

## **Basque Identity in the San Francisco Bay Area Basque Community**

*To what extent did Franco's dictatorship influence the Basque identity of immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area Basque community?*

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the immigration of Basques to the Bay Area during Franco's dictatorship. It examines their individual experiences as Basques in America and provides context to the circumstances they endured under Franco's dictatorship. In particular, this paper explores the impact of Franco's regime on Basque immigrants, examining the question: "To what extent did Franco's dictatorship influence the Basque identity of immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area Basque community?"

To answer this question, the discouragement of a Basque political identity, movement away from conservative Catholicism, and emphasis drawn towards practicing a cultural identity, specifically in the San Francisco Bay Area during the 1960s-1970s, will be analyzed and evaluated. The methodology to answer the question will consist of a brief background and introduction of the topic and then an analysis of the arguments supporting Franco's impact. By conducting first hand interviews with Basque immigrants and using scholarly books and websites, the factors that influenced Basque identity will be explored.

## **Background**

The Basque Country, or Euskal Herria in the Basque language, overlaps the border between France and Spain at the western end of the Pyrenees Mountains. It is split up into seven provinces in Spain and France. The four provinces in Spain are Araba, Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, Nafarroa and the three provinces in France are Lapurdi, Nafarroa Beherea, and Zuberoa. These seven provinces are commonly referred to in Basque as 'Zazpiak Bat', which translates to 'the seven are one' in English. In the Basque Country, this phrase has a political meaning as it refers to the independence of the Basque Country. On the other hand, in the U.S. the phrase 'Zazpiak Bat' does not have a political meaning and it refers to the unity of French and Spanish Basques

working together regardless of their region of origin.<sup>1</sup> The French side of the Basque Country is known as Iparralde (the North) and the Spanish side is known as Hegoalde (the South).<sup>2</sup> Basques, the people who live within these two countries, are connected through their shared Basque identity. In order to properly understand the depth of Basque identity, it is important to define it. Basque identity is a term that is affiliated with Basques who share the collective knowledge of Basque traditions, heritage, language, norms, and customs. In the 1950s, the portrayal of Basque identity in Hegoalde was particularly challenged when Francisco Franco Bahamonde became a dictator of Spain.

Franco was born into an upper-class military family in El Ferrol, Spain on December 4, 1892. He began his career in the navy, but later joined the army where he became a general. Franco was a conservative and a monarchist who was strongly against the abolition of the monarchy and the establishment of a republic in 1931.<sup>3</sup> During the 1936 elections, the conservative Spanish Confederation of Autonomous Right-wing Groups lost, resulting in the leftist Popular Front to come into power. As a result, Franco led a military rebellion against the democratically-elected government of the Spanish Republic in 1936. This sparked the Spanish Civil War which began on July 18, 1936 between the Republicans and Nationalists led by Franco. General Francisco Franco requested all army officers to join the uprising and overthrow Spain's leftist Republican government. Franco gained military assistance from Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. With support from the fascist leaders, Hitler and Mussolini, Franco's Nationalist forces overthrew the democratically elected Second Republic. Franco and his

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<sup>1</sup> Argitxu Camus Etchecopar, *The North American Basque Organizations (NABO), Incorporated* (n.p.: Eusko Jaurlaritzaren Argitalpen Zerbitzu Nagusia, 2007), [128].

<sup>2</sup> Zubiri, Nancy. *A Travel Guide to Basque America*. Edited by William A. Douglass, 2nd ed., U of Nevada P, 2006. The Basque Series 2.

<sup>3</sup> Manuel Palacio, "Early Spanish Television and the Paradoxes of a Dictator General," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 25, no. 4 (August 9, 2006): [599], accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01439680500262991>.

Nationalist forces eventually won the Spanish Civil War in 1939. Franco proclaimed himself Head of State and Government of Spain under the title *El Caudillo*, which translates to “the leader”.<sup>4</sup> In 1947, he declared Spain a monarchy and ruled for 36 years from 1939 until his death in 1975, marking the longest personal dictatorship in modern European history.<sup>5</sup>

### **Introduction**

Authoritarian regimes across the world have demonstrated the power of the state to control the public’s consciousness through censorship and propaganda. This phenomenon can be profoundly identified in Europe during the 1950s as Spain struggled under the dictatorial oppression of Franco.<sup>6</sup> After the Spanish Civil War in 1939, Franco and the Nationalist Party seized control of Spain through political oppression. According to Omar G. Encarnación, a professor of political studies at Bard College, “Franco’s authoritarian rule endured because the Spanish people had been socialized to believe that Spain was ‘different’, that it was an inherently anarchic country in need of a strong hand.”<sup>7</sup> Franco’s authoritarian regime significantly influenced modern Spain as he prohibited the Basques to express any sign of Basque nationalism as his main objective was to turn Spain into a totalitarian state. Franco wanted Spain to be pure, Catholic, and conservative, wiping away any sign of diversity. Franco's regime violated the human rights of Spanish people with different political and ideological opinions. He saw Basques as a threat and targeted them as their unique culture opposed his goal of making Spain traditional.

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<sup>4</sup> Sasha D. Pack, *Tourism and Dictatorship: Europe's Peaceful Invasion of Franco's Spain* (Sage Publications, 2010), 45:[1], accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20753607>.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Seidman, "The Longest Dictatorship," *Contemporary European History* 20 (January/February 2011): [97], accessed May 13, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41238345>.

<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Lea, "Speaking Franco: Francisco Franco and the Evolution of Spanish Artistic Voice," *The Corinthian*, last modified 2013, accessed May 13, 2020, <https://kb.gcsu.edu/thecorinthian/vol14/iss1/3>.

<sup>7</sup> Omar G. Encarnación, "Spain after Franco: Lessons in Democratization," *World Policy Journal* 18 (2001): [35], accessed September 7, 2020, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40209776>.

## **Life in Hegoalde during Franco's Dictatorship**

Life in Hegoalde, the Spanish side of the Basque Country, during the 1950s was drastically impacted by Franco's regime. Franco used propaganda during his dictatorship to manipulate forms of expression into suppression. He targeted the Spanish public but his harsh rules impacted the Basques significantly through his repressive system prohibiting all forms of Basque nationalism. Franco banned the Basque language, deprived Basques of having rights, and suggested Nazi Germany to bomb the Basque city of Guernica.<sup>8</sup> Franco made this possible by controlling the news to silence the punishment of defeated Republicans, or Basques, from the public.<sup>9</sup> He changed the news in ways that would suit the government's views to promote his authoritarian political view. Everyone had the right to express their opinions as long as they did not attack the fundamental principles of a united Spain.

The political outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and Franco's regime resulted in the economic decline of Spain. In the late 1950s, the Spanish economy experienced an inflation crisis. Although U.S. loans entered the Spanish economy in accordance with the 1953 Treaty of Madrid, there was no consistent increase in industrial production, resulting in an increase in inflation. He tried to reconstruct the economy but established an approach of self-sufficiency that prevented growth.<sup>10</sup> Instead, it made prices rise more than wages, resulting in a decline in living conditions. The decline of wages resulted in industrial unrest in Spain which was dealt brutally by the Spanish police. Living in Elizondo, Navarra, Spain during Franco's dictatorship, Isabel Laxague recalls that Franco deprived her family of basic needs such as food. He "gave small

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<sup>8</sup> Erin Blakemore, "How the Basques Became an Autonomous Community within Spain," National Geographic, last modified October 24, 2019, accessed May 14, 2020, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/reference/people/how-basques-became-autonomous-community-spain/#close>.

<sup>9</sup> Mireya Folch-Serra, "Propaganda in Franco's Time," *Bulletin of Spanish Studies* 89, nos. 7-8 (November 27, 2012): [202], accessed May 13, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14753820.2012.731570>.

<sup>10</sup> Thayer Watkins, "The Economic History of Spain," San José State University Department of Economics, accessed September 7, 2020, <http://www.applet-magic.com/spain.htm#REGIONS>.

food rations for oil, sugar, rice, etc. that were insufficient to properly feed a family of ten. I grew up on a small farm, which had corn, chickens, and pigs to help the food supply. I did not taste sugar until the age of 15, it was scarce.”<sup>11</sup> The poor economic performance led to many Basques becoming increasingly resentful of Franco's regime, leading many to flee the country. Many Basque businessmen and skilled workers left and the economic output fell by at least 20%, as citizens fled dictatorship, and access to goods was reduced.<sup>12</sup>

Franco promoted the use of Castilian Spanish and suppressed the Basque language. Euskara, the Basque language, is a significant aspect of Basque life as it was the form of communication used among Basques that united everyone together. Euskara is an extremely valuable aspect of Basque heritage and became in danger of dying out. The Basque language is very unique as it has no known relation to any other existing language and most linguists say it is the oldest living language in Europe. Franco outlawed the Euskara language and the Basques were told to "speak Christian." Vizcaya and Gipuzkoa, the “traitor provinces”, were singled out for special punishment and lost all rights of self-rule.<sup>13</sup> Under Franco, it was also prohibited to teach Basque.<sup>14</sup> This law applied in every circumstance, even during schools. Students were not allowed to speak Basque in class or during recess. If caught doing so, their punishment included a beating or a fine. “I was punished because I spoke in Basque,” said Felix Berrueta, who immigrated to the Bay Area from Arraioz, Spain. “The teacher heard me speaking Basque and made me stay next to her for 20 minutes so the other students could see I did something wrong,”

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<sup>11</sup> Isabel Laxague, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, July 22, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Sara González, "The Politics of the Economic Crisis and Restructuring in the Basque Country and Spain during the 1980s," *Space and Polity* 9, no. 2 (2005): [i], accessed September 7, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13562570500304931>.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Kurlansky, *The Basque History of the World* (New York: Walker & Company, 1999), [227].

<sup>14</sup> Jacqueline Urla, *Reclaiming Basque: Language, Nation, and Cultural Activism* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2012), [120], accessed May 13, 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=Mm2VDwAAQBAJ&oi>

added Felix.<sup>15</sup> “There was a fear of being reported to the public officials for Basque-related activities,” said Laxague. “Members of the regime had the power to deport people with no reason. I remember a neighbor being taken away after being deemed a nationalist,” said Laxague. Regardless of Franco’s harsh rules, people found ways to live around these rules Laxague explains, “people smuggled food from France to eat, people spoke Basque at home, and snuck across the border to France.”<sup>16</sup>

### **Life in Iparralde during Franco’s Dictatorship**

Life in Iparralde, the French side of the Basque Country, during the 1950s was very different from life in Hegoalde. Franco was not the ruler of France, so Basques living in Iparralde were more free to express their Basque culture, but this did not mean they were not impacted by him. “I heard of Franco almost every day when growing up,” said Francois Bidaurreta. Growing up in Aldude, France, Bidaurreta recalls that by “living so close to the Spanish border, we were reminded very often never to say anything about Franco.” Although the Basque culture was not entirely banned in France, the Basque language was forbidden in schools. “Students were not allowed to speak Basque and if we did speak it, we were punished,” explained Francois.<sup>17</sup> Mayte Ocafrain of Osès, France recalls this punishment to be bad grades in conduct.<sup>18</sup> Although the Basque language was restricted in France, it was for different reasons than Franco. “The French government wanted us to learn French because we only knew how to speak Basque,” said Yvette Urruty.<sup>19</sup> The French government thought the best way to approach this problem was by restricting the Basque language entirely with the goal that it will make people learn French without distractions. “Regional languages were banned through hatred, fear,

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<sup>15</sup> Felix Berrueta, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, July 28, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Laxague, interview by the author.

<sup>17</sup> Francois Bidaurreta, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, July 26, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Mayte Ocafrain, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, June 28, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Yvette Urruty, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, July 2020.



suspicion of what they symbolized and the message of political fragmentation they carried, while French was to be the language of freedom and of universal values, and act as a doorway to the future and to individual development within the Republic.”<sup>20</sup> Francois also remembers that “babies were given Basque names by most of the parents, however, when they were registered at City Hall, everyone was registered with a French name.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Basque Immigration to the Bay Area**

Due to political, social, and economic factors, many Basques immigrated from the Basque Country to the Americas.<sup>22</sup> Many of these Basque immigrants settled in San Francisco as it had more job opportunities and no political oppression. In response to the increasing flow of immigrants, boarding houses and hotels were established by Basques.<sup>23</sup> The San Francisco Basque Club (SFBC) was formed in 1960 and consisted of Basques from both Hegoalde and Iparralde. This allowed Basques to freely express their culture without restrictions from leaders like Franco. The SFBC began engaging with other Basque clubs in North America and eventually became a part of the North American Basque Organization (NABO). NABO is a federation of the Basque clubs of North America that hold meetings and convention festivals with numerous activities that gather Basques from all ages and origins.<sup>24</sup>

### **Discouragement of Basque Political Identity**

Basque immigrants in the San Francisco Bay Area had very little interest in Basque politics. When forming NABO in the 1970s, many “non-political” Iparralde Basques feared the

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<sup>20</sup>Dennis Ager, "Territorial Insecurity," in *Identity, Insecurity and Image: France and Language* (Clevedon, Great Britain: Multilingual Matters LTD, 1999), [28], digital file.

<sup>21</sup> Bidaurreta, interview by the author.

<sup>22</sup> Gloria Totoricagüena, *Basque Migration and Diaspora Transnational Identity* (Reno, NV: Center for Basque Studies, 2004), [387].

<sup>23</sup> Pedro J. Oiarzabal, *Gardeners of Identity: Basques in the San Francisco Bay Area* (Reno, NV: Center for Basque Studies, 2011), [116]

<sup>24</sup> Linda White, "Basque Families," FamilyJRank, accessed January 20, 2021, <https://family.jrank.org/pages/153/Basque-Families-Basque-Families-in-North-America.html>.

intensity of political conflicts like ETA that were brought to Hegoalde during Franco's regime.<sup>25</sup> ETA, which stands for 'Euskadi Ta Askatasuna' or 'Basque Homeland and Liberty' in English, is a leftist Basque nationalist and separatist organization in the Basque Country that conducts terrorist attacks to establish an independent Basque state. When forming the non-profit organization, NABO, members from the SFBC insisted to include a clear statement on NABO's apolitical nature in the Article of Incorporation. Articles of Incorporations are a set of documents that legally establishes the creation of a corporation. Although Basque delegates from Idaho wanted NABO to be involved in politics, attorney Bob Goicoechea and the San Francisco Basque Club delegates overrode them, resulting in a new addition to the 1973 bylaws in Article II, paragraph J: "Nothing herein contained shall be construed as authorizing or empowering the Corporation to promote, encourage, aid or advance any political ideology, movement, cause, party or activity, wherever located." Immigrating from Uhart-Cize, France, Pierre Etcharren was one of the SFBC delegates that attended this meeting and said that "this was added to the articles of incorporation because [they] did not want politics to divide the community" since "politics always seems to do that." The SFBC delegates were "trying to make sure there was little division between Iparralde and Hegoalde [Basques]."<sup>26</sup>

In the 1980s, the Basque Government, the governing body of the Basque Autonomous Community of Spain, began to establish relations with Basque clubs in America. In an attempt to set a positive perception of Basques in the U.S., the Basque Government supported and assisted Basque clubs by paying for expenses related to Basque programs. However, the grants provided by the Basque government became a controversial topic as Basque immigrants debated whether accepting money from the Basque Government violated the non-political aspects of the bylaws.

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<sup>25</sup> John Ysursa, "The Basque Diaspora, NABO and Politics," NABO, accessed January 24, 2021, [https://nabasque.eus/diaspora\\_differences.html](https://nabasque.eus/diaspora_differences.html).

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Etcharren, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, January 23, 2021.

The SFBC delegates felt that “NABO should be self-reliant, without having to depend on the Basque Government”.<sup>27</sup> Benan Oregi is a Basque Government civil servant who has travelled to San Francisco close to 20 times since 1998 and has an outsider view of how Franco’s dictatorship affected San Francisco Basques. Oregi believed that one of the reasons why the delegates of clubs like the SFBC once voted against receiving funds was because they thought “the Basque Government and ETA are the same” and that it would “bring a political involvement, which it did not.”<sup>28</sup> In the end, the SFBC ended up accepting the Basque Government’s monetary contributions but it was made clear that they wanted nothing to do with any politics.

### **Moving Away from Conservative Catholicism**

Franco used his power to invoke Catholicism and the Church as sources of political legitimacy.<sup>29</sup> Since Franco prohibited Basque names from being given, many people had religious names. Laxague recalls that “everyone had Spanish religious names on paper, but at home they were called by their Basque name.”<sup>30</sup> Having immigrated from the town of Arizcun, Spain, Carmen Salaburu gave her children the Basque names of Idoya and Xabier without hesitation now that she was living in San Francisco.<sup>31</sup> Another way that Franco’s political system enforced the practice of Catholicism is by having Spanish elementary schools that were taught in accordance with Catholic teachings. For instance, children were taught that Franco was sent by God to help Spanish people.<sup>32</sup> Similar to the Roman Catholic Church, the Franco regime viewed women through a conservative gender ideology. Franco’s conservative ideology created

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<sup>27</sup> Etchecopar, *The North*, [231].

<sup>28</sup> Benan Oregi, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, December 7, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Alfonso Pérez-Agote, *The Social Roots of Basque Nationalism* (Reno, NV: University of Nevada Press, 2006), [228], accessed May 13, 2020, <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=YmyVDwAAQBAJ&oi>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>31</sup> Carmen Salaburu, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, July 11, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Zubiri, *A Travel*, [37].

predetermined roles for women that controlled what was appropriate and possible in education, in work, and in social relations. Women were excluded from personal expression as they were expected to dress a certain way to fit the ideal identity of a Spanish Catholic woman. Salaburu recalls that the church in her hometown of Arizcun was very strict as she wore dresses and skirts that had to fall at least below the knee. However, when she immigrated to America, she said that the church was more relaxed as women were allowed to wear pants. Additionally, she recalls that whenever anyone entered the mass late in Spain, the priest would pause the mass to bring shame upon people whereas in America it was okay to be late.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Laxague said that in Spain most people were too scared to sit at the front pews of the church, whereas in America, people were encouraged to sit at the front as they felt more relaxed.<sup>34</sup> Ultimately, moving away from Franco's conservative Catholicism, Basque immigrants felt more liberated as Catholics in America.

### **Promotion of Cultural Basque Identity**

Instead of practicing a political identity, Basque immigrants practiced a cultural identity that brought Basques together through dance, singing, sports, and festivals. These were non-political events that were not always permitted in the Basque Country during Franco's regime. Basque festivals are an integral part of promoting a cultural identity. A typical Basque festival begins with a Catholic mass that is said in the Basque language and accompanied with Basque songs. This contrasts with masses that Laxague experienced in Spain during the 1960s as Laxague recalled that "at church, the clergy was in favor of Franco's rule, so there was no Basque singing or readings."<sup>35</sup> Following mass, Basque festivals consisted of a traditional Basque-American meal of barbecued lamb followed by dance performances and sporting

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<sup>33</sup> Salaburu, interview by the author.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid

<sup>35</sup> Ibid

exhibits. These festivals consisted of people speaking Basque freely and proudly wearing traditional costumes. Such an expression of Basque culture would not have been tolerated during Franco's regime. Laxague remembers "not being able to use the Basque flag and wear Basque colors" in Spain. Basques in America are passionately participating in Basque cultural activities that would not have been tolerated during Franco's dictatorship.<sup>36</sup>

NABO's most successful initiative is an annual two-week Basque Culture Camp for youths called Udaleku. Since 1973, Udaleku's main goal is to teach children belonging to Basque clubs throughout North America the songs, music, and dances originating from their ancestors in the Basque Country. The intent behind these cultural activities is to encourage youths to become involved in their local Basque clubs.<sup>37</sup> Iban Urruty is a second generation Basque who attended Udaleku from 2014-2019 in the localities of San Francisco, CA; Salt Lake City, UT; Reno, NV; and Chino, CA. He does not recall learning about Basque history pertaining to Franco's era and its impact to Basque society. When asked to summarize what he learned at these camps, he recalls learning about "Basque folklore, art, and geography."<sup>38</sup> There was no teaching of Basque politics or the history surrounding Franco or ETA. However, it is important to consider that he remembers non-political events because that is what was emphasized the most. This is a clear intent of NABO fostering a cultural identity rather than a political identity.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, although it may not be written on paper, Franco's dictatorship did have an impact on the San Francisco Bay Area Basque community. Since the topic of Franco and Basque repression was not widely talked about in the San Francisco Bay Area Basque community, one

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid

<sup>37</sup> "Udaleku: NABO's Basque Culture Summer Camp," NABO, accessed September 7, 2020, <https://nabasque.eus/udaleku.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Iban Urruty, interview by the author, San Francisco, CA, January 23, 2020.

may jump to the conclusion that Franco's regime simply had no impact on Basque identity. However just because something is not visible does not mean it does not exist. Since the San Francisco Basque Club is predominantly occupied by Iparralde Basques, laws against Basque politics were enforced. NABO's original set of bylaws from 1973 specifically avoided any involvement in politics, further supporting the claim that just because politics is not seen, does not mean it does not exist. The removal of politics allowed Basques to focus on cultural activities such as dance, sports, and singing to unite Iparralde and Hegoalde Basques without political discrepancies. When Basques immigrated to the Bay Area, they brought along their Basque culture. The freedom of Basque expression in America was the result of the many restrictions Basques had in their homeland during the Franco years. Moreover, Franco's strict ways of ruling can be seen through his strict enforcement of conservative Catholicism. When Basques immigrated to America, they continued to carry out their practice of Catholicism but in a freer way. Basque women were allowed to wear pants instead of dresses and felt more comfortable at church. The freedom Basques had in America was not remotely close to what they experienced in the Basque Country. Basque immigrants were finally able to express and participate in things that were prohibited in Hegoalde during Franco's regime. Overall, while a political identity was discouraged in the San Francisco Bay Area, Basque cultural identity was undoubtedly promoted and as a result is still thriving to this day.

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