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RICHAR  
& IAN

**T**HIS BOOK offers some  
scholarly chart the pivots  
of modern Ireland  
fresh perspectives  
from colonial political violence  
and feminism  
*The Prince*  
Ireland takes  
conquest in the  
to the content  
of the Celtic  
political development  
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experiences  
have determined  
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alongside developments  
from the Irish  
economy. The  
intellectual

CONT

THE PRINCETON  
HISTORY

*of*  
MODERN  
IRELAND

*Edited by*

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& IAN MCBRIDE

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS  
*Princeton & Oxford*

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CHAPTER 5

NORTHERN IRELAND since 1920

Niall Ó Dochartaigh

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY OF NORTHERN IRELAND is dominated by the violent Troubles that broke out in 1968 and continued for the following thirty years. The intensity and duration of the conflict were exceptional in the context of modern Irish history, and the conflict has attracted intensive academic attention across a wide range of disciplines. It became, as was sometimes caustically remarked, the most intensively studied conflict of them all, providing a highly developed and easily accessible English-speaking research site for the study of organized violence.

One element of the British state's normalization project from the mid-1970s on was to emphasize the unexceptional character of the North, the relatively trivial scale of the conflict, and the marginality of those involved in pursuing it—the diplomatic equivalent of the police officer's "nothing to see here, move along, please." But although the scale of violence was far lower than it was in many other contemporary conflicts across the globe, it was utterly exceptional in post-war Western Europe. As O'Leary notes, the death toll between 1969 and 1990 exceeded the toll from political violence in all other European Union countries combined during the same period.<sup>1</sup> More than 3,600 people were killed and over 47,000 injured in a population of a little more than 1,500,000.<sup>2</sup> *Lost Lives*, a dispassionate and comprehensive chronicle of the dead that details every single killing, brings home the relentless toll of human suffering exacted during the conflict.<sup>3</sup> The death toll reached a peak in 1972, when 479 people were killed, but from 1976 on the rate sharply declined as it flattened out to between 50 and 100 per year, occasionally bumping up. This key indicator of declining violence was often cited as evidence that the situation had essentially been brought under control by the late 1970s. But many other indicators of conflict remained high until the very end—most importantly, the huge numbers of soldiers and armed police officers who had

to be deployed. The cost of the relative stability was an intensive and open-ended militarization of everyday life in many areas where the Catholic minority predominated. And some indicators of conflict were susceptible to abrupt upward shifts, as with the sharp increase in the financial toll imposed by commercial bombings in Belfast and London in the early 1990s.

The Troubles and the related theme of a peace process with no apparent end point continue to dominate discourse on Northern politics and the writing of the North's history. The long, slow half-century before the Troubles is an object of curiosity to the extent that it helps to explain the outbreak of conflict. From late 1968, time seemed to speed up as the languorous years of Unionist domination—symbolized by the image of Lord Brookeborough treating his premiership as a part-time job<sup>4</sup>—were succeeded by a chaotic, disordered blur of contest and violence. What, then, of those long, slow years before the rush forward—was another future possible? Was the acceleration toward violent disorder a maturing and release of the potential stored up in the state from the beginning? Or was it a contingent outcome explicable by a particular set of events, by the specific but not inevitable form taken by the state?

#### MAKING NORTHERN IRELAND

If the covenant on which liberal political theory finds its justification of the state is a notional one, Northern Ireland's founding covenant was a contemporary text whose origins could be pinpointed precisely to the communal resistance of Ulster Protestants to Home Rule. Unionists mobilized, armed, and threatened civil war in 1912 to assert the right of a Protestant minority territorially concentrated in the North to reject the authority of a proposed Irish parliament. Northern Ireland was founded on, and mandated by, its Protestant majority, but the new entity included without its consent a Catholic and nationalist minority that formed one-third of the population.

Both unionists and their nationalist and republican opponents invoked democratic principles in support of their positions, but even though both positions had normative force, it was the material capacity of Ulster Unionists to mount a powerful armed challenge to state authority rather than the respective normative weight of the two positions that decided the outcome. Once Northern Ireland had been established, Unionists invoked the principle of majority rule in opposition to any attempt to revisit the settlement. But the new state had been established on principles that undermined its own legitimacy: that a large, culturally distinctive minority should not be coerced to accept a political system it rejected, and that such a minority has the right to resist this system by force of arms if necessary.

With the establishment of a large, armed, and almost exclusively Protestant Ulster Special Constabulary in 1920 (the "B-Specials"), Ulster Unionists acquired a substantial and entirely novel capacity for the autonomous exercise of legiti-

mate force. Combined with the new Unionist-controlled apparatus of government in Belfast, it transformed the balance of power between Unionists and the British state. In 1914 the British government could still seriously consider exerting coercive power against Ulster Unionist resistance. After the establishment of the new Northern Ireland government in 1922 such a course of action became much more difficult.

Although partition strengthened the position of Unionists, it instituted a threefold weakening of the political position of Northern nationalists. In the first place, they ceased to form part of a political majority in Ireland. Lacking representation in the parliament in Dublin, they had no means of exerting significant influence on the major forces in Irish nationalist politics. Second, the Westminster parliament had also acted as a source of power before partition. The combined impact of the withdrawal of the great bulk of Irish members of parliament (MPs), British determination to keep Irish affairs out of the imperial parliament, and the newly institutionalized power of Unionists nullified Westminster as a source of power for the Northern minority. Finally, Catholics formed an electoral minority in the North large enough that it was important to marginalize and exclude it, but small enough that its representatives were entirely unnecessary for the formation of a government. They were thus doubly absent from the calculus of political power in the new state. Given the absence of any serious threat to order and stability from the minority, only conciliation of the most minimal kind was necessary for the maintenance of public order.<sup>5</sup>

#### UNIONISM IN A DIVIDED IRELAND

The partition of Ireland led to an abrupt shift in the practice of unionist politics, but it also set in motion a long-term process of ideological change. Despite the cultural distinctiveness of Ulster, unionists in the North had long been accustomed to dealing with Dublin as the administrative center of the country, and the imaginative geographies of Ulster unionism stretched into the deep south and the far west of Ireland. One irony of the increasing centralization of the modernizing British state in nineteenth-century Ireland was that it had knitted Ulster ever more tightly in with the rest of Ireland even as the struggle over Home Rule intensified, circulating people throughout the island more than ever before—bringing policemen from Kerry to Belfast and civil servants from Antrim to Dublin.

Prior to partition, unionists in Ulster and in the rest of Ireland gradually drifted apart as their interests diverged, but unionism retained a strong and significant all-Ireland vision even in the final stages of the struggle to prevent Home Rule. The Irish character of Ulster unionism was personified by its leader, the Dublin lawyer Edward Carson, and was asserted firmly in the 1912 Ulster Covenant, whose opening sentence opposed Home Rule because it "would be disastrous

to the material well-being of Ulster as well as of the whole of Ireland." As late as 1921, the year of partition, the Northern prime minister James Craig could declare: "We are very much bound up in the rest of Ireland [and hope for], as Sir Edward Carson said the other day, peace throughout the whole of our land. We must hope not only for a brilliant prospect for Ulster, but a brilliant future for Ireland."<sup>6</sup>

For some time after partition, there was a strong sense among many Ulster unionists that the new entity represented not just the North but also a particular version and vision of Ireland as a whole. This is captured in the *Belfast Newsletter's* 1963 proposal to rename Northern Ireland as "Royal Ireland."<sup>7</sup> It is evident too in the determination of the Belfast-based and Protestant-dominated Irish Football Association to field an international team called "Ireland" for decades after partition—finally being forced to change to "Northern Ireland" in 1954.

Over the decades, a slow retreat from the broader Irish context took place, and the rest of Ireland became a more hazily imagined and homogenized space beyond the border, losing texture and detail in the Ulster unionist imagination. Unionism shifted from a focus on the maintenance of strong ties between Britain and Ireland to a focus on maintaining the separation between the two jurisdictions in Ireland, from an ideology emphasizing unity and combination to one that emphasized particularity and difference. This shift did not happen all at once. A 1967 survey indicated that almost half a century after partition, 88% of northern Protestants agreed that the reunification of Ireland, within the United Kingdom, would be the best political arrangement for Northern Ireland.<sup>8</sup> The all-Ireland character of the Protestant churches and of many sporting organizations ensured the persistence of all-Ireland spaces and institutions that were significantly unionist and Protestant in composition and outlook, providing institutional expression of a form of Irishness that was comfortable and compatible with unionism and a broader British identification.

The most influential typologies of Ulster unionism are organized around an opposition between two competing territorial frames for action and imagination, between a regional Northern Ireland unionism (or Ulster loyalism) that is more sectarian and retrogressive and a broader UK and British unionism that looks to the metropolis and is more liberal, civic, and inclusive.<sup>9</sup> Building typologies of unionism around these two territorial frameworks tends to marginalize the deepest of the shifts that took place in unionism—its transformation from an ideology concerned with the relationship between all of Ireland and Britain to one concerned primarily to legitimize and defend a six-county unit in Ireland.

The institutionalization of the two new polities in Ireland and the naturalization of partition over time produced powerful pressures for an intensified regionalization of Ulster unionism. The outbreak of violent conflict in 1969 accelerated this process of retreat from the Irish context. The imperative to remove all ambiguity around unionist support for Northern Ireland's membership in the United

Kingdom in the face of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) campaign was a major new factor that worked to close off spaces of ambiguity and openness. The sense of distance from the rest of Ireland was increased too by the intensification of circuits of movement for professional employment and university education in the United Kingdom. They tied the Northern middle class much more tightly into the UK context and increased the distance between them and their contemporaries south of the border.

This gradual but deep generational shift in the Ulster unionist relationship to the Irish context was summed up by Democratic Unionist Party leader and first minister Peter Robinson in his Edward Carson lecture in Dublin in 2012: "I consider myself an Ulster or Northern Ireland unionist not an Irish Unionist. The same would be true of the vast majority of unionists in Northern Ireland. That is a significant change not just from one hundred years ago but even from fifty years ago." Robinson was asserting strongly the regional character of his unionism, but his speech was notable too for acknowledging that the fading of an all-Ireland dimension to Ulster unionism had been a gradual process. It was also notable for linking the decline of unionist identification with Ireland with the concept of retreat, albeit in a heavily qualified and indirect way: "Edward Carson was unquestionably an Irish unionist, and while the legacy of Edward Carson lives on, it may be regretted that the idea of 'Irish unionism' in any meaningful sense, as historically defined, does not."<sup>10</sup>

#### A UNIONIST STATE

After partition the North remained part of the United Kingdom, but the Home Rule government and parliament established in Belfast, with its prime minister, ministries, and cabinet, resembled the Dominion governments then emerging elsewhere in the Empire rather than the arrangements for governance in the components of Great Britain. Treasury oversight and fiscal dependence ensured that Stormont remained dependent on London in a way that the Dominions did not, but the Unionist government was nonetheless insulated to a great extent from the pressures of the British government and parliament.<sup>11</sup>

The politics of the new entity quickly took on a rigid, frozen form. For half a century, the Unionist party won every election, formed every government, supplied every cabinet minister, and took every decision. Membership of the party was almost exclusively Protestant, and virtually every minister who served in government was a member of the Orange Order. Voting patterns followed religious affiliation so predictably that large numbers of constituencies and local councils, where the balance between Protestant and Catholic made the victory of one side or the other entirely predictable, remained uncontested for decades.

Little effort was made to co-opt even the most amenable elements in the Catholic community. The Unionist government had large numbers of public appointments

at its disposal but rarely appointed Catholics. It was an indication of the power of populist loyalist pressure for exclusion and, just as importantly, a measure of the political impotence of the minority that the state made so little effort to create a pliable, collaborative Catholic elite. This exclusion at elite level was matched by widespread discrimination in the public service.

However, the image of a monolithically powerful Unionist state does not capture the intensity of internal unionist divisions and the extent to which Protestant unity had to be actively maintained and reproduced. In their scrupulously detailed analysis of the operations of the Stormont government, Bew, Paterson, and Gibbon suggest a continuous struggle between populists and anti-populists.<sup>12</sup> Populists sought increased expenditure, ultimately through the extraction of greater subsidies from the British Treasury, and the maintenance of discrimination against the minority to secure unionism's Protestant, working-class support base. Anti-populists combined a technocratic concern to control spending with the wish to maintain metropolitan standards and resist popular sectarian pressures. The anti-populist position was driven in part by normative considerations but also by the need to keep the money flowing from London and to preempt the exertion of political pressure by the British government. For Bew et al., the dominance of the sectarian populists and the consequent discrimination was a contingent development. It was not a structurally determined outcome of partition. But it is possible to argue that the constant shaping pressure that the populists were able to exert was tied very closely to Northern Ireland's foundational character as a Protestant polity. The partition settlement had produced a drastically unequal division of power between Northern unionists and nationalists. The consequent absence of strong pressure from the minority, from the Irish state, or from London ensured that no significant force balanced the pressure exerted by the unionist right and loyalist ultras. In this sense the consequent exclusion was as much a structural feature of Northern politics as a contingent development.

One significant non-nationalist oppositional force had some success in the late 1950s and mid-1960s. At the height of its power, the Northern Ireland Labour Party took four of the fifty-two seats in the Stormont parliament.<sup>13</sup> But any such third force faced a dilemma produced by the sectarian electoral logic of the state. Such a party could only form part of a winning coalition by allying with the nationalist, republican, and republican labor elements that dominated the politics of the minority. But eroding the power of the Unionist party sufficiently to form an alternative majority and break the Unionist monopoly on power required winning significant support from a Protestant electorate that would be alienated by any such alliance.

Despite the exclusion and discrimination and the disproportionately high levels of Catholic unemployment and emigration, Northern nationalists derived significant material advantages from being on the UK side of the Irish border. With the establishment of the British welfare state in the 1940s, a wide gap began to

open up between the level of public services provided in the two Irish jurisdictions. Overt violent repression, although a feature of the state, was only intermittently necessary. Nonetheless, some forms of exclusion and discrimination practiced by the state were so blatant as to ultimately imperil the state itself. The situation in Derry in particular was unsustainable, as certain Unionists recognized. As the civil rights movement gathered momentum in late 1968, Unionist MP Edmund Warnock wrote to Prime Minister Terence O'Neill: "If ever a community had a right to demonstrate against a denial of civil rights, Derry is the finest example."<sup>14</sup> The apparently permanent political exclusion of the minority ensured that even the most biddable, socially conservative, and potentially acquiescent forces in the Catholic community remained at arm's length from the regime. When the Ulster Unionist monopoly on power was finally effectively challenged on the streets, the most socially conservative Catholics were willing to ally themselves with radical oppositional forces rather than with the Unionist government.<sup>15</sup>

#### MOBILIZATION

In the late 1960s it became apparent that this seemingly impregnable, self-reproducing system had a weak spot that oppositional forces could exploit: the minority was large enough, and territorially concentrated enough, to present a serious challenge to public order and the exercise of state authority in many parts of Northern Ireland.<sup>16</sup> In the right political conditions, a breach of the system at this weak point could bring powerful external forces pouring through the gap. Deep social and economic changes after 1945 helped create a political context in which such a challenge might be effectively mounted and contributed to the emergence of a new cohort of oppositional activists capable of leading such a challenge.

The construction by the British Labour government of a public welfare system that was unprecedented in its ambition and scope transformed the material conditions of everyday life from the late 1940s. Slums were cleared, new houses were built, and free education and medical care were provided universally.<sup>17</sup> Paradoxically, this modernizing state action facilitated a sharp intensification in sectarian discrimination that became a lightning rod for minority discontent. The large-scale housing discrimination that was a central focus for the civil rights movement was no hangover from a bygone age but a novel phenomenon of the post-war era. The practice was intensely concentrated in areas where Unionist control was fragile and where housing-allocation decisions could tip the balance of local political control.

When a massive new program for the building of public housing was launched in the late 1940s, the local councils were put in charge of much of the construction and allocation, significantly increasing the patronage at their disposal. In the most important of the gerrymandered councils—the second city of Derry, where Unionists secured 60% of seats with 33% of the vote—the local council, Londonderry

Corporation, discriminated systematically. By the late 1960s housing construction by the Corporation was grinding to a halt in the city, even though a long waiting list remained. New housing in wards in which Unionists enjoyed a small electoral majority would threaten unionist control of the Corporation and hand this major source of patronage and power to nationalists.<sup>18</sup>

Housing discrimination provided an issue in which the connection between material disadvantage and Unionist political control was immediately apparent. But the mobilizing potential of even this issue was relatively limited. Local activists in Derry and Dungannon, two of the most discriminatory of the gerrymandered local authorities, had been agitating on these issues since 1963. In Derry, activists had staged sit-ins, pickets, and protests through 1967 and 1968. Very few people had been mobilized on the issue of housing, but a cohort of new activists had nonetheless gained experience and had begun to build new networks.<sup>19</sup>

The Civil Rights Association was established in 1967 and provided a focus for mass mobilization on a broad range of issues. The first march, from Coalisland to Dungannon in County Tyrone in August 1968, was a notable success, mobilizing around two thousand marchers. The turnout of about six hundred at the next march, in Derry in October 1968, was disappointingly small, but the TV footage of that march transformed the political climate. Television viewers saw images of a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) baton charge, in which policemen whacked people over the head in a casually random manner—more of a baton stroll than a baton charge, as the raw footage shows.<sup>20</sup> This direct violent confrontation between police and protesters electrified the situation and put the question of the relationship between the Unionist state and its Catholic minority at the top of the political agenda.

The new and powerfully seductive medium of television was central to this shift, providing new channels of influence and communication that connected local oppositional forces with external sources of power, thus changing the balance of forces in the state. It was as if the channels between the Northern minority and both London and Dublin that had been sealed in 1922 had been blasted open.

Now that oppositional forces had found methods that gave them significant political leverage, the question arose of what kind of reordering might be possible. The civil rights mobilization was extremely costly, and as soon as the pressure had abated, external sources of pressure on unionism would ease off. One of the reasons many activists pushed in 1969 for deep changes that went beyond the remedying of the most blatant abuses was the danger that the structural features that had secured Unionist domination for fifty years would once again reassert themselves.

As activists maintained pressure and loyalist counterdemonstrators confronted them, sectarian tensions rose, and clashes between the RUC and people in Catholic working-class areas intensified relentlessly. In January 1969 off-duty B-Specials

and other local loyalists attacked a march from Belfast to Derry organized by the radical student group, People's Democracy, as it passed through a predominantly Protestant rural area on the outskirts of Derry. The RUC escort made little effort to stop the attack. Intense, large-scale rioting broke out in Derry that evening after the marchers arrived. Barricades were erected where the working-class nationalist Bogside District met the city center, and the RUC was excluded from the area for three days. In imitation of the "Free Berkeley" slogan of student protesters in the United States, the barricaded zone was dubbed "Free Derry," and the slogan "You are now entering Free Derry" was painted on a wall in the Bogside.<sup>21</sup> This territorial exclusion of state forces was a watershed event. It illustrated the fragility of the Stormont government's control of many of the predominantly Catholic areas under its authority. Derry was also the site of the "Battle of the Bogside," the large-scale rioting in August 1969 that finally triggered the deployment of British troops. The RUC lost control of large areas of the city, and by the third day of clashes, the coercive capacity of Stormont had almost been exhausted. At Stormont's request the British government deployed troops to restore order. The big question now was what kind of order that would be.

#### ESCALATION

The British state became deeply involved in the day-to-day affairs of Northern Ireland from August 1969 on. This intervention was characterized by a curiously lopsided combination of power and timidity. On the one hand, the state papers convey the impression of an immense and powerful machine overwhelming, infiltrating, and steering the Unionist government. Financially dependent on London since the extension of the welfare state to Northern Ireland in the 1940s and now dependent on London for the maintenance of public order, the Unionist government initially made only half-hearted attempts to bargain against reform and accepted most of the changes recommended by London.<sup>22</sup>

But on the other hand, state papers also depict a British state whose authority was exercised through smoke and mirrors, a Wizard of Oz behind whose curtain lay the reality of limited capacity to enforce its will if faced with resistance. When loyalists and unionists on the streets and in the state apparatus resisted British-sponsored reforms, they discovered it was possible to push back. When the Hunt Report's recommendations for disarming the RUC, for a change of RUC uniform, and for the abolition of the B-Specials were published in October 1969, the subsequent rioting on the working-class streets of Belfast's Shankill Road outlined the limits of the British state's power. Off-duty B-Specials and other loyalists turned their weapons against the troops, and three people were shot dead, including the first RUC officer to be killed in the conflict. The British government retreated from the change of uniform and allowed Stormont to shape the new Ulster Defence

Regiment (UDR) in the image of the B-Specials. From now on the Unionist government could meet any proposal for change with the objection that it would generate violence from the Protestant community.

Resistance to reform on the streets operated in tandem with the braking and shaping power exerted by those in the state apparatus. The implementation of police reform in the two key urban spaces of West Belfast and Free Derry is illustrative of the extent to which overwhelming Unionist and Protestant predominance in the state apparatus constituted an important source of unionist political power and a direct source of political pressure. In West Belfast the new English inspector-general of the RUC, Sir Arthur Young, was met by a wall of hostility from RUC men. The vast majority of them refused to patrol the area under the arrangements negotiated with the local Citizens Defence Association.<sup>23</sup>

In a meeting with Young in Derry, local RUC officers refused to wear the blue uniforms from the London Metropolitan Police that had been delivered to them on the basis that they were not individually tailored. Young yielded. The Derry Citizens Defence Association had made an agreement with Young that the RUC would be accepted back in the area that very day on condition that they were wearing the new uniform.<sup>24</sup> At this crucial juncture, it was not resistance from the Bogside that prevented the return of the police but resistance in the force to the reform package. That these acts of resistance went unpunished showed the limits of the power of the British state. They showed too that Unionist power rested not only with the government but was also diffused throughout the state apparatus and out onto the streets.

With the failure of this truncated reform to secure normal policing of Catholic urban areas, the British army began to settle into a new role as the day-to-day policing agency in large Catholic working-class areas. It was some months before either wing of the IRA launched a campaign. It was above all the failure to resolve the problem of order, which by extension was the problem of the relationship between the minority and the state, that created the space for a violent challenge by the IRA. It was the daily presence of heavily armed troops on the streets rather than the fact of British sovereignty that gave powerful emotional force to the "Brits Out" slogan subsequently adopted by the Provisional IRA.

The army was now holding the ground until a minimally reformed RUC could return to re-establish the authority of a Unionist government that had shown itself capable of setting tight limits to British government action. The army was there to assert state authority and now faced constant pressure from unionists to do so more robustly. The deployment of the army as the agency of day-to-day law and order in Catholic urban areas in October 1969 was a momentous decision. Although many contemporary observers assumed that the subsequent breakdown in relations between local Catholic youths and the troops was manufactured or controlled by the IRA, the intensifying hostility and confrontation had a logic all its own.

In late 1969 and early 1970, a new "Provisional" splinter group broke away from the "Official" republican movement, partly because of dissatisfaction with the perceived reticence of the leadership in pursuing armed action. It is often assumed that nothing would have prevented the Provisionals from launching a determined campaign of violence against the British army. However, that IRA leaders of all shades attempted to maintain good relations with the army into the spring of 1970 indicates that in certain political circumstances, they would have been strongly inhibited from attacking the army. In this respect, the Falls Road curfew of 1970 deserves the prominent place it has been given in explanations of the escalating violence.

In June 1970 rioting and gun battles between the IRA and British troops broke out after a raid for arms in the Lower Falls area of Belfast. The army restored control by imposing a curfew. It is of more than passing significance that primarily the Official IRA fought the troops. Local commander Jim Sullivan had worked cooperatively with the local RUC commander to remove the barricades around the area, and the Officials would lead their movement over the next few years to full support for state security forces and bitter opposition to the Provisional IRA. That this movement found itself involved in gun battles with the British army in mid-1970 is one of the strongest indicators that violent confrontation with the army cannot be explained solely or even primarily in terms of an unalterable determination to launch a major campaign. In the case of the Officials, it happened despite the leadership's intentions rather than because of them.

It is notable too that this crucial escalating event did not originate with a republican provocation of the military—an attempt to draw them into violence—but with a raid for arms that asserted the army's right to control the local territory. The symbolic parade of two Unionist ministers along the Falls in an army jeep after the curfew, sometimes characterized as a publicity error or an act of unfortunate insensitivity, reflected the reality that the British government was indeed acting in response to unionist wishes in asserting the state's authority forcefully in Catholic working-class areas.

#### ARMED STRUGGLE

Several paramilitary organizations, both loyalist and republican, were active during the Troubles, but the Provisional IRA was far and away the most important. Only the Provisional IRA offered a sustained challenge to the British state's claim to a monopoly of legitimate violence in the North, and only the Provisionals continued as a significant political force after the conflict ended. The relative weight of the various paramilitary organizations in the conflict is most frequently assessed by reference to the death toll. While the Provisionals were responsible for 48.5% of all killings and other republicans for a further 10%, loyalists killed 28.8% of the total.<sup>25</sup> However, the death toll does not accurately reflect the balance of

activity between loyalists and republicans. Loyalists in the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force engaged primarily in assassinations of Catholic civilians targeted on the basis of their religious background. In contrast, Republicans focused predominantly on attacking the security forces and also carried out many thousands of attacks on infrastructure and economic targets that did not kill anyone. Focusing on the death toll greatly understates the huge gap between the two in terms of capacity, complexity, and level of activity. The security forces accounted for only a tenth of all deaths, but they constituted far and away the largest and most important agent deploying force in the conflict. Their impact is evident not primarily in the death toll but in other figures, such as the three hundred thousand house searches conducted in the early 1970s, the two thousand people interned without charge, and the more than twenty thousand people imprisoned for paramilitary activities. A total of three hundred thousand British troops would serve in Northern Ireland over the course of the conflict. Killings of civilians by the security forces took place infrequently after the mid-1970s. The deployment of overwhelming force by the state had secured a high degree of territorial control by that stage, reducing the need for the kind of measures deployed in the early years and making it possible, and prudent, to control security force behavior much more tightly.

The overwhelming majority of people from Northern Ireland who bore arms did so as members of the RUC and the UDR, whose combined strength by the mid-1980s was almost twenty thousand. Joining the security forces provided a legal and legitimate route for those who sought to sustain the Union through force of arms that had no equivalent on the nationalist side of the divide. The British state emphasized that it combated both republican and loyalist paramilitaries, but even though large numbers of loyalists were imprisoned, the state had an entirely different relationship with the two. Official documents released in recent years present a picture of a deeply ambiguous relationship among loyalists, mainstream unionists, and the British state. In early 1975 an Official Unionist Party delegation led by the party leader met the secretary of state and senior officials shortly after the IRA had called a ceasefire, at a time when loyalists were still carrying out regular killings. One of the three members of the delegation suggested that the government "recruit large numbers of the UDA [Ulster Defence Association] and UVF [Ulster Volunteer Force] to the RUC [RUC Reserve] and put them into Andersonstown [in West Belfast]." The suggestion was not treated seriously by the British, but the very fact that a member of an Official Unionist Party delegation felt able to make such a suggestion is telling. It is impossible to imagine an equivalent suggestion being made to British officials by a mainstream nationalist.<sup>26</sup>

The Provisional Republican movement's capacity to mobilize and to organize and its ability to maintain a long-term armed campaign against the state are central to understanding the persistence of the conflict and the shape that a settle-

ment eventually took. The Provisionals themselves often represented the movement as an almost mechanical reaction to the structural injustice of partition and state violence, as being forced into their campaign by discrimination and repression. In contrast, much of the historical literature presents the Provisional IRA and its leadership as relentless, driving agents—steering, shaping, and determining the course of the conflict.

In their different ways, both these approaches distort the balance between agency and structure in explaining the role of the Provisionals. The structural explanation fails to acknowledge the range of choices available or to capture the variety of experiences and understandings that underlay the mass mobilization of both the Official and Provisional IRA. In contrast, agential accounts underestimate the extent to which the IRA, like all other actors involved, was constrained and shaped by events and actors over which it had little control. The violence of the Provisionals was an element in a system of conflict in which there were other, far more powerful, forces at work. The coercive capacity of the British state and the shaping pressure of unionist resistance to British policy were much more significant sources of coercive power than was IRA violence.

A direct link exists between the wider political context and patterns of mobilization in the IRA, but the relationship between state repression and militant mobilization was not a linear one. One of the most striking things to emerge from recent interviews with former militants is a pattern of demobilization as repression intensified. Former IRA members recall large numbers of people flooding into the movement in 1969 and 1970, as teenagers of both genders filled the ranks. As violence intensified, many of these recruits dropped out. One teenage member who in 1969 recruited several of his friends into the republican youth wing, the Fianna, recalls that within a year not one of them remained in the organization.<sup>27</sup> Another recalls that the two friends who were sworn into the Fianna with him had both left within eighteen months.<sup>28</sup> A female volunteer who joined in 1969 at the age of fifteen recalls: "We were all involved, but after a while the numbers fell and a lot of people left, but the people who stayed, stayed for the long haul."<sup>29</sup> They may have left partly because of increasing opposition in the Catholic community to the IRA but also, we must assume, because of the rising cost of involvement. As one former member put it: "A lot of them were in the Fianna and then once people got a bit older they realized this is no joke, you know."<sup>30</sup> Many who joined the IRA cite the experience of state repression as the primary motivating factor. This has provoked the response that most people who experienced such repression didn't join the IRA, that individuals were free to make a choice, and that many resisted the temptation of violence. But for many who joined the IRA, it seemed more like an obligation than a temptation. As one woman volunteer who joined Cumann na mBan after her return from working in London with a Catholic charity put it: "I had thought about it and I had to do it and I feel, it was like I felt compelled to do it ... people had to stand up."<sup>31</sup>



This is not to discount the importance of the excitement of covert armed action in motivating many young recruits, but this was just one of several mobilizing factors. Bosi identifies three pathways to mobilization: those who sought to defend their local areas, those committed to republican ideological goals, and those mobilized by transformative events.<sup>52</sup> Regardless of individual motivation, the political context of an intense ongoing struggle to shape the future of the North was far and away the most important factor in mobilization.

For IRA members who were deeply rooted in neighborhoods where the British army was widely regarded by late 1971 as an army of occupation, it seemed self-evident that the movement enjoyed large-scale popular support and had a popular mandate. One former republican internee remembers his disbelief and the stunned reaction of a fellow-internee in Long Kesh when they read a letter from an uncle of his that fiercely condemned the IRA.<sup>53</sup> They were shocked that someone from an Irish nationalist background could characterize the IRA in such negative terms. As time went on, the Provisionals would find themselves increasingly isolated from the broader Irish nationalist context. The condemnation, exclusion, and calculated isolation of the Provisionals helped give the movement something of the character of an angry militant sect, increasingly isolated and marginalized by the late 1970s.

That a significant core of support remained loyal to the Provisionals throughout it all was the product, in large measure, of direct experience of state repression. The state papers, with their reflective and cerebral tone, rarely convey any sense of the chaotic brutality that security force action often entailed. IRA insider Raymond Gilmour's account of his violent brutalization at the hands of soldiers and the RUC Special Branch at the age of thirteen provides one vivid description of the sense of utter powerlessness and debasement that such encounters could generate.<sup>54</sup> Former IRA member Eamon Collins, who later turned against the organization, also provides a powerful account of the humiliating and radicalizing effects of an army raid.<sup>55</sup> These accounts carry a particular weight, because both books are aimed primarily at criticizing the IRA.

Recent accounts by former IRA members have provided us with novel insights into the IRA as an organization, illuminating its complex bureaucratic character.<sup>56</sup> For example, Eamon Collins provides a deeply disillusioned account of an IRA "court martial," in which he participated.<sup>57</sup> While Collins was appalled by the procedural irregularities and the fact that the accused did not turn up, what is perhaps more striking is that the IRA was organizing such quasi-legal processes in a situation where the risks of arrest for taking part were extremely high. The movement's insistence on attempting to follow judicial norms is testimony to its desire to legitimate itself primarily by reference to the norms of legality and propriety that were dominant in the wider liberal democratic society. But a constant tension existed between these aspirations and the practices of the movement,

most evident in the punishment shootings and beatings that were inflicted as penalties for transgression, in the killing of suspected informers and captured security force members, and in the deliberate targeting of off-duty members.

While fanatical mind-sets and frozen ideologies were often identified as the defining features and driving forces behind the IRA, it is its bureaucratic structure, complexity, and the essential modernity of the organization that best explain its strength and persistence. Former IRA commander Martin McGuinness's widely perceived effectiveness in wielding executive power in Northern Ireland's government after 2007 is testimony not so much to the possibilities for individual transformation as to the essential contiguity of the bureaucratic forms of the IRA and the state.

The IRA's legitimization strategies emphasized its legality and the ethical, moral, and even altruistic character of the movement, but the dominant face visible to those outside the movement—particularly as the conflict wore on—was one of appalling and brutal violence. The British government worked hard to demonize and caricature the IRA, but they had plenty of raw material to work with. A huge toll of human life was taken in the random slaughter wreaked by bomb attacks with inadequate or miscommunicated warnings or those that seemed to be carried out with a careless disregard for civilian casualties. Unintentional killings by the IRA took the lives of 376 civilians in Northern Ireland, more than all of those killed by the security forces.<sup>58</sup> For even the most liberal and reflective of unionists, the IRA's campaign was an affront, a carnival of brutality that was not in any sense justified by the levels of injustice present in the state.

Although the death toll inflicted by state forces and loyalists roughly balanced the death toll inflicted by republicans until 1976, the imbalance became quite pronounced after that. The IRA and the Irish National Liberation Army accounted for the great majority of killings between then and 1985, when loyalist killings began to increase and then overtake republican killings in the wake of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. A powerful consensus developed south of the Irish border in the late 1970s that the violence was being driven overwhelmingly by the IRA rather than by state repression or loyalist violence. *The Northern Ireland Question*, poet Desmond Egan's angry challenge to those who endorsed the IRA campaign, distilled that sense of moral outrage:

two wee girls  
were playing tig near a car ...  
how many counties would you say  
are worth their scattered fingers? <sup>59</sup>

From this perspective, the question of "what then?"—what kind of political settlement should follow the end of the IRA campaign—was an insignificant one in

the face of appalling human suffering. But the Provisionals were not alone in placing immense weight on the question of "what then?" Unionists were scarcely any more willing to concede significant political ground in the interests of a peace settlement than were the Provisionals, but they were in a holding pattern, seeking to maintain the status quo rather than transform it. Unionists exerted influence on the conflict primarily through pressure on the British state to use its coercive resources more aggressively to secure a defeat of the IRA, which would obviate the need for major compromises.

#### NEGOTIATION

It is difficult to penetrate the haze of obfuscation and propaganda surrounding contact between the British government and the Provisional leadership during the Troubles. To a certain extent, this haze was a collaborative product, as both parties had a shared interest in maintaining their ideological purity and their bargaining positions in the event of failure.

A stereotype of republican ideological purity was valuable to the Provisionals, but it was also of use to the British government. If the republicans were extreme, rigid, and uncompromising, then no amount of concessions would bring peace. If compromise were impossible, then those who wanted peace had only one clear path to that goal: full support for the military efforts of the British state to secure the defeat of the IRA. The oft-repeated observation that the 1972 talks between Secretary of State for Northern Ireland William Whitelaw and an IRA delegation at Cheyne Walk in London were fruitless because the republicans laid out a set of impossible demands perpetuates a contemporary British government interpretation aimed at winning the blame game. The 1972 talks didn't founder over Provisional ideological rigidity but because of a local confrontation at a peaceline in Belfast. The pattern was repeated in subsequent ceasefires: violence resumed not because of a refusal to compromise on the big issues but because of difficulties in achieving progress that made a difference on the ground.

The exclusion of republicans, loyalists, and the Democratic Unionist Party from the negotiations at Sunningdale that led to setting up a power-sharing executive in 1974 was explained too on the basis that compromise with extremists was impossible. The Belfast Agreement (Good Friday Agreement) of 1998 would subsequently be dubbed "Sunningdale for slow learners," but in certain respects, Sunningdale was the opposite of the Good Friday Agreement: the former agreement was aimed at securing moderate nationalist support for repression of the IRA and offered no major concessions on security-related issues.<sup>40</sup> Reporting on a meeting with the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) leader Gerry Fitt as negotiations began in late 1973, key British official James Allan noted that "Mr Fitt will have been reminded forcefully [at the recent SDLP annual conference] ... that the electorate wanted to see early dividends on the emotional issue

of internment rather than simply to read that the party leaders were occupying themselves in sharing out the jobs."<sup>41</sup> The SDLP failed to secure significant movement on police reform or internment, and the Council of Ireland provided a symbolic victory in compensation. Without the Council of Ireland, Sunningdale offered the SDLP no more than ministerial seats in return for supporting a big push against the IRA that would have stretched the party's electoral support base to its limits. The SDLP brought together civil rights leaders, nationalists, and Labour politicians who were united by their opposition to both Official and Provisional republicans. It enjoyed the electoral support of the majority of Catholic voters throughout the conflict, but the party suffered from a certain lack of coherence. In John Hume, however, it had an exceptionally astute leader who played a major role in shaping the policy of both the British and Irish governments.

The proximate cause of the collapse of the power-sharing executive in 1974 was a massive Ulster Workers Council strike, which demonstrated the power of loyalists to bring the North to a standstill when running with the tide of unionist public opinion.<sup>42</sup> Protestant predominance in the workforce of key facilities, including the power stations, allowed the Ulster Workers Council to exert immense pressure on the British government. Also important was the persistence of the IRA campaign (although at a deliberately reduced level), which provided a backdrop against which unionists rejected compromise. Sunningdale was a project of a previous Tory government, which meant that the new Labour prime minister Harold Wilson had no great political capital invested in it. His strong personal preference for withdrawal was also important in determining his attitude.

The argument was later made that Sunningdale collapsed primarily because of the Council of Ireland and that responsibility for failure therefore lay primarily at the door of insistent nationalists. Power sharing and equality within the state were viable, the argument went, but in pursuing a nationalist agenda that inspired fear in unionists, nationalists pushed unionists too far. This was emphatically not the lesson that the British government drew at the time. A recurrent mantra of post-Sunningdale British policymakers was that power sharing was not practical politics, because unionists would not accept it.

After the collapse of Sunningdale, and particularly as the 1970s wore on, there was significant pressure for the co-option of the SDLP to a minimalist British government agenda whose parameters were set by unionist opinion. Throughout this time, John Hume continued to advocate an overarching settlement to end the conflict and was able to draw on his strong alliances with the Irish government and U.S. politicians to ensure that the political space for this position was maintained.<sup>43</sup>

In the months that followed the collapse of Sunningdale, the British prime minister Harold Wilson authorized the opening of secret contact with the IRA leadership.<sup>44</sup> As in 1972, many of those involved on both sides sought political cover after the talks came to nothing. Because the air had been thick with talk of

British withdrawal in the wake of Sunningdale's collapse, the British government subsequently went to great lengths to insist that withdrawal had formed no part of its plan in 1975. What can be said with some certainty is that this engagement began as a serious attempt to achieve a negotiated settlement of the conflict through the inclusion of paramilitaries. What is also clear is that Wilson viewed British military and political withdrawal from Ireland as the optimal outcome of a settlement. The contradictions of the 1975 talks and their ultimate failure arose to a great extent from the weakness of Wilson's divided government, the narrowness of his parliamentary majority, and the fading of his power as he entered a phase of personal and political decline.<sup>45</sup>

Many state papers present a picture of British officials trying to do their best to choose between difficult alternatives rather than following a relentlessly imperialist or repressive agenda. Some scholars working with the papers have found it irresistible to identify with those perspectives and to treat the development of policy as the outcome of a terribly difficult situation where much of the time decision makers effectively had no choice. We do not have access to equivalent records from the republican movement. However, the diaries of the 1975 negotiations kept by Brendan Duddy, the intermediary who acted as the primary channel of contact between Britain and the IRA then and later, provide a rare contemporary insight into the perspective of senior Provisionals. Duddy's account of the 1975 talks conveys a powerful sense of a Provisional leadership dealing with external constraints, impossible dilemmas, and choices among unpalatable alternatives that strongly echo the themes evident in the state papers. As the Provisional IRA ended its ceasefire in late 1975, for example, Duddy wrote in his diary: "I told the British that the Provos had really no choice. They had backed peace, but the corridors of power had ensured that no progress was possible."<sup>46</sup>

As the state secured greater control of the streets from 1976 on, expectations of a negotiated end to the conflict gave way to the hope among many that the conflict might end as all previous IRA campaigns against partition had done: with a dwindling of IRA violence and capacity and a victory for the state.

#### LONG WAR

The standard account of the Troubles has the British government adopting a policy from late 1975 of normalization, criminalization, and Ulsterization. The policy was aimed at treating the conflict as a criminal problem to be dealt with by policing measures while minimizing the impact on British public opinion by withdrawing British troops. External political pressure would be held at bay through an emphasis on the problem of violence rather than on politics, and there would be no need for engagement or negotiation with the "men of violence." At the same time, the IRA settled into a Long War, reorganizing to ensure that they

could sustain a campaign long enough to eventually "sicken"<sup>47</sup> the British into withdrawal. The two parties settled into a long struggle.

But the sequence of events that later came to be characterized as a policy of criminalization and normalization might usefully be characterized instead as the opening up of a policy vacuum that was filled by the priorities and agenda of the security forces. Roy Mason, the secretary of state who succeeded Merlyn Rees in 1976, epitomized this turn away from politics. Perhaps the most quietly damning comment on Mason's tenure is that of the most senior civil servant in the Northern Ireland Office, Permanent Under Secretary Brian Cubbon. In a letter accompanying a 1979 paper in which he discussed possible political ways forward, Cubbon refers to a few of the possible courses of action and then adds: "Or the new Secretary of State might seek to avoid the political whirlpool altogether, as Mr Mason has. Is this possible?"<sup>48</sup>

In the absence of any clear political vision or policy, those in charge of security began to drive policy by setting operational goals. And those goals had a clear political color. Writing to the head of the Northern Ireland Office and the General Officer Commanding (GOC) in 1976, the incoming RUC chief constable Kenneth Newman, presented the normalization of policing as a sharply focused political project to defeat the IRA:

My first priority must be to create a strong and efficient crime fighting machine designed to erode and ultimately overthrow the power of the PIRA ... the primacy of the police can not be established until the PIRA is weakened and ultimately eliminated ... my concept of police primacy involves: i) full mobilisation of manpower and resources for the investigation and detection of crimes generally and, in particular, the defeat of the PIRA.

Over the previous two years, loyalists had killed almost exactly as many people as republicans had. The Provisional IRA on the other hand had spent much of 1975 on ceasefire, negotiating secretly with the British government. But Newman's sixteen-point memo was dominated almost entirely by the aim of defeating the IRA. Loyalists finally get a secondary mention in point 13, which makes passing reference to dealing with "republicans and loyalists."<sup>49</sup>

Perhaps the most damaging consequence of the policy vacuum was the steep escalation of confrontation in the prisons. Far from seeking to criminalize IRA prisoners in the process of moving them into the H-Blocks of the new Maze prison, Secretary of State Merlyn Rees had actually sought in 1975 to retain special category conditions by extending all but one of these conditions to all prisoners, but his view had not prevailed.<sup>50</sup> If it had, one of the most important elements subsequently sustaining the conflict would have been removed. As IRA and Irish National Liberation Army prisoners protested against the removal of those conditions

in 1976, prison authorities responded with steadily harsher measures, to which the prisoners responded by escalating the protest.<sup>51</sup>

The intensity of the pressure placed on the prisoners aroused the concern even of Roy Mason. In late 1978 his private secretary wrote to the prison authorities on his behalf to say that correspondence about the prison

has raised a query in his mind—why is it necessary to conduct these close body searches of protesting prisoners in the H Blocks? It occurs to the Secretary of State that if these men are naked in their cells for 24 hours a day, then they have very little scope to hide anything. If this is the case, then why subject them to this further, apparently unnecessary, indignity? ... As you know the Secretary of State is not in general disposed to be over-sympathetic to these men ... but he does rather wonder about the question of searching.<sup>52</sup>

In a lengthy and assertive reply, the Director of Prison (Ops) insisted that "the Governor must be allowed to exercise his professional judgment of what is required to maintain the security of his prison." Explaining the rationale behind the searches, he explained that "As in any contest, the participants aim to destroy their opponents' morale" and that it was important that there be no change that the prisoners could see as an advance in their position.<sup>53</sup> By this logic, no escalation in punishment could be reversed until the prisoners had been defeated.

Cheered by the emphasis on defeating the IRA rather than achieving a compromise political settlement, unionists took great heart from what appeared to be a new departure. In fact the emphasis on security reflected an exhaustion of political will and energy that is distilled in the response of one civil servant to Cubbon's suggestions in 1979 for a new departure: "Since there are no foreseeable solutions to the Irish problem (and HMG have anyway no ultimate objective), we are only seeking to pass the time decently."<sup>54</sup>

The displacement of politics by security created a sense of complacency among some senior unionists that was extremely dangerous to the unionist position in the long term. If indeed there was no political conflict, only a criminal problem, then the state had an obligation to tackle it through the criminal justice system. The British government would fund, organize, and fight an open-ended war against the IRA, while unionists resisted almost all movement toward compromise with nationalists. Under direct rule, unionists could shape British policy through a constant exertion of pressure at the level of elite politics and at the operational level of a state apparatus in which unionist opinion was overwhelmingly dominant: in the civil service and the prison service, in the police and the UDR. Finally, unionist politicians could repeatedly invoke the prospect of loyalist paramilitary violence or large-scale resistance by the Protestant majority as an argument against change. An underestimation of the British state's need for political progress was unionists' most damaging political miscalculation.

A sense that the defeat of the IRA was within reach helps explain how the British government allowed the prison dispute to escalate to the stage where the IRA launched a hunger strike. On the eve of the first hunger strike in October 1980, Permanent Under Secretary Ken Stowe told his colleagues:

Senior Northern Ireland civil servants believed that the Catholic community considered the war to be over. Although the position might be affected by the H Block hunger strike there did appear to be a real chance that over the next few months the men of violence would find themselves increasingly isolated ... and the security forces would be able to mop them up gradually.<sup>55</sup>

When the Provisionals called off their first hunger strike in December 1980 on the basis of a promise of very modest changes, Secretary of State Humphrey Atkins regarded this as an act of capitulation, a sign of weakness and of republicanism's desperation to end the protest. When the prison authorities subsequently implemented these changes in a minimal and restrictive fashion, the British government did not make strenuous efforts to avert a second hunger strike.

Only after the first four hunger strikers had died; after one of them, Bobby Sands, had been elected as a Westminster MP; and after two other IRA prisoners had been elected to the Irish parliament did the British government secretly begin negotiating with the Provisionals in July 1981. This move was a measure of the political damage the strike was inflicting. The failure of these talks to produce a negotiated compromise settlement and the deaths of six more hunger strikers remain the focus of intense contemporary debate.<sup>56</sup> Both the IRA and the British government were engaged in intense negotiations during the impending death of the fifth hunger striker, Joe McDonnell, both sides being aware that the imminent deadline that his approaching death imposed produced heightened pressure for last-minute concessions.

The failure to negotiate a compromise settlement over the prison issue had disastrous consequences. Much recent commentary identifies the hunger strikes as the beginning of Sinn Féin's politicization and the route to compromise. But failure to find a negotiated compromise on the prison issue radicalized a new generation of republicans, reenergized the IRA campaign, reconnected the movement with a mass support base, and hardened opinion in the movement. It helped push the eventual political compromise far into the future.

#### PEACE PROCESS

Analysis of the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement generally emphasizes that the Irish government wanted it for political reasons and the British for security. But a much broader set of concerns drove the Agreement on the British side. The initial policy documents in 1979 that proposed dealing with the conflict in a broader

Irish context focused on the aim of building a partnership with the Irish state to share the political burden. Implicit in this model was a shifting of the balance of British policy in the direction of Irish nationalism. That this would involve confrontation with unionists was recognized from a very early stage. As one civil servant put it in 1979, "HMG [the British government] could not offer 'partnership' to the Irish Government unless we were prepared to face the Unionist reaction and deal with it."<sup>57</sup> The Agreement was clearly intended to exert pressure for compromise on unionists and to shatter the assumption that the British government would follow a unionist security agenda regardless of the political position that unionists adopted.

The Agreement opened up a range of avenues for progress. Although the Provisionals rejected it, it contributed to movement in Sinn Féin's negotiating position. In a series of policy documents in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the party nudged forward the outer edge of its negotiating position. Engagement with the SDLP and the Irish government in 1987 and 1988 provided early signs that the Provisionals would be willing to settle for something far short of their stated aims.<sup>58</sup> In November 1989 a journalist asked new secretary of state Peter Brooke if he could envisage a British government talking to Sinn Féin. Brooke replied that it was "difficult to envisage a military defeat" of the IRA and that the government would need to be "imaginative" in dealing with a possible end to the IRA campaign, throwing in a reference to Cyprus for good measure. It provided a public glimpse of some of the more adventurous conversations that were taking place at senior levels of the Northern Ireland Office.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the hail of criticism from Unionists that this apparently inadvertent kite-flying generated, reaction on the whole was sufficiently encouraging that Brooke subsequently gave a carefully considered speech in which he gave a clear public signal to the Provisionals that an inclusive negotiated compromise was possible, that if they "renounced violence," they "would be able, like other parties, to seek a role in the peaceful political life of the community."<sup>60</sup> However, it took another eight years to reach the formal peace agreement of 1998 and a further nine years before the Executive finally began to operate on a firm footing in 2007.

The fraught negotiations surrounding the Belfast Agreement were characterized by a multilayered mutual suspicion. Both republicans and Ulster Unionists argued that they were sincere in wishing to reach a settlement in which they would ultimately allay their opponents' concerns, but they doubted the sincerity of their opposite numbers. Republicans argued that Unionists demanded decommitting before a political settlement because they knew it was impossible. Unionists argued that republicans were cynically holding on to weapons and maintaining the capacity of the IRA for as long as possible because it gave them a powerful (and illegitimate) bargaining chip.

The compromise eventually imposed by U.S. Special Envoy Senator George Mitchell called for parallel processes for the establishment of new structures of

government and the decommissioning of IRA weapons. Both parties would jump at the same time. The intense distrust surrounding the choreography of these acts of simultaneity is captured neatly in comedian Eddie Izzard's 2001 take on the process:

the IRA was going "If you just sign your name on the declaration there, we will be taking our hands off the guns right now, if you could just put your signature there ..."

[UNIONISTS]

We will sign this piece of paper if you will take your hands away from the guns—the signature is so close to going on to the thing—If you could just remove ...

[IRA]

I've got my nail on the gun now. That's all I have. The ball is in your court. If you could just put that ink on to that thing—it's hardly a nanometer away ...

[UNIONISTS]

If you could just fuckin' take your fuckin' finger away. I'm dripping the ink down there. I'm putting ink on. It's not actually making any sentences yet, but I'm ...

[IRA]

You fuckin' ... Alright, it's all fuckin' off. Forget about it!<sup>61</sup>

In many respects, unionist and republican arguments on decommissioning were not contradictory. If the possibility for resumption of an IRA campaign had been eliminated near the beginning of the talks process, it would have greatly eased the pressure on unionists to compromise. They would have been in a much stronger position to exert pressure on the British government for their optimal outcome: a settlement that left Sinn Féin marginalized and perhaps subject to a long "decontamination" process that might split and destroy the movement. Unionists were right to think that delaying the process strengthened the republicans' hand. But given the history of unionist approaches to compromise settlements in the past, republicans were probably right that unionists would have pressed for a much less inclusive settlement if they had the opportunity and that unionists were quite relaxed about the possibility of an IRA split. Ulster Unionist Party leader David Trimble ultimately agreed to take part in a (short-lived) executive with Sinn Féin, the IRA decommissioned its weapons, and Sinn Féin eventually signed up to support policing. The Provisionals had moved to entirely peaceful means, while Ulster Unionists, and later the Democratic Unionist Party, had agreed to share power. These key parties to the negotiations ultimately proved willing to make far-reaching and fundamental compromises, but the intense pressure placed on them played a major role in generating this outcome.

In a 1990 *Star Trek* episode about an armed rebellion, Lieutenant Commander Data—the android crew member who embodies scientific rationality—points out to Captain Jean-Luc Picard that armed rebellion and terrorism sometimes succeed. He reminds him of “the independence of the Mexican state from Spain, the Irish unification of 2024, and the Kenzie rebellion.” “Yes, I’m aware of them,” Picard replies briskly, amplifying the impact of this pseudo-historical list with his offhand confirmation.<sup>62</sup>

The playful reference to Irish unity reflected a widespread assumption that history and the force of natural boundaries were on the side of Irish republicanism. But the century that began with the hardening and militarization of the central cleavage in Irish politics and the subsequent partition of the country has given way to a twenty-first century in which that partition persists and seems likely to persist for some time to come.

For many unionists the question of partition has now been finally settled. The 1998 Agreement is valued above all because it sealed the border, ended the dispute, and locked republicans into the United Kingdom. The bitter cost of this achievement is the toleration of tamed republicans, but the prize of Northern Ireland has been secured. In one sense there is good reason to interpret the Agreement in these terms. Its cross-border elements have proven to be marginal and trivial.<sup>63</sup> If Ireland is ever politically reunited, it will certainly not be through a gradual process of increasing cross-border collaboration. In addition polls suggest that although the Catholic proportion of the population in the North has increased, enthusiasm for reunification is far from strong—although it is subject to sharp fluctuations. However, the combined unionist vote dipped below 50% in the early years of the twenty-first century, foreshadowing a deep transformation in the political dynamics of Northern Ireland. The transition to a double-minority situation for the first time since partition has direct implications for the future constitutional status of the North. Northern nationalists may be cautious about the prospect of reunification, but they do not have the same deep-rooted objections as unionists do to a possible future reordering of relationships on the island.

Whatever relationship develops between the two parts of Ireland and between both parts of Ireland and Great Britain in the twenty-first century, it will be powerfully shaped by wider European and international currents. It will also be shaped by both Irish nationalism and unionism. Despite the powerful discourses that treat the question of the relationship between unionism and nationalism as one that is internal to Northern Ireland, the question is one that stretches across the Irish border and remains intertwined with broader questions of sovereignty, legitimacy, and political power in Ireland.

The great structural themes of class and nation long dominated the historiography of the Northern Ireland state. They were threaded through the two earliest full-length histories of the state, Patrick Buckland, *A History of Northern Ireland* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1981) and Michael Farrell, *Northern Ireland: The Orange State* (London: Pluto, 1980). The most fully developed theoretical project focused on class was Paul Bew, Henry Patterson, and Peter Gibbon, *The State in Northern Ireland 1921–1972: Political Forces and Social Classes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1979). Brendan O’Leary and John McGarry asserted the importance of nationality and the nation-state in the spirit of Ernest Gellner and insisted on the need to address these issues in any peace settlement in *The Politics of Antagonism: Understanding Northern Ireland* (London: Athlone Press, 1998) and *Explaining Northern Ireland: Broken Images* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995). Also important in this tradition are Frank Wright’s groundbreaking comparative work *Northern Ireland: A Comparative Analysis* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987) and Joseph Ruane and Jennifer Todd, *The Dynamics of Conflict in Northern Ireland: Power, Conflict and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

The ending of the conflict and the opening up from 1998 on of the relevant archives has seen a distinct shift in focus from structure to process, from class and nationalism to violence and decision making. This work tends to focus on untangling the threads of responsibility and on analyzing choices rather than on deep structural forces. Examples are Simon Prince and Geoffrey Warner, *Belfast and Derry in Revolt: A New History of the Start of the Troubles* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2012) and Thomas Hennessey, *Northern Ireland: The Origins of the Troubles* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005). In the context of a compromise peace settlement that undermined the narratives that both republicans and unionists had confidently pressed during the conflict, much of this work is bound up with the ongoing struggles of political actors to assert legitimacy and to shape the settlement. There is some irony in the fact that as the conflict recedes further into the past, the struggles around its interpretation seem to become ever more intense.

## NOTES

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