

MAYHEM

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The IRA strategy to isolate the British army and brand them as enemies was successful by the summer of 1970. By that stage, all the efforts of the British army to build relationships with the Catholic population had failed. Since arriving on the streets in August 1969, the army had tried football matches with senior pupils in local schools, they had played water-polo matches in the Falls swimming baths with local teams, they had organised swimming galas and discos, but by early summer 1970 no one was taking up army invitations.

‘I never took part in any of their football matches. I don’t know anybody in Unity who did. We knew what it was about from the start. It was so obvious. I would certainly have discouraged anybody from getting involved. The army organised matches and things with St Malachy’s College [about 400 metres from Unity, one of the two Catholic boys’ grammar schools in Belfast then], but that had nothing to do with us. We kept them at arm’s length from the start.’

The relationship between the army and the Catholic population had broken down in clouds of CS gas, house searches and beatings. The definitive breach was caused by what was known as the ‘Falls Road curfew’ in July 1970, when, following a large find of arms and explosives, the army sealed off the whole lower Falls district for two days and carried out house-to-house searches. During the period of the curfew, three people died from gunfire and one was crushed by an army vehicle. Sixty-eight civilians were injured and about twenty soldiers were wounded in gun battles. Army figures show troops fired 1,427 live rounds in the densely built-up district from their high-velocity NATO-issue SLR assault rifles. The deaths and injuries to the civilian population were compounded by individual soldiers damaging property and personal possessions in houses, and others, notably members of the Black Watch regiment, stealing cash, watches and jewellery.

Parallel to the rioting and organised street disturbances in 1970, the number of IRA shooting incidents and explosions increased as weapons arrived and expertise with explosives developed. In

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August, the IRA in south Armagh killed two RUC men in an explosion, the first police casualties of the IRA campaign. In February 1971, the IRA in north Belfast shot and killed the first British soldier to die. The size and frequency of disturbances increased and the weight of explosives detonated grew. By the beginning of 1971, it was clear the IRA had access to large numbers of guns and explosives and scores of members trained for gun battles. A full-scale campaign was under way.

The unionist prime minister, Major James Chichester-Clark, resigned in March 1971 when the British government refused to send extra troops. His successor, Brian Faulkner, from the outset was privately demanding internment without trial, which, as Stormont Minister of Home Affairs, he had implemented during the IRA border campaign in the 1950s. The British government was very reluctant to accede to his demands, especially since the advice of the army top brass was that internment would not solve the underlying problems in the North and could make matters worse. However, on the night before the twelfth of July Orange parade in 1971, the Belfast IRA mounted a bomb blitz along Royal Avenue, the city-centre route of the parade, which left Orangemen picking their way through rubble between bombed-out shop fronts as venetian blinds and curtains flapped through smashed window frames. It was the last straw. The British government agreed to internment. On 9 August, British army units arrested 342 people in nationalist districts across the North.

Internment produced a tidal wave of opposition among

nationalists. There was, of course, the fundamental objection in principle to internment without trial, an objection strenuously articulated not only by nationalists, but by members of the British Labour party and the Irish government. Then, the implementation of internment was made so much more obnoxious by the fact that only Catholics had been interned. By spring 1972 the number of internees was approaching a thousand.

The IRA company in Unity Flats had played an important role in planting the bombs in Royal Avenue on the night of 11 July, which had clinched the decision to implement internment: Royal Avenue was only 200 metres from Unity Flats. Ironically, no one in Unity Flats, IRA or otherwise, was arrested – or ‘lifted’ as people termed it – on the day of internment a month later in August 1971. The internment operation drew a blank in Unity Flats, but caused intense resentment and hostility in other areas.

Several reasons explain this failure by the security forces. First, as the frequency of shooting and bombing increased markedly through 1971, most IRA men had been expecting internment, as that had always been the response of Unionist governments. Many of them had already gone on the run before the first sweep began on 9 August. Besides, the intelligence the RUC gave the British army, who carried out the internment operation, was lamentably wrong and out of date. All the senior IRA figures in Belfast escaped the first sweep – and the IRA leaders held a press conference the next day in St Thomas’s secondary school in west Belfast to prove it.

However, the introduction of internment had an unlooked-for

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effect. It provided a major boost for the IRA careers of people like Gerry Bradley. With the senior men on the run, young and irresponsible figures like Bradley really came into their own across the city. By the summer of 1971, Bradley was a fully-trained IRA member and chafing at the bit to get into action, but the men in command in Unity Flats kept youths like him on a tight rein. Just as well: there was no telling what they might get up to.

For example, in 1970 Bradley and a friend, Micky Kelly, off their own bat, had tried to set fire to Clifton Street Orange hall, a hundred metres from Unity. It was no ordinary Orange hall, but the most important in Belfast. Located in Carlisle Circus beside the biggest Presbyterian church in the world, the hall was, and remains to this day, the point of departure for the annual twelfth of July parade in Belfast, which forms up in Carlisle Circus. Bearing the marks of scores of attacks, the hall's classical pediment is adorned with the only equestrian statue in Belfast, a bronze King William of Orange. Flanking the statue are flagpoles that fly a Union Jack and an 'Ulster' flag (a loyalist confection of a white flag with the red cross of St George, and, in the middle, a red hand of Ulster with a British crown on it) throughout every July and August. Protective wire caging was removed from the hall façade – only in March 2009 – after a £30,000 makeover.

Bradley and Kelly managed to break open the back doors of the hall. They had acquired tea chests, which they filled with inflammable material, lit it, then triumphantly carried the blazing tea

chests aloft on their heads into the hall and deposited them where they reckoned the blaze would catch best. As they ran out of the back doors, they were caught by a patrol of the King's Own Scottish Borderers and hauled off to the soldiers' base on the lower Shankill Road. Luckily for Bradley, one of the respected community leaders in Unity Flats, Emmanuel O'Rourke (he who had taken on four policemen in August 1969), went to the army base and was able to convince the officer in charge that, rather than setting fire to the place, Bradley and Kelly had been there because O'Rourke had ordered them into the hall to try to extinguish the fire, and that the pair of them had run out when the flames got out of control. Bradley says O'Rourke gave them 'a slap' for the escapade.

The escapade in itself is of no significance other than to illustrate the type of madness the teenagers in the IRA were capable of. It never occurred to Bradley what the repercussions would have been for Unity Flats if he had succeeded in burning down the most iconic Orange hall in the North. It would not simply have been a matter of risk for Unity Flats and its inhabitants, but there would, in all likelihood, have been retaliation against nearby Catholic churches, especially St Patrick's cathedral, the parish church of the residents of Unity.

Even so, Bradley is unrepentant. 'I was just looking at Clifton Street Orange hall recently and thinking if me and Kelly had managed to burn it down it wouldn't be there today.'

The unforeseen consequence of internment was that youths like Bradley were unleashed on Belfast. Initially they had no 'gear', as he

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calls it. 'Gear' meant primarily guns, but also explosives. The gear was controlled by the local IRA OC, or 'officer commanding', and his quartermaster. It was carefully hidden in dumps.

In the absence of 'gear', the location of which only a couple of IRA men in the district knew, the teenage IRA members and Fianna in Unity Flats simply rioted in response to the appearance of British army arrest squads intent on interning men. In practice, this meant that dozens of local youths poured out of Unity Flats, hijacked cars, vans, lorries and buses, set fire to them and blocked the main roads out of Belfast city centre and past Unity Flats with the burning vehicles. They threw stones, bricks, bottles and petrol bombs at any members of police or army who came within range. According to Bradley, the days after 9 August 1971 were 'mayhem'. The statistics bear him out.

If C company, as it then was in Unity, could not get to weapons, A company in Ardoyne certainly did, and fierce gun battles raged night and day in which IRA members, British soldiers and civilians, men and women, were killed. The same was true on an even larger scale in west Belfast. Palls of black smoke hung over nationalist districts of Belfast for days as buildings and vehicles burnt. The thump of explosions reverberated in the city centre and around the big nationalist districts, and gunfire rattled day and night. Eleven people were shot dead in Belfast on 9 August alone, and in the following week another nine were killed. Dozens were injured by gunfire, explosions and missiles of various kinds, thrown by opposing factions. An official report by the

Northern Ireland Housing Executive indicated that at least 2,500 families moved house in the three weeks after internment began, most in fierce sectarian clashes in north Belfast, where two streets of houses were burnt in Ardoyne.

Many in the British government were furious with the unionist ministers at Stormont, who had convinced them that internment would bring an end to the escalating violence. Instead, the opposite was the result. Paradoxically, one of the most forthright condemnations of the whole exercise was given by the clever, lazy, financially corrupt British politician Reginald Maudling, who was Home Secretary at the time. Unfortunately, his condemnation came twenty years after the event. In an interview with the *Independent* newspaper in 1991, Maudling, speaking with the advantage of hindsight said

The experience of internment, from 1971 to 1975, was by almost universal consent an unmitigated disaster, which has left an indelible mark on the history of Northern Ireland. It did not conform to international human rights standards because many of the wrong people were picked up and because it was accompanied by casual brutality during and after the arrests. It was also seen as an illegitimate weapon, in that part of the reason for using it was to prop up an ailing Unionist government.

For more than a year, no loyalists were rounded up, while republicans were kept in miserable conditions in leaky Nissen huts. On the outside, the death toll rose alarmingly, while riots and street disturbances became much worse. Thousands of people moved home.

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Alienation rose sharply in the Catholic population, thousands becoming involved in rent-and-rates strikes and civil disobedience.

For Gerry Bradley the imposition of internment began one of the most frenzied periods of his life. Eventually, of course, he and his pals did get their hands on the gear. The senior men who had escaped the internment sweep were soon back in their districts, districts which, it should be remembered, were still barricaded 'NOGO areas', as they had been since August 1969. With guns and explosives available, the IRA's dozens of trained operatives were ready to repulse any onslaught by British army arrest teams. The IRA also had the support of most people in the communities where they lived. The obvious burning injustice of internment, with so many innocents arrested and beaten, produced a furious response and a solidarity among the people whose husbands, fathers, brothers and sons had been maltreated and slung into Maudling's miserable, leaky huts.

Bradley says: 'In 1971 it wasn't republicans in the third battalion: it was the people. The areas of the third batt were constantly under attack from loyalists, from British army raids. The IRA were the defenders of the area. You had a hundred houses to stay in. Every door was open. Popular support was enormous. Everybody was behind us. We genuinely believed we could beat the Brits this time.'

For a couple of months after August 1971, as a result of internment, the British army was facing an uprising in Catholic districts of Belfast and Derry. This much is admitted in the army's official 'Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland', prepared for

the Chief of the General Staff, Sir Mike Jackson, in 2006. The document describes the period from August 1971 to the mid-seventies as 'a classic insurgency'. My own research reveals that between August 1969 and August 1971, fewer than 100 people had been killed. In the months between August 1971 and December 1971, about 150 were killed. Between August 1969 and August 1971, nine British soldiers were killed. Between August 1971 and the end of the year, thirty-three were killed. It was not only gun battles that the security forces had to contend with. Scores of explosions began to reduce Belfast's commercial centre to rubble. Mayhem indeed.

Young men like Bradley firmly believed they had right on their side. 'We saw ourselves defending people against an occupying army which was coming into our district every day, wrecking all round them, and their reason for being in the North at all was to shore up an unjust regime, just as the British army had always done in Ireland.'

In the first sweep, in August, 342 men had been 'lifted' across the North, but so cock-eyed had the RUC intelligence been that 104 were released within 48 hours. The horror stories those released men told about their brutal treatment by the British army fuelled the resistance that people like Bradley were engaged in, and explained the unquestioning support of people in the Catholic districts affected. Internment finally ended any legitimacy the Stormont government ever had among the Catholic population.

By August 1971, Bradley had graduated to using guns. 'I

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couldn't wait to get using a gun. I'd been doing training and all that. I knew how to use it, but it wasn't the same. When I was first handed a gun, I felt: this is it, the real thing. I was excited. I felt fear. I was apprehensive. I felt responsible. They gave you a gun for a purpose and it was to defend the people in Unity. That's what I was for. It meant I had moved beyond the street rioting. I had power, some control. I wasn't on my own, of course. I was part of a company. Now, instead of me rioting, I was one of the ones using the rioting.

'While the kids were rioting, we got gear and moved it, used them as cover. We'd say, "Start a riot and get the Brits round to such and such a place." The kids knew what was going on. I know because I'd been one of them not so long before. The kids knew the plan. The Brits would come on to confront the stone-throwers and we'd open up, fire forty or fifty shots, scatter them, maybe hit one.'

Bradley believed, 'We couldn't be bate. We were winning gun battles against the Brits. They had everything: armoured cars, the law, firepower, manpower, CS gas, and still they couldn't win. I genuinely believed that one day the IRA would be chasing the British army down to the docks, firing at them, and the last British officer would be backing up the gangway onto the boat with his pistol in his hand.' The IRA knew that's what had happened four years before in Aden in 1967 – although it was an aeroplane the fleeing British boarded – but the seventeen-year-old Bradley and his contemporaries saw direct comparisons.

What did he do in those frantic days? Planted bombs and fired at

British soldiers, police and loyalists whenever he had the chance, which was almost every day. The IRA company he was in would have been involved in at least three or four operations a day. “Operation” is too grand a word. You got a weapon, fired five to ten shots, gave it to a girl: she bolted. No question of washing off residues or anything like that. Forensics didn’t come into it then. Just shoot and walk away. We didn’t know about forensics. Neither did the Brits. It was just blatter, blatter, blatter, and walk away. Maybe go into a bar or walk into a house. Never think of washing, as you would in the eighties. No great pre-planning. Ops were done in minutes.

‘There had to be some degree of planning, of course, even make-shift. People weren’t just walking around with guns. You saw an opportunity, but you had to get the gear and you could miss your chance. You had to plan a run back, how to get the weapon away. And a girl didn’t just pop up. She was as much part of the op as the guy who fired. You had to know where she was: in the next street, in a house, standing fifty yards away round a corner. She had to know what to do, where to run. When you gave her the gun, she knew to bolt in a different direction from you. So it was arranged beforehand as much as possible.

‘That’s why Armalites were so useful, because the stock folded. Same with Peter the Painter. The girl could stuff it down her front or under her frock. It was rare for women soldiers to be in a foot patrol and the girl couldn’t be searched if it was only men. Still, they could hold the girl or take her off to the barracks to be searched.’ Bradley reels off the names of three women caught with guns, one

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with an Armalite.

Of course, like every other youth in Unity Flats, Bradley was arrested a few times, but released after being searched and questioned. He had no weapon and denied everything. No forensic tests were done on him. But his charmed existence couldn't last. After the unionist-inspired fiasco of internment, the British army were now firmly in charge and were building up their own intelligence. They began to create a profile of every person in nationalist working-class districts across the city. They regularly 'lifted' males for 'screening', that is, holding them for four hours to check out if their stories about their identity, their address, their background stood up. Many were gratuitously beaten, partly *pour encourager les autres*, partly because their interrogators thought they had some information, partly as some soldiers vented their frustrations about friends and colleagues being killed and injured. Whatever the pretext, beatings were routine.

In January 1972, Bradley's luck ran out. Along with another IRA member, John Moore, he was in a car going to meet a girl in Ardoyne. Ardoyne was the most comfortable place for north Belfast IRA men to socialise because it was the biggest, safest district in the third battalion area. There was overwhelming support from the people because of the horrifying experiences in 1969, when streets of houses were burnt and people shot dead, and now in 1971 because of continual loyalist attacks and the depredations of British soldiers. Due to the intense hostility of people in Ardoyne towards them, the British army generally operated only on the periphery of

the district, unless they made an incursion in force specifically to try to arrest an individual. Like all the other nationalist enclaves in Belfast, Ardoyne still had barricades at each entrance and IRA lookouts who would warn of loyalist or army incursions by blowing whistles or rattling metal dustbin lids.

The car with Moore and Bradley in it was stopped by the British army on the edge of Ardoyne. Stupidly, because they were not on an IRA operation, the car had false number plates, which, of course, did not check out when the army patrol radioed in. Bradley was taken to Girdwood barracks, the main army base in north Belfast; then came the most frightening experience of his young life. He remembers being taken into a large room, perhaps fifteen metres by ten. Around the walls were about forty cubicles, separated from each other by a partition, one and a half metres high. Men were sitting on chairs in the cubicles, facing the wall in silence. ‘The atmosphere was horrible. As soon as you went in, you were hit. I saw a man from Unity Flats I recognised, a big tough guy and said, “Will you tell my ma I’m here?” The guy looked terrified and whispered, “You’re not allowed to speak here.”

‘Every so often soldiers or police would take a man out for questioning. They all got beaten. The main man doing the beatings was a Scottish man. I remember he was called Seumas. You could hear men squealing. Some of the policemen were drunk and lashed out at people for no reason. I particularly recall Paddy Fitzsimmons, [a former member of the Irish Olympic boxing team], being repeatedly beaten and dragged back into the hall, unconscious. I

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reckon Fitzsimmons was practically unconscious for forty-eight hours.’ Fitzsimmons was interned and later took his case to the European Court of Human Rights.

As for Bradley, he only got slapped, as he says, in Girdwood – that is to say, hit around the head and face with an open hand. Despite successfully maintaining that he knew nothing, the game was up. His run of luck was over. He could deny everything, as he did, but others under interrogation at different locations were going to name him as a prolific gunman. He was not released. The next he knew, he was on his way to the prison ship HMS *Maidstone*, moored in Belfast Lough.