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Bloody Sunday - 50 years of British injustice in Ireland

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On the 50th anniversary of the massacre of innocent civil rights protestors in Derry, Joseph Healy remembers 50 years of British injustice in Ireland.

*I went with Anger at my heel
Through Bogside of the bitter zeal
- Jesus pity! - on a day
Of cold and drizzle and decay.
A month had passed. Yet there remained
A murder smell that stung and stained.
On flats and alleys-over all-
It hung; on battered roof and wall,
On wreck and rubbish scattered thick,
On sullen steps and pitted brick.
And when I came where thirteen died
It shrivelled up my heart. I sighed
And looked about that brutal place
Of rage and terror and disgrace.
Then my moistened lips grew dry.
I had heard an answering sigh!
There in a ghostly pool of blood
A crumpled phantom hugged the mud:
"Once there lived a hooligan.
A pig came up, and away he ran.
Here lies one in blood and bones,
Who lost his life for throwing stones."*

Butcher's Dozen by Thomas Kinsella

When the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella penned these lines he spoke for most of Ireland and for those outside who witnessed the appalling murder of innocent, unarmed Irish protesters by the forces of British imperialism in Ireland. My first encounter with that terrible day, apart from seeing it reported on Irish television news, was when, as a 15 year old Dublin lad, I watched a furious crowd of 20,000 people burn the British embassy there to the ground, two days after the massacre. Feelings were running so high that there was talk of the Irish army marching over the border and several British businesses were attacked. For many it was the latest in a long long line of British atrocities in Ireland, which we had all learned about in school.

Bloody Sunday effectively ended the first phase of the struggle of the Irish nationalist population in the North of Ireland against the blatant injustices and apartheid like state which had been

established with the partition of Ireland in 1921. It had been a gerrymandered statelet from the first, carved out from the 9 nine counties of Ulster, into a smaller unit of 6, to ensure a Protestant and Unionist majority. James Craig, its first Prime Minister, described it as "A Protestant state for a Protestant people". The British state hived it off effectively and not for nothing did contemporary observers in the 1920s compare the police powers there as akin to those of Mussolini's Italy. It was left to the Unionist elite (mostly landowners and large industrialists) to run it as they wished and as late as the 1960s MPs in the British Parliament were unable to put questions about what went on there as it was legally within the remit of the government of Northern Ireland and that regime was given carte blanche to run it as they saw fit. With a gerrymandered voting system and an almost caste system when it came to the allocation of housing, education and jobs, the only recourse for Nationalists who didn't like it was to emigrate. For those who spoke out the brutal Protestant only police force (the Royal Ulster Constabulary) and their even more brutal reservists, the B Specials would see to it that they were silenced.

The wind of change stirred in 1969 with the rise of the Civil Rights Movement, inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the US and the student revolts in Paris etc. Most of the leaders were moderate Nationalists, many from a Social Democrat background, like John Hume and Austin Currie. They sought to challenge the status quo through peaceful means and via demonstrations and protests. This was seen as an existential challenge to the sectarian Northern Ireland state and the police and B Specials were unleashed on the demonstrators. Several brutal attacks on the demonstrations followed, along with attacks on Nationalists by Loyalist mobs, as had happened in the 1920s following partition, when pogroms occurred in parts of Belfast and Catholic workers had been driven from the shipyards.

The British government felt forced to act as the scenes of violence in the North of Ireland proved deeply damaging for the UK state, particularly when viewed from the USA, where there was a large Irish population. British troops were dispatched to Ireland, supposedly to support the police and civil powers and to restore order. The British army was supposedly impartial and would act as a buffer between the two communities but in fact Britain was maintaining its old imperial interests in Ireland and many of the regiments sent had deeply sectarian backgrounds and a strong anti-Nationalist and pro-colonial feeling. Some of these troops had been used a few years before to try and suppress anti-colonial struggles elsewhere in Britain's empire. Ironically looking back at the centenary of the Irish War of Independence the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries had also been sent to Ireland in 1920 to support the police and end disorder.

Unionism, was in a state of crisis, as it saw the pillars of its sectarian state shaken and called on Britain for support, while allowing its own sectarian police forces full leeway to crush the Civil Rights Movement.

The march and rally in Derry in January 1972 was due to be one of the largest demonstrations yet by the Civil Rights Movement. Many young Nationalists and Catholics had been encouraged by the rise of the movement and also by the fact that the world was now watching the North of Ireland in a way which it had not been for the preceding 60 years. There was also real hope and a sense that change was in the air. The Civil Rights Movement had been modelling itself on the one in the US and using anthems such as "We shall overcome" borrowed from that movement.

The Irish Republican Army, which believed in the use of armed force to drive the British out of the North of Ireland, had been in existence since 1921 but had been a marginal force, sometimes almost disappearing but it re-emerged in 1969 and carried out some small attacks on British forces and police. It had a limited role beside the much larger peaceful Civil Rights Movement, which had the support of the Catholic Church and much of the Catholic bourgeoisie.

Britain had introduced internment without trial in an attempt to arrest and detain those Nationalists believed to be in the IRA without access to civil trials, via the Diplock Courts, which were judge only courts, which gave no real voice to those accused. This led to huge resentment in the Nationalist communities and many now turned against the British Army, which some of them had regarded as neutral referees in 1969 when they first arrived. Egged on by the Unionists and Heath's Conservative and Unionist Party government, with all of their ties to the Unionist elite, the British army was turned into an instrument of oppression against the Catholic community.

The march in Derry was to protest against Internment and large numbers were expected. Whole families took part in the protest which was centred in the traditionally Nationalist Bogside area of the city. The notorious Parachute regiment, which we now know had carried out a massacre in Belfast's Ballymurphy a year before and had escaped with impunity, were brought in to support the police and to supposedly ensure that the IRA did not infiltrate the protest and carry out attacks. When the demonstrators being held back by police started to throw stones and petrol bombs the troops were let off the leash and murdered 13 innocent demonstrators in cold blood. The fiction was that those who died had been in the IRA and that the troops had been protecting themselves against IRA fire. This is the line held to this day by the elderly commanding officer of the regiment at the time and some sections of the Unionist community, some of whom flew the flag of the Parachute regiment on flagpoles in Derry this week.



The victims of Bloody Sunday 30 January 1972

The global outcry after the massacre was immense and the British state had to cover its tracks. It did this, as it had done many times before in its imperial history, by establishing a seemingly impartial legal inquiry which would investigate the incident and acquit British troops of any guilt. This was the Widgery Inquiry which was a farce. Widgery, as expected, cleared the troops of any guilt and claimed that they had been acting in self defence but was unable to find any evidence of the weapons which the victims had been allegedly carrying. Naturally it was denounced as a kangaroo court.

The Civil Rights Movement had achieved one of its main aims, as the Irish journalist, Fintan O'Toole wrote recently in the Irish Times: "The truth is that those methods were in fact successful; by the end of 1972, the Orange State was gone. The unionist monolith would never return to power."

The anger and resentment produced by both the massacre and the cover up moved the Troubles into a new phase - that of armed conflict. Many of those killed in Derry had been young men and many of their friends who has witnessed the massacre now joined the IRA. In an interview held in 1992 one of the friends of a victim, who had himself been on the march, described how he and six of his friends had joined the IRA as a result and as he had witnessed "how British rule in Ireland will always result in oppression and bloodshed." He had learned the lesson that generations of Irish nationalists had learned before him, that there was no reasoning with British imperialism in Ireland. Many historians now argue that Bloody Sunday was the central turning point in the Troubles and convinced many young nationalists that peaceful protest against Unionism and the British was ineffective.

Decades later the Saville Inquiry which took 12 years and interviewed hundreds of witnesses overturned the Widgery Inquiry and pronounced all those killed innocent and found that the troops had deliberately killed them and that there had been no involvement by the IRA in the march and no attacks on the troops. David Cameron later apologised to the victims' families on behalf of the British state. The sting in the tail was that the Saville Inquiry had promised those giving evidence that no prosecutions would follow.

The families of the Bloody Sunday victims still believe that those responsible should be brought to trial, as should all of those state forces who carried out atrocities in the North of Ireland. The current British government is currently wanting to push through legislation which would ensure that this never happens. They want to close the book on the crimes carried out by British forces and their Loyalist paramilitary allies in Ireland.

Only two years ago in Dublin a theatrical event was held to commemorate another Bloody Sunday, that of the massacre of Irish civilians at a football match by British troops on the rampage in 1920. The event recreated the scene and gave voices to the characters of those who had been murdered. The play "The White Handkerchief" named after the infamous white handkerchief which the Catholic priest, Father Edward Daly, held before him as wounded victims of Bloody Sunday were carried behind him, is being performed both physically and online by the Derry Playhouse, in the city in which the massacre took place.

Two events separated by 50 years in the long line of murderous actions by the agents of British imperialism and colonialism in Ireland. The events of Bloody Sunday are a reminder that there will never be justice for the victims of British violence in Ireland but they also revealed the true nature of the Northern state and Britain's murderous role there.

Joseph Healy

P.S.

- Anti*Capitalist Resistance. 25 Jan 2022:
<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/bloody-sunday-50-years-of-british-injustice-in-ireland/>
- Joseph Healy is a member of Anti*Capitalist Resistance.