Bloody Sunday in Derry — Origins & Consequences of a Massacre

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Bloody Sunday limited the British state's ability to spin the northern Ireland conflict as one between two warring tribes or criminal gangs. Bloody Sunday exposed the central role of the British state in escalating the conflict. And successive British governments couldn't use that 'that was all in the past' excuse because they were forced to stand over the ludicrous Widgery finding that the Para's were acting in self defence.

Alongside that the annual commemoration of the massacre became a significant organising focus or northern nationalists and the left. Up to 40,000 people took part in the march that marked the 25th anniversary of the massacre for instance, and every year tens of thousands would participate. That weekend in Derry also saw a wide range of well attended events, everything from cultural events to eyewitness accounts of what happened on the day to current political discussions including the creation of links with struggles elsewhere.

Eventually the British state was forced to address the continued anger over the Bloody Sunday massacre through a second 12 year enquiry under Lord Saville. After all most 38 years and 3000 deaths the British Prime Minister finally admitted in the House of Commons what had happened and apologised on behalf of the British government.

"It strikes me that the Army ran amok that day and shot without thinking what they were doing. They were shooting innocent people. These people may have been taking part in a march that was banned but that does not justify the troops coming in and firing live rounds indiscriminately. I would say without hesitation that it was sheer, unadulterated murder. It was murder."

The military road

John Kelly the brother of one of those killed on Bloody Sunday recalled in 2005 that *"There were queues to join the IRA after that day. The paras were responsible for countless deaths that day, including soldiers, policemen and everyone who died during the Troubles. Many young people in Derry and across the North lost their lives through ending up in prison. The paras not only murdered people that day, but they carry the responsibility of the blood that was spilled since."*

Ivan Cooper one of the organisers of the NICRA march on Bloody Sunday also saw the massacre as undermining the non violent basis of the civil rights movement. He thought before that day the IRA was tiny and with little support. The idea that Bloody Sunday led to the gorwth of the IRA is also confirmed by Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams who wrote that *"Money, guns and recruits flooded into the IRA"*

Almost everyone who witnessed the events agrees with that perspective and indeed how could any other outcome have been expected. When an occupying army guns down over two dozen unarmed protesters it would be almost impossible to expect any response other than those who are still determined to struggle looking to arm themselves in defence and to seek revenge. In the three years to Bloody Sunday the escalating violence had killed 200 people. In 1972 alone, the year of Bloody Sunday 479 were killed, the vast majority after the massacre and as part of the reaction to it.

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exist and mobilise in the streets. NICRA organised a march to protest internment from the Creggan through the Bogside into Derry city center. The army erected barricades to stop the march reaching the city center.

Estimates of how many attempted to march that day vary but probably at least 15,000 gathered in the Creggan and marched to the alternative end point at Free Derry corner. As had become 'traditional' youth threw stones at the British army on the barricades and the army used water cannon, tear gas and rubber bullets. Shortly before dusk the army command ordered the Parachute Regiment ('Paras') to enter the Bogside. As in other armies Parachute troops are trained as brutal shock troops, encouraged to use extreme violence to achieve their objectives. That Sunday there were ordered to use live ammunition. As the unarmed crowd fled over 100 rounds were fired, 13 people being killed instantly or dying soon after, 14 others were wounded including two who were ran down by APC's. Many were either shot in the back or shot as they tried to crawl to cover along the ground.

Widgery cover up

In the face of a mounting international outcry, the burning down of the British embassy in Dublin during a huge demonstration against the massacre and the southern Government requesting UN intervention the British state was forced to announce an enquiry. This was held under Lord Chief Justice Lord Widgery and amounted to no more than a massive cover up that sought to confirm the army lie that many of those shot had been armed.

The City coroner, himself a retired British army Major issued a statement on the day of the completion of the inquest into those killed reflecting what had really happened

gable has been preserved to this day bearing either that legend or variations of it tying into a variety of political themes.

The police and army were prevented from entering the area until October 1968. Even when the British Prime Minister Jim Callaghan visited the Bogside at the end of August 1968 he had to abandon his army escort at the edge of the area and accept instead an escort from the Derry Citizens Defence Association set up by the residents to defend the area. After reforms were announced and Callaghan visited again on the 11th October unarmed military police were allowed to patrol.

Internment

This period saw an increasing militarisation of the conflict including a split in the IRA centered around the question of the balance to be struck between radical (but stalinist) politics (the 'Officals') and more traditional national militarism (the 'Provisionals'). Then on 9th August 1971 the British state tried to crush opposition through targeting for internment 450 people from factions of the IRA, left radical organisations like People's Democracy and even some of the civil rights leaders! However there wasn't a single loyalist among the 450 people initially targeted.

Barricades were once more erected in Derry bringing 'Free Derry' back into existence for a third time. This time the area was also defended by armed paramilitaries. Sniper attacks on soldiers became common and an extensive bombing campaign was conducted against commercial premises in the center of the city.

Events of the day

By early 1972 internment was resulting in an escalating cycle of violence but a mass unarmed movement continued to

On the 30th January 1972 British soldiers opened fire on protesters in the city of Derry, north-west Ireland. Twenty six unarmed protesters were shot, 13 died immediately or within hours, one more died just over four months later. Derry was in the section of Ireland claimed by the British state and the shootings happened in the context of the suppression of a growing civil rights movement demanding equality for Catholics in the 6 of Ulster's counties claimed by Britain.

The killings in Derry had a transformative impact on the next 30 years of Irish history. By 1972 the attempt to suppress the Civil Rights movement alongside the anti-catholic pogroms that had taken place, particularly in Belfast, had already seen the popular and nonviolent movement divided into communitarian camps, and fostered the rebirth of a more traditional armed nationalism. The massacre of unarmed protesters that day, and the state cover up that followed, ensured that the response to the British state would become increasingly militaristic, growing the influence of the IRA. What else would be expected in such circumstances? By transforming the conflict from a popular struggle into a military insurrection, the British State pushed the struggle onto terrain in which it was more confident of a victory.

Background

The history of the British state's military involvement in and rule of Ireland is very old, going back to the 1100's. However if we start in 1918, the last year of World War One, we find another round of rebellion igniting that for the first time involved organised labour and which alongside a military struggle saw many local and five national general strikes. This at a time of revolution across Europe, when the various ruling classes desperately tried to impose a new stability. Part of the price for the

British ruling class of that stability was to allow independence for 26 of the 32 counties in Ireland.

Excluded from independence were the 6 counties of Ulster in the North-East of the island, counties which contained a significant protestant majority. British imperialist policy almost everywhere made use of religious or ethnic divisions between 'subject peoples' in order to maintain imperialist rule. That mechanism had been developed and tested in Ireland from the 1500's with the displacement of indigenous gaelic catholics from significant portions of good agricultural land and their replacement with protestant settlers from Britain and Scotland in particular. This policy was most successful in the North East which was in any case close to Scotland and thus saw much movement to and from Scotland. The continued promotion of sectarian divisions meant that by late 1800s the working class in the city of Belfast was divided deeply along religious lines with periodic rioting between catholic & protestant workers often triggered over access to housing & jobs.

The partition of Ireland in 1922 saw the new Northern State being given limited Home Rule. These local powers were used over the next forty years to try and unify all protestants regardless of class behind what came to be called the 'Orange State' through discrimination against the catholic working class in particular. This discrimination was expressed through restricting access to employment and housing but also through limiting access to weapons to the state forces and a very large auxillary force of protestant males, the 'B Specials.'

The Civil Rights Movement

Inspired by the civil rights movement in the USA the late 1960s saw the formation of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association based on the following demands

- one man, one vote in local elections — only rate payers were allowed vote

- an end to gerrymandering — election boundaries had been set so that towns with large catholic majorities elected majority protestant councils

- an end to discrimination in housing

- an end to discrimination in jobs

- the disbandment of the B-Specials, the auxillary force already referrred to

NICRA soon met with state repression and the repression of a demonstration in Derry on 5 October 1968 was followed by two days of nationalist rioting. Footage of the suppression of the march shocked many in Ireland and elsewhere. Radical students influenced by these events came together to form People's Democracy, a grassroots socialist and anti-sectarian organisation with a libertarian character which was at the forefront of direct action and practised direct democracy.

Tensions continued to rise in 1969 culminating in three days of rioting in August when nationalists in the Bogside defend the area against the police and the B Specials. The Bogside and neighbouring Creggan had in effect become a self governing area known as Free Derry, protected behind barricades. On the day 'Free Derry' was set up some 1500 locals armed with steel bars, wooden clubs and hurleys (French parallel?) mobilised to defend the area.

Free Derry

Free Derry derived its name from a sign painted on the gable wall of a house at the edge of the area reading 'You are now entering Free Derry'. That street was later demolished but the