

The dissolution of ETA: A political balance sheet of Basque nationalism—Part two

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This is the second part of a three-part series on the Basque separatist group ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna—Basque Homeland and Freedom) announcing its dissolution. Part one was posted June 12.

The PNV's (Basque Nationalist Party) fear of the working class confirmed Trotsky's insistence in his perspective of permanent revolution that a complete and genuine solution to the attainment of democracy and national emancipation was conceivable "only through the dictatorship of the proletariat, as the leader of the subjugated nation, above all of its peasant masses."

This perspective—which had guided the Bolsheviks in October 1917—was abandoned under the influence of Stalinism and its theory of "socialism in one country." The Stalinists instead adopted a "two-stage theory" that justified local Communist parties collaborating with bourgeois forces and politically subordinating the working class to them. This found its expression in the Popular Front policy, which had become the programme of the Communist International in 1935, and the Popular Front coalition government in Spain involving the PSOE, the ERC and the Communist Party (PCE), formed the following year.

In the Basque region, the Popular Front government approved a Statute of Autonomy that transferred power from the workers of Bilbao to the PNV. During the Spanish Civil War, the PNV played a treacherous role in the struggle against fascism. The American Trotskyist Felix Morrow explained in *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Spain* (1938) the PNV's "constant threats of giving up altogether merely reflected the fact that the bourgeoisie had no serious stake in the struggle against fascism and would not fight under conditions destructive of their property."

In August 1937, in the middle of the Civil War, the PNV signed the Treaty of Santoña surrendering the Northern Front to the fascists. This did not spare the PNV, which along with all non-fascist political parties was banned under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco that followed. Basque regional institutions, culture and language were also suppressed.

ETA's emergence in the aftermath of World War II was an expression of a broader social process. As WSWs chairperson David North has explained:

"The political evolution of these individuals was part of a broader social process, as the Cold War climate, the economic restabilization of post-war Europe, and the bureaucratic stifling of the revolutionary movement of the working class affected the political outlook of the leftist petty-bourgeois intelligentsia. Marxism gave way to existentialism. The earlier focus on social processes was replaced with a fixation on personal problems. The scientific appraisal of political events was dropped in favour of their interpretation from the standpoint of psychology. Conceptions of the future, based on the potential of economic planning, gave way to utopian daydreaming. Interest in the economic exploitation of the working class declined. Preoccupation with ecological problems—separated from the issues of class rule and the economic system—rose to prominence." (David North, *The Heritage We Defend*, Turkish edition, Preface).

In Spain, the Franco regime received the support of the United States, which saw it as a bulwark against the Soviet Union. It destroyed the PNV's illusions that the imperialist powers would intervene to remove the dictatorship.

Marxism and Existentialism

Sections of the PNV youth organised themselves in a new nationalist movement called Ekin (Action), which "drew direct inspiration for their political and cultural activities from the great names of the existential tradition: Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, Camus and Marcel among them."

"If there was one dominant intellectual principle which underscored the formation of ETA it was—according to Txillardegui, one of the organization's founding

members—the search for authenticité. This search did not imply a given Basque essence. Rather, according to those original members of ETA, the Basque essence had to be created. Furthermore, the existential creation of a Basque essence implied a threefold personal and communal experience: the search for the meaning of Basqueness itself, the unavoidable anguish that this search implied, and, ultimately, the negation (of all things Spanish) required to achieve the quest.” (Cameron Watson, “Imagining ETA,” in W.A. Douglass, et al., *Basque Politics and Nationalism on the Eve of the Millennium*).

What attracted the young Basques to the “existentialist tradition,” epitomised above all in Jean-Paul Sartre, who became the spokesperson for the post-war generation of frustrated petty-bourgeois intellectuals, were its nihilist traits and the promise of unrestrained freedom.

For Sartre and his followers, the uncultured proletarian mob represents the “reality” of Marxism, which no amount of theory or talk about raising consciousness can conceal. Workers are seen only as an oppressed class, doomed to living out their lives as a “practico-inert” mass having none of the “human dimension” of the individual. Their role as the only revolutionary class able to overthrow capitalism is rejected.

Sartre made this clear in his 1960 book *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. He explained that reading Marx’s works “did not change me. By contrast, what did begin to change me was the *reality* of Marxism, the heavy presence on my horizon of the masses of workers, an enormous, sombre body which *lived* Marxism, which *practiced* it, and which at a distance exercised an irresistible attraction on petit bourgeois intellectuals.

“We had been brought up in bourgeois humanism, and this optimistic humanism was shattered when we vaguely perceived around our town the immense crowd of sub-men conscious of their sub-humanity” (emphasis in original).

After his initial attraction Sartre concluded, “Marxism, after drawing us to it as the moon draws the tides, after transforming all our ideas, after liquidating the categories of our bourgeois thought, abruptly left us stranded. It did not satisfy our need to understand.” He insisted “existentialism remained the only concrete approach to reality.”

Sartre abhorred Marx’s conception that history expresses itself most powerfully when the “masses,” driven by the objective conditions, “storm the heavens” as they had done in the Paris Commune. He saw the Russian Revolution, not as the moment when, in 1917, the greatest act of “self-emancipation” in human history took place but rather as the moment when it was transformed into its opposite under Stalin’s dictatorship.

Sartre sought to distance himself from

counterrevolutionary Stalinism and its crimes claiming, “As we were neither members of the [Communist] Party nor its avowed sympathizers, it was not our duty to write about Soviet labour camps; we were free to remain aloof from the quarrel over the nature of this system, provided that no events of sociological significance had occurred.”

The extermination of the Bolshevik “Old Guard,” the assassination of Trotsky, the betrayal of the revolution and the besmirching of socialism—all were cynically ignored because they did not constitute, according to Sartre, “events of sociological significance.”

Of course, Sartre was lying. He was not “aloof” from the “quarrel.” He poured especial venom on Trotskyism because it dared to proffer an alternative “other.” He lambasted it as “a dead reality” that offered up “possibles which don’t reach realisation.”

For Sartre, a struggle to radically change society was impossible and impermissible. “Leaders and militants must be able to say to themselves, looking back on the past: ‘We did all that was possible (that is to say, our action extended as far as the circumstances permitted)—nothing was possible save what we did (events showed that the solutions which we set aside were impracticable).’ This attitude leads to an identification of reality and action.”

Sartre continued to prostrate himself before “concrete reality,” extolling Maoism and bourgeois nationalism after becoming disillusioned with the French Communist Party. The break-up of the bureaucracies—Stalinism, Maoism, bourgeois nationalism and reformism—was to prove the superficiality of Sartre’s perspective and the correctness of Trotskyism.

To be continued



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