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The beginning of the Troubles

Barry Doherty, *Northern Ireland since c.1960*, Heinemann, 0-43532-728-3, pp 9-11

The 'Troubles' is the name given to the periods of civil unrest, terrorism and riots which took place in Northern Ireland from 1968.

Austin Currie's sit-in protest - June 1968

Austin Currie was a Catholic and Nationalist civil rights campaigner. He led a sit-in protest at a council house in County Tyrone which had recently been awarded to a single Protestant woman called Emily Beattie. Currie and fellow protestors were outraged that the house was not given to a Catholic family with children. Currie was primarily concerned with drawing attention to the way houses were allocated, but the incident suggested that the civil rights movement was always targeting Protestants and only ever concerned with Catholic interests.

Craigavon Bridge - October 1968

On 5 October 1968 a civil rights march was planned in Londonderry, to protest against what was seen as the unfair allocation of council housing. Most of the marchers were Catholic and some were believed to be members of the IRA. Despite a ban on the march entering Londonderry city centre, the organisers went ahead in an attempt to sustain the growing worldwide interest in Northern Ireland.

As the marchers approached Craigavon Bridge, in the centre of Londonderry, they were confronted by Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) officers. BBC Northern Ireland broadcast censored images of the protesters being pushed back by water cannon. RTE, the Irish Republic's national TV station, broadcast uncensored images of RUC officers assaulting unarmed protestors whilst innocent bystanders were attacked with water cannon. This was not long after similar scenes of police brutality in the USA - against Martin Luther King and civil rights protesters. Television viewers in Ireland and Great Britain were angered by the violent methods used by the RUC.

The incident seriously damaged the Catholics' respect for the RUC. Within Catholic communities the RUC increasingly came to be seen as the brutal and oppressive tool of the Unionist government.

Reform

A month after the Craigavon Bridge incident, following intense pressure from the British Prime Minister Harold Wilson, the Northern Ireland Prime

Minister Terence O'Neill introduced reforms aimed at appeasing the civil rights protesters. The reforms of 22 November 1968 were intended to stop gerrymandering, to award council housing on need, and to begin considering reforms of votes for homeowners and tenants. However, this was too little too late, and the reforms were unable to prevent further confrontations and a major increase of violence in January 1969.

Burntollet Bridge - January 1969

On 1 January 1969 a radical offshoot of NICRA, known as 'People's Democracy' led a march from Belfast to Londonderry. It called for fairer council house distribution, more jobs and an end to extra votes for wealthier citizens. Some NICRA members were against the march because it went through strongly Protestant areas. On 4 January the marchers were seven miles from Londonderry and began crossing the Burntollet Bridge. At that point a Loyalist mob armed with sticks, stones and bottles began attacking the unarmed marchers.

Television cameras caught the RUC making very little attempt to protect the marchers. Not a single Loyalist was arrested whilst RUC officers took 80 People's Democracy marchers away. Television pictures and an official government report confirmed the attendance of off-duty B-Specials amongst the mob. B-Specials were part-time auxiliary policemen (largely Protestant) under the command of the RUC, who were allowed to carry arms and who were hated by the Catholics.

The Burntollet Bridge incident and its aftermath left the Catholic community feeling isolated and unprotected. Many Catholics began calling for their own protective force or vigilantes against RUC and B-Special oppression. It was in this atmosphere that the IRA re-emerged as a major force in Northern Ireland.

The Battle of the Bogside - August 1969

Tension increased across Northern Ireland throughout the spring and summer of 1969, particularly when the Protestant marching season began in June. Marching is a Protestant tradition dating back to 1795 which commemorates the triumph of Protestant William of Orange over Catholic King James II in 1690. The season culminates in the 12 July celebration of

William's victory at the Battle of the Boyne. Another tradition is the march every August of the Apprentice Boys, a ten-thousand-strong Protestant organisation which commemorates the defence of Londonderry against the forces of King James II in 1690.

On 12 August 1969 the Apprentice Boys marched along the Londonderry city walls that overlooked the Catholic Bogside area below. Bogsiders had feared attacks from these Protestant marchers and had erected barricades to prevent entry by Loyalist mobs or the RUC. A minority of Apprentice Boy marchers threw pennies at the Bogsiders, and rioting broke out between Catholics and Protestants. By the late afternoon the RUC decided to try and remove the Bogsider's barricades. Why they wanted to do this is unclear. A minority of extremist Bogsiders, perhaps remembering the Burntollet Bridge incident, began petrol-bombing the RUC.

Two days of fierce rioting followed in what became known as the 'Battle of the Bogside'. In all eight died and 750 people were injured. 270 houses were either demolished or required major repairs. In addition 1800 families were forced out of their homes as housing estates became increasingly divided. Once more the RUC and the B-Specials were discredited; television cameras recorded collaboration between the B-Specials and Loyalist mobs. Violence soon erupted across Northern Ireland, with riots in Belfast, Newry, Strabane and Coalisland.

The arrival of the British Army - August 1969

Northern Ireland appeared to be on the brink of civil war.

As a result the British government in London ordered British soldiers to help the government restore law and order on the streets of Northern Ireland. At first the troops were welcomed by Catholics who famously made them tea, sandwiches and even attended army discos. They were relieved to be protected against the Protestant attacks. The army received a hostile welcome from Protestants, however.

The British government had considered sending in troops for a number of years and had placed large numbers of soldiers in nearby barracks on standby since April 1969. After the previous two years of growing conflict, and the persistent calls of Catholic residents for protection, the army entered Londonderry and then Belfast on 14 and 15 August. The precise reasons why the armed forces were sent in remain unclear.

- The official reason was to protect the Catholic population against Loyalist attacks. At first Catholics welcomed British troops as impartial or neutral peace-keepers.
- Privately the British government was aware that the number of disturbances across Northern Ireland was so great that the 3000-strong RUC could not cope any longer.
- British secret intelligence wrongly believed the IRA was about to launch an uprising in Belfast and Londonderry. In fact the IRA lacked arms, membership and popular support at this time.

Whatever the intention behind the army's deployment - to defend the RUC, to protect the Catholics, or both - it did not prevent the army from being drawn into the violent conflict within a year.

By the end of 1969 entire Catholic communities in Northern Ireland had lost faith in the RUC and the Northern Ireland government. The Civil Rights Movement had given way to enormous discontent and open hatred of British rule. It was in this atmosphere of anger, fear and insecurity that the IRA emerged as the unofficial guardians of the Catholic communities against the RUC, the Loyalist mobs and, later, the British army.



Bogsiders group behind a barricade during the Battle of the Bogside, August 1969.