

Spain's Dirty War



EGIN

Spanish police inspector José Amedo leaving court in 1991 after being charged with kidnapping. Three years later, he began talking and implicated the government in hit squads and terror.

by Darrin Wood

Spanish officials have broken the silence. In a scandal that reaches to the presidency, they charge that government-run death squads assassinated members of the Basque separatist movement.

For Segundo Marey, the war between the Spanish government and the Basque separatist guerrillas of ETA (Basque Land and Liberty) hit home with a vengeance on December 4, 1983. Marey, a Spanish-born French citizen with no ties to the guerrillas, was kidnapped by a shadowy anti-ETA paramilitary group. His abductors released a communique taking credit for the action in the name of the GAL (*Grupos Antiterroristas de Liberación*/

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Anti-terrorist Liberation Groups). But GAL commandos had made a serious error; they had mistaken Marey for their real target, an ETA leader. GAL soon released the unfortunate Marey, but a dozen years later the incident is at the heart of a scandal rocking the government of President Felipe González.

Marey's kidnapping marked the public emergence of GAL. Between 1983 and 1987, the death squad killed 27 people whom it linked to ETA and wounded numerous others in a series of small arms and bombing attacks, carried out mainly in the French Basque

country.¹ A handful of low-level operatives went to prison for some of the crimes, but for years the question of who was ultimately behind GAL went unanswered. Now, after several sets of officials, each more high-ranking and close to the president, have either admitted their complicity or been jailed in the case or both, accusing fingers are pointing at President González himself.

1. The primary purpose of the GAL was not so much to kill ETA militants as it was to force the French government to cooperate more fully in extraditing ETA members in France to Spain. When Jacques Chirac became French prime minister and began that cooperation, GAL actions stopped.

ETA's War on Spain

On coming to power in 1982, González and his Spanish Socialist Party had reason to be concerned about ETA, which had bedeviled successive Spanish governments since the late 1960s (and which remains active today).² In fact, during the years that GAL operated, ETA was very active, killing 34 people in 1983; 24 in 1984; 31 in 1985; and 24 in 1986.³

As ETA itself often noted, it was never an anti-Franco or anti-fascist organization, but one committed to achieving self-determination for the Basque country—a stance reflected in the group's program, whose primary demand is Spanish recognition of Basque sovereignty over *Euzkadi*, the Basque-language name for the region.

It was one thing for the Basque nationalists to attack the fascist Franco dictatorship, as they had done with a series of assassinations, the most spectacular being the bomb attack on Franco's heir apparent, Adm. Luís Carrero Blanco, in 1973. The admiral's car was blown over a five-story apartment building in Madrid, landing in an interior courtyard. His death was widely considered a mortal blow to the fascist regime.

But after Franco's death two years later and the transition toward democracy under King Juan Carlos I, ETA's attacks on the Spanish state continued and even increased. It made little difference to ETA whether it fought a dictatorship or a democracy. As long as Madrid refused Basque autonomy, ETA's war of national liberation would continue. While pressure to *do some-*

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2. In the 27 years since the first shots for Basque independence were fired, close to 800 people have been killed. Currently, nearly 600 ETA activists are imprisoned in Spain and France, and some 3,000 are refugees in Europe, Africa, and Latin America. ETA's political wing, *Herri Batasuna*, consistently receives between 15 and 20 percent of the Basque country vote at election time.

3. Francisco Llera, "ETA: Ejército secreto y movimiento social," *Revista de Estudios Políticos* (Madrid), v. 78 (1992), p. 165.



GAL kidnap victim Segundo Marey upon his release, December 19, 1983. His case would blow the lid off the GAL scandal.

thing about Basque terror tactics has been a constant in Spanish political life, just how far the government was willing to go is only now becoming clear.

In the past year, revelations from both independent press investigations and ongoing court proceedings have so damaged González's standing that he and his allies have been reduced to hapless flailing. Socialist Party parliamentarian Carmen Romero, who is married to González, last May went so far as to laud political illiteracy: "...fortunately... [f]or their own health and hygiene, the Spanish people read the press very seldom."⁴ Romero seems to be confusing the well-being of the Spanish people with the political health of her husband.

Trial of the Innocents

Because of their bumbling, some GAL operatives had been caught in the 1980s. But until 1991, the only people jailed for GAL's four-year terror campaign had been French and Portuguese mercenaries. In what would become a pattern devastating to the government and the ruling Socialist Party, however, the mercenaries implicated their superiors. As a result, that year the first Spanish officials to be charged for GAL-related offenses were sentenced to prison. Two Spanish police

4. "Carmen Romero cree que leer poca prensa es saludable e higiénico," *El Mundo* (Madrid), May 25, 1995, p. 15.

inspectors, José Amedo and Michel Domínguez, were convicted and sentenced to 108 years each. The two police officials, ostensibly acting on their own initiative, supposedly managed dozens of mercenaries, their supplies of weapons and explosives, and relevant intelligence information in an operation to force the French government to cooperate more actively against ETA.

In the face of damning testimony from their mercenary hirelings, Amedo and Domínguez claimed that they were framed by ETA and its political wing, *Herri Batasuna* (Popular Unity). But Amedo's own sloppy clandestine work undercut that explanation. Evidence in the trial showed that the policeman had indeed met with some of the Portuguese mercenaries. To avoid detection, he had used a false identity, but tripped himself up when he paid the dinner bill with his own credit card.⁵

The Investigative Magistrate in charge of the Marey case, Judge Baltasar Garzón, found the claim that Amedo and Domínguez were acting alone hard to swallow. He doubted that two police officers carried out such a far-reaching operation against ETA by themselves. During his investigations, Judge Garzón drew a flowchart in which the names of all the implicated mercenaries led up to Amedo and Domínguez. At the top of the chart, Gar-

5. Ricardo Arques and Melchor Miralles, *Amedo: El Estado Contra ETA* (Madrid: Plaza & Janes/Cambio 16, 1989), p. 520.



Aftermath of GAL assassination of three ETA members in Bayonne, France, 1985.

tention orders for three high-ranking party and government officials: Julián Sancristóbal, a former Socialist Party Civil Governor (the central government's appointed representative) for the Basque province of Vizcaya and former Director General of State Security; Francisco Álvarez, former head of the Unified Anti-Terrorist Command; and Miguel Planchuelo, the former police chief in Bilbao, the capital of Vizcaya.

The three officials were ordered to testify before Judge Garzón and were all held without bond pending investigation of their roles in the government death squad.

In addition to directly implicating the three imprisoned officials, Amedo also named the number two man in the Interior Ministry, Rafael Vera, and the former Socialist Party leader in Vizcaya, Ricardo García Damborenea, as being participants in GAL. Amedo and Domínguez didn't just name names and explain how GAL

zón placed a big "X," signifying his belief that they were receiving money and orders from above.

At the time, the Spanish government refused to admit even that Amedo and Domínguez were responsible. González himself qualified Garzón's efforts and parallel investigations in the press, as a "moral lynching." His position was not especially surprising considering that a month earlier, in response to a question during a press conference about the use of "secret funds" for GAL, González responded, "Democracy defends itself in the courts and in the conference rooms, but also in the sewers."⁶

Despite the government's public support before and during their trial, Amedo and Domínguez were convicted and sentenced. For the first time, GAL had been conclusively linked to agents of the Spanish government. Still, "X" remained unknown, and the case was effectively closed with responsibility limited to low-level police. The Socialist Party's first major scandal since winning power in 1982 seemed safely behind it.

At least until December 1994.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 520, 528.

The Caged Birds Sing

On December 20, 1994, Felipe González and a dozen former high-level members of Spain's anti-terrorist forces must have read their morning newspapers in a state of shock. "Amedo and Domínguez collaborate with Justice and implicate the government in setting up GAL," screamed the headline in *El Mundo*. Amedo and Domínguez had broken their vows of silence.

"We were conscious at all times that GAL was a government plot,"⁷ said Amedo. The imprisoned policemen also provided detailed testimony on the Marey kidnapping, including names of those involved, the location of safehouses, handwritten documents, and Swiss bank account statements.

Amedo decided to cooperate after reading an interview in *El Mundo* in which a fugitive *Guardia Civil* chief explained that he fled Spain because he did not want to be "tricked" into waiting for a pardon "like Amedo."⁸

What the two policemen told Judge Garzón was enough for him to issue de-

7. Melchor Miralles, "En todo momento tuvimos conciencia de que los GAL eran un montaje del Gobierno," *El Mundo*, Dec. 27, 1994, p. 1.

8. Melchor Miralles, "No dimos un paso que no fuera

functioned, they also provided documents handwritten by Planchuelo, Sancristóbal, and García Damborenea that demonstrated their involvement. Based on Amedo's and Domínguez's sworn testimony and supporting evidence, Garzón ordered Vera and García Damborenea to join their former colleagues in prison in February.

The GAL scandal had moved to a new phase, with some of the country's most prominent politicians and law enforcement figures now accused of masterminding death squad attacks on ETA. With some of his inner circle now implicated, González was beginning to feel the heat from a scandal that threatens to bring him down.

The Empire Strikes Back

But González and the Socialists stonewalled. The party and the government stood by the imprisoned officials. José Barrionuevo, interior minister while GAL was functioning, called Sancristóbal, Álvarez, and Planchuelo "friends of mine whom I hold in high esteem."⁹ The So-

una orden," *El Mundo*, Dec. 26, 1994, p. 10.

9. Manuel Sánchez, "Barrionuevo pide a Garzon que tenga 'un gesto de humanidad' y deje en libertad a los ex altos cargos," *El Mundo*, Dec. 23, 1994, p. 8.

cialists even defended former Basque region party leader Ricardo García Damborenea although he had left the party several years earlier and had campaigned for the opposition conservative Popular Party in 1994.

González himself lambasted the singing policemen. "We, the democratic people, cannot give credibility to what two convicts say to one of the media,"¹⁰ he retorted. Never mind that he had stood firmly behind the "two convicts" when they were the accused and not the accusers, or that his government had compensated them while they were in prison.

A party spokesperson added that it is necessary "to do political battle in defense of the Socialist project and support the president of the government, who is being subjected to a clearly unjustified attack operation to weaken his credibility through means that aren't proper in a democratic system."¹¹

Such comments were part of a Socialist counterattack to "protect the presumption of innocence" of those imprisoned. So was the conspiracy theory they began to enunciate, perhaps a technique they learned from Lyndon LaRouche's people.¹² The "conspiracy" seems to consist of the Madrid daily *El Mundo* for its journalistic exposés, Judge Garzón for investigating GAL, and other dark, unnamed forces in Spanish society. Its putative aim is to destroy the presidency of Felipe González and his Socialist Party.

This theory was best expressed by Julián Sancristóbal, the jailed former civil governor and González ally, in a series of prison interviews, events remarkable for their rarity: In Spain, it is practically impossible to get interviews with prisoners before they are tried. But not, apparently, if they happen to be former high level members of the Socialist Party and the Interior Ministry. In January, prison officials gave Sancristóbal permission to be interviewed by the pro-Socialist newspaper, *El País*,

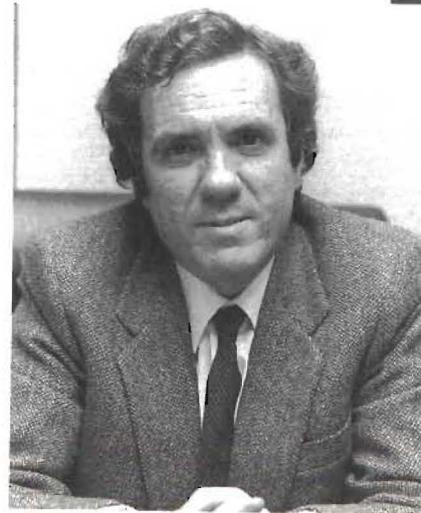
10. "Ni toleré, ni consentí, ni mucho menos organicé el GAL," *El Mundo*, Jan. 10, 1995, p. 12.

11. Pascual García, "Almunia sobre el 'caso GAL': 'Lo que la opinión pública puede conocer del Gobierno ya lo conoce'," *El Mundo*, Jan. 13, 1995, p. 7.

12. The LaRouchites came to Spain in 1983 to join the fray against ETA. They traded intelligence information on ETA members living in France and provided contacts with French security forces to help ease the way for carrying out attacks there. Manuel Cerdan, Antonio Rubio and Darrin Wood, "Un informe de la CIA relacionó a la ultraderecha norteamericana con la 'guerra sucia' contra ETA," *El Mundo*, Aug. 6, 1995, p. 8.

the right-wing Madrid daily, *ABC*, and the government-run television network, *TVE*.

Sancristóbal claimed on TV that the Segundo Marey case was a sinister plot "...which has as its objective the undermining and overthrow of President Felipe González." He added that "without any doubt, Judge Garzón has participated" in the conspiracy.¹³ And, in a clear reference to Garzón's "X" as head of GAL, Sancristóbal mentioned a mysterious "Mr. Z" as the ringleader of the conspiracy. But the former civil governor provided no evidence to support his claims.



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The attacks against Judge Garzón and the two policemen raged unabated until the Socialists inadvertently caused a new round of revelations to explode during the summer. Interior Ministry second-in-command Rafael Vera walked out of prison in July when the Socialist Party paid his \$200,000 bail, set by Judge Garzón. That the party posted Vera's bail while ignoring the others who were imprisoned did not sit well with Planchuelo, Álvarez, Sancristóbal, and García Damborenea. The GAL case was now ready for a new round of unraveling.

Vera promptly put his foot in his mouth by tacitly acknowledging the ex-

13. "Hay una conspiración para derribar a González," *El Mundo*, Jan. 19, 1995, p. 10.



Pres. Felipe González. "Democracy defends itself in the courts and in the conference rooms, but also in the sewers."

istence of government-sponsored hit squads when he told the press that "there are societies in which they have come to legalize this counter-terrorism, like in Israel, where terrorist activities carried out abroad are supported and directed by the State."¹⁴

But for Felipe González, there was much worse to come. The loyal subordinates he, his party, and his government had so tenaciously defended were about to turn on him.

The Sound of Cover-Ups Shattering

Two days after Vera walked, former Bilbao police chief Planchuelo appeared before Judge Garzón, admitted participating in GAL, and began to name names. He fingered former interior minister José Barrionuevo (who only days earlier had publicly defended Planchuelo's innocence) as a participant in planning the Marey kidnapping. Planchuelo quoted Barrionuevo as explaining, "The French need a lesson taught"¹⁵— a reference to Spain's fruitless efforts to gain France's cooperation against ETA. And Planchuelo added a new dimension when he testi-

14. "Fenomenos como el GAL son legales en otros países," *El Mundo*, July 17, 1995, p. 10.

15. Manuel Cerdan and Antonio Rubio, "Planchuelo implica directamente al ex ministro Barrionuevo en el secuestro de Segundo Marey," *El Mundo*, July 17, 1995, p. 8.

fied that both the Spanish military spy agency, CESID—ultimately responsible to the president—and the *Guardia Civil* paramilitary police played key roles in GAL.¹⁶ His testimony was later backed up by documents leaked from CESID.

Planchuelo's jailed comrades quickly followed him to confession. Next to repent was Julián Sancristóbal, whom a Socialist spokesperson had earlier described as a "fighter for peace and freedom in the Basque Country." Sancristóbal too fingered Barrionuevo and his second-in-command, Rafael Vera, as having given the orders to kidnap Segundo Marey. And he described Ricardo García Damborenea as being the Socialist Party's pointman in Vizcaya for the "dirty war" against ETA. Sancristóbal added that, "It isn't logical that, since the Minister [Barrionuevo] knew about it, the president wouldn't know about it."¹⁷

Next in line for Spain's death squad kiss and tell was Francisco Álvarez. He now admitted his role and assumed responsibility for the actions of police officers under his orders who participated in the hit squad's activities. The former

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counterterrorism commander asked that those who ordered him to participate in GAL assume their responsibility as well. Álvarez, like the others before him, directly implicated Vera,

16. Manuel Cerdan and Antonio Rubio, "El comisario Planchuelo admite ante Garzón su participación en el secuestro de Segundo Marey," *El Mundo*, July 16, 1995, p. 9.
17. Agustín Yanel and Manuel Sánchez, "Sancristóbal dice que Barrionuevo y Vera daban las ordenes sobre el secuestro de Marey," *El Mundo*, July 18, 1995, p. 6. He also admitted using secret Interior Ministry funds to finance GAL actions and pocketing between \$500,000 and \$700,000 as a reward for his work.

Barrionuevo, and García Damborenea, although he maintained that he believed the leadership of GAL went higher up¹⁸—presumably meaning Felipe González.

With Planchuelo, Sancristóbal, and Álvarez having loaded the bases, Ricardo García Damborenea stepped up to the plate. And the ex-Secretary General of the Socialist Party in Vizcaya hit a grand slam.

"I have explained that my responsibility consisted in having designed the strategy with other politicians who were responsible. Which ones? Well, with those who could have had a relevant opinion regarding this question. That is to say, with those with responsibility in the Socialist Party in the Basque country,"¹⁹ García Damborenea declared in a stormy press conference following his testimony before Garzón.

Then, abandoning all coyness, Felipe González's old comrade and ally dropped a bomb on the already beleaguered president:

The truth is that, necessarily, we can deduce that Mr. González knew about it. But we don't need to deduce it. I'll tell you: Mr. González knew about it because I had spoken with Mr. González, not just on one occasion but on various occasions. [Because] this was a political strategy that had been undertaken by politicians with responsibility ... he who could make the final decision, well...he did so. Does this mean that I am passing my responsibility on to Mr. González? Not at all. I am recognizing my *co-responsibility* with him, because I agreed with it, and I went, along with others, with those who encouraged him to adopt this strategy of intervening in the south of France."²⁰

18. Agustín Yanel and Manuel Sánchez, "Álvarez dice que siempre creó que la cúpula de los GAL estaba 'mas arriba' del ministro," *El Mundo*, July 19, 1995, p. 7. One of the more interesting aspects of Álvarez's confession was his affirmation that there wasn't just one GAL, but various GALs. According to him, there was the "Brown GAL" (brown-uniformed CESID defense department officers), the "Green GAL" (green-uniformed *Guardia Civil* officers), the "Blue GAL" (police) and the "French GAL" (members of France's security forces). Álvarez's assertion, backed with CESID documents, would broaden the continuing investigations in the press and the courts.

19. "Animo' a González en la estrategia de los GAL," *El País* (Madrid), July 21, 1995, p. 13.

20. *Ibid.*

And García Damborenea broadened the scandal's sweep yet again. He named Narcis Serra, defense minister during GAL years and later González's vice president,²¹ along with Txiqui Benegas, the current Socialist Party head in the Basque country, as also involved.

The combined impact of the declarations by these men—high party or government officials—was a body blow to the González administration. For the first time, González himself was directly implicated, and not by his foes but by his longtime allies. What is more, their testimony implicated an ever-growing array of Spanish security services, as well as even more high government officials.

The End of the Trail?

As long as GAL conspirators kept their mouths shut, the Socialist Party stood staunchly with them. Not anymore. García Damborenea, whose declarations caused the most damage, bore the harshest attacks. The current Interior Minister has called him a "delinquent confessed terrorist," and accused him of being Judge Garzón's "Mr. X."²² The Socialists now also attacked García Damborenea for having recently switched political alliances.

Felipe González, as was his pattern, denied García Damborenea's charges. He alleged that he had *never* talked about terrorism or anti-terrorism with his accuser.²³ His claim seems unbelievable considering the level of political violence in the Basque country, García Damborenea's position as party leader in the Basque country, and the fact that García Damborenea had for years publicly held extremely hard-line views against ETA. It was also later contradicted by several members of his own party.²⁴

According to Spanish law, only the Supreme Court can investigate mem-

21. Narcis Serra was recently forced to resign as Vice-President because of a scandal at CESID involving illegal phone tapings of everyone from journalists and soccer club owners to King Juan Carlos.

22. "El ministro Belloch afirma que García Damborenea 'es el Señor X de los GAL,'" *El Mundo*, July 22, 1995, p. 9.

23. "Damborenea culpa a González de los GAL y el presidente responde con acciones penales," *El País*, July 21, 1995, p. 1. González did not even bother to address the charges by Sancristóbal, Álvarez, and Planchuelo, even when he was forced to appear before Parliament to refute the charges on July 27.

24. Rafael Herrero, "Jauregui acusa a Damborenea de defenderse 'ensuciando todos,'" *El Mundo*, July 22, 1995, p. 7.

