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It was always time to go

Troops Out Now!

Andrew Flood

1994

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, on Thursday, August the 15th, 1969, 400 soldiers from the Prince of Wales Own Yorkshire Regiment took up positions around Derry city. Why they arrived has been the subject of myth making and distortion for the last 25 years. The myth is a simple one, that the function of the British army in the 6 counties is to preserve the peace, to keep apart fanatical Catholics and Protestants who would otherwise tear each others throat out at the first opportunity.

It is a myth, which like all good ones, incorporates elements of the truth. After the last months few need to be reminded of the vicious actions of the loyalist death squads. But despite this grain of truth it is in fact a distortion, even a lie. Far from the aim of the army being to break down such sectarianism their role was to support it and prevent the development of an alternative to it. The point the army moved in was the point at which the Stormont controlled sectarian police was losing control of Derry and there was a danger that if this situation continued an alternative centre of power could develop.

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The troops arrived in the six counties, not to enforce equality, but in opposition to what the demand for equal rights had come to. The refusal to grant reform and the deployment of considerable state force to smash the reform movement had led not surprisingly to people fighting back. It was this fightback that the troops had arrived to defuse and if necessary smash.

The northern state was created in 1921 as a sectarian state, “a Protestant state for a Protestant people” as Lord Brookeborough, one of its Prime Ministers called it. Its ruling class protected their power by maintaining sectarianism; from calls by Brookeborough (again) to only employ loyal Protestants, to loyalist death squads killing and driving out those who resisted (Catholic or Protestant). It was created as a society where your chances of housing and employment depended on your religion. This happened with the full approval of the British ruling class.

In 1967 the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was formed. Its demands were most striking for their extreme moderation:

- one man — one vote
- allocation of housing on a points scheme
- redrawing of gerrymandered electoral borders
- repeal of the Special Powers Act*
- abolition of the B specials**
- laws against discrimination in government
 - The Special Powers Act allowed arrest on suspicion, and imprisonment without trial. An additional clause gave the Minister for Home Affairs authority to do anything else required!

- The B-specials were a state paid armed militia of the Unionist Party, officially an auxiliary of the RUC.

In August of 1968 NICRA called its first march. 2,500 marched from Coalisland to Dungannon to protest against local housing discrimination. Since 1945 71% of local houses had gone to Protestants, yet the area was 53% Catholic. The march was peaceful despite the occupation of Dungannon town centre by loyalists. Yet when a second march was called in Derry the Home Affairs Minister (William Craig) banned it.

Local left wing activists along with the Derry Labour Party announced they would march anyway, and NICRA decided then to go ahead. 2,000 people turned up and that evening the TV footage of the police attacking the demonstrators with batons, punches and water cannon were seen around the world. A march for peaceful reform was met by the northern state with physical violence and smashed off the streets.

Faced with the violent state repression of such mild demands, Catholics (with the support of the small number of socialists from a Protestant background) decided this time they were not going to just lie down. Six weeks later 15,000 marched through Derry. The RUC, outnumbered 50:1, stayed in their police stations. In Belfast an earlier march of 800 had resulted in the formation of Peoples Democracy (PD) which aimed to extend the campaign to winning improvements for working class Protestants as well. In November part of the ruling class around Terence O'Neill tried to defuse the situation by granting some of the demands and promising a review of others. This was sufficient to satisfy the 'respectable' leaders of the civil rights movement, like John Hume.

However this was too much for other elements of the bosses who started an "O'Neill must go" campaign, including William Craig who ranted on about "unnecessary reforms". And they were all united in saying nothing more would be given. When PD organised a march across the north from New Years Day 1969 it was

harassed by the RUC all the way, until it was finally forced into an ambush at Burntollet bridge outside Derry. Here it was attacked by 350 loyalists, including many off-duty B-specials with rocks and clubs spiked with nails.

Despite the fact that many marchers were seriously injured, two nearly being killed, the RUC made no move to intervene and none of the attackers was ever brought before a court. O'Neill indicated his approval by going on TV and saying "we have heard sufficient for now about civil rights. Let us hear a little about civil responsibility".

This was how the northern state dealt with peaceful attempts that stayed within the normal rules of "democracy" to reform it. Not surprisingly this caused massive anger among Catholics. On August 12th 1969 the Apprentice Boys in Derry marched and threw pennies off the city wall into the Bogside. Local youths threw stones back. The police used this as an excuse to charge in, cracking heads open and storming into houses. But the local people fought back and drove them out, erecting barricades to keep them out.

The RUC tried to fight their way in over the next few days using CS gas but met with an increasingly organised defence force armed with bricks and petrol bombs. In inspiration, and also to draw some of the RUC off, other working class nationalist areas rioted. Huge numbers of RUC were injured and it was clear that there were unable to restore 'stability' on their own. To help them out the British army was sent in on the 15th. In the meantime the loyalists got their revenge in Belfast, storming the Falls with the aid of the RUC and burning down 200 houses.

Up to this stage the IRA were non-existent in terms of activity. They had last been active in a failed and short lived border campaign from 1956 to 1962. Their unpreparedness for the "troubles" was reflected in graffiti at the time which read "I Ran Away". But the gun had been re-introduced into Northern politics by the forces of the British state, most notably when the RUC had driven up the Falls on the 14th firing Browning sub-machine guns from armoured

cars (their victims included a 9 year old boy in bed and a British soldier home on leave). If even the moderate demands of the NICRA had been met with force from the state, the lesson was clear that in order to fight back you had to meet force with force. The left at the time failed to offer a coherent alternative and so people turned to the politics of republican armed struggle.