstrate that ethnonational identity is resilient even in the face of outright oppression, discrimination, and attempts at forced assimilation. More recently, literature on identity has emphasized the extent to which identity is socially constructed. What remains to be seen, therefore, is whether or not the recent advancements in the peace processes in Northern Ireland and the Basque Country represent a shift or a change in the ways in which these identities are constructed.

Nagel summarizes the constructivist view in the following terms:

According to the constructivist view, the origin, content, and form of ethnicity reflect the creative choices of individuals and groups as they define themselves and others in ethnic ways. Through the actions and designations of other groups, their antagonists, political authorities, and economic interest groups, ethnic boundaries are erected as dividing some populations and unifying others. Ethnicity is constructed out of the material of language, religion, culture, appearance, ancestry, or regionality. The location and meaning of particular ethnic boundaries are continuously negotiated, revised and revitalized both by ethnic group members themselves as well as by outside observers.²⁷

Ethnic and national identity, therefore, are the outcome of external events. These outcomes are, by extension, the result of the individual internalization and analysis of the person in question. How the 'material' cues such as language, religion, ancestry or regionality are internalized and interpreted will produce the outwardly apparent identity. From this perspective therefore, the importance of understanding violence and non-violence as it is linked to identity is clear. If identities are constructed in a climate of violence, if hatred and intolerance are taught, it is reasonable to assume that the outcome will be more violence. However, this perspective also makes it clear to us that identities are malleable and in flux. It

²⁷ Joane Nagel, "Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture", Social Problems, Vol. 41, No. 1, Special Issue on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America, February 1994, pp. 152-153

should also be noted that an individual does have the capability to hold several identities simultaneously, even if they seem to be antithetical to one another. This can explain, for example, a commitment to democracy and radical nationalism. In other words, a person may be a radical nationalist, but this does not necessarily lead them to accept radical nationalist violence.

Once again, I must point out here that the observations being made here are of the very preliminary and generalized variety. It is too early to tell how the events I have been speaking about here will impact upon the process of ethno-national identity formation. There has yet to be a comprehensive study published that looks into the identity affiliation of those in the areas to which I am referring to here. Most of the work published on identity affiliation was undertaken before the IRA disarmament and ETA's ceasefire. Nonetheless, I think there is some insight to be gleaned from this discussion. Let me move on to a general discussion about the factors that have been involved in the construction of ethnonational identity in these areas, with some consideration of how these identities may now be in a state of change.

Identity in Northern Ireland

Ireland, North and South, like all nations, is founded and premised upon the use of myths and symbolism. One of the major historic events used in Ireland (often in mythical proportions) are the devastating potato famines of the 1800s, during which time England was largely perceived to be turning a blind eye. It was during the Famines that foodstuffs were actually *exported* to England, despite the dire conditions that the Irish population was being subjected to.²⁸ Migrants who were lucky enough to leave the ravaged island were treated as second class citizens in the countries where they landed. Irish slums became a facet of every day life in urban centres around the world such as London, Glasgow, and New York. The slums were characterized by violence, overcrowding, lack of proper sanitation and rampant sickness and disease. They were characterized as barbarous beings who engaged in decidedly un-Christian activities. They suffered from acute religious discrimination, and were therefore often relegated to the very lowest ranks of the workforce, the ranks that were the most vulnerable to the boom and bust nature of the Victorian industrial revolution.

All nations generally have a historical event that is linked to a notion of common ancestry. The Famine, in the case of both Northern Ireland and the Republic, therefore, serves as an important and central pillar in the formation of nationalist history. The memories of collective suffering, suffering that came at the hands of their colonial British masters, serve as a unifying force to this day. By remembering the suffering of generations past with such vividness and clarity, the Irish nationalist identity is able to remain unified against what they consider to be a common enemy. It creates the mythic 'other', the dominating oppressor who turned and looked away from starving and dying children. The 'other', in this case English Protestants, becomes the central and natural enemy of Irish republicans.

It is certainly true that the Famine, and the stories surrounding it, have taken on mythic proportions, often at the expense of historical accuracy. However, identity formation is not always and entirely rational process. It has been noted that while foodstuffs were exported from Ireland during the Famine years, that *imports* were actually five times as large, a fact conveniently ignored by nationalists.²⁹ What is interesting about this, is that it is not always easy to decipher why identities are formed the way that they are. It is not always clear that

²⁸ O'Sullivan See, p. 63

²⁹ Tom Wilson, Ulster: Conflict and Consent, New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989 p. 27

identities will be formed rationally. People will not necessarily weigh their identity options in a rational or Enlightenment-principle inspired way. Often myths will be held as truths.

For example, Ulster unionists also have a number of historical myths upon which their identity is premised. The Battle of the Somme in particular in its use as a central rallying point. Like the Famine, its history has been skewed by unionists who have manipulated its historical accuracy in order to make it an example of Protestant heroism. In terms of the 'greater picture' of the war, the battle had little discernable impact on the overall outcome of the war. However, there are few things more potent than war imagery, particularly when it involves a story of a regiment highly outnumbered by their opponent, yet heroically fighting anyway.

What all of this leads to is the fact that, "The labels of *Catholic* and *Protestant* in Northern Ireland connote much more than conflicting doctrines or minor cultural distrust. These terms refer to profound ethnic differences."³⁰ In addition, religious institutions have tended to reify sectarian difference through religious teachings, as well as through the practice of having separate Catholic and Protestant schools for children. Indeed, the more aggressive the Northern Irish get about their nationalism, the more and more the 'Irish' or 'British' part of the hyphenated identity melts away, leaving only the two opposing religious truths.

Therefore, what is most interesting about the formation of identity in the North of Ireland at this particular time in history, is that new 'myths' or truths might be emerging. The myth of the monolithic English enemy may be being replaced by the image of England as the great compromiser. It is indeed reasonable to argue that without the leadership and fortitude of Prime Minister Tony Blair, that the peace process would not be anywhere near the stage that it is at today. Whereas violence was an omnipresent force in Northern Ireland, evidenced through 'peace walls' and nationalist murals, the 'new' Northern Ireland may come to see peace and democratic cooperation, the ability to overcome longstanding and deeply held conflicts, as fundamental and central to their ethnonational identity.

Identity in the Basque Country

To begin my discussion of Basque identity it is important to note that the Basque people are descendents of an ancient culture, apparently being mentioned by Roman travellers over two thousand years ago.³¹ Because of their long and unique history, many in the Basque nationalist community claim that the Basque people constitute a unique and distinct race. Some point to the apparent high instance of Rh negative blood type, arguing that the Basques have a higher concentration of the same blood type than other ethnic groups do. It should be noted, however, that Basque racial distinctiveness is not considered to be an entirely valid claim by most of the scholars in this area of research. It must be said that even if the Basques were, at some point in time, a unique and distinct race, it is not likely that this remains to be the case. Intermarriage is the probable result of the high level of migration to the Basque region, thus producing multi-ethnic children and diluting the supposed pure Basque blood. Nonetheless, however, the myth of racial distinctiveness contributes to the romantic appeal of Basque nationalism, and thereby adds to support for the nationalist and independence cause. In this sense, therefore, Basque ethnic identity is constructed around a

³⁰ David E. Schmitt, "Ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland: International aspects of conflict management", in Milton J. Esman, ed., *Ethnic Conflict in the Western World*, London: Cornell University Press, 1977 pp. 229-230

³¹ Shepard, p. 58

myth of common ancestry. Like many other ethnic minority groups who may or may not be able to claim common kinship, the important thing is that they believe they can. In this sense, therefore, it is not *what is*, but rather, *what is believed to be*, that matters. To the Basques it matters little whether or not scientific proof exists of their racial distinctiveness. Once again, identity construction may not always be an entirely rational process. What matters here is perception.

A discussion of Basque identity simply cannot occur without a consideration of the Basque language. When claims to racial distinctiveness fail (as they will to rational, scientific arguments), nationalists in the Basque Country can justifiably and successfully point to the uniqueness and perseverance of the Basque language. Centuries of linguistic research has yet to unearth another language on earth that Basque is related to. During the Franco era the use of the Basque language was outlawed, and those caught speaking it in public were subject to arrest. Nationalists took to the Pyrenees mountains, Arana writings in hand, and held clandestine meetings that helped to keep the language alive. Throughout this period, language became politicized, and the use of *Euskera* was a political weapon.

Language, therefore, is the central pillar around which Basque identity is constructed, and it provides the parameters whereby 'us' can be distinguished from 'them'. Groups are separated and reified through the use of language. There is no clearer or more obvious boundary than between those who one can communicate with, and those who one can not. From this perspective, therefore, language in the Basque region is a fundamental centre-piece in the construction of identity.

However, there are myths surrounding the Basque language as well, much the same as there are surrounding Basque racial distinctiveness. For example, according to a 2005 Eurobarometer survey, only 1% of those living in Spain claim to use the Basque language as their mother tongue.³² The vast majority of those who live in the Basque region speak fluent Castilian Spanish. In fact, those who do speak *Euskera* do so in a number of different dialects that are often mutually unintelligible. The important thing to note here, therefore, is that despite the actual usage of the Basque language, it remains an important and central part of the way in which ethnonationalist identity is constructed. The nationalist movement has also been strengthened through the perception that language policies from Madrid are unfair and discriminatory.

The permanent ceasefire that was declared by ETA in March of 2006 demonstrates that violence is not an inherent part of Basque culture. More likely, violence was the response of a group that simply had no other option. The scars from the oppression suffered by the Basques at the hands of the Franco regime continue to run deep. However, a more conciliatory approach from the Spanish government has brought peace to the region at long last. As mentioned earlier, the long term effects and power of the ceasefire remain to be seen, as does its continuation. It is far too early to make reasonable prognostications on this topic. One can only hope that the violence and destruction that has for so long characterized the Basque nationalist movement has finally come to an end.

³² Eurobarometer: Europeans and Languages, September 2005. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_237.en.pdf. Internet accessed 5 June, 2006.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that, while violence has characterized and typified the nationalist movements in Northern Ireland and the Basque region, that recent events can lead us to question whether or not violence is, indeed, an inherent or natural facet of ethnonationalist identity and struggle. By utilizing a constructivist approach to the study and understanding of identity, we are able to understand that identities are malleable, and are influenced by external conditions. It is the job of the individuals in question to internalize, interpret and analyse these conditions and then make judgements upon them regarding how they affect their identity as it relates to their ethnicity and nationalism.

The events referred to in this paper are relatively recent, and this paper, I hope, will serve as a starting point for further discussion and research. It is difficult, at this point in time, to make concrete arguments one way or another about the impact of these events. However, time will test the strength of these new arrangements. While the Basque situation seems less likely to remain stable, the situation in Northern Ireland is very optimistic. For the first time since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, representatives from both sides came together in Belfast in May 2007 to form a new, devolved, power-sharing government. The importance of this event cannot be understated. As recently as 1999 George Mitchell, the American ambassador to Northern Ireland and American envoy in the Northern Irish peace talks, said that the leadership from the nationalist and unionist sides could not even stand to be in the same room with each other.³³ Therefore, to see the Reverend Ian Paisley, leader of the staunchly Protestant Ulster Unionist Party, and Martin McGuinness, the former leader of the IRA, sitting at the same table, is, to some, nothing short of an outright miracle. While it remains to be seen what the lasting effect of all of these changes will be, there can be no doubt that this particular moment in time offers incredible hope to those who have struggled for years to see the peace process succeed, and to those whose lives have been touched by the conflicts.

³³ Frederic S. Pearson, "Dimensions of conflict resolution in ethno-political disputes", Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 38, No. 3, Special Issue on Conflict Resolution in Identity-Based Disputes, May 2001, p. 275

Bibliography

- Clark, Robert P. The Basques: The Franco Years and Beyond, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1979.
- Clark, Robert P. The Basque Insurgents: ETA 1952-1980, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984.
- Coogan, T.P. Ireland Since the Rising, New York: Praeger Publishers, 1966.
- Coogan, T.P. The I.R.A., Glasgow: William Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1980.
- Dekker, Hank; Darina Malová and Sander Hoogendorn, “Nationalism and its explanations”, Political Psychology, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2003, pp. 345-376.
- Eurobarometer: Europeans and Languages, September 2005. Available at: http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/ebs/ebs_237.en.pdf. Internet accessed 5 June, 2006.
- Garvin, Tom. “Hibernian endgame? Nationalism in divided Ireland”, in John Caplan and Richard Feffer, eds., Europe’s New Nationalism: States and Minorities in Conflict, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Lecours, André. “Ethnonationalism in the West: A theoretical exploration”, Nationalism & Ethnic Politics, Vol. 6, No. 1, Spring 2000.
- Loughlin, John. “New contexts for political solutions: Redefining minority nationalisms in Northern Ireland, the Basque Country and Corsica”, in John Darby and Roger MacGuinty, eds., Contemporary Peacemaking: Conflict, Violence and Peace Processes, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003.
- McGarry, John; and Brendan O’Leary. Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995.
- Mitchell, Thomas G. Native vs. Settler: Ethnic Conflict in Israel/Palestine, Northern Ireland and South Africa, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000.
- Nagel, Joane. “Constructing ethnicity: Creating and recreating ethnic identity and culture”, Social Problems, Vol. 41, No. 1, Special Issue on Immigration, Race, and Ethnicity in America, February 1994, pp. 152-176.
- Newman, Saul. Ethnoregional Conflict in Democracies: Mostly Ballots, Rarely Bullets, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996.
- O’Sullivan See, Katherine. First World Nationalisms: Class and Ethnic Politics in Northern Ireland and Quebec, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

Payne, Stanley G. Basque Nationalism, Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1975.

Pearson, Frederic S. "Dimensions of conflict resolution in ethnopolitical disputes", Journal of Peace Research, Vol. 38, No. 3, Special Issue on Conflict Resolution in Identity-Based Disputes, May 2001, p. 275-287.

Schmitt, David E. "Ethnic conflict in Northern Ireland: International aspects of conflict management", in Milton J. Esman, ed., Ethnic Conflict in the Western World, London: Cornell University Press, 1977.

Shepard, William S. "The ETA: Fighting Europe's last active terrorist group", Mediterranean Quarterly, Winter 2002, Vol. 13, Issue 4.

Smith, M.L.R. Fighting for Ireland? The Military Strategy of the Irish Republican Movement, New York: Routledge, 1995.

Sullivan, John. ETA and Basque Nationalism: The Fight for Euskadi 1890-1986, New York: Routledge, 1988.

Tom Wilson, Ulster: Conflict and Consent, New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1989.