

Creative Avenues of Reconciliation in the Basque Country: *La Mirada Del Otro*



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Table of Contents

Introduction...2

Context and Need for Reconciliation...3

Conflicting Perspectives in the Wake of ETA...5

Project 43-2 and Creative Approaches to Reconciliation...7

La Mirada Del Otro...9

The Effect of La Mirada Del Otro...10

Conclusion...13

Endnotes...15

Bibliography...18

Introduction

Located between the Bay of Biscay to the north and La Rioja to the south, the Basque Country is a region of Spain rich with fine art, diverse natural landscapes, and a distinctive language and culture. The region's complexity is hallmarked by a longstanding desire for political independence and societal autonomy, with a perilous history of unrest, flanked by Francoist Spain and the establishment of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, or ETA.

For nearly five decades, since the reinstatement of the constitutional monarchy in 1978, the end of GAL in 1987, ETA's ceasefire in 2011, and the start of the region's advancement towards equilibrium, there have been efforts to acknowledge and create space for all those who have been victimized by the multifaceted conflicts that have gripped the region.

Through this discourse, innovators have turned to the arts to bridge gaps between communities, motivate victims to share their stories to educate those who are willing to listen, and encourage



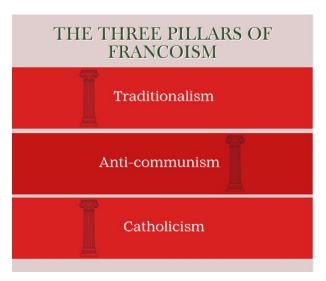
comprehensive plans for healing those who have been harmed. One example of this is the play *La Mirada Del Otro*. Exploring themes of humanity, forgiveness, and understanding, playwright María San Miguel places the victim and the victimizer in the same room with one another, face to face. Both characters must look into the eyes of the other for the first time and decide if and how they will move forward.

Context and Need for Reconciliation

With a shifting public opinion of the monarchy and increasing polarization of political parties, the Second Spanish Republic was formed in 1931, after a series of elections that marked the country's departure from autocracy and the popular desire for democracy. The Republic transformed the country through economic, military, and religious reform until 1933, when another round of elections signaled a more conservative trend in the ideology of the voters. Simultaneously, Francisco Franco was on a path of upward mobility in the Spanish military and had secured the position of Chief of the Spanish army's general staff.

In the mid-1930s, right-wing leaders began planning a Coup D'état; General José Sanjurjo y Sacanell, Emilio Mola y Vidal, and Franco led the rebel Nationalists, establishing the Falange Española, a fascist political party. iv Franco merged the Falange Española with other right-wing political groups to create the Falange Española Tradicionalista y de las Juntas de Ofensiva Nacional Sindicalista, or the FET. v

From 18 July 1936, Franco and the FET laid siege to the country; starting in the west and moving eastward and to the north, Franco, with the aid of Germany's Nazi regime and Benito Mussolini, claimed Spain town by town, city by city. Vi After the bombing of Guernica and a three-month battle in Teruel, the resources of the Republican front had been exhausted, and Franco declared victory on April 1st, 1939. Vii



Under Franco's regime, women's rights were stripped away, the media was carefully censored, and children born to Republican families were taken from their homes and given to Nationalist families to be raised in alignment with Franco's ideals. VIII The FET was the sole political party in the nation, and the Catholic church was given total control over the country's education system. IX Further, all political and social movements were hastily suppressed, and Franco worked to put an end to all regionalist independence movements,

particularly the one taking place in the Basque Country.^x

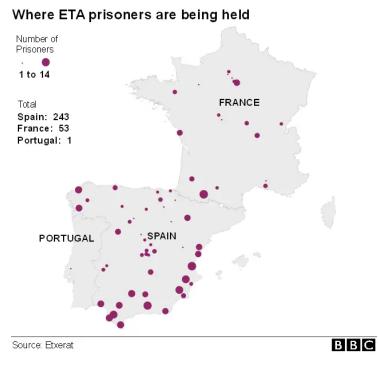
As a response to Franco's attempt to terminate all independence movements in the country, Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA), meaning Basque Homeland and Liberty, was established in 1959 by young radicals who wished to use armed tactics to advocate for Basque independence. Throughout the 1960s, ETA became a terrorist group, utilizing assassinations, bombings, and guerrilla warfare tactics to instill fear into those who disagreed with or worked to thwart their goal of achieving Basque independence.

It is estimated that over 850 people were killed by ETA, including Luis Carrero Blanco, who became Prime Minister in 1973 when Franco resigned. xiii Over the next decades, ETA targeted government officials and their families, and though the Spanish government attempted to negotiate peace, these efforts were met with deadly bombings and high-profile kidnappings. xiv One of the most horrific attacks took place in 1987, when 21 people were killed in a supermarket in Barcelona. xv

To combat ETA, the Anti-Terrorist Liberation Groups, or GAL, were created under Felipe González, the former Prime Minister. **vi GAL*, though organized in opposition to the violence used by ETA, utilized equally violent tactics to achieve their goal of putting an end to ETA. **vii Active from 1983-1987, GAL killed over 50 individuals who were allegedly connected to ETA, though there is debate over how many of their victims were truly ETA members. **xviii* Upon the demise of the organization, various political and law enforcement leaders in the Spanish government were arrested for their involvement with GAL, and convicted of kidnapping. **xix*

In 2011, ETA announced a ceasefire, and in 2018, the group officially disbanded. ** At the time of the ceasefire, over 500 ETA members were imprisoned all over the country, and that number had halved by the time of the disbandment. **xii* It is estimated that nearly 100 are still in jail today. **xii* Most ETA prisoners are in jails over 800 kilometers away from the Basque Country, and many have been given sentences that span decades and involve long periods of solitary confinement. **xiii* There have been thousands of documented cases of alleged torture of former ETA members in prison. **xxiv*

The family members of those who have been arrested for their involvement with ETA successfully petitioned the government to move the prisoners closer to the Basque Country, claiming that holding them so far away was a punishment to the relatives who must travel for days to visit their loved ones. **xxy* Further, many have called for a release of former ETA members or reductions in sentences, as the terrorist group is no longer in existence, has issued a formal apology and recognition of their wrongs, and many were mere teenagers when they joined ETA. **xxyi**



However, the family members of those whose lives were taken by ETA feel differently. Many are still reeling from the losses of their loved ones and feel that, even though the group has officially disbanded, the past should not be forgotten, and those who were involved with the terrorist organization should not be so quickly forgiven. xxvii

A documentary entitled "The Basque Country and ETA", by Deutsche Welle, follows the lives of individuals who have been affected by ETA and the imprisonment of its members. **xxviii* Etzozi Elgezabel tells of her monthly, strenuous journeys to visit her partner where he is serving a 44-year sentence in a prison in southern Spain, and of the toll it takes on her and her children to be so far away from him. **xxix* The documentary next follows Araitz Hildago and her partner, Endika, who is released after serving 15 years for nonviolent crimes attributed to ETA. **xxx* Endika is welcomed home by a crowd of community members who have gathered to celebrate his release. **xxxi*

The documentary turns to those who have been affected by ETA's murders. Consuelo Ordóñez is the sister of a man who was killed by ETA in San Sebastián in 1995. **xxiii* Consuelo speaks of the turmoil she has experienced in the years since her brother, Grigorio's, death, and of her desire to see those who are responsible be held accountable for their crimes. **xxxiii* Ivan Ramos tells a story of a time he was at the pool, and the former ETA member who killed his mother, after being released from prison, sat next to him. **xxxiii* Ivan Ramos tells a story of a time he was at the pool,

The issue is complex, with victims on every side of the conflict. The nuanced nature of the circumstances begs the question: How can the Basque Country move forward from this era of violence to reconcile those who suffered at the hands of ETA and GAL, and those who are still suffering from the harsh imprisonment of ETA's former members? How can the region move on from this decades-long battle, while still memorializing the lives that have been lost?

Conflicting Perspectives in the Wake of ETA

Various initiatives have ignited in the Basque Country to solve the issues that come with a divided community, and to help advocate for the rights that need protecting. Among these organizations is the Victims of Terrorism Collective (COVITE). COVITE was created in 1998 in the Basque Country by those who had been direct and indirect victims of ETA's violence, and their surviving family members. XXXXV Consuelo Ordóñez is the current president of this organization and says that the purpose of COVITE is to condemn terrorism and violent radicalization and unite and empower victims. XXXXVI Through activism, dialogue, and research, COVITE aims to lead the discourse surrounding terrorism to a place where victims are uplifted, and members of terrorist groups answer for their crimes. XXXXVII

The Map of Terror, pictured here, highlights those who have been killed by ETA and similar terrorist organizations and places them geographically to show the wide range of areas that have been impacted. xxxviii It is clear from this map that the Basque Country has experienced terrorism at a higher



rate than anywhere else in Spain. *xxxix* Consuelo and victims like her have banded together to support one another and help each other heal from their losses, while also ensuring that the names of their loved ones are not forgotten and their lives not taken in vain.

Etxerat is another organization that was formed in the Basque Country and consists of individuals whose family

members have been arrested and punished for their involvement with ETA. Etxerat was initially created in response to the methods of prisoner dispersion that the Spanish government used to place ETA members in prisons all over the country once they were arrested. xl Since its establishment in 1991, Etxerat has also effectively united the relatives of the prisoners to build an understanding community for individuals who may not be obvious victims of terrorism, but who are suffering nonetheless. xli Members of Etxerat organized weekly bus rides that allow family members to visit their loved ones, traveling over 15 hours to the prisons where they were being held. xlii Further, the group lobbies to secure strong rights for those in the Spanish prison system and to try to ensure the prisoners themselves do not become victims at the hands of the Spanish government. xliii Etxerat sheds light on conditions in the prisons that former ETA members are subjected to and encourages public discourse around prison systems, to make sure that officials cannot act in secret, and the effects on prisoners are seen. xliv

Though at first glance it may appear as though the goals of the two organizations are at odds with one another, both groups are working towards the same end: to generate dialogue that is sympathetic towards victims of all kinds of violence, and to guarantee that history will not repeat itself through perpetual harm to citizens of the Basque Country. However, the groups differ in their suggested avenues for reaching this goal. While COVITE deems it necessary that former ETA members remain in prison to pay retribution to those they have hurt, Etxerat believes that these prisoners must be released so that the region can truly move on from its violent past. Perhaps a middle ground could be found between the two

competing visions, one that achieves social harmony while making certain that no more community members suffer from conflicts that have long been over.

Father Ángel Maria Uzuate of Bilbao worked to do just that until his death in 2020. xlv Father Uzuate was a member of the Bilbao Forum for Peace and Coexistence. xlvi Established in 2017, the Forum has spent the past eight years trying to bring the victims living in Bilbao together through community gatherings and annual celebrations to remember those who lost their lives due to violence in the Basque Country. xlvii Father Uzuate met with victims on both sides of the conflict and held services for them in an effort to bring them together so that they may see the situation from the other's point of view. xlviii In 2022, the Forum showed Proyecto 43-2's *La Mirada Del Otro* to an audience who gathered at Campos Theatre, and concluded the play with a panel where victims and experts alike were able to share their experiences. xlix

Project 43-2 and Creative Approaches to Reconciliation

Proyecto 43-2 is a theater company created between September 2009 and October 2011 by María San Miguel during her master's program at the University of Madrid, and has produced plays such as The *Big Crunch, Frederico*, and *La Mirada Del Otro*. The company has traveled to various countries and performed in front of the European Court of Human Rights, the Ministry of Justice in France, and the Cervantes

Institute in Los Angeles. Ii San Miguel began this project with the goal of using theater and the arts to give a voice to experiences that so many citizens share, but are reluctant to talk about. Iii

San Miguel warns that to stay silent about our pasts is to allow the memories of violence to seep through the cracks of our minds, and to concede to the cycle of violence that has been present in the country for so long. ^{liii} The theater, she says, is a unique tool to combat the silence; going beyond what scholars and journalists are able to capture, when an audience sits in the same room with actors who represent victims of violence, they must look the issue in its face, and be confronted with the consequences. ^{liv} San Miguel has successfully created a theater company that is able to reach hearts and minds not



only in large auditoriums, but in schools, universities, and prisons as well. $^{\mbox{\tiny lv}}$

In 2012, San Miguel wanted to explore the question: Are there more things that unite us or separate us? lvi To answer this, she began constructing *Rescoldos De Paz y Violencia*, or *Embers of Violence and Peace*, a

theatrical trilogy that explores the conflict in the Basque Country and investigates available avenues of reconstructive justice that could reunite the region. Ivii

The first play, entitled *Proyecto 43-2*, demonstrates the ways in which the violence shaped familial and societal dynamics; on the 10th anniversary of their father's murder, a family tries to navigate the unresolved emotions towards ETA and towards one another that have been neglected for a decade. ^{Iviii} San Miguel chose the numbers 43-2 as the title for the company and the play, because those are the coordinates of the Tree of Guernica. ^{lix} Located in Guernica, Spain, the Tree has become a symbol of peace and the Basque's resilience. ^{lx}

The second play, *La Mirada Del Otro*, is a documentative piece that portrays a meeting between a former member of ETA and his victim. ^{lxi} The meeting is modeled after a number of real encounters that took place in the Nanclares de la Oca prison in 2011. ^{lxii} The goal of the play is to document the reality of what those meetings were like for the individuals who agreed to take part. ^{lxiii} To accomplish this, San Miguel and her team interviewed the victims and dissidents, giving each of them the opportunity to share their story. ^{lxiv} Fernando de Luís Astarloa was the first former ETA member that San Miguel and her team met with. ^{lxv} Fernando tells them that the minutes before he met with his victim, Iñaki García Arrizbalaga, felt like the minutes leading up to the murder of Iñaki's father. ^{lxvi} Iñaki, explaining his experience, says that the moment you see the person in front of you not as a former terrorist, but as a human being asking for a second chance, your whole perspective changes. ^{lxvii}

San Miguel also sat down with Txema Urkijo, the assistant director of the Department of Care for Victims of Terrorism of the Basque Government who she says was the cornerstone of the program that conducted the meetings. ^{lxviii} Urkijo emphasized that it was the prisoners themselves who chose to get close to their victims, and said that the fruits of the meetings are evident when you consider that each one lasted two to three hours. ^{lxix}

The third and final installment in the trilogy, *Viaje al Fin de la Noche*, or *Journey to the End of the Night*, examines the aftermath of the violence, and the ways that the children of former ETA and GAL members or their victims will discover their own identities in the wake of the conflict. lxx After creating *La Mirada Del Otro*, San Miguel asked herself who was still being left out of the discourse surrounding reconciliation, and she found that the children who were born in the aftermath of the conflict had been silenced by a society who was unwilling to revisit its violent past. lxxii *Journey to the End of the Night* is an attempt to give this generation a voice and encourage continued discussions about the region's history, so that the cycle can be broken. lxxii

La Mirada Del Otro

La Mirada Del Otro, or The Other's Gaze involves just three characters: the victim, the victimizer, and the mediator. lxxiii It tells the story of Estíbaliz and Aitor, who meet for the first time when they are brought together by Marta, a lawyer working for the Madrid Mediation and Pacification Association. lxxiv

Estíbaliz was just 19 when her father was shot and killed by ETA. bxxv Aitor is the man who pulled the trigger. bxxvi Now, 14 years later, the two have agreed to take part in a program facilitated by the Department of Care for Victims of Terrorism of the Basque Government, where they will sit across from

one another and have an open conversation about their grief, their regrets and their love for their families and their country. ^{lxxvii}

The program must be conducted in secret; only those who are directly involved can know about it, as both the victims and prisoners must be sure that they have the freedom to speak openly,



and not be worried about how they will be perceived by their respective communities. lxxviii When Estíbaliz tells her mother about the program, her mother is appalled; how could Estíbaliz willingly sit across from the person who murdered the man they both loved so dearly? lxxix

Estíbaliz and her family have spent the past 14 years reeling from the loss of her father, and trying to learn to live with the pain, anger, and sorrow that come with losing a close family member to violent terrorism. lxxx Aitor has spent the last 14 years in prison, far away from his home, trying to face his past and pave a way forward so that, in six years when he is released, he will be able to look ahead, not backwards. lxxxi

Both Estíbaliz and Aitor have gone through profound transformations over the past decade, where they have redefined their identities and worked to come to terms with the conflicting ideas of what it means to love your country. Estíbaliz speaks of a time when a close friend of hers began advocating for the former ETA members, insisting they be brought to prisons that are closer to the Basque Country; "Bringing back the prisoners? What about my dad? What about my dad?" Aitor reflects on the forested seascape that he used to call home and what it was like to be there with his late grandfather, free from the gray world he is now trapped in. Decay in the strapped in in the str

Though the audience is quick to sympathize with Estíbaliz because of the obvious ways in which she has been victimized by ETA, San Miguel carefully constructs Aitor's character so that viewers find themselves taking pity on him, despite their disdain for the crimes he has committed. Aitor explains that he was only 19 when he joined ETA. He did so because it was commonplace for young members of his community to join the armed independence movement, and that he was admired by the people around him for taking part. laxxiv Since being in prison, Aitor tells Marta he has been beaten more times than he can count, kept in solitary confinement for over 20 hours a day, and says that when ETA commits crimes throughout Spain, the former members who are imprisoned are treated as if they have carried out the acts themselves. laxxiv



The dissonance experienced by audience members when they find themselves sympathizing with both the victim and the victimizer reveals the multilayered nature of this conflict; on the surface, it seems easy, almost instinctual, to side with Estíbaliz and favor her point of view. However, as the story goes on and the audience is brought deeper into Aitor's life, it becomes apparent that the

issue is not so cut and dry. At a certain point, the victimizer becomes a victim himself at the hands of the Spanish government, and the viewers are left trying to navigate the complicated emotions that come with this realization. They must decide how to make space for Estíbaliz and the undeniable turmoil she has spent the last 14 years living in due to Aitor's choices, while also recognizing that Aitor is suffering in a distinctive but equally painful way.

An issue that invokes such powerful, seemingly inconsistent emotions does not have an easy road to reconciliation. When both sides are experiencing warranted pain, there are no straightforward solutions. Conflicts like this one can only be resolved with candid, honest conversations between open-minded people who are willing to take a step back from their own grievances to consider that they may not be the only person struggling. As Estíbaliz's father said, "You don't solve things with gunshots. Dialogue is what solves things." lxxxvi

The Effect of La Mirada Del Otro

María San Miguel and Proyecto 43-2 demonstrate an emotionally provocative example of what the dialogue between former members of ETA and their victims could look like; the discussion must be

genuine, and the participants must be psychologically prepared for the intense emotions that may arise. The character of Marta plays a crucial role in the conversation, as she not only facilitates the exchange but continues to remind Aitor and Estíbaliz what they are there for and assures each of them that they are safe and supported.

La Mirada Del Otro was created in direct response to the conflicts in the Basque Country, but its effects reach far beyond the boundaries of the region and even past the borders of the country. The play has been performed in over 70 cities from Spain to Colombia, from Mexico to Portugal, from the United States to France. ^{lxxxvii} Though each audience interprets the play in a distinct, personalized way depending on the conflicts that have taken place in each country, the overarching message remains the same; to overcome our past, to unite despite our differences, we must meet one another, look each other in the eyes, and find our common humanity.

Those who attend performances of the play often share that they experience catharsis firsthand, as if they were the ones involved. The production brings them closer to the actual experience of reconciliation and what it may require. In Estíbaliz's concluding monologue, she tells the audience that Aitor came to her father's annual memorial with 15 flowers: 14 red for every year he was not there, and one white to symbolize a new beginning. As Aitor says, "Human beings have a right to a second chance"; the victims of ETA deserve a chance to live a new life, free of the fear and suffering they have been subjected to, the former ETA members deserve a chance to seek forgiveness from those they have harmed and begin again, and the region as a whole deserves the opportunity to move away from its violent past, into an era of understanding, optimism and community.

San Miguel reflects on times that the real effects of her work have been felt by the audiences that witness the play, recounting a time when they performed in front of inmates in Seville; after the production was over, the prisoners asked San Miguel and her team to stay longer, and an engaging debate ensued. Some inmates advocated for their victims, saying they were each imprisoned for a reason, that they have a debt to pay to society, while others defended their own humanity and their fundamental right to a second chance. In once the discussion was over, the inmates brought San Miguel and the cast to their craft workshop and gifted them items they had spent weeks making, saying that it was a small way of paying them back for what San Miguel had given them that day. In Institute Instit

San Miguel highlights the significance of having these discussions in open spaces, and the importance of viewing such an emotionally challenging performance in a room full of people who you aren't familiar with; this environment allows for the silence to be broken and encourages people to listen to the diverse opinions that are being shared. **c It is empowering both for the speakers, and those who listen, to be confronted with candid reactions to the play and opinions that they may not agree with. **ci

On several occasions, *La Mirada Del Otro* has had such a powerful influence over audience members that they left with an openness to viewpoints they were once passionately opposed to. ^{xcii} After one performance in Vitoria in the Basque Country, one of ETA's direct victims said that he had been given the opportunity to take part in the program and meet with his victimizer face to face, but he had declined. ^{xciii} However, after viewing the play, he decided he would like to participate after all. ^{xciv} When San Miguel and her team traveled to Colombia to share the play with victims of political violence there, at the conclusion of the production they were met with a teary-eyed 82 year old woman. She confessed to being adamant in her hatred for the perpetrators of the violence that her community had suffered up until that point, but that now she was reconsidering her vote in the 2016 Colombian peace agreement. ^{xcv} San Miguel says that moments like these make all of the emotionally taxing work, financial expenses and long journeys worth it; moments when you can look someone in the eyes and see the ways they have been impacted by the art you have spent years creating. ^{xcvi}

Conclusion

Productive reconciliation efforts such as *La Mirada Del Otro* do not mark the end of the conflict; rather they signal the start of something bigger. In contexts of post political violence, there is much difficult work to be done, and it will take a dedicated community committed to peace to move towards social reconciliation. The past mustn't be forgotten; Franco's regime and the terror of ETA both played a substantial role in making the Basque Country what it is today, and to neglect this acknowledgement is to risk history repeating itself.

San Miguel says that the first step in moving on from the past is to know it and understand it; that in order to avoid the perpetuation of violence, societies must collectively agree to break the silence and be committed to sharing their experiences with future generations through storytelling. She says this is why artistic mediums such as theater play such a crucial role in the discourse around history; theater works on our hearts in a way that academia is not able to. *cvii To hear someone's story, to watch actors perform a challenging narrative, is to experience the consequences of history in a tangible way and to feel it in your body, not just think about it in a detached sense. *cviii Because of this, San Miguel is devoted to creating art with the freedom to say what many are afraid to speak, and with the dedication that is required of one who wishes to accurately convey such complex themes. *ccix*

Growing up in a home with parents who were committed to an open dialogue about the violence their families had endured, San Miguel was made aware of the harsh truths about the history of her country. ^c When she began her studies in theater at the University of Madrid, she asked herself what stories she wanted to tell through her work, what impact did she want to have on the theater? ^{ci} Then in 2006, during her final year of school, she met Edu Madina who – at the age of 26 - was a victim of an ETA car bomb attack. ^{cii} He was a professor at the university and an advocate for peaceful dialogue. ^{ciii} This kind of mediative discourse was not popular in the mainstream media at the time, as ETA was still active and the country was still experiencing violent terrorist attacks. ^{civ} San Miguel was impacted by Edu's bravery and willingness to speak so boldy about something most people in the community, including his family members, adamantly disagreed with. ^{cv} From that moment on, San Miguel has been committed to

standing by victims on all sides of the violence, hearing their stories, and relaying them to those in her audiences.

Through *La Mirada Del Otro*, San Miguel has done exactly what she intended to do; she has opened a dialogue that communities all around the world have been reluctant to engage. Wounds that were once covered up and shrouded in silence are now beginning to heal from the inside out. "Listen to each other. Sit down, look into each other's eyes, and acknowledge the pain. Talk. Share your experiences with each other. And time; time is essential. Time has to pass; the wounds will begin to heal." cvi

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