

Basque exiles in Uruguay

Xabier Irujo 1967an jaio zen Venezuelako erbestean. Filologia, Filosofia eta Geografia eta Historia ikasketak egin zituen eta duela gutxi "Euskal erbeste politikoa Uruguain (1943-1955)" izenburupean Nafarroako Unibertsitate Publikoan aurkeztua izan den bere doktoradutzako tesia defendatu du. Joseba Agirreazkuenaga katedradunaren zuzendaritzapean bildutako tribunalak cum laudea emateko erabakia hartu zuen.

Born in exile in Venezuela in 1967, Xabier Irujo holds a bachelor's degree in Philology, Philosophy, Geography and History. He recently defended his dissertation at the Public University of Navarre on "Euskal erbeste politikoa Uruguain (1943-1955)". His thesis committee, chaired by Joseba Agirreazkuenaga, considered his work outstanding and Irujo graduated cum laude.

Irujo's thesis, the second at the Public University of Navarre to be defended in Euskara, focuses on a group of Basque exiles and Uruguayan nationals – descendants of earlier Basque immigrants – and their activities

associated with a very ambitious Basque Government Office in Uruguay. 600 members belonged to the Euskal Erria Basque Center in Montevideo in 1937; but it only took a handful of them to carry out a huge amount of work in both the political and cultural arenas. According to Xabier Irujo, "The Basque Office in Montevideo worked with the presidency and the ministers of Interior and Foreign Affairs of the successive Uruguayan governments to keep Uruguay from allowing a dictatorship which had collaborated with Nazi Germany and fascist Italy access to the United Nations."

The Basque Office operated like a genuine Basque embassy in America. "in terms of its relations with the Uruguayan Government, the country's political parties (primarily *Unión Cívica* and *Partido Colorado*), and the United States secret service. It also worked with Basque Offices in other countries throughout Europe and Latin America. It played a role in the opening of Plaza Gernika in Montevideo in 1944 and was active in the First Christian Democrat International Congress in Latin America inaugurated by Jacques Maritain, held in Montevideo and organized by Senator Dardo Regules, loyal friend and champion of the Basque community."



Representative of the Basque community in Uruguay with Aguirre and Councillor Aldasoro.

The celebration of Basque Week in Montevideo in 1943 kicked off a period of intensive cultural activity. The Department of Basque Studies was created at the National University, as were the first chairs of Euskara and Basque Culture in America. GALEUZCA Uruguay came into being, as did the group Euskaltzaleak and the *Club del Libro Vasco*, sponsored by the Montevideo-based Euskal Erria Basque Center, which translated and published Shakespeare's "Hamlet" and Juan Ramón Jiménez's *Platero y yo* (Platero and I). This group of people also collaborated with the Montevideo cultural center, known as the *Ateneo*, and with the National University. "Basque culture in

exile owes a lot to such prominent Uruguayans as Carlos Vaz Ferreira, Raúl Montero Bustamante, Eduardo Berro García, Leopoldo Agorio Etcheverry, and to the sons and daughters of earlier Basque exiles including Carlos G. Mendilaharsu, José Mendiola, Miguel Bañales, María Ana Bidegaray Janssen and Héctor Tosar Herrecart, to name just a few."

Uruguay was a fertile ground for tenacious and hardworking Basques. "The country that saw the birth of the so-called *Generación de los Maestros Serenos* (generation of the quiet masters), which so enriched Latin American and European letters in the first half of the twentieth century, had a great sense of democracy," says Irujo, who adds that "it is one of those rare examples in history of the socialization of democracy and human values. It had a highly advanced education system and in many aspects is still an example today. Uruguay's criminal code, brainchild of José Iruretagoyena Anza, son of Basque immigrants who sought refuge in Uruguay after the second Carlist War, just to cite an example, is one of the first in the world to regulate euthanasia and abortion. And much the same can be said of the brilliant work of Eduardo Couture Etcheverry, also descendent of Basque immigrants, in the field of procedural law."

With regard to sociological make-up, "the group of Basque exiles," comments Irujo, "included people from all social classes. However, they had a strong political



Inauguration of Plaza Gernika in Montevideo, 1944.

affinity. The struggle for human rights and the historical rights for the Basque people in exile helped to consolidate the profound human relations that characterized the Basque diaspora. They recreated the extended family left behind in Euskal Herria, and the Basque centers became their new homes, creating genuine family bonds and sincere friendships."

Xabier Irujo's research covers the period ending in 1955, the year the Franco regime was finally admitted to the United Nations. However, as Irujo explains, this development was not what brought about the end of Basque exile in America. It could be better explained by the "rupture between the Basque Government and the U.S.

secret service in 1949, one of the Basque Government's primary sources of funding. The rise to power of General Eisenhower and the Republican Party, the policy of censure and foreign alliances favored by conservative senators MacCarthy and MacCarran, among others, coupled with the interests and reorganization of the newly created Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), brought an end to the strategic alliance with the Basque Government that had been in place since 1941."

Irujo concludes that after 1955 the Basque Government had to face the most difficult crisis of its exile – self-management – its economic base supported by an odd sort of 'loan' financed by the Basque centers or private donations from the exiles themselves. From 1951 to 1955 the political and cultural activities of the Basque Government Office in Uruguay steadily declined until all but disappearing by the end of the five-year period.

"Researching this period in the history of our people is a study on the solidarity of a nation, Uruguay, which in spite of political and economic interests, made a conscious effort to support the cause of justice and

human rights: the cause of the Basque people. My most heartfelt affection goes out to all of the men and women who so selflessly collaborated with the Basque Office in exile in Montevideo. Those are the people to whom I dedicate my thesis, and most particularly Carlos G. Mendilaharsu, the last witness to that generation."

*Uruguaira jo zuten
euskaldunak oso
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desberdinetakoak
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