



Ben Walsh
The Struggle for Peace in Northern Ireland
John Murray, 071957-472-2, p. 76

Why was the reaction to the civil rights movement so violent?

Sectarian prejudice

Clearly, long-standing sectarian prejudice played a major part in explaining the long-term civil rights abuses.

It was also one reason for the violence in 1969.

The government's own report (by the Cameron Commission) went out of its way to criticise the sectarian bias in the actions of some RUC officers and B-Specials.

It made it clear that the marchers were not violent.

Working-class Protestant resentment

Many working-class Loyalists were angry at the demands of the 'civil righters'.

They resented the impression given in the media that only Catholics suffered hardships while a privileged Protestant community looked down on them.

They also had to deal with poor living conditions and hardship.

Radicalism in the civil rights movement

The NICRA was concerned first and foremost with the issue of civil rights, and many Protestants supported this. However, some of the leading figures in the civil rights movement were republican Nationalists.

Many others believed in socialist principles, especially the leaders of the People's Democracy movement. Northern Ireland was a very conservative society, and socialist ideas were still treated with suspicion.

O'Neill's failings

O'Neill was a moderate politician, who found it very difficult to deal with extremists.

His reforms were hurried.

They were too radical for his unionist critics, but not radical enough for his republican critics.

Media attention

The entire saga took place under the gaze of the television cameras. This raised the stakes and heightened confrontation.

Fear of the IRA

Many Protestants, including many in the Northern Ireland government, saw the civil rights movement as a plot to destabilise Northern Ireland, little more than a front for an IRA attack backed up by the Republic.

With hindsight, this may seem to be nonsense. The IRA was virtually nonexistent at this time. However, what people think is true is more important than what is true. Many of the Protestant population in Northern Ireland did not question whether this threat was real. They had seen thousands of Catholics turn out to parades commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rising in 1966.

This strengthened their fears that Catholics in Northern Ireland were a secret republican army. Some politicians in the Republic made tensions worse. Charles Haughey (later to become Taoiseach) was suspended from the government under suspicion of helping to fund the IRA.

Marching & confrontation

Marching has a long tradition in Northern Ireland.

It has often led to confrontation.

The People's Democracy march in January 1969 deliberately took a route through sensitive areas, which would be sure to stir up Protestant hostility.

Ben Walsh
The Struggle for Peace in Northern Ireland
John Murray, 071957-472-2, p. 76