

Spain: Ex-Army official claims responsibility for killing leading Basque separatist

Vicky Short**15 January 2004**

Under the headline “I killed Carrero Blanco’s assassin,” the December 21 *El Mundo* published an interview with an ex-army official. Referred to as “Leonidas,” the 55-year-old confesses to being part of a commando unit that killed the leading Basque separatist, José Miguel Bañaran Ordeñana, alias Argala, on December 21, 1978, in France.

According to Leonidas, Argala was targeted because he was the leader of the team and activated the explosive charge that blew up the car containing the fascist dictator General Franco’s handpicked president and successor, Admiral Luis Carrero Blanco, in 1973. Blanco’s assassination was the biggest coup for the separatist organisation ETA (Euskadi ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom), and was considered as the last nail in the coffin of the crumbling fascist regime.

Carrero Blanco had been made vice admiral in 1963 and an admiral in 1966. He came to control government affairs as vice premier (1967-73). In June 1973, when Franco separated the duties of head of state and head of government, Carrero Blanco became premier. Since he had been influential in developing contacts with monarchist groups, his appointment was generally regarded as a step toward Franco’s planned restoration of the monarchy under King Juan Carlos, under conditions in which the dictatorship remained in place.

While Carrero’s assassination was attributed to ETA, there were rumours that other forces were operating behind the scenes, forces that saw Carrero Blanco as an obstacle to the liberalisation of the Spanish economy and government. One of those who adhered to this theory was the general secretary of the Communist Party, Santiago Carrillo, who in his memoirs writes:

“It was clear to anyone with a minimum of experience in clandestine work that without important and very high level protection, the ETA members would have been arrested long before realising their target. The death of

Carrero Blanco is one of those mysteries...that have not been explained and I don’t know if they ever will.”

Carrillo adds, “It is very likely, however, that even without the knowledge of the perpetrators, behind them hid the real brains of this resounding success.” Some of his contacts were surprised that the police had not closed the roads on the day of the outrage or the days that followed. At the time, Carrillo was deep in negotiations with sections of the ruling elite, including Franco’s nephew Nicolás Franco Pascual de Pobil.

During the period of Carrero’s premiership, a revolutionary situation was developing. Old regimes such as the Greek junta and the Portuguese dictatorship of Salazar were being brought down. These developments had an enormous impact on the people of Spain, who had for 34 years suffered under the yoke of the Franco dictatorship.

Sections within the Franco regime itself, the so-called “aperturistas,” mindful of the social turbulence that was occurring among the Spanish working class and conscious of the parlous state and isolation of the country’s economy under Franco’s autocratic rule, had begun discussions with leaders of the workers’ organisations on the possibility of transforming the regime while at the same time stifling the threatening social revolution.

After the death of Franco in 1975, as part of a general amnesty intended to smooth the path towards the class compromise that led to the so-called “peaceful transition” from dictatorship to bourgeois democracy, imprisoned ETA members suspected of killing Carrero Blanco had been freed. “Leonidas” declares in the interview, “We never understood that the government would give amnesty to the people who attacked don Luis Carrero, so after we killed Argala we felt happy, we had done our duty and had carried out justice for our Admiral... We all considered that we had done a great service to our country.”

The assassination squad was composed of eight people: three marines, one air force official, one civilian, one official of the notorious Civil Guard and two army officers. “Leonidas” says that the idea for the revenge attack on Argala was initiated by Carrero Blanco’s mates, the marines, all of whom came from the spy service. For more than seven months, they had prepared and directed the fatal attempt against Argala, who had by that time become one of the leading ETA military figures. The commando unit also included an ex-member of the French secret service, Jean Pierre Cherid; a member of the Argentine “triple A” (Alianza Apostólica Anticomunista), Jose Maria Boccardo; and an Italian fascist, Mario Ricci.

When asked about the role of the last three, “Leonidas” explains that because they had such experience (in counter-insurgency, death squads, etc.), they were in charge of spotting, watching and controlling Argala and finding safe houses for the team.

The commando unit watched Argala for about six months. “Leonidas” says that they could have killed him before, but they wanted to do it on the anniversary of the death of Carrero Blanco, on December 20. (As it happened, Argala did not leave his house on that day and was murdered the following day instead.)

“Leonidas” says that the explosives that killed Argala came from an American base, Torrejon or Rota: “I know that the Americans did not know what they were to be used for. It was a personal favour to Pedro, the marine.”

After the explosion and the death of Argala, “each member of the group left the scene and returned to Spain by different means. The majority went through Paris, although others went via Nantes and Bordeaux. Some stayed in France waiting for things to calm down before returning to Spain.” Asked about the financing of the operation, “Leonidas” replies that it came mainly from a bank loan applied for on “a personal basis.” The weapons were bought in Belgium.

He then describes how, after they had all returned to Spain, they met in a restaurant to celebrate the success of their action and the fact that don Luis had been avenged.

Asked if he would act in the same way today, 25 years later, “Leonidas” says that they were young at the time, but “I also want to say that I am not sorry for what I did.”

He then goes on to deny any comparison between the BVE (Batallón Vasco Español)—to which he obviously belonged—and the GAL (Grupos Armados de Liberación)—the rightist terror squad that was in fact funded secretly by the Socialist Party government of Felipe Gonzalez. “We were not backed by anybody and

we acted as patriots. The [socialist] government was behind the actions of the GAL and also they all acted for money.”

Despite protestations by “Leonidas” against any suggestion that the regime or the armed forces and intelligence services were behind their crime, the newspaper adds a note at the end of the interview showing that quite the opposite was the case. The consequent evolution in the career of some of those involved in the assassination also points to the affinity between the BVE and the GAL.

The naval captain, Pedro Martinez, better known as Pedro El Marino, was the leading light of the entire operation, obtaining the people and the explosives utilised. After the assassination of Carrero Blanco and Franco’s death in 1975, Pedro El Marino became the coordinator of all the small groups that wanted to take revenge on ETA. He began the dirty war against ETA.

According to the newspaper, Pedro el Marino was a member of the naval intelligence and gathered around him a group of mercenaries and ultra-rightists that included Cherid and Ricci. Cherid later became one of the most active mercenaries in the dirty war against ETA. He died in 1984 when explosives he was going to place near an ETA leader exploded. Among the remains of his car and body, the French gendarmerie found a telephone list that included the numbers of the Centre of Special Operation of the Ministry of the Interior and a Civil Guard official. They also found a membership card of the General Office of the Civil Guards with his photograph and a false name. After his death, his wife claimed her widow’s pension from the Ministry.



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