Book Review

Niall Cullen, *Radical Basque Nationalist-Irish Republican Relations. A History.* Abingdon: Routledge, 2024, 347pp., ISBN: 9781032435961

There have been lots of rumours and some suspicion, and perhaps even more ideologically motivated propaganda, in relation to connections between the Basque militant organisation ETA (*Euskadi 'ta Askatasuna*, Basque Country and Freedom) and the predominantly Northern Irish Provisional IRA (Irish Republican Army). And yet, apart from a few semi-official meetings and ritualised expressions of solidarity, usually at *Sinn Féin* or *Batasuna* party events, not much is properly known about the relations between the two radical military formations and their political sister organisations. The same could be said about the wider social, political, and cultural contexts, including some of the more specific historical constellations and challenges which provided the rationale for the existence of such radicalised movements (however overdrawn and questionable the justifications of their own existence sometimes appeared). The knowledge gap is even more surprising given that the two militant, self-declared vanguards and their actions are associated with two of the longest lasting conflicts in Western Europe: one grounded in the quest for Basque independence from Spain (and France; plus aiming at a union or some form of federation between the Basque Country and Navarre); the other one related to Northern Ireland and whether it should remain associated with the UK or become part of the Republic of Ireland.

It is perhaps not by chance that a more thorough and historically comprehensive study of the relationship of the two radical formations

has emerged only now, in the context of what appear to be two enduring peace processes. Niall Cullen, the author of the book under review, is an Irish historian and researcher associated with the University of the Basque Country. He has seized this opportune moment and has given us a fascinating account of the historical context of the rather complex relations between the two nationalist movements and their militant spearheads.

Cullen's research serves as a kind of counternarrative when compared to the undertaking of some other, often problematic institutions — that sub-branch called 'terrorism studies' and their respective research centres — who more often than not focus solely on security aspects, including reports to the powers that be, but who have little or nothing to say about the social, political, cultural or even anthropological aspects of such conflicts.

While the choice of the book title's wording is perhaps unfortunate in its accumulation of adjectives ('Radical Basque Nationalist-Irish Republican', with no comma between them) such qualifiers nevertheless describe the author's aim and purpose. Cullen's ambitious account of the nexus not only maps the crossing of paths but also addresses the major differences and difficulties that remain despite the rhetoric of 'elective affinity' used in both movements. The author largely succeeds in his attempt: the encounters are never described as inevitable and necessary in a Hegelian sense; and instead of mythologising and reading too easily past antecedents and parallels into the present the author explores the links between structures and events in such a way that the emerging encounters remain open to historical contingencies and unforeseeable developments, including some of the contradictions the latter produced.

In the first two chapters the author highlights the most obvious parallels — let's call them 'structural' or *longue durée* elements — of Ireland and the Basque Country. Both countries played a not insignificant role in the

colonial and imperial history of their respective 'masters', Britain and Spain. However, despite geographic proximity and notwithstanding their both pertaining to empires there remained some considerable differences between the two organisations, especially in terms of what that implied for the perception of each other's colonisers. Cullen points out that in the Basque case there had been some noticeable admiration for Britain — an empire that was seen, despite its imperial overstretch, as having a civilising trajectory. Such a view found no equivalent in the British and Irish perception of Spain, which was, particularly after the mid-1890s and the loss of the Philippines and Cuba, regarded as an empire in its final throes.

Cullen also points to other important affinities such as culture and language. Juxtaposing Euskara against Spanish and Gaelic vis-à-vis English, it becomes obvious that Euskara and Gaelic speakers are both small language groups that constantly struggle to survive. Important in this context is also to note that in both cases language revival played an important political socialisation and political-cultural role.

Finally, Cullen notes some interesting parallels in terms of religion and religious institutions. A prominent example here might be the Jesuits and the impact their teaching had on the Basque Nationalist Party (PNV); we might further think of those Basque clerics who did not side with Franco, unlike the overwhelming majority of the Catholic Church in the rest of Spain; or Catholic youth organisations which played a major role in the Basque nationalist movement, especially in its more radical manifestations.

In Ireland, and especially in Northern Ireland, Catholic organisations played an equally important formative role and impacted on the rhetoric of oppositional political movements and activists (at a later stage, and in both cases, some Catholic figures would also come to function as

messengers and moderators between oppositional, often more militant, forces and the powers that be).

Despite these similarities between the Basque Country and Ireland, Cullen points out that there does, at first, not appear to have been any deeper connection between them. That only changed towards the latter half of the 19th century when new political, social, and cultural constellations arose, and new collective actors arrived on the scene. Thus, Ireland experienced famine, emigration, land reform, Catholic emancipation, economic and social modernisation, and with it the emergence of different political cultures and new movements, organisations and parties, perhaps most important among them the political friction between home rulers and nationalists.

In Spain things developed differently; here and especially in the Basque Country and Navarre the three Carlist Wars became the violent manifestation of a long and protracted 19th century conflict between rural and conservative forces against the liberal forces of modernisation. Bilbao as an industrial magnet would become another important symbol for the cultural cleavage that emerged between Basque nationalism and the new, mainly immigrant based, socialist movement.

What formerly were barely communicating parallel developments were now, toward the fin de siècle, perceived by both Basque and Irish activists as being connected. However, as Cullen stresses, even with this new and increased mutual interest, there remained somewhat of an imbalance in the perception: Basque politicians continued to be fascinated by Ireland, a view that was, in terms of intensity and passion, not as keenly reciprocated by Ireland's elites, politicians and activists.

Again, this soon would change, and the author is especially good in describing the historical challenges that independentists from both countries faced in the period 1916-1945.

The 1916 Easter Rising, and subsequent events related to it, indicated that a significant part of Ireland had embarked on a republican path in the attempt to gain independence from Britain. This led first to a protracted guerilla war with the British forces, followed by negotiations with the British government. These eventually ushered in a treaty that implied the establishment of an Irish Free State. Almost concomitantly a civil war broke out between pro-treaty and anti-treaty factions. The Protestant powers and its more militant organisations in Northern Ireland had already decided to resist the idea of joining a united Ireland. The net result was a partition between the North and the South of the island.

As to events of similar magnitude in Spain, it would take another decade — to be precise, until the arrival of the Second Spanish republic in 1931 — for the emergence of a more meaningful discussion about the future of the Basque Country as a political entity, including its further aspirations to achieve an autonomy status or even become independent.

Between the Irish Easter Rising 1916 and the beginning of the second Spanish Republic mutual Basque-Irish perceptions and observations became not only more frequent but also more substantial. For the more radical leaning Basque nationalists, the aspiration to establish an independent Ireland would become an important marker of distinction. In contrast, for the more conservative-leaning Basque nationalists such a project was to be rejected (after all, who else would save Catholic Belgium from German aspirations than the Brits?). In the end it was the establishment of the Irish Free State in 1922 which confined the home rule argument and movement to history — and, as a knock-on effect, also muted those Basque nationalists who until then had held on to their English 'illusions'.

De Valera's rise to power in Ireland, the Basque autonomy statute from 1936, the Spanish general's coup d'état followed by the outbreak of the

Spanish Civil War, the collapse of and defeat at the northern front and the consecutive fall of Bilbao, the Basque refugee and exile crisis that ensued (incl. that of the Basque government under José Antonio Aguirre), and finally Franco's rise to and stabilisation in power affected Basque-Irish perceptions in ways that are not always easily disentangled.

Especially complex and problematic to understand were the effects that the Spanish Civil War had on Ireland. Irish reactions were mixed, to say the least. In a mainly Catholic nation, the war had predominantly been perceived as a conflict between the two opposed *Weltanschauungen* of Catholicism vs. communism. However, that was not the view that every Irish citizen shared. A mix of people, consisting of critical members of the Irish clergy, some union activists together with a loose group of radical republicans (amongst them the important Irish-Argentinian activist Ambrose Martin), and a small group of Basque individuals and Hibernophiles like Eli Gallastegi — though not always in accordance or in sync with each other — reacted in a more solidary fashion and sided with the Spanish Republic, and thus with the legitimate Basque Government in exile.

However, with hindsight, the Spanish Civil War, its outcome and its consequences, resulted in the lowest period of Basque-Irish relations, despite the aforementioned emergence of a smaller network of Irish activists who had helped to save some individual Basque refugees and their families but were simply not powerful enough to protest or act effectively against De Valera's and *Fianna Fáil*'s politics of neutrality, neither in relation to the Spanish Civil War nor in connection with Spain's post war regime led by Francisco Franco. Nothing symbolises this period more than comparing the disproportionate very small number of those from Ireland who joined the international brigades to defend the Spanish republic — nobody seemed to have joined the Basque *gudariak* in their defence of the Basque Country as part of the legitimate

government of the Spanish republic — and those who fought on the side of Franco.

The Irish government's reluctance very briefly made the headline news during World War II, when a small group of prominent Basque refugees who after the end of the Spanish Civil War had first escaped to the French part of the Basque country and then found themselves trapped after the German invasion of France in 1940. While this small Basque group managed to flee on boat to reach the southern coast of Ireland, their arrival in Ireland proved to be an embarrassment for the Irish government. Accepting these refugees officially would have posed a threat to neutrality. It became apparent that, despite some individual and small-group efforts, Basque-Irish solidary remained an extremely limited, almost 'private' affair.

The surprise visit of *Taoiseach* Éamon de Valera in the Basque seaside resort of Zarautz in 1953 did not signify any great shifts in terms of official politics. Rather De Valera was hailed by the Spanish press as a true Catholic leader, just like Francisco Franco, and the other autocrat of the Iberian Peninsula, Portugal's António de Oliveira Salazar. Such autocratic sentiment, however, neglected a crucial difference: Ireland was a parliamentary democracy while Spain and Portugal were clearly not.

Hardly noticeable but still symbolically important was that the Taoiseach's visit had also spawned some protest from younger Basque activists who reminded both the Spanish government and the population of the host town of the important distinction between dictatorship and democracy, and of the fact that Ireland had fought for its independence.

The local group that had initiated the protest was called *Ekin* (Basque for 'to act'). This group of protagonists morphed six years later into a new, more militant and more effective undertaking: ETA. But as to *Ekin*'s

early protest, here, for the first time, was a group that would no longer argue along the more traditional political lines and affiliations of the Basque Nationalist Party or hold the Basque government in exile in high esteem never mind receiving instructions from abroad. *Ekin*'s protest, small as it was, signalled that local dissent and resistance had begun to take shape and that more action was likely to follow — mainly in lieu of the exiled PNV, which seemed increasingly disconnected from the situation in the homeland.

What looked like a small protest eventually became an early pattern of perception and emulation. Looking to Ireland and its struggle with Britain the younger cohort of Basque activists found the *idea* of the IRA (not necessarily its complex if not to say precarious existence for much of the 40s and 50s) inspirational. With the creation of ETA such reasoning and identification would become a habit: for the next five decades, until the cessation of arms in 2011, the reference to Irish political developments and the IRA's struggle against British rule would become an important reference point, almost to the point of uncritical reflection and acceptance — for better (in the case of cease fires, participating in negotiations and embarking on a peace train) or for worse (in the case of continued terrorist campaigns).

In the next four chapters of his book, in many ways the core of the author's research and historical narrative, Cullen describes in often gripping detail what that implied in the complex and complicated zig zag course of Irish and Basque — and British and Spanish — politics. The uncritical identification and emulation sometimes led to misjudging important political shifts and events (such as the change of political legitimation of the Spanish government once Franco's dictatorship had come to an end; similarly, the Republic of Ireland becoming one of the most stable political and democratic entities in Europe if not the world, until today not to be overtaken by some IRA campaign or *Sinn Féin* victory).

The price of hanging on to the idea of armed struggle was indeed high, for victims, bystanders, and perpetrators. That painful process and how the two formations tried to address this (while dialoguing about it and mutually noticing and acknowledging real improvement) is meticulously described in Cullen's chapters six and seven. However, being blind toward their own path dependency as an armed organisation ("so many would have died for nothing if we stopped now") meant often not seeing the world in colour but instead through the ideological lens of armed struggle and the extreme juxtaposition of friend and foe. The self-righteousness if not to say dogmatic behaviour of some leaders and factions about the right course of history also contributed to the prolongation of the struggles.

It seemed that many militants and their followers didn't reflect on the fact that armed struggle had a strange logic of its own. Very often and over the course of almost 15 years this would lead not only IRA and ETA but also their political representations in the form of *Sinn Féin* and *Herri Batasuna* (later *Batasuna*; *Bildu* today is no longer the latest incarnation of the independent and patriotic Basque left but a different political organisation altogether) into political cul-de-sacs.

In the final chapter Cullen provides his own explanation as to how the Irish-Basque nexus came to be and why the connection lasted until the present day. As he sees it, there were three factors that both movements and their environment had in common: a shared ideology, the movements' needs and objectives, and a shared political culture. However, with time the two movements got caught in the respective polities' halls of mirrors perhaps an explanation why it took so long to come to any agreements and to embark finally on a peace process.