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Ireland

The battle of the Bogside

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Marking its 50th anniversary, Vincent Doherty looks at one of the most significant episodes in modern Irish history

“The Derry Citizens Action Committee declares that after 50 years of Unionist tyranny we have finally come to the crunch. Either we smash Unionism now or we go back to sleep for another 50 years.” Irish Times, 14 August 1969

This week marks the 50th Anniversary of the Battle of the Bogside, an event which is recognised as an indelible moment in modern Irish history. It fundamentally altered the relationship between the oppressed Catholic minority and the Orange State that had existed in the 6 north eastern counties of Ireland since the British imposed partition of the island in 1921. It also happened to be the summer I'd left the ancien regime that was the Christian Brothers School, Brow of the Hill, a school that was located at the bottom of a winding street known as Hoggs Folly, at the junction of the Bogside and the Brandywell.

My class was made up of 15 and 16-year-old boys, many of whom would later spend long years in prison cells, on the blanket protest, on hunger strikes, prisoners of a conflict which grew out of the events in Derry in August 1969. We were the teenage rioters who took on the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and later the British Army. There had been rumblings of discontent and resistance to the Stormont regime across the North since the Civil Rights March in Derry on 5 October 1968. The march gained worldwide attention when it was brutally attacked by the RUC, a heavily armed, overwhelmingly loyalist militia, which included the infamous ‘B’ Specials, an auxiliary paramilitary force created out of the wartime UVF at the time of partition. Like much else in the Orange State the police force was a representation of the local Stormont regime, famously described by one Northern Ireland Prime Minister as “a Protestant parliament for a Protestant people.” In this case, a Protestant police force for a Protestant people.

You are now entering Free Derry

The Bogside had become a particular thorn in the side of the Orange State with ongoing engagement between locals and the RUC often supported by far right loyalist gangs. Following sustained and bloodied assaults on a People's Democracy-led student march from Belfast to Derry in the early days of 1969, a march inspired by the Selma to Montgomery march in the US, the RUC had invaded the Bogside and terrorised the local community, breaking into homes and beating people indiscriminately. By August '69, in anticipation of further RUC attacks, the local community were better prepared to defend the area. Following the annual highly provocative Orange Order parade through the predominantly nationalist city, the RUC and loyalist mobs charged into the Bogside to disperse protesters who had gathered at the edge of the area. What awaited them was unforeseen. They were met by ferocious resistance by local people inspired by youthful radicals including Bernadette McAliskey and Eamon McCann. A contemporary report from the Irish Times captured the moment:

“For the second night in a row Derry is in flames and chaos reigns About 5,000 men, women and children hurl petrol bombs and stones at the RUC and B Specials. A new station - Radio Free Derry - is broadcasting and urging people to man the barricades. Fires are burning at several points across the city and there is widespread street fighting. The heavy blanket of CS gas has taken its toll, particularly the old, the sick and the very young.”

The same paper also reported widespread solidarity protests across the 6 counties, in Coalisland, Enniskillen, Dungannon, Strabane, Armagh and in Dungiven, “where police are besieged in the local RUC station.” This was

mass action on a scale not seen before, people power at its most vivid and dramatic. A petrol station on the edge of the Bogside had been “liberated” and the production of petrol bombs - Molotov cocktails was on an industrial scale. The Bogside effectively drove the RUC, the B Specials and the loyalist mobs out of the area and a famous slogan was born, which to this day adorns a wall at the site of the battle - “You are now entering Free Derry.”

The Falls Road Pogrom

I recall as a 15 year old making my way home from the Bogside past heavily armed B Specials, gathered in small groups on every street corner, to find my father and other men from our area, who had never engaged in any form of protest before, preparing to go on patrol to defend the local Catholic Chapel, amidst threats that it might be burned down by loyalists. Even the normally hesitant leadership of the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association warned: “A war of genocide is about to flare across the North.”

The loyalist onslaught aided and abetted by the RUC and the B Specials had already begun across the north. But it was to be in Belfast, where many protests in solidarity with the Bogside had taken place, that it was to be at its most vicious. Determined to subdue the risen people the Stormont regime gave carte blanche to the police and the loyalist gangs to terrorise the local Catholic areas. Firing from heavy machine guns mounted on armoured cars the RUC overran areas of the Lower Falls in West Belfast killing a nine year old boy in his home in the Divis Flats, whilst creating cover for loyalist mobs who burned down whole streets of Catholic houses. Over the 3 days of disturbances in Belfast 7 people would die and 750 would be injured. Thousands of Catholic families and businesses were burned out with many fleeing over the border to special camps set up by the Dublin Government to provide basic foodstuffs and accommodation for what were effectively refugees from what generally became known as “The Falls Road Pogrom.”

No going back

The events of August 1969 saw the effective alienation of the vast majority of the Catholic nationalist population from the institutions of the Orange State. The introduction by a British Labour Government of British troops “To aid the Civil Power” demonstrated to many that the British Government, when all was said and done, would side with the Unionists despite all the injustices that were the hallmark of the Stormont regime. Despite military occupation and repressive policing the resistance to injustice would never again be totally tamed or contained. Hard-won reforms on housing and voting rights were achieved but they were seen by many in the nationalist community, particularly amongst the youth, as “too little, too late.” There was to be no going back. A new dynamic was now in place, which questioned the very notion that the Orange State could be reformed from within, or whether it needed to be effectively overthrown. That was the real message that emanated from The Battle of the Bogside and subsequent events.

The genie was out of the bottle; there was to be no going back.

August 14 2019

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PS:

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