

Open letter to a socialist sympathiser of the IRA

Three events that shaped the IRA

"IRELAND occupies a position among the nations of the earth unique... in the possession of what is known as a physical force party — a party, that is to say, whose members are united upon no one point, and agreed upon no single principle, except the use of physical force as the sole means of settling the dispute between the people of this country and the governing power of Great Britain...

The latterday high-falutin hillside man exalts into a principle that which the revolutionists of other countries have looked upon as a weapon, and in his gatherings prohibits all discussion of those principles which formed the main strength of his prototypes elsewhere and made the successful use of that weapon possible. Our people have glided at different periods of the past century from moral force agitation, so called, into physical force rebellion, from constitutionalism into insurrection, meeting in each the same failure and the same disaster, and yet seem as far as ever from learning the great truth that neither method is ever likely to be successful until they first insist that a perfect agreement upon the end to be attained should be arrived at as a starting-point...

Every revolutionary movement in Ireland has drawn the bulk of its adherents from the ranks of disappointed followers of defeated constitutional movements. After having exhausted their constitutional efforts in striving to secure such a modicum of political power as would justify them to their own consciences in taking a place as loyal subjects of the British Empire, they, in despair, turn to thoughts of physical force as a means of attaining their ends.

Their conception of what constitutes freedom was in no sense changed or revolutionised; they still believed in the political form of freedom which had been their ideal in their constitutional days; but no longer hoping for it from the Acts of the British Parliament, they swung over into the ranks of the 'physical force' men as the only means of attaining it".

James Connolly, Workers' Republic, July 1899.

Dear Peter,

THE end of the IRA ceasefire makes it necessary to look once more at Irish republicanism — what it is, where it comes from, where can it go.

The last time we spoke you insisted that the Provisional IRA was a "genuinely revolutionary organisation", and a left-wing one at that — "not textbook, ideal, working-class revolutionaries", you said, "but real revolutionaries rooted in an age-old conflict that pushes them to the left and pits them against the establishment on both sides of

the Irish Sea". If they win, you added, that would deal an immense blow at "British imperialism" and the British state.

I, of course, contested all these statements, and other similar ones you made. I also contested your argument that the Provisional IRA campaign and the revolutionary-nationalist movement it spearheaded was part of an Irish concretisation of Trotsky's theory of permanent revolution.

Your ideas are typical of a sizeable layer of the international left. I want to use recent events, the ceasefire and its breakdown, as an occasion to go over these questions once more.

The 1916 Rising

THREE events shaped 20th century Irish republicanism. The first was the Easter rising in 1916.

About now, exactly eighty years ago, "in the springtime of the year" 1916, Connolly, Pearse, Mellows, Clarke, McDonagh, MacDermott, Markievicz, De Valera and their friends were feverishly working towards what they hoped would be a rising throughout most of Catholic Ireland. As it turned out, there would be a rising only in Dublin, and a few sparks struck in Galway and Cork.

They had planned a simultaneous rising in a number of centres throughout Ireland. The rising was to have been launched under cover of "manoeuvres" by the legal nationalist militia, the Irish Volunteers, which had been established during the Home Rule crisis on the eve of World War 1. At the last moment the official head of the Volunteers, Professor Eoin MacNeill, called off the manoeuvres.

Connolly and the others contemplated the collapse and ruin of all their plans. Connolly believed that European peace was imminent between powers that had been locked in blood-drenched stalemate for 20 months. If he and his friends failed to act, Ireland would miss the chance of winning belligerent status and thus representation at the expected peace conference; they faced the prospect of being rounded up, disarmed and imprisoned without having struck a blow. Their choice was to act dramatically, with little hope of the success they had hoped for, or else to let themselves be joined to the already large company of self-disgracing comic-opera revolutionary buffoons populating Irish history — to people like William Smith O'Brien MP, the man who led a ragged band around the starving countryside in 1848, at the end of the Famine, and felt obliged to first ask the permission of a landlord before he would order the cutting down of trees to build a barricade!

James Connolly, had written about such things with great bitterness and scorn in his book "Labour in Irish History" (pub-

lished in book form in 1910). There, he told the bitter tale of botched risings and missed chances that had succeeded each other like endless days of mourning and depression in Irish history. Connolly's bitterness attested to his determination to do better himself if the chance came. Seeing the chance going, Connolly, Pearse, and their friends acted to make the best of it.

And so they turned out in Dublin on Easter Monday, 1300 or 1400 of them against the might of the British Empire, in the Empire's second city — most of whose people, even those who wanted Irish Home Rule, supported the Empire and its war and therefore considered the insurgents traitors. Patrick Pearse read the declaration of the Irish Republic from the steps of the General Post Office, which they made their headquarters, to an uncomprehending crowd of casual spectators.

When the week-long battle that followed was over, and the Volunteers and their Citizen Army comrades were being led away under armed guard, some, including Connolly, to be shot after summary courts martial and others to be jailed and interned, crowds of Dubliners spat at them.

Thus Irish Republicanism took centre-stage in modern Irish history with a great revolutionary deed, startling alike in its heroic audacity and in its disregard for democracy in form or substance. For the elected leaders of the Irish were the Home Rule and Unionist MPs; the traditional leaders, the priests of the various persuasions. The insurgents had no mandate, not even the shadow of one, for what they did.

Connolly could not even have counted on the bulk of the members of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union, of which he was acting general secretary. He did not

The Rose Tree

"O words are lightly spoken,"
Said Pearse to Connolly
"Maybe a breath of politic words
Has withered our Rose Tree:
Or maybe but a wind that blows
Across the bitter sea."

"It needs to be but watered,"
James Connolly replied,
"To make the green come out again
And spread on every side,
And shake the blossom from the bud
To be the garden's pride."

"But where can we draw water,"
Said Pearse to Connolly,
"When all the wells are parched away?
O plain as plain can be
There's nothing but our own red blood
Can make a right Rose Tree."

WB Yeats



The Volunteers, 1916

count on it. Of all people, Connolly knew how useful a general strike would be to "paralyse the arm of militarism". If he did not try to call the workers of Dublin into action on the side of the insurgents, it was because he knew he could not.

The 1916 rising was an act entirely in the tradition of mid-19th century European revolutionism — of 1830 and 1848. In one of the articles Connolly wrote on the eve of the rising, on the techniques of insurrection, he analysed the Moscow rising of December 1905 — but that only pointed up the difference. Moscow came out of a mass movement; Easter 1916 presaged and prepared the way for the subsequent mass movement of nationalist revolt, a movement that might never have come, or might have come not so strongly, if the British had not tried to impose conscription on Ireland in 1918.

The minority acted in the name of the nation and called on the nation to follow, hoping to spark a national movement. In signing the surrender, Connolly was careful to sign only for Dublin and not to speak for the rest of the country. Plainly even then his hopes had not died. Yet the leaders of the rising cannot have hoped, even in the best case, that their actions would arouse anything but implacable hostility from the Northern Ireland Unionists.

Connolly

WHAT did Connolly think he was doing? Connolly's shaping experience had been in the British labour movement. He was a Marxist who did not believe, could not have believed, that a minority can substitute itself for a major class, or for a nation.

The key to Connolly is probably to be found in the fact that he did not believe that there was such a thing as a mechanically, spontaneously, ripe revolutionary situation. Recasting Machiavelli into his own idiom, he had written: "The only true prophets are those who carve out the future they announce". Mocking the comic-opera Irish revolutionists, he had spelled his idea out:

"An epoch to be truly revolutionary must

have a dominating number of men with the revolutionary spirit — ready to dare all and take all risks for the sake of their ideas... Revolutionaries who shrink from giving blow for blow until the great day has arrived and they have every shoestring in its place and every man has got his gun and the enemy has kindly consented to postpone action in order not to needlessly hurry the revolutionaries nor disarray their plans — such revolutionaries only exist in two places: on the comic opera stage and on the stage of Irish national politics" (November 1915).

Between writing that and deciding to turn out knowing that "we are going out to be slaughtered", as he said to one of his comrades on Easter Monday, Connolly's hopes of an all-Irish national rising had collapsed.

At the outbreak of the world war, Connolly — all of whose Irish hopes and perspectives had until then been focused on the development of the Irish labour movement within a Home-Rule bourgeois Ireland — had instinctively stood with those socialists who wanted working-class action against war in all the belligerent countries. He advocated Irish resistance to the war.

The collapse of the Socialist International and its disintegration into fragments lined up behind their own bourgeoisies threw Connolly back on to reliance on a national Irish struggle. He took sides with Britain's enemy, Germany, believing British imperialism to be the more reactionary imperial force because the British Navy controlled the seas. For this reason and on that issue, he seems to have been an Irish fellow-traveller of the patriotic majority of the German Social Democracy, who justified themselves by scholastic reliance on the arguments of Marx and Engels, in another epoch, against Russian imperialism.

Though all of this drove Connolly back into Irish nationalism, what he did was conceived still as part of an international struggle. "Starting thus, Ireland may yet set the torch to a European conflagration that will not burn out until the last throne and the last capitalist bond and debenture will be shrivelled on the funeral pyre of the last war lord". There is no doubt that Connolly saw what he was doing in 1916 in the light of the tactics Marx and Engels had elaborated for socialist activity in European countries like Germany and Italy in the mid 19th century. All through his life in Irish politics it is a recurring theme in his writings, now more, now less, emphasised. If it re-emerges startlingly after the outbreak of the 1914 war, that is because it had grown to seem remote in the evolution towards Home Rule of the previous years. 1914, rather than 1916, changed everything.

In 1850 Marx and Engels had written: "The relation of the revolutionary workers' party to the petty-bourgeois democrats is this: it marches together with them against the faction which it aims at overthrowing; it opposes them in everything whereby they seek to consolidate their position in their own interests".

In taking these views as a guide, Connolly anticipated the approach which, under Lenin's influence, the Communist Interna-

tional would advocate, in, for example, the Theses on the National and Colonial Question of its Second Congress in 1920.

Victory in defeat

THE 1916 rising is one of the great examples in history of success coming soon on the heels of what looked like absolute failure. The defeated insurgents were spat at by the people they considered theirs after the rising; but a little over a year later most of them came home from internment camp and prison to a welcome for heroes. Two and a half years after the rising, Sinn Féin won 73 out of 105 seats (for 48 per cent of the vote) in the 1918 general election, standing for a Republic and advocating the immediate setting up of an Irish parliament by the elected Irish MPs.

In January 1919 they did that. Two and a half years of often savage war later, Britain was forced to treat with Sinn Féin, offering most of Catholic Ireland Dominion status — substantial independence, the same as Canada and Australia had — within the British Empire.

If Sinn Féin failed to get all they wanted — an independent republic outside the British Empire, and a united Ireland in which the one million people in north-east Ireland who wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom would accept the "majority rule" of Catholic and mainly agrarian Ireland — that could be put down to a betrayal of the spirit of "1916". If there had been more of intransigence, outright refusal to compromise, then... Thus reasoned the minority who rejected the Treaty with Britain.

In its strange and dramatic contradictions, in the sudden reversals of fortune, in the confused and unexpected roles some of its participants played, 1916 inevitably generated confusion and mystification. Its power over the mind and imagination of subsequent generations comes not only from its heroism, or from the attractiveness and fascination of some of its leaders, but from its subsequent success.

The minority acted, outraging most of the nationalist people as well as Irish unionists north and south. They were loathed until the leaders were killed, and then came the magical transformation — the resurrection. Soon there was enough of a victory to unanswerably vindicate the minority, and retrospectively vindicate the insurgent tradition, the "little risings", of the 19th century. The retrospective weaving of poetic myth around the events and the idea of the blood sacrifice that redeemed Ireland, drawing much of its power from Christian myth, drawing too on the writings of Pearse and McDonagh, and given its shape by "the great myth-maker", Yeats — all of that, saturating the popular culture of Catholic Ireland, became and remains a great political force.

The minority acted, and won; the gun bestowed a power, magnified wonderfully, on the minority and their cause: and thus ever after you have a model of minority revolutionary action. In that "miraculous" experience you have the reason behind much of the unreason of modern

republicanism. History is a miracle-play! The republicans expect a miracle to overwhelm the unfavourable hard facts in the Six Counties.

Serious people do not believe in miracles. When something looks like a miracle, we probe to see what really happened and why.

For example, such seemingly miraculous things as the overnight eruption into a general strike of millions of workers who but yesterday were passive and indifferent — France, 1968, is one of the best examples — have for Marxists no mystery: they are rooted in the fact that normally there is a contradiction between the consciousness of working-class people and their real situation. That is what can trigger seemingly miraculous change.

In post-1916 Ireland the cause of the insurgents prospered quickly because of a number of material factors. Probably there was nothing inevitable about it. One of Connolly's chief spurs to action was his "fear" of a quick negotiated peace. If that had happened; if, later, the British had not tried to impose conscription on Ireland; if events had not continued to discredit and pulverise the Home Rule party and its entire philosophy of Irish progress by way of agreement with the British state — then "1916" would have been no success.

In Northern Ireland, since 1969, there has been no shortage of republican heroism or of epic events with the power to over-

whelm the sympathetic or even hostile imagination — the 1981 hunger strikes, for example, when ten men starved themselves to death. There has been no magical transformation — because the material conditions forbid it.

Civil war

THE second event that shaped 20th century republicanism was the civil war. The Treaty was imposed on Collins and Griffith by the credible British threat of "immediate and terrible war". The British had plans for internment camps in Ireland in which large parts of the whole population would be imprisoned, as Boer civilians were during the Boer war, to cut off support from the IRA.

After Sinn Féin split over the Treaty, the Republicans lost out in the political electioneering and manoeuvring. The bourgeoisie, the men who in the Dublin Chamber of Commerce had passed a resolution after the 1916 rising denouncing it as "Larkinism run amok", the big farmers in the east who had recently engaged in a large-scale social war with their labourers — all flocked behind the Collins-Griffith faction of Sinn Féin, the new party of order.

Fundamentally, however, what the "Free Staters" had going for them was the lack of any viable "Republican" alternative to compromise with Britain, and the fact that most people could not see the differences between Collins and De Valera as worth fighting about. Many saw that Collins was right that he had, indeed, won "the freedom to win freedom" — to gradually expand the Irish state's real independence.

Against that, there was the mysticism of Catholic nationalists — honourable, conscientious people like Cathal Brugha, who had sworn an oath to maintain the Republic and could not now swear the required allegiance to the King of England. At the base, there was the inchoate and dimly felt millenarianism of large numbers of people, especially in the West, for whom "the Republic" represented the drive for a great social transformation — for what Connolly had called the Workers' Republic. How widespread this was is now almost forgotten.

In all the labour and small-farmer struggles during the war of independence, the IRA acted as a force defending the status quo and securing private property. It was a national, and not a "sectional" movement. And before and during the civil war, the IRA leadership attempted to act as if they could — like the "men of 1916" — ignore elections, majorities, in short, politics. They acted as a separate military power in the state; they fought a civil war without any coherent alternative to the status quo.

They could not force a better deal than the Treaty out of the still very mighty British Empire. They had no policy for overcoming the division of the country, implicitly accepting that the North could not be "forced". The North, amazing as it may seem, had little part in the considerations of Dáil Éireann on the Treaty in December 1921 and January 1922. Division was a fact, and discussion

focused on things like the Oath of Allegiance.

The IRA drifted into a civil war they could not win and probably did not deserve to win because they thought that the gun and intransigence were enough. Being born was what might be called "Carbonari Republicanism", after a 19th-century underground revolutionary sect — archaic, sterile, conspiratorial republicanism, without any political programme to match its revolutionary aspirations. An attempt by the imprisoned republican Liam Mellows to restate Connolly in explicitly left-wing-populist nationalist terms — the republicans needed the "men of no property" — had been drowned in blood: Mellows was shot out of hand in December 1922.

My sympathies are with the republicans, with the young lads who would not accept compromise with imperialist iniquity or accept less than the radical transformation of life "the Republic" represented to them; with those who would not break their oath and their pledge, or break faith with Connolly and Pearse and those who had died in the fight — and with Liam Mellows, who told Dáil Éireann in the debate on the Treaty that Collins and Griffith were opting for the "fleshpots of Empire", turning their backs on the Indians and the rest of the oppressed peoples struggling for freedom against the British Empire. For socialists, those are our people, even when we disagree with them, or would have advocated a different course to theirs.

But the greatest tragedy of the civil war was that the republican side caught up into itself and into its notions of action — not politics, not working-class action, but the gun — a large part of the revolutionary energy of plebeian Ireland. For decades Carbonari republicanism would act as a lightning conductor, as one of Ireland's safety valves.

With its social base among small farmers, and rural and small-town labourers, the republican movement was separated from the organised labour movement in Catholic Ireland not so much by ideals as by method. Republicanism took shape as an "outsider" revolutionary movement. It defined itself as revolutionary by its commitment to minority action, to armed struggle on principle and as soon as possible. It saw military action as something sufficient to itself, dependent for success more on military logistics than ripe socialist conditions. After 1922 it was cut off from and abjured political action on principle, resolutely boycotting every parliament in the British Isles, Dublin, Belfast, or Westminster.

It was an archaic revolutionary movement, a throwback to mid-19th century movements in Europe, a hybrid, with (in practice if not in theory) many points in common with a militant anarchism. Social questions would be of interest to republicans — some of them — only as a means of gaining support for the nationalist armed struggle. It was an upside-down view of the world, in an archaic, land-that-time-forgot revolutionary movement on the fringes of Europe. Frederick Engels had described one of their 19th century ancestors, the terror-

Soviets in Ireland

THE Catholic Ireland of the war of independence was an Ireland in which the idea of the Workers' Republic had an immense popularity; an Ireland where very large numbers of people had been gripped by a diluted and imprecise (and therefore inevitably ineffective) version of Connolly's politics. It must have been a good time, though for socialists a painful one, to live through! In that Ireland, little groups of wage-workers in creameries, living in a sea of proprietary and would-be proprietary small farmers, time and again went on strike and ran up the Red Flag above a newly-proclaimed and short-lived "soviet". This happened on perhaps 38 separate occasions in those years.

It was an Ireland in which large numbers of people, including many who were not proletarians, were hungry for the Great Change, for the Workers' Republic that was for the majority the restoration of ancient Ireland, the imaginary golden age of the past, and the realisation of an impossible Catholic pre-capitalist world, and for a small minority what it is for us. And it was a revolutionary Ireland, of course, dominated by the fact that the great majority of the industrial proletariat were cut off from and hostile to the great awakening I describe.

If the war with the British (1919-21) radicalised and shook up the people in the South, in Belfast, where there had been a tremendous engineering strike in 1919, it helped trigger intra-working-class pogroms. Yet without the Northern workers, there could be no Workers' Republic.



Jim Larkin

ist sect of "Invincibles", as "Bakuninists".

The stagnation in Ireland, the situation created for revolutionary politics by the split in the working class and by Partition, and, as we will see, the collapse of the Communist International, would combine to keep the physical force revolutionaries in business. The IRA would become Ireland's substitute for a "revolutionary left" of the modern, 20th century, sort — based on the working class, using politics and trade unionism normally, treating questions of the state and armed force rationally rather than making a fetish of any particular form of action, organisation or struggle.

The fate of Connolly's socialist republicanism

THE third crucial development, allowing Carbonari republicanism to survive and helping to shape it, was the fate of revolutionary working-class socialism in Ireland — first, the dissipation of Connolly's political tradition, and then the degeneration of the communist movement into Stalinism.

Connolly had followed the tactics advocated by Marx, and later to be advocated by the Communist International — act together, organise and propagandise separately. But politically Connolly was swallowed up by his bourgeois and petty-bourgeois allies; socialism, despite the wide sentiment for "Connolly's Workers' Republic", was not an independent force in the years after 1916.

Connolly coined the ambivalent slogan that would serve populist republicanism: "the cause of Ireland is the cause of labour; the cause of labour is the cause of Ireland". He did not understand it as either a merging of the working-class interest into a multi-class national entity, or, as populist republicans — some in the Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin today, for example — do, the enlistment of labour and social issues as a means of gaining support for the national struggle. He saw the national question and the social question as flowing together, and national liberation as the victory of the working class. In any clash, he saw the "national" question as secondary.

"In the evolution of civilisation the progress of the fight for national liberty of any subject nation must perforce keep pace with the struggle for liberty of the most subject class in that nation and... the shifting of economic and political forces which accom-

panies the development of the system of capitalist society leads inevitably to the increasing conservatism of the non-working-class elements and to the revolutionary vigour and power of the working class".

The flaw in Connolly's design for 1916, as a working-class activity, was twofold. Any possibility of a national movement and a socialist working-class movement flowing together and "reconstructing the nation under its own leadership" in the vaguely "permanent-revolutionary" way James Connolly formulated it above (and elsewhere) was ruled out by the split in the Irish working class, and by the relative weakness of the Catholic working class vis-a-vis the rest of Catholic Ireland, which was, essentially, a peasant country. The "national question", as defined in most of Ireland, cut off the majority of the working class, who saw themselves as British.

It was the division in the Irish working class, and in the unions, that paralysed the labour movement in the war of independence. It organised general strikes as part of the political-military struggle, but it left politics to the bourgeois factions, unionist and republican: otherwise, it would have split.

The second flaw, which shaped the posthumous fate of James Connolly in Catholic Ireland, was his failure to build an educated, clear and coherent revolutionary socialist organisation, able to pursue consistent goals in changing circumstances. Connolly left a great vacuum. To discuss why would take us too far afield here. The consequence was that after 1916 the labour movement was a captive of nationalist forces.

"Connollyism" was reduced to a vague aspiration, his hard Marxist ideas immediately subjected to working over by "left-wing" priests and others to assimilate them to Catholic Nationalist Ireland. Their widespread popularity helped the labour movement grow — the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union experienced a phenomenal expansion in the period between 1916 and 1922 — but it had little other effect.

Talk of a Workers' Republic merged with Catholic mysticism and vague "back to the clan system" millenarianism to provide an aureole for the republican struggle against Britain. Connolly's legacy dissolved into a vaguely socialist and populist wing of nationalism during the war of independence.

The Communist Party of Ireland

THE forces of revolutionary socialism had to recompose themselves, and this was attempted as the war of independence was ending by the creation of a Communist Party, linked to the Communist International. Tiny and led by very young people, among them James Connolly's 20 year old son Roddy, it had little weight, and politically it let itself become a satellite of the physical-force republicans in the civil war.

After 1923, it regained the founder of the mass Irish workers' movement, Jim Larkin, who came back from jail in the USA, and led the breakaway from the Irish Transport and

General Workers' Union, the Workers' Union of Ireland.

In the late 1920s, after Jim Larkin drifted away from the Communist International, there was no Communist Party. The movement was recommenced by young militants trained for years at the "Lenin School" — i.e., the Stalin school — in Moscow, Betty Sinclair, Sean Murray, Brian O'Neill, Michael McNerny and one or two others. When the Communist Party of Ireland was refounded in 1933, it was rigidly Stalinist, with a hardened Catholic-nationalist and Menshevik stages-theory of development in Ireland.

The early Communist Party had been the real heir of Connolly. In the natural course of healthy political evolution it would have overcome its weaknesses and subsumed the working-class revolutionary element trapped in republicanism, winning republican militants to a clear notion of the workers' republic — working class power — as the only republic that would not be a gommeen mockery of the centuries of struggle of the Irish people.

Thus it had been in 19th century Europe, when the primitive, politically incoherent, underground revolutionary sects had over time dissolved and merged into modern labour movements — in France, for example, the Blanquists did that. In Ireland, the old revolutionary sectarianism survived in the IRA, penned up in the social and political blind alleys of post-partition Ireland. It did so because the alternative, rational, revolutionary movement, the communists, collapsed into a variant of populist nationalism, and became only a tributary stream into republicanism.

The Fifth Congress of the Communist International and "stages theory"

FROM 1923-4 the Communist International veered to the right. Its Fifth Congress — reflecting the interests or the perceptions of the ruling bureaucrats in the Soviet Union — began the process of substituting other politics for working-class, communist politics.

The working-class communists began to advocate the creation of two-class "worker and peasant" parties, and — in practice — the subordinate alliance of the communists with the bourgeois nationalists in colonial or semi-colonial countries. In China this led the working-class communist movement into the bourgeois-nationalist organisation of Chang Kai-Shek's Guomindang — and to a terrible massacre of Communist workers in 1927.

Everything which in 1916 and post-1916 Ireland had come about because Connolly was dead and because there was no communist party, that is, from confusion and working class defeat, now was deliberately fostered as a matter of high Comintern policy, under the direction of the Executive of the Communist International. In Ireland, the tiny, fledgling Communist Party had already tended to become a tail of the physical-force republicans in the civil war, before such politics became official Communist International policy. By the time the original Communist Party of Ireland collapsed,

Connolly in 1916

ARTHUR MacManus, one of the founders of the Communist Party of Great Britain, Glasgow-based, and like Connolly a Scots-Irish communist, explained Connolly's action in 1916 thus, quoting a letter he had received from him:

"Jim Connolly was the first socialist I had met who actually worked for Revolution, and dreamt of its immediate possibility. He was continually striving to read into every crisis the potentialities of a Revolutionary situation.

It is this which explains Connolly best. Foreseeing the inevitable struggle over the war, and aware of the forces which would be involved, he saw possibilities of at least a Political Revolution in Ireland.

If he remained aloof, then there could be no possible doubt as to it being merely a Political National one. But if he entered the throes of the struggle and could retain integral his own forces behind him, then given the first success, there was possibility in the second.

In any case, as he himself put it, "It is a Revolutionary's duty to encourage and aid the development of any and every crisis, and latterly to set about transforming it into a Revolutionary situation". This was Connolly's hope, and, if he failed, who can blame him? It is better to fight half a cause than talk a whole one; and in so far as Connolly was true to himself in this sense, to whom was he false?

The following letter, written by him in November 1915, gives pretty clearly the view he took of the whole situation:

To A McManus. Dear Comrade,
Your letter of 15th inst. duly received. I need hardly assure you that I would gladly accept your offer and invitation to address an anti-conscription meeting in Glasgow were it at all possible. But every moment in Dublin just now is full of tragic possibilities, as our beneficent Government is becoming daily more high-handed in its methods, and my presence is required here in constant watchfulness.

Hence, with regret, I must decline your kind invitation, and send you instead this message to yourself and all the Comrades who refuse to be led astray to fight the battles of the ruling capitalist class. Tell them that we in Ireland will not have Conscription, let the law say what it likes. We know our rulers: we know their power, and their ruthlessness we experience every day. We know they can force us to fight whether we wish to or not, but we know also that no force in their possession can decide for us where we will fight. That remains for us to decide; and we have no intention of shedding our blood abroad for our masters; rather will we elect to shed it if need be in a battle for the conquest of our freedom at home. Yours fraternally [signed] James Connolly."

From *The Socialist* April 1919

and a replacement was organised around Jim Larkin and his union, official Communist International policy was pushing them towards being a mere left-wing tail of the republican nationalists, around whom was grouped much of the natural constituency of the communists in Catholic Ireland.

The Communist International produced a great flowering of revolutionary Marxism, a great clearing away of reformist encrustations, a sharpening of long blunted Marxist perspectives, and an ardent commitment to militancy on the national question, too. The documents embodying this work — Lenin's draft, amended by the Second World Congress, on the National and Colonial Question, for example — are the bedrock of modern Marxism.

Yet no major Communist International document analysed Ireland. The nearest approach was a couple of weighty pieces on the current situation in the light of history by young Roddy Connolly. By the tenth anniversary of the rising, Stalinist hacks were writing commentaries in which Irish history was current Communist International policy read backwards — and forwards. For, of course, Catholic Ireland's nationalist tradition fitted well with the Stalinist "line". It fitted, too, the scholasticism that replaced Marxism as living analysis in the Communist International. Marx had written about Ireland. So had Lenin. Neither, naturally, had an analysis of post-partition Ireland to offer. And it was a radically different Ireland.

The Border had become the focus of nationalist feeling and anger. The North was now "Ireland unfree". For the post "Fifth World Congress" Irish communists, the task was first to "complete the bourgeois revolution" before then proceeding to socialist concerns, and for the Communists as for the least enlightened Catholic nationalists that came to be identified with unifying the island. On that basis the Communists merged themselves politically with republicans moving left.

The Stalinist strategy did not necessarily imply any commitment to militarism, still less any commitment to an attempt to conquer the Northern Ireland Protestants — even most of the republicans explicitly then repudiated that — but it shared the analytical, political and moral foundations of physical-force republicanism. It shared the common culture of bourgeois Catholic Ireland: that the main difficulty in achieving a united Ireland lay in British control or "occupation" of Northern Ireland. At its most benign, that culture looked to a British-Irish bourgeois deal over the heads of the Irish Protestant minority: this was most characteristically the approach of the De Valera wing of constitutional republicanism. A central difficulty for the left-wing and physical-force republicans was that, within the parameters of the common culture, there was no revolutionary alternative to De Valera's "reformist" approach.

Rational revolutionary politics could be developed only by stepping out of those parameters. The division in Ireland had nothing to do directly with the bourgeois

revolution. Northern Ireland had long been the most bourgeois part of Ireland, as well as the most developed — it had had its "bourgeois revolution", as part of England's bourgeois revolution, in the 17th century. The 26 counties had had a thorough bourgeois revolution — that on the land organised by the British state after the 1880s; then the political revolution and independence in 1918-22 — and retained far fewer pre-capitalist trappings than Britain itself had. There was nothing pre-bourgeois about the split in the island. There was a split bourgeoisie and a split population following them before there was a divided island. The messy and untenable partition, the crime against the Irish Catholic people and particularly against those in Fermanagh and Tyrone kept against their will in the Northern state, was the Irish-bourgeois/imperialist crime that actually happened. Another Irish-bourgeois /British-imperialist crime had been attempted before 1914 — the forcible putting under Dublin rule, against their will, of the Northern Ireland Protestant people, who thought of themselves as primarily British.

Before communists could accomplish anything, they had to come to terms with the facts of post-partition Ireland.

The task was to unite the working class on the island of Ireland, and in the two islands. Redress of the injustice to the Six Counties Catholics, defence of their rights — and defence of the rights of the Protestant minority in the South — were naturally part of that, but no more than part. It was necessary above all to argue with republican militants against their pseudo-anarchist positive fetish of physical force and their negative fetish against existing parliaments, and for politics centred on the development of the labour movement, not on nationalist myth.

In fact, however, from the fifth world congress of the Communist International, Irish communism was morally disarmed before Catholic nationalism. Its analysis of the situation was utterly false, marrying narrow nationalist and Catholic-nationalist concerns with mechanical Stalino-Menshevik dogmas about necessary "stages" of revolution so as to elevate the "irredentist" concerns of Catholic nationalists above everything else. Communist political independence was thus snuffed out by the development of Stalinism in the Communist International and in Ireland, and Carbonari Republicanism was reinforced.

In this way, the most "revolutionary" politics in Ireland came to be symbiotic with old Catholic nationalism, and even Catholic communalism. Revolutionary working-class politics came to be dressed up in Catholic-nationalist costume. The result was an inchoate and unstable nationalist populism which more than once spun off new physical-force strands because the core axioms of the physical-force faction were never questioned, and the "left" alternative could never be effective when measured against those axioms.

Physical force against the North was abjured by all republicans until the late



1930s — apart from a few token actions against customs posts on the border during the coronation of King George VI — but, left or right, the populist analysis, the merging of working-class politics into populism, of the working class into the Catholic nation, until the “completion of the bourgeois revolution”, or “reunification”, was a common culture.

Mainstream bourgeois republicanism

SOME of the republican programme was impossible. No force on earth could convince the Northern Ireland Protestants to become Irish nationalists, hustle them reluctantly under Dublin rule, or make capitalist Ireland anything other than a small, weak unit in a vicious capitalist world. Such parts of the republican programme as were feasible were carried through in large part — but by mainstream bourgeois republicans who in time would turn sharply against the physical-force republicans.

A bourgeois Catholic Ireland developed in which — especially after the Free State Land Act of 1923; but, essentially, long before that — working peasants and labour-exploiting bourgeois farmers owned the land. The Statute of Westminster, in 1931, recognised the effective independence of Ireland and the other Commonwealth “White Dominions”; De Valera, in 1936-7, seized the chance of Britain’s abdication crisis to effectively remove the monarchical element in the Free State constitution. The formal declaration of a Republic in 1949 would add nothing to this. In so far as the Free State was not “free”, was unequal to Britain, that was because in a world dominated by bourgeois relations the small never can be the equal of the big. (Britain faces the same disadvantage now in relation to Europe).

The bourgeois physical-force-ists of 1919-21 had formed a government in 1922. They were opposed by a large part of Sinn Féin, an uneasy bloc of politicians and of militarists acting as a law unto themselves, who fought and lost a confused civil war, in 1922-3.

After the civil war, the rump Sinn Féin, led

by Eamonn De Valera, refused to recognise the Dublin or Belfast parliaments or to take the seats they won in Dail Éireann. They retained the support of large parts of Ireland, particularly in the south and west, where some districts had had to be conquered for the Dublin government by landing from the sea, as though they were foreign territory.

In late 1925 the IRA convention withdrew recognition from De Valera’s so-called Republican Government (whose claims to be the legitimate government of all Ireland were based on the authority of the “Second Dail”). It became a party-army in itself. In May 1926 De Valera founded Fianna Fáil, taking most of the old anti-Treaty forces with him. Sinn Féin as a political organisation was reduced to a rump: it did not contest the 1927 election.

In August 1927 De Valera dropped abstention from politics, and Fianna Fáil entered the Dublin parliament: hard-line republicanism had lost its major force. Fianna Fáil formed a government in January 1932 with parliamentary backing from the small Labour Party, and won a majority of its own at the end of the year. It brought in a weak version of Roosevelt’s New Deal, and pushed the 26 Counties along the road it had travelled since 1922, towards effective independence.

Fianna Fáil would become the major party of the Irish bourgeoisie, ruling for most of the next 60 years. They would shoot republicans during World War 2. The traditional intransigent republican explanation — Fianna Fáil betrayed — explains nothing.

The three sorts of republicanism

FROM republicanism as it came out of the civil war, you can see a pattern, often repeated, of three-way splitting — a recurrent tendency to flake apart into three main elements: core physical-force republicanism; bourgeois republicanism; and communistic, socialistic, left-wing republicanism, which was in fact populist.

The quotation from James Connolly at the head of this article was his 1899 summing up of the experience of the republicans of the 1840s and of some of the Fenians. It would be repeated again and again in the 20th century, beginning with the Collins-Griffith, Cumann na nGaedheal, faction of Sinn Féin (1917-21). This element, the recurrent drift into mainstream bourgeois politics, is brought into focus once more by the evident intentions of the Adams faction of the Provisionals today.

After De Valera’s move into parliamentary politics, the rump IRA was essentially a pure nationalist movement, but it acted as a lightning conductor, deflecting social discontent from any effective action. It initiated agitation among small farmers against paying the annuities outstanding from the transfer of land, and took part in international Stalinist junketings such as those of the Anti-Imperialist Fronts and the Prointern, the so-called Peasants’ International.

Led by Maurice Twomey and Sean MacBride, it had perhaps fifteen or twenty thousand members. It suffered severe repression from about 1930 onwards. In 1931 it formed a political wing, Saor Éire

(Free Ireland), which disbanded when the Catholic hierarchy denounced it as “communistic”. This was the period when a Dublin mob attacked the premises of the reorganising communist movement in Dublin.

De Valera’s victory in 1932 opened the jails. There was some revival of working-class confidence, and a big upsurge of republicanism. In fact, De Valera’s victory cut the throat of Southern republicanism, but this would not be clear for some years.

Stalinist influence had grown among the republicans, swaying men like Frank Ryan and Peadar O’Donnell who were, however, first nationalists and then Stalinists.

If it were not for the prevailing pervasive Catholic-nationalist middle-class analysis of Ireland, which has always fed physical-force republicanism — sometimes feeding young men and women ideas and then jailing them from drawing logical physical-force conclusions from those ideas — the Communist International’s ideas of “completing the Irish bourgeois revolution” would never have had much of a hearing among serious people. In fact the Stalinist dogmatising threw militants moving from nationalism back to nationalism, conceived as a higher world-historical cause. Irish nationalism blended into Stalinism’s pseudo-Marxist imaginary map of history. Lenin’s casual journalism was misused to justify Catholic communalism. A peculiarly Irish hybrid was created, essentially Catholic-nationalist but with a republican rhetoric and a Stalinist tincture.

Desiring to turn sharply to populist and socialist agitation without abandoning the militarist obsessions of the IRA, the “Republican Congress” left broke away in 1934, and formed an active bloc with the Communist Party of Ireland. This was the high point of populist Stalino-Republicanism, a powerful and serious movement. Two hundred of its people volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and over half of them died there.

Though the CPI was politically tied to Catholic nationalism, it could nonetheless talk to Northern Ireland Protestant workers. Nobody at that stage, not even the most Catholic and mystical right-wing Republican, dreamed of simply conquering the Protestant working class. The right had no policy for the Protestants, and the left a not-very-coherent policy of somehow uniting Ireland by uniting the working class. In practice the message in the North tended to be the left-wing one, “overthrow capitalism to unite Ireland” — effectively a reversal of the stages laid down in Stalinist theory. Although this begged the question of why socialism should be defined as a means to the greater end of nationalism, the CPI had some success with Protestant workers.

In 1934 the Communist Party and the Republican Congress brought a contingent of Shankill Road Protestants to the annual celebration around Wolfe Tone’s grave in Kildare. As they marched behind a banner with the slogan “Break the Connection with Capitalism” (Tone had called for breaking the connection with England), they were set upon by the right-wing rump Republicans.†

This movement fell apart very quickly, in a dispute over whether to raise the Workers' Republic as the Congress slogan, or just "the Republic". The latter was scarcely distinguishable from Fianna Fail and was meant by its proponents to appeal to the Fianna Fail rank and file against De Valera. The Stalinists were the backbone of the "Republic" faction. Perhaps symbolically, James Connolly's children Rory and Nora were with the "Workers' Republic".

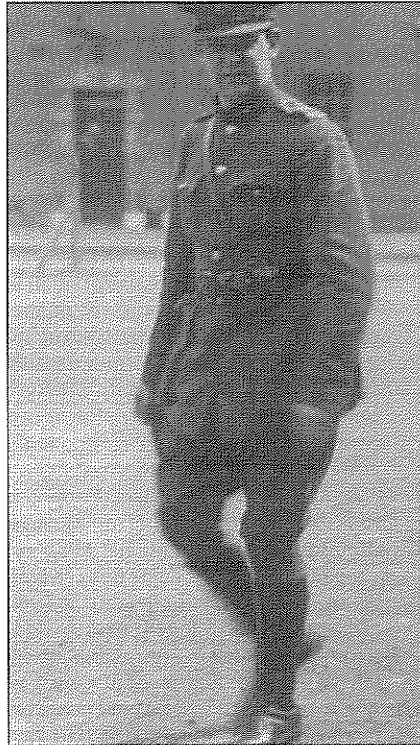
In 1934 the Republican Congress split, and the left, on whom there was some Trotskyist influence (certainly they had contact with Trotsky and with British-based Trotskyists like C. I. R. James and, maybe, Tom O'Flaherty) joined the Labour Party.

By this stage Fianna Fail had consolidated itself as the main Irish bourgeois party, sucking support away from both the old ruling party, now called Fine Gael, and the IRA. The republicans, and the Stalinists too, were "militant" satellites of Fianna Fail: all they could do was back it — especially after the ex-government organised a mass fascist-style movement, the so-called Blueshirts. In the mid 1930s, having defeated the Blueshirts, Fianna Fail turned on the republicans, and started a slow-build-up of the repression that was to crush them in World War 2.

An era of reaction and Catholic oppression descended on the South. Left populist republicanism declined. Leaders like O'Donnell and Gilmore dropped into political inactivity by the late 1930s. Essentially they had had their thunder stolen by Fianna Fail: in so far as they had anything different to advocate, it was their Stalinist predilections and international affiliations. As war approached, those became more and more of a liability. By the time war came, populist republicanism had shrunk to virtually nothing.



Woolf Tone



Michael Collins

ing. Tragically, no class-struggle-based revolutionary-socialist movement had taken its place: this left it the possibility of reviving.

World War Two

THE 26 Counties retained its neutrality — thus proving to anyone who needed proof that it was indeed independent of Britain — and the Communist Party, pro-German propagandists during the Hitler-Stalin pact of August 1939 to June 1941, echoed that. When the Nazis invaded Russia in June 1941, life became very difficult for the Communist Party of Ireland. A few of its members were interned alongside republicans.

In December 1941 the Communist Party of Ireland met in Belfast and dissolved as an all-Ireland body, setting up the Communist Party of Northern Ireland instead. The left populist republicanism of the 1930s now existed only as a literary ghost of itself, mainly through O'Donnell's writings. The CPNI grew into a strong force, fervently pro-war, effectively Unionist (and fingering Trotskyists to the police!) The Communist Party revived in the South after the war, and the two separate CPs were reunited in 1970.

After the 1934 split, the right-wing Republicans fared not much better than the left. Essentially apolitical, militant Fianna Failers with guns, they lacked a role. What should they do? Various plans were mooted, including an invasion of the North. They finally decided to issue an ultimatum to Britain to vacate the Six Counties and to declare war on Britain if the ultimatum was rejected. The "war" they unleashed in 1939 consisted of a few bombs in British cities.

This group, led by Sean Russell at this

stage, entered into a formal alliance with Nazi Germany. Britain's enemy was Ireland's friend. Britain's difficulty was Ireland's opportunity. In principle, other things being equal, a nationalist movement would have the right to play one imperialism off against another. Even so, the "foreign policy" of the IRA was a rare example of the obtuseness nationalist blinkers can impose. The idea that the victory of Nazi imperialism could help free Ireland, or that an Irish republic set up under Nazi patronage would be a step forward, was tenable only for blockheads and mystics. If the Nazis had invaded Ireland — they had contingency plans for it — they might have had the IRA collaborating against Unionists, in a pattern similar to that in Belgium and Yugoslavia.

Heavily repressed North and South, in fact the IRA counted for nothing. Its leader, Sean Russell, an honourable, essentially apolitical, traditional nationalist, died on board a Nazi submarine off Ireland's coast. Frank Ryan, a central leader of left republicanism all through the 1930s, and a hard-core Stalinist among republicans, was captured fighting in Spain for the Republic and spent much of the war representing all the republican factions as a guest of Hitler's government! He died, peacefully, in Dresden in 1944.

The IRA after the war

THE IRA was not dead, because Catholic Ireland's sense of itself was still outraged by the partition, because the state stifled as an agrarian backwater in the late '40s and '50s, and above all because there was no effective working-class revolutionary organisation to draw to itself the sort of social discontent that fed into the IRA and its political wing, Sinn Féin. Reorganised after the war, the IRA slowly revived. It was still physical-force-ist and anti-parliamentarian on principle, and very right-wing; indeed, it had a quasi-fascist element influenced by a Catholic movement called Maria Duce, which propagated all the quack right-wing Catholic nonsense about "Jewish" international finance being the source of the world's ills.

Like an early 19th century insurrectionary movement, the IRA's and Sinn Féin's goal was to build up arms and recruits until it was strong enough to relaunch a campaign against Britain. It raided police barracks occasionally for guns.

This time, it decided not on a bombing campaign in Britain, as in 1939, but on a war in Northern Ireland — "British-occupied Ireland". Knowing that action in the cities would stoke up Catholic-Protestant antagonism, it decided to confine its "campaign" to attacks on customs posts and police barracks in the mainly Catholic territory along the Border. This was the work of depoliticised right-wing Catholic republicans, some of them, indeed, not far from fascism.

A splinter group launched the first attack,



Anti-Treaty IRA troops on streets of Dublin

and then the main campaign began in December 1956. It spluttered rather than exploded. A small rash of attacks dwindled soon to an occasional attack. Some hundreds of young men were interned, North and South of the border. It was Fianna Fail, "the Republican Party", that introduced internment in the South in 1957. The Border campaign was abandoned formally in March 1962, having died long before.

From the '30s this was a movement on the margins of Irish society. Yet, even so, the zig-zag pattern traced by Connolly above, between physical force and nationalist bourgeois politics, the transformation of revolutionaries with guns into tame time-serving politicians continued to unfold... in the Adam's wing of the Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin it is unfolding still.

Clann na Poblachta

AFTER they gave up the gun and the bomb, the leaders of the mid-1930s IRA formed their own political organisation in the mid-1940s. Its leader was Sean MacBride.

Winning ten seats in the 1948 election, Clann na Poblachta joined a coalition government with the then two Irish Labour Parties and... Fine Gael, the Blueshirt party of the 1930s!

The pattern Connolly outlined thus reasserted itself in reverse order, with the open emergence of the physical-force men of the 1930s, including some from 1939, as a Fianna-Fail-type ordinary bourgeois party. They travelled in the wake of the men of

1922 (Fianna Fail), who went the same way in the late 1920s.

Clann na Poblachta grew quickly, feeding on disillusion with Fianna Fail which, in power since 1932, had grown somewhat corrupt and, as we have seen, had savagely repressed republicans during the war. It benefited from the vacuum in labour politics, the Labour Party then being split into two small groups.

Sean MacBride became foreign minister. He offered to take the 26 Counties into NATO in return for a united Ireland. The coalition government then took these 26



Sean MacBride

Counties out of the Commonwealth and declared a Republic that made no difference to anything — except that it erected additional barriers between the 26 Counties and the Six Counties.

The great success of this government was Dr Noel Browne, a Clann na Poblachta minister of health who campaigned successfully to eradicate tuberculosis, one of Ireland's endemic diseases and a great killer.

The test for the government came when Browne tried to bring in a rudimentary health service, following the lead of the Labour government in Britain, and came up against the opposition of the arrogant Catholic bishops who had over 25 years of independence grown accustomed to telling governments what to do. When Browne refused to be told, he was destroyed: abandoned by his comrades, and most implacably by the recent ex-republicans, he was forced to resign. After the 1951 election, Clann na Poblachta suffered a quick and catastrophic decline, its support flowing back to Fianna Fail. Like Fianna Fail's, its leaders, once out of "revolutionary" physical-force costume and in mainstream politics, had shown themselves to be timid bourgeois and petty-bourgeois politicians, time-serving, Catholic, and subservient to the priests.

The IRA after 1962

THE physical force republicans of 1956-62 went through a variant of the same evolution as MacBride and his friends. Defeated, they decided that they needed a social dimension to gain support. Quickly, they fell under the influence of Stalinists peddling the nationalist populism of the 1930s: "republicans need social policies to build a base". They turned towards politics, took up social agitation, and moved towards abandoning the characteristic dogmas of physical-force republicanism which forbade entry into the Westminster, Dublin, or Belfast parliaments.

They shed the organisation that became the Provisional IRA (December 1969 and January 1970) and later (1977) what became the INLA and the IRSP, and evolved into a "left" constitutional party. They differed from their predecessors in adopting many of the trappings of a Stalinist party and in accepting subsidies from Moscow. When the USSR collapsed, they split, and their spin-off, the Democratic Left, is now in the Dublin government, led by Proinsias De Rossa, who was interned in the 1950s.

Nor is the pattern exhausted. The Provisionals emerged in 1969-70, triggered by the eruption in the North, as a recoil against the moves by the old movement away from the shibboleths of physical force on principle and boycott of parliaments.

They have evolved now to the point where they have a wing openly straining at the leash to get into mainstream bourgeois politics, as Gerry Adams's junketing with the Dublin and Westminster politicians clearly indicates.

The Provisionals

IN March 1971, a group of Carbonari republicans, depoliticised, committed on principle to physical force and the boycotting of parliaments, launched all-out guerilla war to forcibly unify Ireland. They acted to liberate a "British-occupied Ireland" that existed more in their imagination than in the reality of Northern Ireland, where the "British occupation forces" that counted were the Protestant-Unionist Irish majority there. They brought to the project their political blindness, their fetish-mongering, and their belief in political miracles of the sort that followed 1916.

Basing themselves on the Northern Catholic minority, they made war on the "Crown forces" and on Northern Ireland Protestant society. In 1956 the IRA had tried to avoid stirring up Catholic-Protestant antagonism. Now they acted as if deliberately to rouse it to delirium pitch.

This was a strange, and to most observers startling, development. By the mid-1960s Carbonari republicanism had seemed to be dying. Increasingly Stalinist populist republicans, looking back to the Republican Congress of the 1930s, had taken over the IRA. They turned to social agitation, away from militarism, though some of them had the intention of returning to militarism once they had built support.

In the Six Counties they agitated for civil rights among Catholics suffering job discrimination, gerrymandered local government, and unfair treatment in provision of social housing. Modelling themselves on the US civil rights movement, they were encouraged by the British Labour government's unprecedented "interference" in the internal affairs of the Six Counties, which then had its own Belfast government. A Protestant backlash followed.

In August 1969 British troops took control when sectarian Catholic-Protestant fighting broke out, first in Derry and then

in Belfast. The demobilised "left-wing" IRA counted for little in all this. The leaders told the "Army Council" that they had lent the organisation's remaining guns to the Free Wales Army...

The republican backlash that followed shaped events in Northern Ireland more decisively than the Protestant backlash that triggered it. Old Carbonari, men of the 1956 campaign like O'Connell, O'Brady, MacStiofain, came out of retirement. The IRA and Sinn Féin split in December 1969 and January 1970. Serious academic students of such movements like, for example, J Bowyer Bell, dismissed the "Provisionals" as neanderthals without a future. Nevertheless, they grew very quickly in a Northern Ireland where Catholic youth had few jobs and the best prospect was to emigrate. They grew in an atmosphere saturated with nationalist tradition and myths which were nourished by living grievances, among the people who had lost out most in the crude partition settlement of fifty years before.

For months after the Provisionals launched a military campaign in August 1971. Internment — exclusively against Catholics, though there were also Protestant paramilitary groups — threw mass Catholic support behind them. By March 1972 Britain felt obliged to scrap Protestant Home Rule in Belfast. All attempts since then to replace it by Catholic-Protestant powersharing have failed. The most serious attempt was destroyed in May 1974 by a tremendous Protestant general strike. The war has continued ever since with two ceasefires, one in 1975 and one in 1994-6.

In the course of this long war, remarkable things have happened to the Provisionals. From being explicitly right-wing Catholic traditionalists, they moved in the 1970s and '80s to something very like the populist left-wing republicanism from which they had recoiled in the 1960s and early '70s, shooting some of the populists

in transit.

They would take seats in Dail Éireann if they could get them — though in fact their support in the South is minimal, much smaller than when they won four Dail seats in the late 1950s. Their militarism is no longer the religious fetish of the purifying and redeeming power of blood that it was for Carbonari republicans for so many decades.

All these changes reflect a radical shift in republicanism, from a movement thinly scattered across the whole island to one concentrated in the Northern Ireland Catholic ghettos and Border areas. From that shift also comes the Provisionals' scarcely-disguised communalist character. They are locked into a war waged by a minority of the Northern Catholic minority. The highest percentage of the Catholic vote they ever got was 42 per cent, just after the 1981 hunger strikes.

Despite all their leftist shifts, politically they represent the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum* of Carbonari republicanism — its furthest point of travel away from the republicanism of Wolfe Tone and James Connolly.

"British-occupied Ireland"

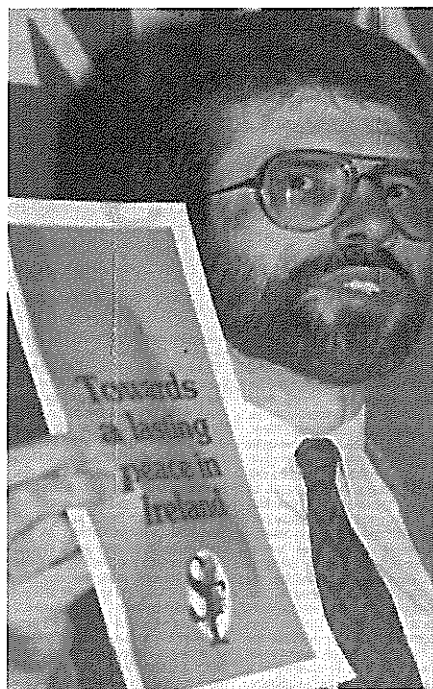
THE Provisional IRA's war has been based on the middle-class Catholic nationalist account of Northern Ireland, as "British-occupied Ireland". That is the poisoned root of everything that followed.

Yet, once they began to act, reality forced its logic on them. Setting out to fight the British Crown forces "occupying" the Six Counties, the Provisional IRA found itself confronting and targeting the real "occupation forces", the Irish minority. In the early 70s, it bombed the centres of Irish towns and blew up and shot *Irish people* in the RUC and UDR. These were "traitors", "collaborators", "Orange supremacists", if you find that illuminating, but Irish people nonetheless, and representatives of an Irish minority entitled to have its rights treated with respect by honest Wolfe Tone Republicans.

Over time Six-Counties people inevitably came to the fore of the Provisionals' leadership, and they, moving towards their impressive *realpolitik* of today, knew that the enemy of their "the island is the nation" republicanism was fundamentally the Northern Irish majority, the Irish Unionists. In 1981 the Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin dropped their old talk of a federal Ireland and moved explicitly to leave themselves even in remote theory no possible relationship to the Protestant-Unionist Irish minority except to demand of them that they surrender unconditionally and agree to be submerged in what was then plainly a Catholic confessional state — and is now only a bit less so, spectacular and hopeful though the shifts have been in the 26 counties away from brutally explicit Catholic rule. The targeting of the Irish minority was there from the beginning behind the ideological talk about fighting the crown forces and driving the British out, but it became more and more explicit and clear-



1970: the streets of Belfast



Gerry Adams

cut as the war and the years dragged on. It reached its obscene paroxysm in the years before the ceasefire, when sentence of death was pronounced against even those who did odd repair jobs in police stations — and carried out too.

All this urgently pointed to a mystery at the heart of what the Provisional IRA were doing. Though they called themselves republicans who followed Tone's goal of uniting all the people of Ireland and the 1916 Declaration's intent to "treat all the children of the nation" equally, and insisted that the problem was "British occupation" of Six Counties of Ireland, it became unmistakably plain from what they did that, in practice if not in theory, they saw the problem not primarily as a matter of British occupation — not, that is, unless the "Brits" in question were the million Irish Brits.

Republican theology stopped the Provisionals making such an idea explicit. The "left", paradoxically, was less restrained — from Michael Farrell's early 1970s theorising about the Irish Protestants being like the one million European settlers who were driven out of Algeria in 1962-3, to INLA's unashamed attack on Protestants picked at random as Protestants, paralleling the activities of Loyalist murder gangs — who do not invoke Tone or Pearse and Connolly, still less Lenin or Marx.

Denying in theory the idea that the Irish-British were the 'problem', the Provisionals recognised it in bloody practice. The nonsensically inadequate explanation that the Protestant-Unionists were all traitors, collaborators, anti-nationalists came in time to amount to a "republican" version of the idea that there were two Irish nations, or peoples. The Protestants were a bad, non-legitimate, Irish nation; and so the Provisionals, in effect a private army backed by perhaps a third of the Six-Counties Catholics, could maim and kill as many of the one million Irish Unionists as whim, ex-

gency and military or sectarian logic suggested to them. The "left-wing" INLA could go into a Pentecostal church in Dalkey and open fire with a machine gun on the worshippers; the Provisional IRA could blow up an 11 November commemoration-day Protestant service in Enniskillen (1987). They could yet trigger an immense tragedy, sectarian civil war followed by bloody repartition.

The Provisionals look to Britain

HERE were the Provos, backed only by a minority of the six county Catholic minority, acting as if to drive the history-gouged ditch between the Protestants and Catholics deeper and bloodier, yet claiming that their supreme goal was a united Ireland. Did they think they could simply overwhelm the Protestants? Surely not.

In 1996, after all that has happened in the last 30 years, it is impossible to pretend that the problem is only or mainly a matter of "British-occupied Ireland". The keystone of the Provisionals' entire political structure is still the idea that the Six Counties problem is definable as "British-occupied Ireland", but they now understand it to mean that Britain is to blame for not "persuading" (coercing) the one million Irish Protestants into a united Ireland! These "Irish nationalists" and "Irish republicans" now self-righteously denounce Britain because Britain will not force one million Irish (or Irish-British) people into an independent Irish Republic for them!

The Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin have come to look to not an intra-Irish but a British-imposed settlement. They kill Irish-Unionist people in order to compel the British government to impose a settlement on those Irish Unionists.

The great self-hypnotising lie — British-occupied Ireland — has thus been twisted in the course of the war into the demand for the demonised British not to get out until they have compelled one million Irish people to do what the Provisional IRA want.

Despite the ideologising, the appeals to history, and the appeals to republican ideals and aspirations, the Provisionals do not believe in an Irish solution. They believe in a British solution to the problem of relations between the two people on the island. The logic of reality has forced the Provisional IRA not only to accept that the root problem is not "British occupied Ireland" but to look to the British military occupying forces to solve their real problem, the fact that one million Irish people will fight, guns in hand, against submitting to the Provisionals, and if necessary will carve out their own "self-determination" against Catholic Ireland. The Provisionals have blundered and stumbled on to the ground of traditional Unionism! That is what the talk of the British becoming "persuaders" of the Protestants really means.

Like the Redmond Home Rule party

THUS, the Provisional Carbonari-republicans, having donned much of the old clothing of Stalino-populist republicanism,

reduce the whole tradition to bloody nonsense. They have become an utterly decadent sect of washed-out republicans concerned not with Wolfe Tone's goal of uniting the Irish people but with uniting the territory regardless of the people. They pledge to go on bombing and killing — mainly Irish people — until they get the British solution they favour, until they get Britain — the great Satan of Irish history — to compel the Irish minority to "unite."

Yet this approach is not really new. The demand that the British compel the Protestant-Unionist Irish minority to submit to the Irish Catholic-Nationalist majority is a very old one. It sustained the Home Rule Party in its long tail-to-dog relationship to the Liberal Party in the quarter century before the First World War.

Both Irish peoples were allied to a "great"

*"The demand that the
British compel the
Protestant-Unionist
Irish minority to
submit to the Irish
Catholic-Nationalist
majority is a very old
one."*

British party, the Protestant-Unionists to the Tories and the Catholic-Nationalists to the Liberals. Each looked to its ally to gain it complete victory — the Unionists to the Tories to stop Home Rule for any part of Ireland by killing it with coercion and by such "kindness" as distributing the land to the tenants; the Catholic-Nationalists to the Liberals to bestow Home Rule and enforce it on the Irish minority. Corrupted and demoralised by their British alliance, neither side looked to an intra-Irish solution.

In the event, the Tories proved better allies than the Liberals, and a solution was imposed by a British cabinet in which the leaders of the pre-World War One Unionist rebellion against the Liberal government sat as powerful members. Seemingly very favourable to the northern Unionists, the settlement was in fact very short-sighted, because it included so large a Catholic-Nationalist minority in the Northern Ireland state as to make it unviable.

Do the Irish Protestants have rights?

THERE is no democratic — that is, no republican — case for the Provisionals' attitude to the Protestants. The only case is a Catholic-chauvinist one. If Wolfe Tone's republicanism started with the call to end sectionalism, the nadir of Carbonari republicanism is reached in the present-day Provisionals' use of republican catchcries in the pursuit of sectionalism and sectarianism.

A million or so of Ireland's people —

natives of the island of Ireland, and descendants of people who have lived in Ireland for hundreds of years — want British in "occupation" because they consider themselves British. Those million are not loosely sprinkled amongst the Catholic majority population of the island, but the compact majority in north-east Ulster.

You say, their rights cannot include the right to veto the rights of the Irish majority? No, but there is no democratic — that is, honest republican — or socialist case to be made that the rights of the Irish majority includes the right to rule territory where they do not have majority support, that is, to oppress the people of another identity living there.

Of course, this can not legitimise the Six Counties, where the Catholic minority is in fact the majority in not much less than half the territory. But for socialists and democrats the question is inescapable: why do not the compact Protestant majority in north-east Ulster have the right to refuse to sink their identity into the status of a smallish minority in a Catholic state? Why, according to the same principle by which our Ireland claimed and won independence from Britain, do they not have the right to claim and hold their independence from our Irish majority?

Plainly repartition would not be desirable. Its overhead expenses would be huge. But in principle, there is no good democratic reason to deny the Irish-British minority their right to resist forced unity. The reflex Catholic nationalist objection is necessarily couched in appeals to the mystical unity of Ireland, the irrational conception of the sacred unity of the island. The island is the nation — not the people; geography and a mystified and myth-ridden history replace concerns with the living Irish people. It is difficult to argue with such people, the more aware of whom would not, in the final decision, accept that such sacred things as the integrity of the island, (not the people!) are subject to the dictates of profane human reason. In the name, not of the living people of Ireland, but of the dead generations...

About this attitude Connolly long ago said all that needs to be said: "Ireland as distinct from her people is nothing to me". You, however, call yourself a socialist, a Marxist and a "Connollyite". You accept that, in Sri Lanka, the Tamil minority have the right to claim and fight to win independence from control by the Sinhalese majority on the island. Why, Peter, in a united Ireland if the Protestant minority felt oppressed or merely stifled and frustrated in their national or communal identity, would they not have the same rights?

You say, because they are not a nation! I don't know how — apart from the appeal to geography: they live in Ireland! — you would go about arguing that they are not part of the British people. Who decides such things? What makes the Serbs and the Croats, whose ethnicity is the same and even, for the most part, their language, different and murderously hostile nations?

History!

Nations and peoples are shaped — and reshaped — by history. It is plain fact that two distinct peoples exist in the Irish island. To ask, like some inspector general of history, are they this? Are they that? is to take refuge in pettifogging pedantry. To a decisive degree, a people must decide such things for itself; its "rights" and possibilities beyond that decision are then a matter of circumstances.

You know of course that even the prophet of universal national freedom in the 19th century, Giuseppe Mazzini, denied that the Irish were a people separable from the English and Scots? We had, in the main, a common language; vast numbers of Irish — in Tipperary, for example — though their identity has been shaped by Catholicism, are descended from forgotten English planters. The answer to Mazzini, the pedant of nationality, was that the Irish majority knew their own identity, and this was decisive. Nothing less than the same answer can be given when the Protestant-Unionists of north-east Ulster are concerned.

Peter, you respect Lenin, you like to cite his support for Irish independence. The beginning of wisdom! Believing that socialists, concerned to unite the working class across all the national and communal barriers, had to champion consistent democracy in all relations between peoples and fragments of peoples, Lenin proclaimed it a principle that we have no interest in state boundaries as such; that if the majority in a state supported keeping a minority people in that state against their will, they were contemptible chauvinists.

The English who refused self-determination to the Irish majority were chauvinists. Why would not the same principle brand you as a chauvinist for your attitude to the Irish minority? I think it does.

Social discontent and false answers

THE Six Counties Provisionals, like their lineal predecessors, get their energy from



Protestants protest after 1985 Anglo Irish Deal

mass social discontent. They have been able to mobilise that discontent because, as in all the decades I have briefly surveyed, there is no serious revolutionary contender against them: all the "communists" share their basic analysis even if they deplore their "tactics", the "Trotskyists" differing only in the gloss they put on events and in the irresponsibility and indifference with which they endorse Provisional IRA "militancy".

Unlike previous IRAs, the Provisional IRA, rooted mainly in one community, the Northern Catholic minority, is defined directly by the split in the working class.

The young men and women who come to the Provisional IRA in the Catholic ghettos of Northern Ireland are propelled by the intolerable conditions there — unemployment, poverty, by the boredom of otherwise aimless and hopelessly stultified lives. They are cut off from the heavily Unionist Northern Ireland labour movement.

Much of what they do is at root a protest against those circumstances, a striking out against them. Much of the energy that fuels the Provisional IRA comes from these conditions of disruption and economic, social and spiritual starvation. This has been true throughout the entire course of the Provisional IRA campaign.

The socialist who does not feel with these mainly young people and understand and sympathise with them has something missing. Yes. But the socialist who does not go beyond that gut feeling and ask the obvious questions has something missing too.

Can the military and political activities of the Provos, which draw on the discontent of the Northern Ireland Catholics as fuel, have anything remotely to do with solving the cause of those discontents — unemployment for example? Would the situation of the Catholic working-class youth be transformed for the better if the Provisionals won everything they fight for? Based on minority action and physical force as a prime component of policy, and having "the nation" at the centre of their vision, they are not socially revolutionary. To accept them as a progressive, or possibly progressive, response to the oppressive conditions under which many Six Counties Catholics suffer, is to allow myth to eclipse politics.

Not to ask what, if anything, the activities of the Provisional IRA have to do with the ideals of the republican socialism of Connolly; not to measure what the Provisional IRA actually does and its calculable consequences against historic Irish republicanism — not the degenerate Carbonari republicanism of the mid 20th century, but the ideals of Tone and Connolly, or even of the somewhat mystical Pearse — not to ask yourself whether or not the shards and fragments of "Tone republicanism" or "Connolly republicanism" the Provisionals deploy are being abused and used (as "ideology" in the proper Marxist sense of that word) — that is to refuse to think about the issues.

In fact, many left wingers simply bow



Grass roots Republicanism of the 1980s

down before a fetish: the Provos have guns, the Provos fight, therefore they are revolutionaries against the establishment — therefore they are to be supported. Some of the most fervid of the Provophiles in Britain impress me by their utter indifference to what happens to ordinary Irish people and what would happen in an all-out civil war.

They have submitted themselves to massive depoliticisation on the Irish question. They have let the fact of the Provo war run like a tank through their minds, churning to mud political ideals, socialist goals, Marxist assessments, and even elementary class criteria.

They dispense with almost every single tool of Marxist, or socialist, or plain rational analysis — that is with every means available to us, as socialists, Marxists, workers, Wolfe Tone republicans, or plain human beings, for making sense of the world. Violence takes on a mystical significance and assumes an all-transforming quality. Many, especially in Britain, left-wingers become vicarious Carbonari republicans.

The continuing influence of Stalinist ideology

MUCH of the left, guided by ideas like those of the Fifth Congress of the Comintern, share the essentials of the Provisionals' ideology — and many Trotskyists no less than the others. They take over the entire Catholic-nationalist/Stalino-populist analysis, and add only a verbal gloss — "permanent revolution" — to the scenario of moving through "completion of the bourgeois revolution" to socialism. They are what might be called "Fifth Comintern Congress Trotskyists"! Trotsky was not.

The "Fifth Comintern Congress Trotskyists" face reality blindfolded by ideology. Marxist socialists and republicans in Tone's and Connolly's tradition look reality straight in the face. That is the only way to change it for the better, not to let it dominate you and impose its own age-old patterns on you even while you struggle against it.

I put it to you, Peter, that here we have

a picture — it is a true picture! — of latterday republicanism at the end of its tether, reduced to absurdity and self-mockery, albeit still-murderous absurdity and sometimes heroic self-mockery.

That was the republicanism that engaged in the 1994 ceasefire and which broke out with bombs again on 7 February.

Conclusion

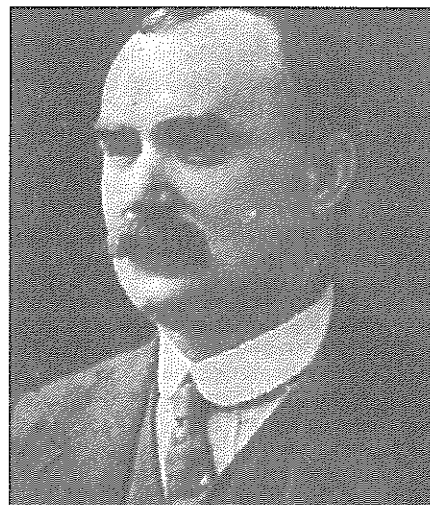
YOU should come out plainly against the Provisional IRA and define their war and their existence in their present form as entirely negative for the interests of Irish socialism or Irish republicanism. You should help cut away the mystification and demagoguery. What they do never made sense. What they do now — looking for a British solution that will, from outside, compel the Irish to unite — has reached Marx-Brothers levels of absurdity. There is no possible British solution for Ireland! This old Republican truth is true still, despite Gerry Adams and his friends.

The only solution to Irish workers' problems is a Workers' Republic; and that Workers' Republic can be created only by a united working class, led by revolutionary Marxists. The job of Marxists, therefore, is to work for workers from both communities to unite around a programme of social advance (public investment and shorter hours for full employment, leveling-up of social provision, etc.) and consistent democracy. The democratic rights of both communities must be accommodated: this can be done only in a free federal united Ireland, with local autonomy for the Protestant-majority area, and with confederal links with Britain. We should assist any moves to establish a Labour Party in Northern Ireland based on the trade unions and uniting workers from both communities: in the first place, we must seek to mend the fragmentation and marginalisation of the left in Ireland by dialogue, debate, and ruthless criticism of the whole Carbonari-republican tradition. There is no other way out of this blind alley.

Yours fraternally, Sean Matgamna

"Ireland, as distinct from her people, is nothing to me; and the man who is bubbling over with enthusiasm for "Ireland" and can yet pass unmoved through our streets and witness all the wrong and suffering, the shame and the degradation wrought upon the people of Ireland — aye, wrought by Irishmen upon Irish men and women, without burning to end it, is, in my opinion, a fraud and a liar in his heart, no matter how he loves that combination of chemical elements he is pleased to call 'Ireland'."

*James Connolly,
Workers' Republic,
7 July 1900*



James Connolly