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**An Alternative Take**  
**on the Terrorist**  
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# **Al-Qaeda or ETA? An Alternative Take on the Terrorist Attacks in Madrid**

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The series of explosions that took place in Madrid on March 11, 2004 furnished food for the Spanish mind, giving rise to different theories, chief among which were those concerning the culprits responsible for that brutal crime. Following its investigation, the public prosecutor's office declared Islamic jihadists to be the guilty party. At least two counter-narratives have arisen, however; in addition to the official version, there is an unofficial one that throws suspicion on the Basque terrorist organization, ETA. Such a version of events was seen as the most probable by the public prosecutor's office at the outset of its inquiry. Denials by the Spanish government some years later have been interpreted as evidence of a lack of transparency in official proceedings and a form of political manipulation.

## **Conspiracy Theory or Uncomfortable Truth?**

Conspiracy theories do not constitute theories in the scientific sense. They do not represent a coherent system of

axioms, statements, or definitions that define, systematize, and explicate a chosen aspect of reality. Such a theory is, instead, a set of imaginings constructed around a statement or hypothesis about events viewed as a conspiracy being carried out by powerful forces. Conspiracy theories are fundamentally designed with a focus on important political events that awaken the interest of the mass media and have the potential to resonate within social discourse. As scholars of the subject have noted,<sup>1</sup> conspiracy theories are no longer marginal in nature, and their construction is now an element of public life.

Unlike the scientific application of the word “theory,” the term “conspiracy theory” is one used a priori to discredit. It questions facts, making claims, hypotheses and speculations on the sequence of events and their causes, and providing evidence to support to its arguments. Labelling these as false or even absurd can add legitimacy to the interpretation generally considered to be correct. In dealing with contestations of facts, declaring a particular version of the facts to be a conspiracy theory aims to highlight the difference between what is accepted as true and what is considered to be false. The term “conspiracism” is applied in a similar way.<sup>2</sup> It designates alternative visions of the truth as manifestations of an overactive imagination or of personality disorders, as lies or infantilism on the part of their adherents. They are often

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<sup>1</sup> J. Boyford, *Conspiracy Theories. A Critical Introduction*, Basingstoke – New York 2011, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup> M. Gray, *Conspiracy Theories in the Arab World. Sources and Politics*, London – New York 2010, p. 168 and passim; A. Graf, S. Fathi, L. Paul (ed.), *Orientalism and Conspiracy. Politics and Conspiracy Theory in the Islamic World*, London – New York 2011; M. Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy. Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2013, p. 99.

treated as signs of the demagoguery of their purveyors, or as an epidemic or plague taking over people's defenceless minds.<sup>3</sup>

It is hard to believe, nonetheless, that belief in a single version of events could remain intact among all the citizenry in a democratic society, in whose structure the existence of divergent beliefs is inscribed. Given the current level of development of the media and the varied political interests they represent, mutual contradictions in the information they convey is an integral property of them. For the opposition and its supporters, the designation of an alternative version of events as a "conspiracy theory" may also lead to the conjecture that the official version is merely a cover-up for a politically uncomfortable truth. Furthermore, in a climate where citizens' trust in their government is generally at a low level, the antitheses of official narratives may have greater verisimilitude.

### **11-M in Madrid. Details of the Terrorist Attacks**

The abbreviation 11-M<sup>4</sup> has come into widespread use in Spain to refer to the series of terrorist attacks that took place on March 11. Polish and other foreign mass media refer to them as the "attacks in the Madrid metro"; the bombings took place on four trains within the city's Cercanías commuter train system.<sup>5</sup> Ten explosions occurred almost simul-

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<sup>3</sup> See P. Knight, *Conspiracy Culture. From Kennedy to The X Files*, Abingdon – New York 2000.

<sup>4</sup> It is also sometimes written 11M.

<sup>5</sup> *Cercanías*, the train network in whose cars the attacks took place, consists of commuter trains, bound to the city center and connecting it with surrounding areas. This train system enables Spaniards to travel quickly to work. It is more or less the equivalent of the Polish Szybka Kolej Miejska (SKM—Fast Urban Train) that runs in Warsaw and the Tri-city metropolitan area of Gdynia, Sopot and Gdańsk.

taneously, over a period of a few minutes, in various areas, indicating the existence of an entire network of perpetrators who prepared carefully and coordinated efficiently. The explosions occurred during the morning rush hour, between 7:36 and 7:40 AM, when trains were typically full of people heading to work. The number of casualties from the attacks was significant – those killed numbered between 191 and 193, depending on the source, while around two thousand people were injured. This cruel onslaught horrified Spanish society, but it also became the subject of speculation, particularly with regard to the identity of the culprits.

Nearly a year after the attacks, the Islamist organization Al Qaeda took responsibility for them and that version of events was accepted by the public prosecutor's office in its resolution concluding the criminal investigation.

### **An Alternative Vision. Data on ETA Terrorist Activity**

Besides Al Qaeda, the ETA was also suspected of orchestrating the attacks, but other suspicions also arose. In tabloids and in daily conversations among supporters of the right-wing Partido Popular there was talk of possible involvement by the Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE), the opposition at that time, which had supposedly schemed and plotted in favour of the attacks in the final days before the elections for political advantage. Members of both parties accused each other in the course of the media commotion. Some even hinted that the attacks might be linked to French and Moroccan secret service interests. Those rumours were

rather marginal discourses, however, and the main narrative divided into two lines, one blaming Al Qaeda, the other blaming ETA. The version that claimed ETA had perpetrated the attacks attained great popularity. This view was propounded by, among others, the internet daily *Libertad Digital*, but it also appeared in *El Mundo*, one of the most widely-read newspapers in Spain, center-right in its political orientation.<sup>6</sup> That version gained added plausibility from the fact that ETA was known for having been involved in committing acts of terrorism on Spanish soil over many years.

There is evidence pointing to attempts made by ETA members to commit a similar type of attack shortly prior to 11-M. On December 24, 2003, two members of ETA<sup>7</sup> were held by the Spanish police under suspicion of attempting to carry out an attack. Not only was the intended strike supposed to occur at the Chamartín train station in northern Madrid, but similar tactics were also employed, including the use of explosive materials concealed in backpacks. Two months later, February 28, 2004, two other members of the organization were arrested as they headed toward Madrid in a delivery van carrying over 500 kilos of explosive materials, referred to later on in news articles, including in the pages of *El País*, as the *caravana de la muerte*, or

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<sup>6</sup> Several years later, the new editor-in-chief, Casimiro García-Abadillo, wrote a short feuilleton on the subject of 11-M, discrediting the attempt to attribute the attacks to ETA and declaring that “we all make mistakes.” See C. García-Abadillo, *Diez años después, un balance desapasionado del 11-M*, *El Mundo*, 9.03.2014, <http://www.elmundo.es/opinion/2014/03/08/531b74b122601da1438b456d.html> (23.01.2016).

<sup>7</sup> These were Irkutz Badillo Borde and Gorka Vidal Álvaro, also known as Irkus Badillo and Gorka Vidal (in Spain, including in the Basque Country, most people have two surnames. In daily life, many use only one. The use of the second is less frequent, hence the variation in their media documentation.)

“caravan of death”.<sup>8</sup> Those who were arrested confirmed not only their affiliation with ETA, but also that they were acting on the organization’s orders. Like another member of the organization, the well-known Basque-Algerian recidivist Henri Parot, they denied any connection with the March 11 attacks or with Islamists throughout the criminal proceedings. The news made the front pages of the newspapers,<sup>9</sup> together with the names and photographs of the accused. In addition to those earlier efforts, there were other attempts by ETA after the massacre, both in 2004 and 2005, to place explosive materials in various places in Madrid. Those, however, did not result in casualties.

### **Arguments for the Involvement of ETA**

Firstly, on the day preceding the attacks, flyers were distributed on the streets of San Sebastian calling for a boycott of Spanish trains. In light of the events of March 11, this could be interpreted as a warning, directed at ETA supporters, to avoid ending up among the casualties. Secondly, there were no suicide bombers in 11-M, so that it lacked a typical feature of attacks organized by Islamists. The terroristic practices of ETA involve the detonation of charges without resorting to suicidal tactics. Thirdly, suspicions have been raised that the explosive materials were of the same type as those commonly used by ETA. This information was even released by the Spanish authorities through the mass media shortly after the tragedy, as a result of the police investigation. It led to

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<sup>8</sup> The same name was applied in the early 1970s to a famous Chilean army death squad under the rule of Pinochet.

<sup>9</sup> See e.g. J.A. Rodríguez, J. Yoldi, *Tres conocidos etarras rechazan cualquier vínculo con los atentados del 11-M*, El País, 24.04.2007, [http://elpais.com/diario/2007/04/24/espana/1177365608\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2007/04/24/espana/1177365608_850215.html) (23.01.2016).

a wave of inquiries as to whether not only the type, but the brand of materials was also the same as that used by ETA.

The type of material used was said to be Titadyn 30AG, referred to by the Spanish media as titadine, a brand of dynamite manufactured in southern France, conventionally used by the terrorist organization in the past. That information was then corrected by a statement that in fact Goma-2 ECO,<sup>10</sup> a kind of explosive material made in Spain, had been used; it had occasionally been used by ETA, before the organization began to resort to the more powerful Titadyn 30AG, which was easier to obtain in France. As these facts were disputed, an increasing number of details were revealed. Finally, the government in its statements to the press denied that the explosive materials employed in the attacks were the same as those used by ETA.

No detailed report on the subject of the explosive materials used was made available for public consumption. That led to intensified suspicions that the truth was being somehow covered up by the Spanish government. According to statements by the government, the case has officially been closed. The final statement on behalf of the government was issued by Minister of the Interior Jorge Fernández Díaz exactly a decade after the tragic events at the request of journalists. He announced that, first of all, it was not the ETA but *ihadis* who carried out the attacks, and secondly, that the matter was closed. This information was broadcast via television, radio and newspapers of diverse polit-

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<sup>10</sup> Also known as Riodín.



ical orientations, including their online versions.<sup>11</sup> Doubts as to who was to blame for the attacks have nonetheless remained a vital presence in the social imagination.

### **The Attacks of March 11, 2004 and the Election Results**

The coexistence of an unofficial version of the course of events alongside the official one has obviously been inconvenient for the Spanish government, regardless of what the factual truth might be: the version accepted by the public prosecutor's office, blaming Al Qaeda, which in fact took responsibility for the attacks, or the version that claimed the attacks were carried out by ETA. During the period immediately preceding the tragedy, the Partido Popular (PP) had been in power, led by José María Aznar. The attacks not only coincided with the end of his term, but occurred just three days before the elections and influenced their outcome. The day before the elections, protests were held as a direct result of the attacks. The government even considered the possibility of postponing the elections in view of the possible influence of societal unrest on the results of the upcoming elections. Furthermore, on the eve of the elections, thousands of people gathered in front of the Partido Popular headquarters to protest enigmatic information issued by the Ministry of the Interior regarding the attacks, thereby elevating the chances of the opposition party, Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE). In the final reckoning, PSOE won the elections of March 14, 2004,

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<sup>11</sup> See e.g., *Fernández Díaz sobre el 11M: es evidente que fue un atentado ejecutado por el terrorismo yihadista*, ABC, <http://www.abc.es/videos-espana/20140310/fernandez-diaz-sobre-evidente-3323845705001.html> (23.01.2016).

and its leader, candidate José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, took power. Large segments of society remained disturbed by the horrific events of March 11 and, moreover, the level of trust in the authorities, already low, fell further among the people regardless of their political orientation.

The alternative interpretation of those events continues to be maintained and treated by its exponents as revealing the hidden meaning of the affair. To this day it is treated as a proof of the thesis, repeatedly asserted by these exponents, that “the government is lying.” They voice objections to both parties, the PP and the PSOE, given that the attacks took place just before the change of cabinet, and the investigation continued for several years. In recent years, particular attention was paid to proceedings begun in early March 2012 in connection with a report on the *Libertad Digital* website that the police, or the judge in charge of the case, Juan del Olmo, had ordered for the remains of one of the cars in which a detonation took place to be suppressed, as a result of which it had not been tested or examined. After about three months the case was dropped, a decision officially justified by a lack of evidence. That not only has given further encouragement to those who maintain the unofficial version, but also, more generally, had constituted an argument, widely advanced in Spain, that there is a lack of transparency in the government’s operations, particularly where the organs of justice are concerned.

The memory of the tragedy lives on. There is a strong sense of injury on the part of those who survived the attacks and

the families of the dead and wounded. There is a civic platform called Peones Negros,<sup>12</sup> whose goal is to propagate the view that the government has been lying about 11-M. Its banners have frequently appeared at demonstrations organized with the participation of NGOs who act on behalf of the victims. Among these NGOs is an association called Asociación Víctimas del Terrorismo,<sup>13</sup> referred to by the acronym AVT, the Asociación de Ayuda a las Víctimas del 11-M<sup>14</sup> and the Asociación 11M. Afectados del Terrorismo.<sup>15</sup> The last two named were founded in 2004 for the purpose of helping the victims of 11-M and their loved ones. The last one was refused financing from public funds, which was seen as an additional argument in favour of the thesis that the government is concealing the truth.

## **translated by Timothy Williams**

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<sup>12</sup> The Black Messengers (*peones* in other contexts can also mean “workers” or “pawns”). See Plataforma Ciudadana Peones Negros, <http://www.peones-negros.com/>, Plataforma Ciudadana Peones Negros Libres, <http://peonesnegroslibres.com/> (23.01.2016).

<sup>13</sup> Association of Terrorism Victims. See <http://avt.org/> (23.01.2016). In *Spanish mass media*, the name Asociación de Víctimas del Terrorismo is sometimes used, but the first version is the organization’s proper name. It was formed in Madrid in 1981, first as Hermandad de Familiares de Víctimas del Terrorismo (Brotherhood of Relatives of Terrorism Victims). Its purpose, as declared in its charter, is to support and offer assistance to those who have suffered as a result of acts of terrorism in Spain and their families, and also to raise awareness of their situations and problems in society. The association receives subsidies from several ministries including the Ministry of Employment and Social Security, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of the Interior, and also receives financial support from local administrators, enterprises, and private individuals through a foundation called Fundación Víctimas del Terrorismo (Terrorism Victims Foundation). See <http://www.fundacionvt.org/> (23.01.2016).

<sup>14</sup> Association for Aid to Victims of 11M.

<sup>15</sup> 11M Association for Victims of Terrorism. The word *afectados* can refer to both victims and those affected or hurt by the attacks through family or other connections. In the context of the association’s name and the scope of its activities, it is best translated as “victims,” though this unfortunately renders the name similar to that of the AVT. See [www.asociacion11m.org/](http://www.asociacion11m.org/) (23.01.2016).