Aresti, Nerea. "Women Warriors or Mothers of the Fatherland: Hero Cults and Gender in Basque Nationalism." *Women Warriors and National Heroes: Global Histories*. .. London,: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. 55–72. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350140301.ch-004>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 07:45 UTC.

Copyright © Boyd Cothran, Joan Judge, Adrian Shubert and contributors 2020. Released under a CC BY-NC-ND licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>). You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Women Warriors or Mothers of the Fatherland: Hero Cults and Gender in Basque Nationalism

Nerea Aresti

Basque nationalism emerged as a movement seeking to defend Basque political rights at the end of the nineteenth century. From its inception, it was influenced by contemporary ideas of social hygiene, social Darwinism, degeneration, and race. This new movement was also in part a response to far-reaching local transformations, specifically rapid industrialization and, above all, the mass of migrants from other parts of Spain attracted by employment opportunities in the region's mines, foundries, and shipyards. One response to what some perceived as an invasion of brutish, impious, and racially inferior immigrants was the elaboration of Basque nationalism, a political project in defense of the Basque race and its traditions. This was, in the words of the historian José Luis de la Granja, traditionalist and fundamentalist, anti-liberal and anti-Spanish, anti-socialist and anti-industrialist.¹ Above all, it was Catholic. Basque nationalists defined the Basque race more in moral than in biological terms, and they called on the Basque people to recover the halcyon days when they, as an example of moral and religious rectitude, had enjoyed political independence from Spain and a racial purity free from "Spanish" contamination.

In addition to alleged racial differences, early Basque nationalists built their identity on the basis of the uniqueness of their culture and their language—*euskera* or Basque, a language without Indo-European roots—and long history of resistance against invaders led by heroic patriots. As with other contemporary nationalisms, this narrative resulted from a specific understanding of gender and sexual difference. But despite the fact that Basque nationalists' visions of gender were traditionalist and profoundly misogynistic, some women were given pride of place in the pantheon of national heroes. Far from being a contradiction, this was the consequence of the particular way Basque nationalists understood gender with respect to the nation. Their misogyny prevented real women from participating in the movement, but their privileging of race meant that it could prevail over gender so that Basque women could be regarded as being more the former than the latter. Sharing the virtues of the race,

This research for this chapter was done as part of the Project "La experiencia de la sociedad moderna en España: Emociones, relaciones de género y subjetividades (siglos XIX y XX)," HAR2016-78223-C2-1-P, MINECO y FEDER, and the UPV/EHU research group, GIU17/37.

they were able to transcend their sexual condition and, in some cases, act as women warriors who were then celebrated as virile heroines by a movement of men.

This situation did not last long. In just under two decades, these virile heroines of early Basque nationalism had been feminized and/or expelled from the canon of national heroes. This development was linked to far-reaching changes in gender relations in the context arising from the First World War. Traditionalist misogyny gave way to more essentialist and biological visions of sexual difference that had no room for the exceptional virile heroine. The notion of “motherland” then burst onto the political scene, achieving a huge symbolic relevance. That was when the *sexed* incorporation of women in the Basque nationalist movement came about. The once-celebrated virile warrior women had no place in this new scenario. The changing representations of the fifteenth-century woman warrior Libe between 1902 and 1934 illuminate this process particularly well.

Through the analysis of Basque nationalism, the aim of this chapter is to illustrate two more general ideas. The first is that the national heroine cult—or its absence—had more to do with gender perspectives in each specific context than with the real role that these women had played in past national liberation struggles or in wars against invaders. Accordingly, gender is a category with a huge, but unstable, capacity for generating meaning and creating order in the processes of creating patriotic discourses and symbols.² The second idea is that, insofar as the meaning of gender is unstable, it is impossible to establish *a priori* the way in which this category functions to build nations and nationalisms. This mutability thus helps us to understand the transformations over time in the significance of warrior women and in their status as national heroines.

The Virile Heroines of the First Basque Nationalism

The origins of modern Basque nationalism at the end of the nineteenth century are linked to the figure of Sabino Arana, regarded as the political and doctrinal father of the new movement.³ Even though Arana's thought was framed by Catholic traditionalism,⁴ he gave this tradition new meaning in a political project intended to cast modernity in the mold of the past, holding out the promise of an “archaic future.”⁵ Arana's understanding of sexual difference should be analyzed in the light of his worldview. He firmly believed in women's inferiority to men. Women were flawed versions of the opposite sex, imperfect beings prone to sin.⁶ This judgment was grounded in a series of values universally regarded as positive and inherently masculine, according to a sole chain of human perfectibility. The Basque people were, Arana claimed on more than one occasion, a virtuous and virile people, the qualifier “virile” referring here to the qualities of strength, courage, religiosity, and moral rectitude.

For Arana, gender was a less salient factor than lineage and race in determining the identity of a human being. As a result, there could be outstanding women who were not representative of their sex and who shared with men a set of values that placed them above the rest of their gender. They were exceptional cases in which an attribute other than gender defined their character and actions. From this point of view, even

though Basque men constituted the fullest expression of the nation, their womenfolk shared the virility inherent in the race⁷ without it compromising their femininity, a quality which was less appreciated at the time than it would be later on.

Arana's vision was firmly rooted in an image of strong, vigorous, austere, and even coarse women that had been described by many writers, naturalists, anthropologists, and travelers, from German naturalist Alexander von Humboldt to Spanish novelist Emilia Pardo Bazán. Clear precedents for this vision can be found in many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century works, such as the writings of the Jesuit and philologist Manuel de Larramendi, studied by the historian Bakarne Altonaga. In 1754, in his book *Corografía de Guipúzcoa*, Larramendi claimed that the women of the provinces were "worth more than their sex in general, not as skittish as in other provinces" and that on the battlefield "some and many have performed heroic and very manly exploits." Since antiquity "there had been Guipuzcoan Amazons who knew how to handle weapons, wield the sword and defend the breach, killing and dying while wreaking terrible havoc among their enemies."⁸

Despite conceding that Basque women shared the virtues of the race, Arana was, as already noted, an inveterate misogynist. In a letter written in 1897, on one of the few occasions on which he referred to the fairer sex as a whole, he addressed the defects of what he called the "unhappy half of the human race." Women were vain, selfish, superficial, and inferior to men and had, he wrote, "in the extreme all the weaknesses inherent in human nature." They were also morally weaker, threatened by temptation, and prone to sin: "Therefore, they were the first to fall," he recalled. He did not even accept that the values of sensitivity and sentiment were more highly developed in women. They were simply, "inferior to men in mind and in heart."⁹

Arana's misogyny, somewhat attenuated by the value of Christian respect, led to what José Javier Díaz Freire has dubbed the "absent presence" of women in his discourse,¹⁰ a vacuum that structured the space that it occupied. Significantly, Arana neither dedicated much time to discussing women, nor did he give them a place or specific mission in the Basque nationalist movement. They did, of course, have one in the preservation of racial characteristics through the family and lineage, but not as feminine subjects with an active role in the movement. Women per se were excluded from the manly project he created because of the contempt and distrust that he felt for them and, in these first years, they were prohibited from joining the party. This segregation was also extended, for example, to the theater, one of the most important propaganda vehicles for Basque nationalism since its inception.¹¹ From a moral perspective, the strictly masculine nature of Basque nationalism was incompatible with the participation in its activities of this potentially corrupting element. The avoidance of mixed spaces and the exclusion of women from the public sphere were deemed more important than the task of disseminating its ideology that, moreover, was vital for a party that aspired to prosper in the new world of mass politics.

Based on the conception of women as morally contaminated inferior beings inclined to sin, Arana considered femininity, above all, a set of debasing effects which he would effectively apply to the Spanish people.¹² In his view, femininity was a fixed quality, an attributable value and, as with masculinity in men, a condition potentially

separable from the sexual body. Under this logic, the virile Basque people would serve as a moral counterbalance to what he saw as debased and corrupt nations such as the Spanish, “a people both effeminate and brutish.”¹³

There might appear to be a contradiction between the misogyny permeating Arana’s writings and his benevolent opinion of Basque women. These ideas would have been contradictory only if his had been a train of thought constructed from a rigid essentialist dimorphism that defined gender as an inalterable kernel attached to a specific biological body. To the contrary, according to Arana’s vision, gender did not exhaust the cultural and social meaning of human beings with a woman’s body, insofar as other variables, and especially race, could be even more decisive. As a result, Arana’s tolerance of exceptional women was much greater than in radically essentialist thought, totally sexualized, in which feminine nature imposed inviolable limits on each and every woman. At the same time, admitting that individual women could be feisty warriors and patriots did not contradict his negative view of the gender as a whole. The same yardstick could be employed when assessing all the Vizcayan—Basque—women, who were exceptional within their gender group.

The role played by exceptional women in Arana’s writings allows us to gain insights into this harmonious coexistence between his misogyny and his tolerance of feminine excellence. On the one hand, early Basque nationalism constructed patriotic female figures who spilt their blood or laid down their lives on the battlefield in scenes that occasionally had profound religious connotations; while on the other hand, these brave women could also be guilty of sins of the flesh that gave rise to the decadence of the race, contaminated with Spanish, that is foreign, blood. Those female characters, at once heroines and sinners, reflected the complexity of Arana’s gender perspective. The possibility that Arana’s outlook provided for Basque women to be recognized as women warriors and heroes of the Basque nation was exemplified in his treatment of Libe, a fifteenth-century figure who was the protagonist of his most famous play.

As in other societies and cultures, some Basque women had stood out for their warlike deeds in oral and written traditions. This was the case of María Pérez de Villanañe, an eleventh-century character from Álava, who was worthy enough to be called *La Varona* [The Manly Woman] by King Alfonso VII of Castile and Leon, in honor of her “manly courage” on the battlefield. During the nineteenth century, the story of *La Varona* was recovered and, in 1885, Ricardo Becerro de Bengoa dedicated a poem to her in his *Romancero Alabés*, in which he evoked the lady “who behaved/like a formidable man.”¹⁴ By the same token, the figure of Catalina of Erauso, the *Lieutenant Nun*, whose military career was recompensed by the recognition of Philip IV and Pope Urban VIII at the beginning of the seventeenth century, enjoyed a lengthy popularity.¹⁵

In Arana’s oeuvre, the first of these exceptional women appeared on the scene at the Battle of Arrigorriaga in the ninth century, her intervention being decisive for the favorable outcome of the first of the “four patriotic glories.” Arana recounts how, having lost his helmet “fighting against a vigorous Biscayan woman, the Leonese commander Ordoño received such a hefty blow on the head from her axe that he fell, lifeless, to the ground.” This rendered his soldiers so downcast that, losing their courage and strength, they ended up retreating “like bucks” along the same route they had taken “to launch the criminal conquest of a pacific nation.”¹⁶ The heroine of Arrigorriaga was thus

construed as an autochthonous Joan of Arc or Agustina of Aragon.¹⁷ Incidentally, it is interesting to note how Arana shifted the limelight from the nobleman and military chief Juan Zuria ("The White Lord"), a mythical Lord of Biscay who, throughout the nineteenth century, was regarded as *the* hero of this decisive Battle of Arrigorriaga.¹⁸

The figure that best expressed Arana's particular gender perspective was the main character of his play *Libe*. This historical melodrama, which recreated the Battle of Munguía in 1471, was written in 1902 and published a year later.¹⁹ Three different dimensions can be glimpsed in the character of the young female protagonist: the human being endowed with free will who has to choose between virtue and sin; the Eve, a weak woman incapable of resisting the temptation that would condemn her people; and the exceptionally vigorous woman, a splendid example of patriotism and the architect of the victory against the Spanish enemy.

In Arana's telling, the feeble Libe falls in love with a Castilian count, thus betraying her people and hastening them down the path of racial degeneration. "Our blood, always pure: we do not give our daughters away to foreigners," one of his characters cautioned.²⁰ The danger of sin, of the loss of racial purity, came yet again from women who, using the expression of Mercedes Ugalde, were apparently the "weak link in Basque society."²¹ By becoming the heroine responsible for the victory on the battlefield of Munguía against the troops of the Count of Haro, Libe would redeem her original fault. Thanks to her, the fatherland was freed from the invading enemy. Over the dying Libe, who has already raised herself above her status as a woman on the battlefield, her father exclaims, "Oh, Libe! God is taking you for Himself to heaven, because there is no man worthy of you on earth!" The Biscayan troops then kneel before the venerable body of Libe, who will always leave her people with "the memory of a woman who has laid down her life for the fatherland."²²

Even though Arana did not devote much space in his writings to discussing women, female characters did feature in the most significant and influential literary passages of an epic narrative in defense of the imaginary free and independent Biscayan nation. As he was creating Basque nationalism, Arana gave courageous and virile women warriors pride of place in its pantheon of heroes. This type of discourse and these icons overshadowed the dignifying effect of maternity and the very figure of the "mother country." For Arana, of course, Basque women played a central role in the reproduction of the lineage and the Basque nation-family. Biscay was built on family ties and women there acquired a greater political significance than they would have done in a nation considered to be an aggregate of individuals. But in Arana's thought, this positive significance of maternity was incapable of prevailing over a misogyny in which virtue was, by definition, masculine.

The Mothers of the Fatherland

Between 1914 and 1930, gender perspectives evolved apace in Spanish society as a whole. This evolution also affected Basque nationalism in a particularly powerful way because the baseline was the traditionalism inherent in Sabino Arana's time. The changes had a direct impact on the Basque heroine cult. Broadly speaking,

this evolution was linked to the context emerging from the First World War— notwithstanding Spain's neutrality in the international conflict—a new scenario in which the presumption of male superiority was challenged. In that context, women defied, in practice, longstanding preconceptions with their daily activities and, occasionally, with feminist political action. The conviction that women were incapable of undertaking many physical and intellectual activities clashed with reality. The nationalist press warned against the new dangers, claiming that “the offices, the schools, the chemist shops, the medical profession, the courts are already being invaded by the enemy. It is a terrible avalanche before which we are yielding ground day after day.”²³ New fears and anxieties about the future of gender relations, often associated with the figure of the “modern woman,” led to changes in the discourses of Basque nationalism, changes that had significant implications for the figure of the woman warrior.

The response to these fears and new uncertainties was the reaffirmation of sexual difference, based on the idea of complementarity between men and women. In reality, this idea had always been present in nationalist discourse, coexisting with more radically hierarchical perceptions. What occurred during the first decades of the twentieth century was that the notion of women as inferior beings, defective versions of men, lost ground to one in which women were essentially different from them. The reaffirmation of the existence of a feminine nature defined in biological terms went hand in glove with a radicalization of the maternal mandate, denying other possibilities of dignified femininity—the pious spinster or the case of exceptional women. As a result of this evolution, women were incorporated into the nationalist political project, albeit always as women and mothers. New exclusively feminine organizations emerged within the movement. And when they were not simply erased, national heroines were feminized, modifying their symbolic and political meaning.

A nationalist organization strictly for women, the so-called *Emakume Abertzale Batza* (EAB) [Association of Women Patriots],²⁴ was created in 1922, an initiative strongly influenced by the experiences of the Irish women's organization *Cumann na mBan*.²⁵ Its advent should be understood not only as a product of the movement's change of tack, but also as a personal achievement of women who challenged the prohibition on their participation in the movement and thus created a new space of social and political participation.²⁶ From the birth of the EAB, different women nationalist leaders became involved in the movement's activities, with a growing number of female speakers occupying the squares of the Basque Country.²⁷ A chain of events during the Second Republic (1931–36) favored a level of acceptance of female militancy which would have been impossible before, even though no women occupied leadership roles in the Basque Nationalist Party nor did any appear in its lists of candidates for elected office.²⁸

It is true that the activity of these women was often of a conservative nature and limited to social welfare, cultural dissemination, Christian charity—the distribution of food, clothing and toys—and even the defense of the family following Catholic principles. More often than not, however, their activity encroached on the field of politics in such a way as to challenge the gender order. Women were plainly visible at decisive moments, such as at the demonstration held on the occasion of the first

Aberri Eguna (Day of the Basque Nation) in Bilbao on March 27, 1932. At these multitudinous events, they demonstrated their capacity to mobilize and occupy public spaces, some of the young protagonists and speakers becoming well-known figures of the movement. The imprisonment of Haydée Aguirre, Polixene Trabudua, and Miren Nekane Legorburu for their propaganda activities had a huge impact, and the political work of young nationalist women earned them the respect and recognition of their peers. On another occasion, in 1933 the premises of the EAB were closed by the government authorities.²⁹ And the women's demonstration that they themselves organized against the president of the Republic's visit to Biscay on April 30 of that same year is yet another compelling example of the prominence achieved by nationalist women.

Their political drive, their clashes with the police, and the arrest of some of their most prominent propagandists allowed nationalist women to take center stage in party activities, becoming, according to the nationalist press, "the spearhead of the movement."³⁰ Finally, in 1933, thirty-eight years after its founding, the leaders of the Basque Nationalist Party had to accept women as full members of the party.

As women were allowed to participate in the Basque political sphere, however, the heroic actions of exceptional female patriots became less important. In the words of EAB leader Sorne Untzueta, while all the races had their great women warriors, such as Joan of Arc and Agustina of Aragon, Euzkadi had no need for such occasional figures. The "total volume of work undertaken" by Basque women was more "interesting."³¹

These changes were reflected in re-evaluations of Arana's *Libe*. In 1922, Carmen de Errazti, the first chairwoman of the EAB, rejected the idea that his *Libe* was a woman warrior like others.

Sabino did not conceive [the character] as a woman warrior, like that woman from Álava called '*Barona*', about whom medieval stories speak, or that other woman Catalina of Erauso from San Sebastián, famous for her manly deeds and, therefore, known by her sobriquet 'the Lieutenant Nun', about whom Spanish critics and poets have spoken so much [...].

No; *Libe*, the main character of Sabino's melodrama, was a young Basque woman, full of beauty and candour, possessing in her noble and simple heart all the virtues of the race; the most sweet and gentle of Basque maidens, but who, when the time came, would know how to answer the call of the blood of a hundred Basque generations flowing through her veins.³²

The reassessment of *Libe* culminated in the 1934 adaptation of Arana's play by nationalist writer Manuel de la Sota.³³ His *Libe* embodied the new understanding of gender difference in Basque nationalist circles. Arana's youthful main character: weak, virgin, martyr, and virile warrior all in one, was turned into a tender eighteen-year-old maiden "at the peak of her femininity," from whose breast sprung strong passions and emotions.³⁴ In this new version, *Libe* was feminized, but without that femininity implying an ignominious weakness, and sexualized, but without that sexuality being sinful per se. *Libe*, described by de la Sota as being "all love," was nonetheless faced with the dilemma of two conflicting emotions: "love for the enemy or love for her

Figure 3.1 Polixene Trabudua and Haydée Aguirre, both EAB leaders, leaving Larrinaga Prison, Bilbao, 1933.

Figure 3.2 Cover of Manuel de la Sota's *Libe: Melodrama histórico* (1903, Bilbao: E. Verdes Achirica, 1934).

fatherland.” Where Arana had made Libe’s love for her fatherland irreconcilable with her love as a spouse and required that she rise above her position as a woman and renounce earthly love, the new Libe could have both and offers her heart to the young Basque Andima: “Yours is my love, Andima, yours are my soul and my body, for you are risking your life to defend the sons that we, the Biscayan women, are expecting in our wombs.”³⁵ The 1930s heroine was converted into a “fearless soldier of the Basque hearth,”³⁶ a loving wife and fertile mother who fought for her children and cared for and dressed the wounds of the future representatives of the race. The image on the cover of the published version certainly had very little of the warrior about it. The play’s final scene, in which De la Sota deviated from Arana’s original work by introducing a new character, evokes, as Miren Llona has rightly pointed out, the image of the Mother of Sorrows.³⁷ A child named Kuliska, who has lost his mother during the war, rushes around on stage disconsolately calling out for her until, attracted by the dying Libe, he approaches her. Then, drawing her last breath, Libe addresses all the children of the Basque fatherland, warning them about the dangers of being orphaned and abandoned, like the boy remaining at her side, who is comforted by her words despite his grief.³⁸

The Spanish Civil War and After

Following Francisco Franco’s coup d’état against the government of the Second Republic, the Spanish Civil War (1936–1937 in the Basque Country) did not contribute any new female figures to the pantheon of heroes of the Basque fatherland even though many women did take up arms in defense of the republican cause. The most outstanding examples did not hail from the ranks of the Basque nationalists, but from the political groups most committed to bringing about far-reaching social change. Cases such as that of the brave Guipuzcoan anarchist Maximina Santa María³⁹ made the front pages during the first months of the conflict, in a climate of anti-fascist fervor. But the figure of the *miliciiana* (militiawoman), as the women who fought against Franco’s army were called, was rapidly discredited on the republican front itself. As part of its effort to rebuild the army that had been shattered by the military uprising, on October 29, 1936, the Republican government restricted the recruitment of soldiers to men aged between twenty and forty-five. The authorities thus regained control of the army, heading off the threat of social revolution and sexual disorder represented by the militiawomen. As historian Mary Nash has noted, within a few months the image of the *miliciiana* disappeared from republican propaganda, subjected to a smear campaign that even went so far as to identify militiawomen with prostitutes.⁴⁰ Forty years after having fought on the front defending the Peñas de Aya, Kasilda Hernández fended off the humiliating accusations that had been leveled at her at the time: “It was a tough lesson of the war. And the people belonging to the republican camp who have said that we mountain women were little less than sluts are liars who I shall never forgive.”⁴¹

In the Basque case, the attempt to re-establish order in the context of the war was, moreover, related to a nation-building project that required different things from men and women.⁴² Basque nationalists saw the strict division between the masculine

front and the feminine rear guard as both important and necessary. This did not mean, however, that as with the sexes themselves, they were theoretically defined by any pecking order: "In any war there are two places from which it is possible to serve the cause being defended. These places are the front and the rear guard. Neither is it necessary, nor is there any reason, to say which is the most important, for even though one of them is more important, it cannot endure without the other."⁴³ The metaphor of the motherland that, "torn by pain," selflessly offered up her sons in sacrifice became a leitmotif in the nationalist press during the war.⁴⁴ The idea that patriotism should not be confused with politics, and that nationalist women had "enlarged the household until transforming it into a national one," were platitudes in a discourse that explicitly appealed to the post-Arana domestic version of Libe, symbol of female patriotism in support of the husband, the son or the fiancé.⁴⁵

Despite the foregoing, it is interesting to note how the Basque mother continued to be seen as a sober, strong, and restrained woman. For the sake of preserving the difference, the value of tenderness and sentimentality commonly associated with maternity were sacrificed, a sacrifice that became both an existential demand and a source of pride for Basque women. As Polixene Trabudua explained in January 1937, "perhaps because they do not know how to kiss, embrace or cuddle," when they saw off the *gudaris* (Basque soldiers) leaving for the front, the women confined themselves to turning their "humble gaze, bearing the full force of their affection as of Basque mothers" on them.⁴⁶ Manly self-restraint and emotional austerity marked the character of the Basque woman and distanced her from the gestural voluptuousness and expressive eloquence of her Spanish counterpart. The renewed political importance of maternity was thus endowed with its own distinguishing features.

Notwithstanding this division of wartime roles, some nationalist women also performed highly courageous acts. In recent years, under the impetus of the movement for the recovery of historical memory in Spain, some of these names that had been invisible during the Franco dictatorship and neglected by historians have begun to receive the attention that they deserve. This is the case, for example, of the so-called "Álava Network," an anti-Franco resistance group essentially composed of women that functioned from 1937 to 1940 thanks to the clandestine action of four women: Bittori Etxeberria, Itziar Mujika, Delia Lauroba y Tere Verdes, whose names are only just beginning to be known and recognized. They went to great lengths to assist those persecuted by the dictatorship, helping them to cross the frontier with France, saving lives and carrying out espionage even in the context of the Second World War, when they gathered information on the movement in and out of Bilbao of ships supplying the German army and of U-boats on the coasts of the Bay of Biscay.⁴⁷

The legitimacy that the actions of the heroines of the "Álava Network," framed in the struggle against Francoism and Nazism, currently enjoy is a clear example of the continual rewriting of the past. A different context turns episodes of treachery into glorious exploits and villains into heroes, and we historians play a fundamental role in these processes of symbolic transformation. This same phenomenon, but in an opposite sense, has affected the perception of the role played by women in the activities of the armed group ETA (*Euskadi Ta Askatasuna*, Euskadi and Liberty), a military organization created in 1958 within the Basque nationalist movement, in a

break with the mainstream.⁴⁸ Social support for ETA fell drastically over the following fifty years, as a result of changes in the political context—with the transition from a military dictatorship to a parliamentary democracy—and in the strategy of the armed organization—targeting objectives in an increasingly more indiscriminate fashion. At the height of ETA's armed activity in the 1970s, women accounted for between 10 and 15 percent of its members. Nonetheless, in spite of the existence of a number of prominent women activists, the image of the organization has always been overwhelmingly male. The figure of the suffering mother of the male militant has been central to the symbolic construction of ETA's world. But it is worth mentioning that, as the historian Carrie Hamilton has noted, the organization's militants tended to be totally against identifying femininity with specific values, such as peace, a greater sensitivity, or a greater rejection of violence. As one of her respondents said, "ETA violence is absolutely political. It's not about testicles. It's not about ovaries. [...] It's a way of fighting because unfortunately there are moments when the enemy doesn't understand any other ... Violence has nothing to do, absolutely nothing to do, with the feminine sex, or with the masculine."⁴⁹ In all likelihood, the legendary image of the strong and emotionally restrained Basque woman helped to build an identity compatible with the exercise of political violence.⁵⁰

In this chapter, I have attempted to shed some light on the symbolic construction of national heroes from a gender perspective. The history of Basque nationalism shows that the incorporation of women in the pantheon of national heroes has depended more on the different visions of sexual difference than on the real role played by these characters in the nation's past. Thus, when the conditions were right for constructing these symbols, fictional heroines demonstrated their full capacity to create a feeling of belonging and to trigger patriotic emotions. These characters, real or apocryphal, evoke concrete ways of understanding gender differences, femininity, maternity, and the inter-relationships among them. The Basque case thus confirms that the metaphor of the mother nation has not been a constant image in modern nationalisms and, above all, cannot be taken for granted.

The first Basque nationalism, from its traditionalist perspectives and its strict Catholic anthropology, participated in a regime of truth averse to biological determinism as the basis of sexual dualism. Seen from this perspective, Arana's doctrine would dovetail with an explicitly hierarchical model in which the gender condition was chiefly moral and performative, and virility constituted a universally positive value. This vision fostered the construction of virile heroines such as Libe, who rose above their status as women in such a way that the misogyny permeating that thought combined harmoniously with the glorification of their military exploits. Nor was maternity presented as a necessary or more worthy condition for women. For women—and for men—chastity was the state closest to human perfection.

The changes that occurred in the first decades of the twentieth century responded, in part, to the needs of a nationalist movement that aspired to create a political

community in the context of a society of masses. But the symbolic elements employed to integrate women into the movement point to profound transformations in perceptions of gender. The complementarity between the sexes, the strictly biological definition of sexual difference, and the complete identification of women with maternity made the narratives of virile heroines unfeasible. That was when the notion of the mother nation began to play a more prominent role. Political exclusion was replaced by a controlled presence, even though a new generation of young activists defied the political limits imposed on them by the party leadership. The experience of the Civil War consolidated sexual difference and restored the gender order at a particularly volatile moment.

Notwithstanding such significant changes, the legendary image of the strong and austere, coarse and severe Basque woman has survived until this day. This image served to give consistency to political identities to which violence was central, as was the case with the women of ETA. But beyond the now fortunately defunct armed struggle, the power of some narratives, such as that of a supposed ancient Basque matriarchy created by the philosopher Andrés Ortiz-Osés in the 1970s,⁵¹ was felt in other political milieus. Specifically, some currents of feminism in the 1970s looked to the past in search of egalitarian origins, strong women, powerful goddesses, and witches possessing ancestral knowledge of the Basque land, mythical references they could revive and endow with meaning relevant for a new political scenario. Similarly, some elements of Basque nationalism looked to these historically dubious theories as a way of claiming that the Basques were fundamentally different from “Spaniards.” The political vitality of those images and their capacity to shape identities contrasted with their brittle historical foundations. A contrast that invites us to contemplate gender as one of most important and versatile materials with which nations have been built, traditions have been invented, communities have been imagined, and nationalisms banalized.

Notes

- 1 José Luis de la Granja, *El Nacionalismo Vasco: Un Siglo de Historia* (Madrid: Tecnos, 1995), 14. For a similar definition, see Santiago de Pablo and Ludger Mees, *El Péndulo Patriótico. Historia del Partido Nacionalista Vasco (1895–2005)* (Barcelona: Crítica, 2005), 16.
- 2 Without denying this capacity, Anne McClintock has warned against the danger of reducing the gender analysis of these phenomena to the inversion of the prevailing notions of power. In Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995), 15.
- 3 Sabino Arana (1865–1903) was the author of the body of doctrine of Basque nationalism, the leader of the movement founded in the 1890s, and the inventor of its main symbols and emblems. He also created a historical narrative that would—along with the Basque language and a moral definition of the Basque race—provide the basis for the forging of a new national identity.
- 4 José Luis de la Granja, *El Nacionalismo Vasco*, 14; Santiago de Pablo and Ludger Mees, *El Péndulo Patriótico*, 16.

- 5 José Javier Díaz Freire, *La República y el Porvenir: Culturas Políticas en Vizcaya durante la Segunda República* (San Sebastián: Kriselu, 1993), 224–225.
- 6 Sabino Arana, “Los pseudo-ángeles y el pseudo-arte,” *Euzkadi*, no. 4 (1901), in Sabino Arana, *Obras Completas de Arana Goiri’tar Sabin* (San Sebastián: Sendoa, 1980), vol. III, 1984.
- 7 José Javier Díaz Freire, “Cuerpos en Conflicto: La Construcción de la Identidad y la Diferencia en el País Vasco a Finales del Siglo XIX,” in *El Desafío de la Diferencia: Representaciones Culturales e Identidades de Género, Raza y Clase*, ed. Mary Nash and Diana Marre (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco, 2003), 78. See the same author, “Nacionalismo Vasco y Redención del Pasado,” in *Historia e Identidades Nacionales: Hacia un Pacto entre la Ciudadanía Vasca*, ed. Mercedes and Pilar Pérez-Fuentes (Bilbao: SRB, 2007), 127. Galician women were also often portrayed as strong, but in this case the feminizing images of the Galician nation and its menfolk represented the downside. Helena Miguélez-Carballeira has analyzed the endeavors, after 1916, to create a narrative of masculinization aimed at countering these feminizing metaphors. Helena Miguélez-Carballeira, *Galicia, a Sentimental Nation: Gender, Culture and Politics* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013), 101–134. See also Paula Pérez Lucas, “Género, Literatura e Identidad Nacional: Discursos Políticos y Culturales del Proto-Nacionalismo Gallego,” *Arenal* 15, no. 1 (2008): 342.
- 8 Bakarne Altonaga, “Mujeres Viriles en el Siglo XVIII: La Construcción de la Femenidad por el Discurso Foralista de Manuel de Larramendi,” *Historia Contemporánea* 52 (2016): 11 and 28.
- 9 Sabino Arana, *De Fuera Vendrá... Comedia en Tres Actos* [edition and historical study by José Luis de la Granja] (1898, San Sebastián: Haranburu Editor, 1982), 145. For this quote and the previous ones appearing in the paragraph.
- 10 José Javier Díaz Freire, “Cuerpos en Conflicto,” 74.
- 11 See a specific study on the issue performed by José Luis de la Granja, “El Teatro Nacionalista Vasco de Sabino Arana,” in *Eskual Antzertia. Le Théâtre Basque*, ed. Pierre Bidart and Txomin Peillen (Bayonne: Université de Pau et des Pays de l’Adour, 1987), 19–37. See also Santiago de Pablo and Ludger Mees, *El Péndulo Patriótico*, 10. José Javier Díaz Freire has emphasized the role of theater as a generator of emotions. In José Javier Díaz Freire, *La República y el Porvenir*, 213. Arana himself noted the need to place “the Biscayan before his own eyes, clearer than in the most life-like portrait, and make him feel, moving his most delicate fibre.” Sabino Arana, “El Teatro como Medio de Propaganda,” *Bizkaitarra* 17 (1895), in Sabino Arana, *Obras Completas*, vol. I, 471.
- 12 José Javier Díaz Freire, “Cuerpos en Conflicto,” 78.
- 13 Sabino Arana, “La Ceguera de los Bizkaínos,” *Bizkaitarra* 30 (1894), in Sabino Arana, *Obras Completas*, vol. I, 365–366. This characterization had a dual purpose: to debase the Spanish by feminizing them, on the one hand, and by reducing them to mere nature, to a brutal and uncivilized masculinity, on the other.
- 14 Ricardo Becerro de Bengoa, *Romancero Alabés* (1885, Bilbao: Amigos del Libro Vasco, 1985), 104.
- 15 On the historical significance of this figure from the point of view of constructing sexual difference, see Nerea Aresti, “The Gendered Identities of the ‘Lieutenant Nun’. Rethinking the Story of a Female Warrior in Early Modern Spain,” *Gender & History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 401–418.
- 16 Sabino Arana, *Obras Completas*, vol. I, 113.

- 17 The nationalist poet Esteban Urkiaga, *Lauaxeta*, would see in Libe “our Joan of Arc.” Cited in José Luis de la Granja, *El Siglo de Euskadi. El Nacionalismo Vasco en la España del Siglo XX* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2003), 181.
- 18 Coro Rubio and Santiago de Pablo, “Before and after the Nation: Basque Patriotic Heroes, 1834–1939,” *Studies on National Movements* 2 (2015): 5–6.
- 19 Sabino Arana, *Libe* (Bilbao: Tipografía Universal, 1903).
- 20 Sabino Arana, *Libe* (1902), in Sabino Arana, *Obras Completas*, vol. III, 2016.
- 21 Mercedes Ugalde, who in her pioneering work already identified Libe with Eve, has offered an interpretation of this play in which she has placed the accent on the instrumental role given to women in Basque nationalism. In Mercedes Ugalde, *Mujeres y Nacionalismo Vasco. Génesis y Desarrollo de Emakume Abertzale Batza, 1906–1936* (Bilbao, Universidad del País Vasco, 1993), 44.
- 22 Sabino Arana, *Libe* (1902), in Sabino Arana, *Obras Completas*, vol. III, 2035 and 2037. Miren Llona has drawn interesting parallels between the character of Libe created by Arana and the symbolic reference to the Immaculate Conception, underscoring the emphasis placed on female purity. In Miren Llona, *Entre Señorita y Garçonne. Historia Oral de las Mujeres Bilbaínas de Clase Media (1919–1939)* (Málaga: Atenea-Universidad de Málaga, 2002), 192. José Javier Díaz Freire, for his part, has stressed the tension between the feminine nature of the character and her participation in the Basque identity, dispelled by the former’s rectification and its confirmation in the tragic final scene. In José Javier Díaz Freire, “Cuerpos en Conflicto,” 79.
- 23 R. de I., “Notas al Margen. Feminismo,” *Euzkadi*, January 14, 1930: 1.
- 24 The organization was established in Bilbao in April 1922 by fifty founding members. Beforehand, in 1907 some women had already used charity or welfare organizations as a political springboard, and in 1908 they created the “Ropero Vasco” [Basque Wardrobe]. After its activities were resumed in 1931, the EAB had over 25,000 members at one juncture. Mercedes Ugalde, *Mujeres y Nacionalismo Vasco*, 471–492; Mercedes Ugalde, “Dinámica de Género y Nacionalismo: La Movilización de Vascas y Catalanas en el Primer Tercio de Siglo,” *Ayer* 17 (1995): 143–146. González i Vilalta attributes a greater political initiative to female Basque nationalists than to their Catalan counterparts. Arnau González i Vilalta (2005): “Mujer y Nacionalismo Conservador (1931–1936). Análisis Comparado de Dos Casos: Las Emakumes del PNV y la Secció Femenina de Lliga Regionalista,” *Historia Contemporánea* 31 (2005): 625 and 632.
- 25 The Irish influence on Basque nationalism, which has been considerable since the end of the twentieth century to date, has been analyzed by Xosé M. Núñez Seixas in the “Irlanda” entry in Santiago de Pablo, José Luis de la Granja, Ludger Mees and Jesús Casquete, *Diccionario Ilustrado de Símbolos del Nacionalismo Vasco* (Madrid: Tecnos, 2012), 547–562. See also Alexander Ugalde Zubiri, *La Acción Exterior del Nacionalismo Vasco (1890–1939): Historia, Pensamiento y Relaciones Internacionales* (Bilbao: IVAP, 1996).
- 26 Miren Llona, *Entre Señorita y Garçonne*, 161–207.
- 27 Isaac de Etxebarria, “Nuestras Oradoras,” *Euzkadi*, July 9, 1932: 1.
- 28 Leire Arrieta Alberdi, “Emakume,” in Santiago del Pablo et al., *Diccionario Ilustrado*, 208.
- 29 Begoña Bilbao, Gurutze Ezkurdia, Karmele Pérez, and Josu Chueca (coords.), *Emakumeak, Hitza eta Bizitza* (Bilbao: Universidad del País Vasco. Servicio Editorial, 2012).

- 30 Egizale (Alberto de Onaindia), "Homenaje de Admiración. A las Emakumes del 3 de Mayo," *Euzkadi*, May 6, 1933: 1.
- 31 (Unsigned), "Los Actos Organizados por EAB. Conferencia de la Señora Untzueta de Errazti," *Euzkadi*, December 4, 1931: 3.
- 32 Carmen de Errasti, "Juventud Vasca de Bilbao al Maestro. En el XIX Aniversario de su Muerte" (speech delivered by the chairwoman of EAB), *Abeñi*, November 30, 1922: 5–6.
- 33 Manuel de la Sota, "Libe. Unas Consideraciones sobre su Realización Dramática," *Euzkerea* 6, no. 1 (1934): 39–53.
- 34 Ibid., 46.
- 35 In Manuel de la Sota's own words, as the person adapting the work, he had allowed himself "to be generous with Andima and give him the love of Libe." Ibid., 53.
- 36 Sabino Arana (adapt. by Manuel de la Sota), *Libe: Melodrama Histórico* (1903, Bilbao: E. Verdes Achirica, 1934), 100.
- 37 Miren Llona, *Entre Señorita y Garçonne*, 193.
- 38 Sabino Arana (adapt. by Manuel de la Sota), *Libe: Melodrama Histórico*, 108.
- 39 El reportero de guerra, "Una Mujer Lucha por la Libertad y la Justiciar en la Avanzadilla de las Peñas de Aya," *Frente Popular. Diario de la República*, August 10, 1936: 1.
- 40 Mary Nash, *Rojas: Las Mujeres Republicanas en la Guerra Civil* (Madrid: Taurus, 1999), 96–97 and 160–170. For an analysis of the attitude of the nationalist forces in the Civil War, see José Luis de la Granja, *República y Guerra Civil en Euskadi. Del Pacto de San Sebastián al de Santoña* (Oñati: IVAP, 1990); Santiago de Pablo and Ludger Mees, *El Péndulo Patriótico*; Xosé M. Núñez Seixas, "Los Nacionalistas Vascos durante la Guerra Civil (1936–1939): una Cultura de Guerra Diferente," *Historia Contemporánea* 35 (2007): 559–599.
- 41 Luis M. Jiménez de Aberasturi, *Kasilda, Miliciana. Historia de un Sentimiento* (San Sebastián: Txertoa, 1985), 44.
- 42 Miren Llona, "From Militia Woman to Emakume: Myths Regarding Femininity during the Civil War in the Basque Country," in *Memory and Cultural History of the Spanish Civil War. Realms of Oblivion*, ed. Aurora G. Morcillo (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2014), 194.
- 43 Eduardo de Nafarrete, "Labor de Retaguardia: Lo que Corresponde a Nuestra Emakume," *Euzkadi*, September 27, 1936: 5.
- 44 Germán M. de Iñurrategi, "Ciudadanía y Confianza," *Euzkadi*, November 8, 1936: 1. The approaches of the women of the non-denominational and liberal nationalist organization Basque Nationalist Action, a splinter group of the PNV, were more advanced. They encouraged women to follow the example of the physical and spiritual strength showed by the *Lotta Svärd* (a Finnish voluntary auxiliary paramilitary organization for women) during the First World War. In Delfi Bonet, "La mujer en la guerra," *Tierra Vasca*, December 30, 1936: 8. Also in the number of January 1, 1937.
- 45 Garbiñe, "Labor de Emakume," *Patria Libre*, February 18, 1937: 3.
- 46 Polixene, "Amatxu," *Patria Libre*, January 14, 1937: 1.
- 47 Josu Txueka Intxusta, "Emakumes Presas, las Primeras en la Resistencia," *Hermes: Pentsamendu eta Historia Aldizkaria* 44 (2013): 20–27; Ane Azkue Zamalloa, *Red Álava 1936–1947. La red de mujeres invisibles* (Vitoria: Diputación Foral de Álava, 2018).

- 48 The organization's armed actions since 1961 until the announcement of the permanent ceasefire in 2011 claimed the lives of 854 people.
- 49 Carrie Hamilton, (2017): "Political Violence and Body Language in Life Stories of Women ETA Activists," *Signs: Journal of Women in Cultures and Society* 32, no. 4, 2007, 923. See also Carrie Hamilton, *Women and ETA: The Gender Politics of Radical Basque Nationalism* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2007).
- 50 Paradoxically, Dolores González Catarain, *Yoyes*, the first female leader of the organization at the end of the 1970s, is conceivably the militant who has enjoyed the greatest popularity and symbolic significance. *Yoyes* was murdered by the organization itself in 1986, under the accusation of betrayal, after she had decided to abandon the armed struggle and return to civilian life.
- 51 Andrés Ortiz-Osés and Franz Karl Mayr, *El Matriarcalismo Vasco: Reinterpretación de la Cultura Vasca* (Bilbao: Universidad de Deusto, 1980).