In December 1970, 16 members of the Basque separatist group ETA, the acronym for Basque Homeland and Liberty, were charged with the murder of a Spanish police commissioner. The Burgos 16, court-martialed and found guilty, had little or no access to attorneys. Six of the accused were sentenced to death by firing squad. The case drew global notoriety, calling attention to the larger issues of independence for the Basque Country and the disregard for civil liberties and human rights under the rule of General Francisco Franco. In Idaho, many Basques protested, urging the commutation of Franco’s sentences. For many Boise Basques, this was the latest chapter in a centuries-old cycle of repression and cultural subjugation.

The Basque Country (Euskal Herria) today is a region with three languages, two sovereign states and seven provinces. Approximately three million people make the region their home, most of whom live in Spain, with the remainder in France. Since the Middle Ages, French and Spanish kings agreed to a set of laws (foruak) that gave the Basques local control over tax-
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reclaiming the flag

171 becoming basque

ation, imports/exports, military conscription and inheritances. The French Revolution (1789–99) effectively eliminated those rights in France, and the War of Spanish Succession (1701–1714) and the Carlist Wars (18th century) led to their demise in Spain. The decline in local autonomy reached its nadir with Gen. Franco’s Nationalist victory in the Spanish Civil War (1936–39). Over the next 35 years under Franco’s rule, the Basque language was prohibited; Basque names were removed from birth records; the Spanish police (Guardia Civil) was a visible and repressive presence in the Basque region and all forms of Basque identity—language, music, literature and political symbols such as the Basque flag—were prohibited. These efforts to remove Basque culture in the years following the Civil War were extremely damaging, especially in the northern provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa. Post-war generation Basques remember being slapped in the face, or worse, at school for speaking their language, Euskara. These efforts, while moderately successful, did lead to a significant reduction in native Basque speakers.

The contentious relationship between Franco and the Basque Country hardened into acrimony because of Franco’s insistence on a unitary Spanish state with no room for Basque identity. Basque nationalists from the time of Sabino Arana (1865–1903), the father of Basque nationalism, and later a Basque government in exile, have pressed for a peaceful and negotiated process leading to self-determination. By the 1960s, young Basques, tired of these failed attempts at a peaceful solution, formed ETA, Eusko Ta Askatasuna (Basque Homeland and Liberty). The roots of ETA can be traced to Bilbao’s University of Duesto, where in 1952 seven students met to discuss Basque self-determination. Their group grew in numbers and the desire for direct action increased. The young activists officially founded ETA on July 31, 1959.

At its inception, ETA promoted public, non-violent protests through its communications. However, a small cadre within the larger movement advocated armed resistance as a useful way to fight Franquist repression. In 1961, ETA executed its first act of political violence when it tried to derail a train full of Franco supporters in transit to a rally. The weak bomb explosion...
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ETA’s goals were Basque solidarity, independence and reunification, along with the preservation of Basque culture and language. Their statement of demands, known as the “KAS Alternative,” included recognizing that all Basques had a right to self-determination, the withdrawal of all national security forces from the Basque regions, the integration of the province of Navarra into the Basque Country, total amnesty for all Basque political prisoners, independence for all four Basque provinces in Spain and the legalization of all separatist political movements. These goals had significant support among nearly all Basques, but there was a large divergence over tactics.

In faraway Boise, Basque nationalism was “an undercurrent, not a groundswell: a matter of concern, not action,” as New York Times columnist Anthony Ripley wrote in 1970. Basque immigrants who came to Idaho in the years before the Spanish Civil War hesitated to get involved with the political and social turmoil of their homeland. Survival in America seemed to be their priority. But an influx of new Basque immigrants, those after the 1950s who had experienced firsthand the Franco repression, were more involved in the political fortunes of the homeland. In the aftermath of the Burgos 16 trial a few of these recent Basque immigrants formed an entity that supported Basque nationalism. The group called itself Anaiak Danok (Brothers All). At the onset, Anaiak Danok was a part of the established Basque Center, the
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As in the Basque Country, the local Basque community had mixed feelings about the region’s politics. Almost all felt that the Basques were a unique people and should be given the right of self-determination. Some felt independence from Spain was the only way to ensure Basque identity, while others felt that a model of regional autonomy similar to states in the U.S. would be sufficient for the Basque regions.

Two first-generation immigrants are symbolic of those divergent views within the Boise Basque community. In 1952, Basque native Simon Achabal wrote a letter to his uncle Andres Achabal explaining his interest in coming to the United States. The 18-year-old Achabal came that same year to herd sheep. Two years later, his younger brother, Julian, came to the U.S. and worked alongside Simon. Simon said that his intention was "to come to this
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country, sacrifice, save money, go back to the Basque Country, buy something [a house] and make a living.” But upon his return from a visit to the homeland, he realized that Franco had made life “miserable” for the Basque people. He made up his mind that Boise was now his home.

Although Simon had little interest in Anaiak Danok, Julian, immersed himself in its activities. He served as president of the organization for a year. Julian was also passionate in his animosity toward the Spanish government. He once asked a family member who visited Franco’s tomb, “Did you piss on that bastard’s grave?” Julian tried to recruit Simon, but Simon never felt the political intensity of his younger sibling. Simon surely had reasons to join Anaiak Danok. His father was a prisoner for four years after the Spanish Civil War, accused of being a “communista terrorista.” Simon also related that if

one wrote a letter from the U.S. to Basque friends or family members, any mention of politics meant retribution against the recipient in the homeland. Even so, Simon refused to join.

According to Simon, Anaiak Danok supported ETA. This position was in line with Julian’s political ideas, but it was not Simon’s. According to Simon, Anaiak Danok began as an organization that supported Basques back home and held local celebrations of Basque culture. But it transformed into a group that became too enamored of ETA’s political aims and tactics. “When you start killing people, I can’t go for that,” Simon said. This was the central conflict for many Basques, both in the homeland and the diaspora.
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The most notable Basque voice in Anaiai Danok was Secretary of State Pete Cenarrusa. He joined the organization after a trip to the Basque homeland. Born in Carey, Idaho, in 1917 of Basque immigrant parents, Cenarrusa was a prominent supporter of Basque independence. Since the Basque Country is the motherland of the Basques, wrote Cenarrusa in his memoirs, the Basque Country is a nation. The Basque people should have the right of self-determination; they ought to have the right to become a nation-state if the majority of the people chose to do so in a free election. The Basque people, according to Cenarrusa, have wanted an independent Basque state since the 18th century. Basque independence was a crucial political goal for Cenarrusa for decades. He never wavered in his support for ETA’s political aims; however, Cenarrusa publicly rejected the small number of ETA supporters who resorted to violent tactics, once stating to Spanish Ambassador Javier Ruperez, “Our end is to get rid of terrorism.” From Cenarrusa’s point of view “patriotism” better reflected ETA’s goals for Basque autonomy.

The Burgos 16 case instigated the first activity of protest toward the Franco regime in Idaho. Cenarrusa led the effort. The trial focused the world’s media attention on the political repression in Spain. Governments and international political groups demanded that the death sentence for six of the accused be commuted. Cenarrusa worked with the Idaho congressional delegation in an attempt to influence the U.S. State Department to pressure for restraint by the Spanish government. Idaho Gov. Don Samuelson, a close political ally of Cenarrusa, sent a cable to Gen. Franco espousing the principles of trying civilians in civil rather than military court. After the death sentences were announced, Cenarrusa organized a declaration signed by more than 200 Boise Basques asking Franco to commute the sentences. A benefit dance followed, with the proceeds going to the 16 families of the accused. U.S. Sen. Frank Church, then a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, also lent his voice for commutation of the sentences. On Dec. 30, 1970, one day before the first scheduled execution, Franco commuted the sentences to 30-year prison terms for each of the six.
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In 1975, two Basques were executed for the death of a Spanish police officer, bringing more criticism of the Spanish court system. Members of Anaiak Danok asked the U.S. to support 16 other nations in protest by removing their Spanish ambassadors. Anaiak Danok met with Sen. Church, asking him to address the Basque conflict. In 1978, Sen. Church and his wife, Bethine, visited the Basque Country and received a hero’s welcome. It was viewed as a victory for Basques living in the U.S. when Church visited the symbolic Tree of Gernika and the historic Basque parliament. In October 1975, Anaiak Danok received a request for aid from Anai Artea, a Basque refugee house in the homeland. Bombings and cruelty in the southern provinces sent an overflow of refugees to the house. The Basque women of Anaiak Danok launched an effort in Boise to gather blue and green stamp books, money and other necessities. They sent their fellow Basques at Anai Artea Christmas packages that were graciously accepted. By the late 1970s, however, Anaiak Danok disbanded due to lack of interest and some internal discord. At its core, this discord related to the use of violence by ETA.

Idaho, primarily through Cenarrusa, has had a long, often vexed, relationship with the Spanish government over the Basque Country. Cenarrusa devoted a lot of time on Basque affairs outside of his duties as Secretary of State. He was extremely concerned with his homeland; his relatives lived in the Basque Country under Franco’s dictatorship. The Idaho Legislature, at Cenarrusa’s request, passed a resolution in 1972 calling on the United States to pressure Spain to stop executing, torturing, jailing and suppressing Basques for political reasons. The resolution called for the halt of all Spanish foreign aid unless amnesty was granted. The U.S. had sent nearly $2.5 billion in assistance to Spain during the Cold War years in exchange for military bases.

Years later, Cenarussa had the opportunity to defend Basque autonomy and criticize Spanish policies in a face-to-face meeting with Ambassador Ruperez. In the 2001 meeting arranged by Idaho Sen. Larry Craig to discuss Spanish-U.S. relations, the ambassador declined to mention Spain’s relationship with the Basques. This failure to address the Basque question angered Cenarrusa, who was present at the meeting. In the ensuing heated discussion, Cenarrusa, who believed the ambassador cavalierly dismissed three decades of Franco’s repression, stated, “It [ETA] started with Franco suppressing Basque culture and assassinating people.” Ruperez and Spain’s Prime Minister, Jose Maria Aznar, believed that the issue of Basque independence had nothing to do with politics. Rather, it had to do with getting rid of ETA. Ruperez claimed that ETA kidnapped him in 1979, a statement that Cenarrusa vehemently denied.

In 2002, one year before he retired as secretary of state, Cenarrusa and then-state representative David Bieter ushered another memorandum through the Idaho Legislature supporting self-determination in the Basque Country. The measure caught the attention of the U.S. State Department, which strongly suggested the addition of wording that condemned terrorism. The Basque-language newspaper Egunkaria covered news of the resolution. Soon after, the Spanish government closed the paper’s offices and arrested
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Despite the increased freedom of speech, assembly and more local control, the dirty war between ETA and the Spanish government continued unabated through the 1980s, 1990s and into the new century. Increasingly, ETA targeted Basques who did not share its political tactics of extortion, kidnapping and assassination. In the 1980s, the Socialist government of Felipe Gonzalez sanctioned the use of private “hit
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Recently, the Basque government has tried with some success to bypass the Spanish court system to present its case to the European Union. A recent EU court found that the Spanish government’s unilateral “extension” of sentences for Basque prisoners without right to counsel, hearing or appeal was a human rights violation. Basques continue to stage demonstrations protesting Spanish human rights policies, such as one in Bilbao in January 2014 when tens of thousands of protesters marched through the city’s streets. The issue of the Basque homeland remains unresolved and tenuous, but more hopeful than at any time in recent memory.

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