

# INTERNMENT

# 50

YEARS ON  
MATT COLLINS



**REBEL**

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In the early hours of the morning on 9 August, 1971, British soldiers swooped into estates across the North of Ireland to arrest and detain hundreds of people, under the pretence that only ‘suspected terrorists’ were targeted. The Army kicked down doors and dragged men from their homes at gunpoint before hauling them into military vehicles; many were beaten and abused with more sustained violence awaiting them in the hours and days ahead. Over 300 arrests were made in the first raid alone. Some detainees were released in a matter of days, others would be incarcerated for extended periods of weeks or months, while many endured years of imprisonment without any semblance of due process. Officially codenamed *Operation Demetrius*, it became more widely known simply as *internment*: a far-reaching state-sponsored campaign of imprisonment without trial, hatched by an embattled Unionist government in Stormont, and enforced by the muscle of the British Army.

Internees were taken to a number of military installations for questioning: Crumlin prison and Girdwood barracks in Belfast; Magilligan prison in Derry; and the HMS Maidstone, a naval depot transformed into a makeshift prison ship, moored at Belfast Lough. Eventually, the military constructed a more permanent camp at Long Kesh, made up of Nissen huts and surrounded by armed observation towers and barbed wire. Observers quickly pointed out how the site resembled a German POW camp, which was ironic at best, considering it was constructed on the ground of a former British military airfield built during the Second World War.

Stories of ill-treatment, abuse and torture swiftly filtered out, with people on the outside eager to hear news from the “men behind the wire”. Almost all had been mistreated in some form, with experiences varying from verbal abuse to physical violence, sleep deprivation, and more extreme torture techniques. Some were taken blindfolded into helicopters and thrown out a few feet above the ground. The most notorious treatment was meted out to a group of fourteen detainees later dubbed the “Hooded Men”, who were subjected to the Army’s ‘five torture techniques’, developed in colonial expeditions around the world. These included white noise, deprivation of sleep, deprivation of food and drink, hooding, and wall-standing.

The Unionist government presented internment as a necessary solution to defeat the IRA and restore order. In reality, it only served to heighten tensions and accelerate the North’s descent into violence.<sup>1</sup> The sheer scale of the military repression, combined with the flagrantly sectarian nature of its deployment, emboldened those intent on launching an armed campaign against the Northern state. Despite repeated efforts by the Unionist government to suggest otherwise, it was obvious to anyone paying attention that internment was directly aimed at the Catholic community and those opposed to the Unionist state. Between 1971-1973 not a single loyalist was interned, in a context where loyalist paramilitaries were highly active in sectarian murder. Indeed, in the period from the introduction of internment until the end of 1972, loyalist paramilitaries murdered 107 innocent Catholics in the North.<sup>2</sup>

Internment was only possible because of the repressive nature of what Michael Farrell called the ‘Orange State’. John McGuffin, a civil rights activist arrested in the initial raids who went on to write the first popular account of internment, remembered the dismissive response of British soldiers in Girdwood barracks to his repeated requests for legal representation: “Listen, you smarty bastard, under the Special Powers Act we can keep you here as long as we like. You can’t see anyone. No

one will know where you are and we don't have to charge you with anything."<sup>3</sup> The soldier's comments might have been disturbing, and a clear contravention of the European Convention of human rights, but in many respects they were an accurate depiction of the North's repressive legal system.

The Northern Ireland Special Powers Act was passed in 1922 after the partition of Ireland, granting the newly formed Unionist government sweeping and controversial powers of coercion. Indeed, in 1963, the South African Minister of Justice, B. J. Vorster—a notorious racist and proponent of apartheid—infamously stated that he would gladly exchange the legislation that underpinned his government's system of apartheid for one clause of the Special Powers Act, which included the ability to introduce internment without trial. Internment was arguably the single most significant turning point during the early part of the Irish 'Troubles'. It took place during a context of deep crisis for the Unionist government, categorised by a pattern of mass opposition to the Orange State and a vicious loyalist backlash. In turn, it gave rise to a resurgent Irish republicanism from which emerged an armed campaign against the state, setting off a sequence of events that would result in the suspension of the Stormont parliament, and the introduction of Direct Rule from London.

Given its centrality to the Troubles, *Operation Demetrius* has been well documented across a wide body of work by historians and scholars, and almost universally appraised as a counterproductive policy that tipped the North into a sustained and violent conflict.<sup>4</sup> Yet more often than not, these accounts focus on the activity of republicans and the British military response, overlooking the mass, popular, civil resistance movement that emerged as well. This involved various forms of civil disobedience and resistance, including marches, protests, sit-downs, strikes, riots, and in the most militant areas, the erection of 'no-go' zones where security forces were temporarily driven out of barricaded communities, typified

by Free Derry. It was this mass participation of workers, protestors and others that brought the Orange State to its knees, and pointed to an alternative to the strategy of 'long war' that would come to predominate the years ahead.

## **The Orange State**

Internment was not a new policy to the North of Ireland. It was a tactic that had been repeatedly used with some success by previous Unionist administrations: in the period immediately after partition (1922–1924); in the run up to the Second World War (1938–1945); and during the IRA's military offensive known as the border campaign (1956–1961). On each previous occasion, internment enjoyed varying levels of success. It had been an effective tool in stabilising Unionist rule after partition and was equally effective during periods of heightened IRA activity, as with the border campaign.

What changed in 1971, and this is a crucial difference, was that it coincided with the mass insurrectionary upsurge of the largely Nationalist section of the working class in the North. The civil rights movement had exploded onto the streets of Belfast and Derry in the years previous, against discriminatory conditions experienced largely by the Catholic minority, representing an Irish version of the global revolt of the late 1960s. Drawing inspiration from the civil rights campaign in the US, the upsurge of student radicalism across Europe, as well as other left-wing causes of the time, the civil rights movement greatly exacerbated the contradictions at the heart of a five-decade-old state. Any explanation of internment, then, must take stock of this deep crisis the Unionist state faced.

The Orange State was the product of the undemocratic imposition of partition in Ireland, with a new sectarian state carved out of six of the nine counties in Ulster, resting on the power and infrastructure of the Unionist Party and the Orange Order. Central to maintaining Unionist dominance in the state was a system of discrimination toward the minority Nationalist community, mainly in areas of jobs, housing and the electoral franchise. But it was also a state that was built upon an

intersection of economic factors; namely, the strength of heavy industry owned in the main by Unionist industrialists, the close political and material ties between the Ulster bourgeoisie and the British Empire, and the ability of these elites to exploit both factors to construct a Unionist hegemony that appeared to offer a stake to all Protestants. Finally, the state was born out of violence and could rely on readily available 'bodies of armed men', including the B Specials, the RUC, and the British Army.

By the late 1960s, the unique economic basis of this state was coming apart. The world historic decline of the British Empire weakened the centrality of its former industrial powerhouse in Ireland's North. This weakened the base of the sectarian state and began a crisis of Unionist hegemony; instigating a rethink on the part of Northern Irish elites.<sup>5</sup> They toyed with the idea of more outreach to the growing Southern Irish economy, which normally took the form of token gestures or nods to the inclusion of Catholics into the Northern state. Even by the mid-sixties, when these initiatives were largely symbolic, they had the potential to stoke a serious 'loyalist backlash', as Paisleyites and loyalists objected to any dilution of the 'Protestant state for a Protestant people'. This point is worth underscoring. Many commentators place the roots of the 'loyalist backlash' as a reaction to Catholic street protest or later republican violence. But in reality the emergence of Paisleyism, and indeed the formation of paramilitary groups like the UVF, predated such things.

Consequently, when the civil rights movement took to the streets in 1968, even though non-violence was at its centre, it was met by a powerful and violent backlash based largely on sectarian justification, as well as a wholly exaggerated view of the threat posed to the wider Protestant community by civil rights demands. The arch-bigot Ian Paisley was the first to insist that the civil rights movement was little more than a Trojan horse for Republican subversion. Many contemporary academics have swallowed this narrative whole, reinforcing a degree of victim blaming in accounts of the period, in which non-violent civil rights demonstrators—often

themselves the victims of violence—are essentially held responsible for bringing about conflict.

The highpoints of early civil rights agitation are well documented, as is the violent response of the state. In October 1968, the first civil rights march in the city of Derry was brutally beaten off the streets by the RUC, sparking a wave of popular protest that continued apace in the weeks ahead. Students mobilised in Belfast under the banner of the newly formed People's Democracy (PD): the radical student wing of the civil rights movement, which best represented the Irish dimension to the global student revolt. The PD was the most noticeable expression of the 'New Left' in Ireland, who were defined by their emphasis on Protestant and Catholic unity in action, a willingness to confront state forces and pro-state loyalists on the streets, and perhaps also a political impatience that was common during the upsurge of the late 1960s. More broadly, the civil rights campaign's emphasis on non-violence and mass protest from below was representative of a break with the two traditional forms of agitation that had categorised oppositional politics in the North, namely the constitutional parliamentarianism of the Nationalist Party and the armed struggle of the IRA.

Almost immediately, however, the level of violence posed bigger questions about the nature of the Northern state. The most important turning point in the early civil rights campaign came when a small group of students from the PD were brutally beaten at Burntollet Bridge during a march from Belfast to Derry. The march was modelled on the Selma to Montgomery demonstration led by Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965. The ambush involved a large number of off-duty B Specials—the Unionist state's all-Protestant quasi-paramilitary police force—and had all the hallmarks of a trap carried out in collusion with the RUC. The unionist establishment blamed the PD for provoking the sectarian violence, but what happened at Burntollet exposed the inability of Prime Minister Terence O'Neill's administration to offer any meaningful reform. A few

months following the ambush at Burntollet, O'Neill was forced out of office after a series of UVF bombs, which signified the growing loyalist backlash aimed at strengthening Orange power.

In early 1969, protests demanding democratic reform were increasingly met with organised loyalist violence. At best, state forces turned a blind eye to these assaults; at worst, they helped facilitate them or even partook in the violence themselves. This created a substantial obstacle to those seeking to peacefully reform the state. Despite the civil rights movement making important inroads on the streets and the political arena—not least the election of the 21 year-old student Bernadette Devlin as an MP to the Westminster Parliament, as well as three civil rights activists elected to the Stormont parliament, John Hume, Ivan Cooper and Austin Currie—the protest movement was met with increasing violence.

On 19 April, one Derry man, Samuel Devenney, was beaten so badly by the RUC that he later died of his injuries. Violence reached a crescendo that year in August when armed loyalists, aided and abetted by the B Specials and the RUC, carried out what can accurately be described as an attempted pogrom against the Catholic community in working class districts of Belfast, most notably in Bombay Street in West Belfast, as well as parts of Ardoyne in North Belfast. By the end of the weekend, eight people had been killed including a nine-year-old boy, Patrick Rooney, whose head had been partially decapitated by a heavy calibre bullet fired by the RUC. The Scarman Report—set up to investigate the disturbances in the summer of 1969—estimated that 1,820 families fled their homes between July, August and September. Of these households 1,505 were Catholics, making up 82.7 percent of those who were forced to leave, and 5.3 percent of Catholics overall in the city.<sup>6</sup> In Derry—a majority Catholic city whose population was largely corralled into the densely populated Bogside housing estate—the fortunes of those fighting against the RUC in the summer of 1969 were more prosperous, as working class rioters drove the RUC and B Specials out of their area. Free Derry was

born, posing an unprecedented threat to Unionist power.

The deep crisis in Belfast and Derry precipitated military intervention and the widespread deployment of the British Army, whose primary objective was to strengthen Unionist rule. There is a considerable degree of retrospective hand-wringing over the deployment of British troops in contemporary literature. Most of these accounts are at particular pains to portray the British Army as a neutral peace keeping force, sent in to keep the warring tribes apart—even if they sometimes acknowledge that the British government made mistakes in the decades that followed.

But this is not something that stands up to serious scrutiny. No number of stories about Catholics welcoming the troops at first changes the irrevocable fact that troops were deployed on behalf of the Unionist state, at the behest of the Unionist government, in order to maintain its existence. What followed in subsequent years was a hugely uneven British operation in the North, with the contours of British policy evident in both the disproportionate application of internment, and later in policies such as ‘shoot to kill’, collusion, and a string of other repressive measures directed, in the main, against the Catholic population.

Claims of a ‘honeymoon period’ after the deployment of British troops have at times been overstated and can be misleading. As early as April 1970, the first large-scale confrontations between Catholics and the British Army were taking place in Ballymurphy, west Belfast. On 28 June a gun battle between Provisional IRA (PIRA) volunteers and loyalists in north Belfast signalled the first major military outing from the PIRA, who had formed in late 1969.<sup>7</sup>

As the marching season approached in 1970, the military deployed a wholesale crackdown on the Lower Falls area. The area was saturated with thousands of canisters of CS gas and some 3000 troops from seven regiments of the British Army, which imposed a curfew that lasted three nights. Four civilians were killed, hundreds were arrested,

and scores injured. The Falls Road Curfew was carried out under the auspices of a search for small amounts of IRA weapons, yet at the same time, thousands of legally held firearms existed in the hands of loyalist members of the B Specials. In the end, it wasn't the 'cutting edge' of IRA militarism that forced an end to the curfew, it was a mass movement of people power, led mainly by women, who marched in their thousands to break the lockdown. The result of the assault on the Falls was a growing Catholic alienation from the state, which in turn greatly expanded the base of support for the various factions of physical-force republicanism.

This pattern of oppression was not an accident of history, nor was it simply a reaction to violent resistance by republicans. Rather, it was the logical conclusion of an imperial policy that sought to protect the existence of the Northern state over all other considerations, which meant, by extension, siding with those on the Unionist side who sought the same objective. The British government was not an indifferent bystander in the North, therefore, but rather the ultimate protector of the sectarian and discriminatory Northern state. The use of internment in 1971 vividly illustrates this point.

## **The Build-Up to Internment**

Throughout the 1968-1969 period the civil rights movement had done more to challenge the discriminatory practices of the Unionist government than previous decades of political stalemate. But it had been met with a powerful loyalist backlash and a level of violence that created grievances far surpassing those that had fuelled the movement in the first place.<sup>8</sup> The period in the run up to 1971 saw a steady drift to the right in Unionism. A similar process that brought down O'Neill wracked his successor, Chichester Clark. In 1971 loyalist forces began to mobilise significant sections of Protestant workers. In March of that year, thousands of shipyard workers marched on Stormont calling for the introduction of internment, illustrating the extent to which a large section of the Protestant working class had fallen under the influence of Paisleyism. Tragically, some of the trade union leaders that had prevented violence in workplaces during the trouble of August 1969, were now echoing militant loyalists calling for internment.<sup>9</sup>

The move toward internment was, however, one that emanated primarily from the upper echelons of the Unionist government. Brian Faulkner, who took leadership of the Unionist Party after the resignation of Chichester Clark in March 1971, viewed internment as a tried and tested method of restoring order and putting down the IRA. Faulkner had served as Minister of Home Affairs and was responsible for internment during the IRA Border campaign, but his push for internment was not simply a one-man tirade; it was a calculated effort to placate hard-line loyalists in a last ditch bid to stabilise Unionist rule.

Much attention has been given to the private disagreement between the British government and the military over the implementation of internment in the run up to August 1971. In reality, this was a disagreement over timing rather than strategy. Tory Home Secretary

Reginald Maudling conceded ‘that a Protestant backlash was the great danger we all feared’,<sup>10</sup> outlining the British government’s rationale for sanctioning internment: ‘If it worked, it would avoid the necessity of introducing direct rule, but if direct rule could not be avoided, it would be preferable for internment already to be in place as a result of a Stormont decision.’<sup>11</sup> So it was in August 1971, Ted Heath gave the go ahead to introduce internment in the hope it would shore up Unionist rule.

While Faulkner was agitating for a tougher security response, he had also attempted to reach out to the Catholic middle class and co-opt elements of the opposition. For example, he appointed a Northern Ireland Labour Party (NILP) member as a Minister in his cabinet, and offered opposition parties seats on government committees. Although these positions had little power, they were welcomed by the SDLP; “Faulkner’s finest hour” was how one party MP, Paddy Devlin, was reported to have met the announcement.<sup>12</sup> These overtures were soon eclipsed when the British Army killed two Derry men, Seamus Cusack and Desmond Beattie, in what were widely viewed as executions by Derry’s Catholic community. The SDLP withdrew from Stormont in protest and the Provisionals embarked on a heightened campaign of bombing in April, May, and June. This was the wider context in which Faulkner successfully pushed for a renewed campaign of repression, culminating in the policy of internment.

## **They Came in the Morning**

342 men were arrested in the first internment raids. Despite Faulkner's repeated contention that the operation was a success in delivering a blow to the IRA, the immediate evidence suggested otherwise. While many republicans were targeted, the majority of Provisionals either evaded capture or were not on the military's intelligence radar. Most of the republicans captured came from the Official wing; some were 'retired' veterans, but many prisoners were simply political opponents of the Unionist government, including civil rights activists, socialists and militant trade unionists. Others were innocent civilians with little or no involvement in politics. One man was drunk waiting on a bus home when he was arrested.<sup>13</sup>

The fact that so many innocent people were arrested as well as socialists and civil rights activists, whose political efforts for the past three years had been based on non-violence, vividly illustrated the discriminatory nature of the operation. Official state papers further show how the latter groups were specifically targeted. Prior to the arrests operational instructions stated that, "Both factions of the IRA, NICRA [Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association] and PD have contingency plans for a campaign of violence and civic disobedience if internment should take place."<sup>14</sup> Afterward, despite incontestable evidence to show that many internees were not involved in violence, Brian Faulkner, who personally oversaw and signed off on each internment case, defended his decision with a brazen disregard for the truth:

I have made no internment order without being satisfied on evidence placed before me that the person interned was and still is an active member of the Official or Provisional Wing of the IRA... It is because of such involvement that persons are being held and not because they oppose the government. Persons who

may be members of the Civil Rights movement or the People's Democracy, or of other organisations, are being interned only if they are also members of the IRA or actively involved in it...<sup>15</sup>

Immediately, accounts filtered out describing the treatment of internees and it was evident that almost all had been mistreated in some form, with experiences varying from verbal and physical abuse to more extreme torture techniques. Paddy Joe McClean was a civil rights activist from Tyrone who was taken from his home at 5am, Monday 9 August. His experience of his first two days interned is worth quoting at length:

At the end of these initial 48 hours a hood was pulled over my head and I was handcuffed and subjected to verbal and personal abuse which included the threat of being dropped from a helicopter while it was in the air. I was then dragged out to the helicopter, being kicked and struck about the body with batons on the way. After what seemed about one hour in the helicopter I was thrown from it and kicked and batoned into what I took to be a lorry. The lorry was driven only a couple of hundred yards to a building. On arriving there I was given a thorough examination by a doctor. After this, all my clothes were taken from me and I was given a boiler suit to wear which had no buttons and which was several sizes too big for me. During this time the hood was still over my head and the handcuffs were removed only at the time of the 'medical examination'. I was then taken into what I can only guess was another room and was made stand with my feet wide apart with my hands pressed against a wall. During all this time I could hear a low droning noise, which sounded to me like an electric saw or something of that nature. This continued for what I can only describe as an indefinite period of time. I stood there, arms against the wall, feet wide apart. My arms, legs, back and head began to ache. I perspired freely, the noise and the heat were terrible. My circulation had stopped. I flexed my arms

to start the blood flowing again. They struck me several times on the hands ribs, kidneys and my kneecaps were kicked. My hood-covered head was banged against the wall [...] During this time certain periods are blank — fatigue, mental and physical, overwhelmed me; I collapsed several times only to be beaten and pulled to my feet again and once more pushed, spread-eagled against the wall. Food, water, the opportunity to relieve my bowels were denied me. I had to urinate and defecate in my suit. I collapsed again [...] The hood was removed and I was handed what I was told was a detention form. I was told to read it. My eyes burnt and were filled with pain; they would not focus and I couldn't read the form. . . . The hood was pulled over my bursting head. I was roughly jerked to my feet and half pulled, half kicked and beaten for about 400 yards. This was the worst and most sustained beating to date. Fists, boots, and batons crashed into my numbed body, someone else's not mine. Hands behind my back, handcuffs biting into my wrists. Pain! Someone was pulling and jerking my arms. Thrown headlong into a vehicle — soft seats, beating continued, boots, batons, fists. Then the noise, that dreaded helicopter again. Dragged out of the vehicle by the hair, thrown onto the floor of the helicopter. Blacked out!<sup>16</sup>

In the Ballymurphy estate in West Belfast, the internment swoop coincided with a three-day killing spree by the Parachute regiment. By the end of what became known as the Ballymurphy Massacre, eleven innocent civilians were dead with one man, Daniel Teggart, riddled with fourteen bullets. The anger on the streets to internment was palpable, and far from defeating the IRA the internment operation and the violence that accompanied it provoked a huge fightback from republicans. Both factions of the IRA fought it out with the British military, who found themselves in a number of gun battles. The violence in the week after internment far surpassed anything the North had seen in the previous three years. One historian notes that in the four days after internment

twenty-two people had been killed and up to seven thousand people (mainly Catholics) were left homeless, as their houses had been burnt to the ground. In 1971 alone, 34 people had been killed before 9 August, while a further 140 were to die before the year ended.<sup>17</sup>

August 1971 saw the British Army, a highly equipped and experienced modern military machine, attacking Nationalist areas on a much larger scale. The violence further alienated Nationalist areas from the Northern state, pushing society over the brink and into a period of protracted conflict. These same conditions unleashed a much wider dynamic of protest and popular resistance in Nationalist areas, which largely ghettoised anti-Unionist politics and brought to an end the possibility of a movement with some degree of cross-community support, as was briefly witnessed during the height of the civil rights struggle.

Working class estates erupted into a wave of riots, and barricades were erected to keep the military out. These were the first instances of a widespread community struggle and campaign of 'civil resistance', including the mass withholding of rent and rates, which, alongside the increased ferocity of IRA armed action, brought a new level of instability to the Unionist state. This period saw the remobilisation of the civil rights campaign on more militant terms, with the already existing tensions within the movement more exacerbated than ever.

## **The Civil Resistance Campaign**

Internment was met by a sustained wave of mass opposition, including marches, protests, strikes and riots. British military incursions into working class estates were now met with fierce resistance, often resulting in the creation of “no-go areas”. In Derry, mass protests drove the military from the Bogside area creating Free Derry. Smaller versions of Free Derry also existed in many Catholic estates where internment and army repression had been hard felt.

On 16 August, workers in Derry downed tools and took strike action. Five days later 8,000 people took part in a major sit-in in the Brandywell football stadium.<sup>18</sup> In West Belfast, up to 15,000 people packed into a mass rally at Casement Park.<sup>19</sup> Opposition to internment spanned the entire community with the middle class becoming alienated from the Northern state in a way that had been hitherto unseen. Up to 130 opposition councillors—members of the SDLP for the most part—resigned their positions from local councils in protest against internment.<sup>20</sup>

A central pillar of opposition to internment became the rent and rates strike, when thousands withheld their payments to local authorities in protest. While supported by various political organisations, the strike erupted on such a broad scale that it can't be seen as the initiative of any one group, even though some tried to claim it as their idea. The tactic of not paying rent in protest against the government spread like wildfire. One account estimated that some 40,000 households took part at its height and these were organised through local civil resistance committees, which were strongest in the areas that bore the brunt of internment.<sup>21</sup> Civil rights activist Kevin Boyle estimated that 95 percent of 15,000 families in west Belfast were refusing to pay rates at the height of the campaign. The cost of the strike after four months was said to be up to £500,000, which by today's standards would amount to over

£7 million.<sup>22</sup> Such was the impact that the Unionist government moved to introduce legislation to counter the campaign, allowing authorities to divert the social security payments of those taking part in the strike toward missed rent and rates payments.

The mass protest that met internment intensified the instability of the Unionist government. By February 1972, the Joint Intelligence Committee at Westminster would admit that, “[p]erhaps the most threatening feature of the present situation in Northern Ireland is the civil disobedience campaign.”<sup>23</sup> Opposition to internment, then, was widespread, but there was a lack of coordinated action with anti-internment forces in a disorganised state. However, as momentum gathered, civil disobedience action began to coalesce around the central demand “release all internees”. This resurgent mass movement faced considerable obstacles: Faulkner had announced a 6 month ban on marches, making demonstrations illegal.

Faced with the prospect of illegal marches, moderate forces within NICRA and the SDLP were wary of remobilisation. The left of the civil rights movement, mainly the PD as well as other socialists and republicans, argued for a coordinated return to the streets. Such a position was at odds with the broader NICRA leadership and, in response to the failure of the civil rights association to initiate a campaign of protest, the PD alongside republicans and sections of the civil disobedience committees organised a series of conferences with the aim of launching a return to the streets in support of internees.

The first such initiative took place on 21 November, at a conference sponsored by the Tyrone and Fermanagh Civil Resistance Committees, where, after a motion from Michael Farrell, the conference elected an interim committee. From this the *Northern Resistance Movement* was established, although its name would not be announced until later.<sup>24</sup> The initial unifying aim behind the NRM was to remobilise the streets in support of the internees, but it also signalled a closer working relationship

between republicans and elements of the Left who argued that the fight against repression necessitated a struggle against the Northern state itself. Its demands included:

1. All internees are released unconditionally and the Special Powers Act is abolished.
2. All political prisoners jailed since 1968 are released.
3. Stormont is smashed and the Unionist government is sacked.
4. British troops are withdrawn from Northern Ireland.

Socialist Eamonn McCann stresses how the effort to remobilise from the left represented a different conception through which the campaign to bring down the Northern state should be conducted—through mass protest, mass action and the involvement of the wider population:

The faction most in favour of marching, almost as a matter of principle, was the left within the broader civil rights movement. The argument was that none of the other forms of protest provided a way for the working people to become actively involved in the fight. The rent and rates strike had its attractions, but it was a passive sort of activity. The armed struggle could, of its nature, only involve a few, while rioting was appropriate mainly to the energetic young. At the core of this argument there was a conviction that in politics the means can determine the ends; the question of whether change could be won by electoralism and parliamentary manoeuvre, or by trial of arms, or by mass action, would help determine the nature of that change.<sup>25</sup>

## **Return to the Streets**

The NRM launched anti-internment pickets across the North and in early December took part in ‘border fillings’ across the country—a response to a British Army policy of cratering border roads with explosives, ostensibly to hinder the IRA, but creating much more trouble for local residents—with anti-internment activists in rural areas refilling the roads to make them accessible.<sup>26</sup> A more ambitious return to the streets was called by the NRM in the form of a march from West Belfast to Long Kesh on Christmas day, 1971. Anti-internment rallies had so far been confined to demonstrations and gatherings inside working class Catholic areas. The NRM intended to break this by walking from the Beechmount estate in west Belfast to the prison camp with the route of the march traversing the M1 Motorway to Long Kesh, some 10 miles outside Belfast. The march was met with a heavy military presence, which stopped the crowd and a sit-down protest on the motorway followed.<sup>27</sup>

The march was followed by wider action from the civil rights movement. On 2 January, NICRA held a demonstration in the Falls Park in West Belfast. It was a safer bet, as it stayed inside the Catholic area, but mobilised thousands of people. This was the first of a series of NICRA actions.<sup>28</sup> On 15 January the NRM marched in Dublin and on 22 January, in Armagh, a reported 2,000 attended a demonstration where they met a huge military presence that was said to have turned Armagh into a “fortress”.<sup>29</sup>

On 29 January the NRM and the Tyrone Central Civil Resistance Committee retraced the steps of the first civil rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon where they were met with UDR roadblocks and a massive concentration of the police and military. Simultaneously, NICRA organised actions and, as broader forces mobilised, crowd sizes significantly increased. While the NRM was marching in Armagh,

John Hume led a demonstration to the newly opened internment camp at Magilligan, outside Derry, which coincided with other rallies in Newry and Castlewellsan. At Magilligan, the military acted in an openly repressive manner, using CS gas, rubber bullets and baton charges from the paratroopers.

When NICRA called an anti-internment march intending to break the marching ban in Derry, on Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> January, confrontation with the military was seen to be inevitable, but no one quite anticipated the extent of what would come. The NICRA leadership was conflicted over demonstrating, but in the end the call to action prevailed. When some 20,000 marches attempted to move outside of Derry's Catholic area they were prohibited by the Army, resulting in a small-scale riot that was, by now, a regular occurrence in the Bogside. The military response was to open fire with live rounds, resulting in an unprecedented massacre; 42 people were shot, 13 of them died on the day and one died later. All 14 of those killed on Bloody Sunday were innocent and unarmed civil rights protestors, victims of a calculated attempt to put down resistance in the very area that the Catholic masses had been most successful in driving the military out. Bloody Sunday sounded the death knell of the non-violent civil rights campaign and pushed the North into its most violent period in history. After Bloody Sunday, according to Gerry Adams, "Money, guns and recruits flooded into the IRA."<sup>30</sup>

There was also an immediate outrage that expressed itself on the streets. While the southern establishment announced a period of 'national mourning', working class Ireland erupted after Bloody Sunday. Tens of thousands of workers took strike action in Cork, Galway, Limerick, Dundalk and Dublin. As far away as the East coast of the US, dock workers refused to handle British ships and in Dublin, after three days of rioting, the British embassy was burnt to the ground.<sup>31</sup> In the North there were strikes, walk outs and riots, with the vast majority of them in Nationalist working class areas.

MP Bernadette Devlin delivered her now famous form of “proletarian protest”, thumping Tory MP Reginald Maulding in the House of Commons after he argued that the army had fired in self-defence against the IRA. Even in Britain, where solidarity with the civil rights cause had been difficult to muster outside of the organised Left, the weeks after Bloody Sunday saw the high point of solidarity, with the Anti-Internment League organising marches in various cities, including, Birmingham, Manchester, Bristol, Cambridge, Leeds, London, as well as Glasgow and Edinburgh.<sup>32</sup>

When NICRA called a demonstration for 6 February the turnout was huge, with up to 50,000 people taking part. But military repression had transformed the situation and the increasing feeling inside working-class nationalist areas was the need to fight fire with fire. In a context where non-violent civil rights marchers—many of whom had been marching peacefully for four years—were openly murdered by state forces, peaceful means of struggle appeared to be a dead end, with illusions in reforming the Northern state effectively shattered.

1972 saw the most intense year of violence. The crisis between the British government and the Unionist leadership came to a head in March. After Brian Faulkner refused to hand security powers over to Westminster, the British government suspended the Stormont parliament, bringing an end to 52 years of Unionist Party rule. The height of the civil resistance period came to an end in the summer of 1972, when the no go areas were smashed by the largest British military offensive since the Suez crisis of 1956. *Operation Motorman* saw 12,000 British troops, supported by tanks and bulldozers, descend into working class areas across the North, dismantling barricades, fortifying military barracks, dealing a decisive blow to these no-go areas where the civil resistance exercised a level of control and autonomy. This ultimately laid the basis for a militarisation of the North that would last decades.

## **Armed Struggle, the Left and Internment**

Despite claims from the Unionist government that internment would deal with the IRA, its impact was the polar opposite. From 1968-1972, state repression transformed the IRA from a movement “that time had forgot” to one of Europe’s best organised urban guerrilla armies, who would go on to wage a damaging and brutal war for the next three decades.<sup>33</sup> The IRA was certainly not absent from the early civil rights period, but its role was largely reactive to loyalist and state violence, and its activities were often peripheral when compared to the scale of the mass resistance in events like the Battle of the Bogside. In 1969, for example, small groups of republicans gathered what arms they could and tried, largely in vain, to defend these Nationalist districts. But on the whole, the IRA was ill-equipped and unable to sufficiently respond to the level of attack.

The pattern of repression from the introduction of British troops in 1969 onward, through the internment period and its aftermath, created the context in which large numbers of working-class people looked to fight back against state violence by any means necessary. In the absence of a clear and viable alternative on the Left— one that could build on the mass tactics of the civil rights movement but move beyond its reformist illusions in the Northern state—the Provisionals became the chief beneficiaries of the mood of anger inside the Catholic working class. But the armed struggle was always built on profound contradictions; it ultimately relied upon small groups of fighters whose very tactics were often counterposed to the strategy of mass action, whether through street protest, strikes, or later electoral mobilizations. While this contradiction was perhaps less pronounced during the insurrectionary period of 1971-72, it became evident as mass struggle waned and the prospect of a long and unwinnable military conflict became reality.

Among the contradictions was the fact that PIRA actions often alienated large sections of the population from republican aims. Provisional bombs may well have caused great damage to the Northern state and at times even the British army, but as Daniel Finn points out, the wider impact of armed struggle was “effective at destroying the moral credibility of a cause and alienating its mass support.”<sup>34</sup> The events of Bloody Friday, on 21 July 1972, are tragically illustrative in this regard: twenty PIRA bombs exploded in Belfast killing nine people, including five civilians, injuring scores more, and creating widespread revulsion, including in working class Nationalist communities. None of this absolves the Northern state and the British government in London for creating the conditions that gave rise to this kind of violence, not least in closing the door to a peaceful solution by repressing the civil rights movement, but the tactic of armed struggle would prove incapable of delivering the kind of fundamental change that people desperately wanted. The implementation of internment was arguably the chief precipitating factor in the foreclosing of peaceful options and the acceleration towards violence.

How did other forces on the Left at this time deal with these developments? Part of the problem from the onset of civil rights agitation was the Left’s political incoherence. During the heady days of 1968-1969, much of the Left had been united in assuming that partition was no longer relevant to the struggle for civil rights. When the PD first emerged, for example, it had explicitly stated “we regard the border as irrelevant in our struggle for civil rights.”<sup>35</sup> Such a statement illustrated how the new generation of civil rights activists viewed the national question as the property of conservative political forces, on both sides of the border. Others on the Left viewed the question of partition as one that ought to be parked until a later date, after democratic reforms had been realised.

The obvious problem, of course, was that reform had been consistently blocked by the Orange machine, which relied on sectarianism for its

survival. The intervention and role of British troops from 1969 onward confirmed this. Overcoming sectarianism, therefore, meant overcoming the power of the state. Elements of the Left did learn this lesson. Michael Farrell laid out his view in 1969:

The border must go, but it must go in the direction of a socialist republic and not just into a republic which might at some future date become socialist. Firstly, the border must go because it is a relic of imperialism, and in order to root out imperialism we have to root out the neo-imperialist set-up in the South and the neo-colonial one in the North. Secondly, Northern Ireland is completely unviable economically and only exists as a capitalist entity at the moment because of massive subventions from Britain. Similarly the South on its own is an area of small farms with very little industry. It too is completely unviable on its own and as a result is dependent on Britain. The unification of Ireland into a socialist republic is not only necessary for the creation of a viable economy, it must also be an immediate demand, because only the concept of a socialist republic can ever reconcile Protestant workers, who rightly have a very deep-seated fear of a Roman Catholic republic, to the ending of the border.<sup>36</sup>

The loose group of radicals around Farrell was too small and flimsily organised to put such a perspective into practice, but as we have seen they did play a crucial role in pushing forward popular protest from below, both in the early phase of civil rights activism, but also in the period after the introduction of internment when they pressed ahead with a return to the streets.

What of the more established forces of the labour movement and the organised political left at this time? The Communist Party of Northern Ireland (CPNI) was involved in the civil rights campaign, mainly through NICRA, since its inception. Its role, however, had been one that largely warned against a strategy of political action, such as marching and street

mobilisation, in favour of a more gradual campaign to reform the state. CPNI leading figure Betty Sinclair, for example, was one of the most vocal moderate voices on the NICRA executive, both in arguing against mobilisation and in championing the reforming capacity of Terence O'Neill's administration, against those who sought to directly confront the government.<sup>37</sup>

The socialism of the CPNI looked to the Soviet bloc as a form of 'actually existing' socialism. In Ireland, this informed a strategy that saw the potential for socialist politics emerging through the structures of the state. Democratising the Northern state was seen as the first 'stage' in this process. The CPNI saw NICRA "as the first step towards a broad electoral alliance for replacing the Unionist regime with a 'progressive' government at Stormont."<sup>38</sup> In practice, this meant acceptance of the constitutional position of the Northern state and a postponement of raising questions such as partition or workers' control until a later date, presumably until after the state had experienced a stage of democratisation.

Throughout the civil rights period the Communists clung rigidly to this perspective. The major problem facing proponents of the 'stages theory' by 1969 onward was that events indicated how their first stage—a process of democratic reform within the structures of partition—had been wholly unachievable. As Mike Milotte argues, the CPNI were able to punch above their weight in the early days of the civil rights campaign: "Their ability to influence events waned, however, when the masses took to the streets in ever-increasing numbers and evaporated entirely when the guns came out."<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the main current with the potential to transform the situation in the North were the trade unions. Elements of the labour movement had been involved in pushing class politics to the forefront of civil rights agitation, but they had done so in a largely formal and tokenistic fashion during the early period of NICRA, when letter writing and lobbying was the order of the day, as opposed to active street mobilisation. Those

looking to the trade union leaderships to lead the way against state repression throughout this period were continually found wanting.

While many individual trade unionists played at times a remarkable role in standing up to sectarian violence, sections of the trade union leadership were at best guilty of ignoring the main forces of sectarian violence or, at worst, aiding the very state institutions that carried out violence and repression. Thus in August 1969, while shop stewards were challenging sectarian violence the Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU) was appealing for support for the forces of 'law and order', seemingly oblivious to the fact that it was these forces, namely the RUC and B Specials, who were assisting in burning out Catholics from their homes.<sup>40</sup>

Therefore, as pressure for a stricter security response became more intensified, trade unionists who had taken a principled stand against violence in 1969 increasingly tailed loyalist agitation for internment. The period is well summed up in the role of the often-lauded NILP trade unionist, Sandy Scott, who led opposition to violence in 1969 only to end up taking part in trade union delegations to the Unionist government that called for tougher security measures in the run up to internment, alongside future leaders of the UDA.

In one such delegation, in June 1970, the trade unionists told the government that "it was possible that some Roman Catholic workers might be gently requested to leave for their own good", before going on to warn: "It was also possible that there might well be cases of intimidation and it was hoped that they would be permitted to deal with them. It was also hoped that the management would be understanding in its attitude to small groups of men who might gather in the yard." Unionist Minister for Commerce, Robin Bailie, ended this particular meeting by giving a commitment that he would speak to management about the latter point.<sup>41</sup> The inability to challenge loyalism inside the labour movement directly facilitated the violent backlash of the early 1970s.

This mobilised significant layers of Protestant workers demanding the introduction of internment in 1971 and later culminated in the Ulster Workers Council Strike in 1974, a reactionary attempt to restore Orange rule in the North.<sup>42</sup>

The trade union movement was at times effective at curbing sectarianism on the shop floor, but its leadership was much too conservative to pose the kind of robust and sustained campaign needed to eliminate it. The fact that internment saw many trade union members unlawfully arrested was rarely taken up. When trade unions at grassroots level got behind the NRM march that broke the ban on Christmas Day 1971, the leadership of NIC-ICTU explicitly distanced itself from such actions. Subsequently, when 6 trade union members were gunned down during Bloody Sunday, the trade union movement refused to officially take part in mobilisations, instead organising a 'peace conference' in Belfast two days after the killings.<sup>43</sup>

The history of the NILP also reflects the worst elements of this tradition. The NILP reached its heyday in the mid-1960s, and entered the civil rights period with a substantial electoral base, albeit primarily in Protestant areas. The Party essentially advocated a parliamentary solution to the issue of sectarianism. While NILP members played a role in the early civil rights campaign on an individual basis, the organisation was wedded to supporting partition and sought to use the state structures as an arena to transform society.

As the state stepped in to repress the civil rights campaign the party found itself increasingly falling behind state repression. Indeed, in 1971 the NILP went as far as joining Faulkner's cabinet. By the time non-violent anti-internment marchers were gunned down by the British Army on the streets of Derry, NILP MP Vivian Simpson endorsed much of what the government was saying about the atrocity from the floor of the Stormont parliament, while failing to offer any words of condemnation toward the military. It illustrated how disconnected the NILP were from

the growing movement against internment and to 'Smash Stormont'.<sup>44</sup>

None of this should denigrate the remarkable role played by individual trade unionists, or the potential for principled class politics to have emerged in the period if the opportunity on offer during the civil rights movement had been taken. But there was a profoundly damaging history of acquiescence in the face of sectarianism in the labour movement as well, not always as extreme as that of the beginning of the Troubles, but usually with the same features: a refusal to condemn state repression, an unwillingness to challenge sectarianism within the movement, and the advocacy of support for the institutions of the state, which, above all else, have always been the main guarantor of sectarianism in the North of Ireland.

## **50 Years On**

50 years on from internment and the legacy of violence looms large in politics in the North. Today, the legal system is one battleground, as surviving hooded men take their fight to the Supreme Court in search of legal redress and justice.<sup>45</sup> In May 2021, in what was a vindication of the families' decades long campaign for truth and justice, a historic inquest into the Ballymurphy massacre of August 1971 stated what the people of west Belfast knew all along: the victims murdered by the British Army were entirely innocent. The inquest came over a decade after the Saville report of 2010, which found victims of Bloody Sunday massacre innocent.

But while sustained campaigns from victims' families and their supporters have revealed the truth about what happened to their loved ones, the British government continues to obstruct justice and seeks to absolve its own forces, through an amnesty for soldiers responsible for killing innocent people. Today, Tory politicians seek to block justice for victims, largely because they know that such a pursuit will inevitably implicate the top brass of the British establishment: the politicians and generals who gave the go ahead.

Internment and its aftermath crystallised the role of imperialism and partition in the North of Ireland. British military intervention was dictated by well-worn and often brutal colonial strategies: internment without trial and prisoner abuse, shoot to kill, and 'counter-insurgency' operations, such as the use of loyalist paramilitaries as allies. The level of state violence in this period was the major contributor to filling the growth of armed groups and 25 years of violent conflict. The state's reaction to reform created far bigger grievances than those originally highlighted by the civil rights movement, and this in turn called into question the reformability and legitimacy of the state.<sup>46</sup>

Nor are the injustices of internment confined to the history books. *Operation Demetrius* was wound down in 1975 as part of the wider overarching strategy of British imperialism, which sought to confine the conflict to the internal boundaries of the North, initially through the strategy of ‘Ulsterisation’—a policy akin to its namesake, ‘Vietnamization’. The shift saw the beginnings of the policy of ‘criminalisation’ toward political prisoners, which, alongside counterinsurgency tactics notable for their brutality, had a significant capacity to wear down armed struggle. Yet this context also helped lay the basis for the next major period of civil unrest in the early 1980s during the Hunger Strikes.

But throughout all of this internment never quite went away. In the 1970s the flagrant arrest and detention of suspects without trial was soon replaced with the widespread use of non-jury or ‘Diplock courts’ and other emergency powers, rendering the idea of due process or a fair trial null and void in many cases. And even in the post peace process era, flagrant examples of internment continued. In 2016, Derry republican Tony Taylor was arrested at the behest of then British Secretary of State, Theresa Villiers, resulting in 993 days of imprisonment without trial before being released in 2018, in what was by any account a grave miscarriage of justice.

While the use of internment today in Ireland is not as widespread as it once was, it is not difficult to trace the techniques of coercion and torture that the British military honed in Ireland in its later imperialist adventures. Indeed, one of the most nauseating products of the ‘Northern Ireland peace process’ is how the British establishment have paraded their self-proclaimed skill in ‘conflict management’ and counter insurgency around the world, as part of sustained imperialist expeditions. Thus, in the period of the ‘War on Terror’, the British colonial experience in the North of Ireland provided some of the inspiration and legal justification for the CIA’s ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’.<sup>47</sup> Understanding the use and abuse of internment in the North, then, helps illuminate the

cause of justice and anti-imperialism in the contemporary world.

Crucially, it should also be remembered that any significant gains made during the course of the civil rights movement and onwards came about primarily through mass struggle from below, not as a result of parliamentary manoeuvre, or of armed actions carried out by the few. The development of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, for example, established after the Housing Executive Act (1971), was a clear concession won by the civil rights campaign. Yet the overriding lesson of the civil rights campaign was that the primary force of violence and division was the existence of the Northern state itself. British intervention and internment confirmed this in a painful, repressive way.

Five decades on from internment and understanding these lessons remains crucial. The challenge of the civil rights upsurge in Ireland was, in essence, the challenge of re-forging the anti-sectarian and anti-imperialist politics of James Connolly; rejecting the pan-class nature of the Unionist and Nationalist projects, and advocating for a new Ireland based on the unity of working class people on both sides of the divide and on either side of the border. Today, faced with a sectarian state that continues to deny rights and fails to deliver for working class people, the task of re-forging the politics of Connolly remains. Understanding the past helps us fight for a better future. This pamphlet aims to be a very modest contribution to that effort.

## **Endnotes**

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6 *Scarman Report*, 1969, p. 248

7 The events of August 1969 and their aftermath spurred an historic split in the Republican movement, with the breakaway Provisional IRA espousing criticism of the political orientation of the movement as resulting in the failure of republicans to adequately defend Catholic Belfast. In response, the Provisionals sought to forcefully re-establish the traditional commitment to armed struggle. The 'Provisionals' and 'Officials' made up separate organisations hereafter.

8 Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of the Irish Troubles*, Cork University Press, 1997, p. 311.

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- 21 McGuffin, *Internment*.
- 22 *Irish News*, 10 September 1971.
- 23 Rosa Gilbert, 'No rent, no rates: Civil disobedience against internment in Northern Ireland 1971-1974', *Journal of Irish Studies*, 2017, p. 32.
- 24 *Unfree Citizen*, No. 20, 26 November 1971; also see, *Donegal News*, 27 November 1971 and McGuffin, *Internment*.
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- 28 *Irish News*, 3 January 1972.
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35 'Manifesto of the People's Democracy', 1969, People's Democracy file, Northern Ireland Political Collection, Linenhall Library, Belfast.

36 'Discussion on the strategy of People's Democracy', *New Left Review*, 1969.

37 In 1969 Sinclair released the following statement with other 'moderates' after walking off the NICRA committee in protest against the PD: "All we needed was time...a lull in which to see if Captain O'Neill is going to carry out the reforms he had promised. But the PD would not give us time and their political views are infringing on the non political aims of NICRA...We have been taken over by people preaching the most extreme form of revolutionary socialism, the sort of politics that have been causing trouble in France, Germany, Japan and many other parts of the world." Paul Arthur, *The People's Democracy 1968-73*, Belfast, Blackstaff Press, 1974, p. 61.

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