



# Workers' Liberty

Reason in revolt

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**100 years after the declaration of the Irish Republic by Dail Eireann**

# Ireland, Brexit, and Partition





# Why not a united Ireland?

**The Six Counties of Northern Ireland will leave the European Union on 29 March if the UK does.**

Yet a 56%-44% majority in Northern Ireland voted against Brexit.

Those who had been brought up Protestant voted 60%-40% for Brexit, those brought up Catholic 85%-15% against. There is a clear democratic majority in both Irelands for the whole island remaining in the EU.

Brexit, with the Northern Ireland electorate a political prisoner of the UK, is likely to do serious damage to Northern Ireland and to Ireland as a whole. It will be yet another brutally anti-democratic imposition on Ireland by Britain, backed now only by a minority even in the Northern Ireland sub-state.

Inescapably, Britain leaving the EU in anything but the "softest" ("Norway Plus") way will mean a restoration and strengthening of the border between Northern Ireland and the 26 Counties, a border which has become almost invisible over the last 15 or so years.

The 26 Counties will remain in the EU. Brexit is likely to involved something like a new partition of Ireland, or partitioning Ireland all over again.

Many who are Protestants and Unionists fear bad consequences for themselves from Brexit. Northern Ireland farmers gain no less than 78% of their income from EU grants. Northern Ireland's Protestant capitalists and farmers mostly support the EU's "backstop" requirement to harmonise economically across the border, and disapprove of the DUP's stand against the backstop.

The "backstop" is a legally binding guarantee by Britain not to reimpose a hard border on what will be the only land frontier between Britain and the EU.

But Brexit also brings both pro-EU Irelands more into alignment with each other as part of Europe than either with Britain.

**This Workers' Liberty discusses the interaction of Brexit with the partition of Ireland. It reviews the basic and long-standing arguments why Northern Ireland, as it stands, is not a viable democratic political unit. It surveys the historic inadequacies of the often-heroic Irish Republican tradition in dealing with the issue of Partition, and the political logic of the recurrent transitions of Republican currents, once revolutionary by their own lights, into conventional bourgeois politics. The articles are all by Sean Matgamna.**

The people of the Six Counties face the choice of having economic borders erected either with the 26 Counties or with Britain. Which? The partition of Ireland and the union of the Six Counties with Britain implies an answer to that question that a big majority in the Six Counties fear and do not want. A big minority of DUP voters do not want it.

How would Northern Ireland vote in a referendum on some variant of a united Ireland within the EU?

You can no longer read the answers off from a headcount of Catholic Nationalists and Protestant Unionists. Many once all-determining factors have changed in the last twenty or so years, not only in the Six but also in the Twenty-Six Counties.

A poll in June 2018 had 42% for a united Ireland, 45% for staying with the UK. Another poll in December 2017 had a majority for a united Ireland in the event of "hard" Brexit.

In its insistence on a legally-guaranteed backstop, the Dublin government has the backing of the EU. The EU insists that a withdrawal agreement will have the backstop - or Britain will leave without an agreement.

For centuries Britain's rulers feared that their European rivals would use Ireland against Britain, as Spain and France did in the distant past and Germany threatened to in World War 2. Now all of mainland Europe stands solidly with Ireland against Britain.

In the years of the Provo war in Northern Ireland, from 1971 to 1994, the border was what the military struggle against the Provisional IRA required it to be. It was fortified and militarised.

For that reason, although both Britain and the 26 Counties had joined the EU in 1973, the border within Ireland lagged way behind the weakening and near-abolition of borders between countries elsewhere in the EU.

Since the late 1990s Ireland has caught up with the rest of Europe, spectacularly. All the British Army checkpoints on the border were dismantled by 2005. The partition of Ireland has been softened and weakened, losing much of its overt brutality.

Attitudes and identifications have evolved, even though "peace walls" continue to divide the cities of Northern Ireland and electoral politics mostly remains polarised between communally-based Nationalist and Unionist parties.

Sinn Féin president Mary Lou McDonald said recently, in a significant shift from old Sinn Féin attitudes: "British identity can and must be accommodated in a united Ireland, and I believe nationalist Ireland is open to constitutional and political safeguards to ensure this".

The exigencies of British politics now threaten to undo and dramatically reverse that progress. And worse than that.

Not only the North has changed. In the 26 Counties, there has been a tremendous cultural revolution in the last 25 years. The people of the old priest-ridden Catholic backwater have shattered the power of the Catholic Church.

It is Ireland's third revolution in the last 150 years. The first was the revolution in land ownership from the 1880s through to the 1920s. The second was the political revolution between 1916 and 1922. Now, the cultural revolution. It might be called the end of the Roman occupation.

The 26 Counties is now a remarkably liberal place. In 1983 a ban on abortion was put into the constitution of the state, in a referendum. In a new referendum in May 2018, 66% voted to remove that ban from the constitution, and thus to bring women's rights in the 26 Counties into line with Britain and the rest of Europe.

The current Taoiseach is openly gay.

In the past, honest people could not deny the truth in the Orange cry against Irish self-government: "Home Rule is Rome Rule". It is no longer true.

Economic relations between North and South have also changed. At the time of Partition, in 1920-2, two-thirds of all Ireland's industrial production was in the North-East. The 26 Counties are now more economically dynamic than the Six.

The dispute over Brexit and a restoration of the border is paralleled by a pulling-apart of power-sharing within Northern Ireland, and a weakening of the will of both the DUP and Sinn Féin to sustain power-sharing. There has been no Northern Ireland government in Belfast for more than two years, and there is no progress towards one.

That is an urgent argument for abandoning the Northern Ireland framework, which is artificial, creating a Catholic-Nationalist minority which was proportionately bigger than the Protestant minority in all Ireland at the time of Partition. In the 2011 census, 45% of Northern Ireland's population was Catholic or brought up Catholic, as again 48% Protestant.

The power-sharing Belfast government collapsed in January 2017, when Martin McGuinness of Sinn Féin resigned



**The 26 Counties is now a remarkably liberal place. In May 2018, 66% voted to remove the ban on abortion from the constitution.**



as deputy First Minister. London has run the Six Counties since then.

The breakdown in Belfast is almost as farcical as it is irresponsible. There are two issues, and a difference in social philosophy between the DUP and, it seems, the majority of Six Counties people.

The First Minister before January 2017, Arlene Foster of the DUP, had been running the Department of Enterprise when things went wrong with a “Renewable Heat Incentive” scheme, resulting in the loss to the Northern Ireland government of millions of pounds.

Sinn Féin suggested that Foster should “withdraw” as First Minister while the affair was investigated. Backed by the DUP, she refused.

The second issue is the Gaelic language in Northern Ireland. The DUP Communities Minister scrapped a fund of £55,000 that provided bursaries for poor people wanting to attend Gaelic language classes in the small Gaelic-speaking Donegal “Gaeltacht” (just across the border from Derry). That was petty harassment, and a piece of childish nose-thumbing at the nationalists.

The “language question” has a special place in the minds and hearts of nationalists. It is not a matter of the rights of people whose first language is Gaelic. There aren’t any in the Six Counties, and very few in the 26.

It is a question of “reviving” Gaelic. The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 promised to treat the Gaelic language as “part of the cultural wealth of Northern Ireland”. Sinn Féin talked about giving it “parity of esteem” with English. To balance that, and perhaps to prove that someone had a sense of humour, the Agreement also contains a promise to treat “Ulster-Scots” as “part of the cultural wealth”.

There is no-one in the Six Counties whose first language is “Ulster-Scots”, and very few who speak it at all, though some people will have had distant ancestors speaking it. It has had no equivalent importance among Unionists to that of Gaelic among Nationalists.

On the same level of nonsense is a “Gaelic or English” conflict about the name of a fisheries protection ship. It has been renamed in English, the Queen of Ulster. It had been called, in Gaelic, the Beanriadh Uladh. Both names mean the same thing.

There are more serious and more fundamental differences between the former power-sharing Executive partners, the DUP and Sinn Féin, on social questions such as abortion rights and same-sex marriage. Sinn Féin, like 26 Counties society, and much of the Six Counties, is socially far more liberal than the DUP, whose outlook is something like the mindset in the US Bible Belt, with which Ulster Protestants have many direct links.

The March 2017 Northern Ireland election did not shift the elements of the stalemate between Sinn Féin and the DUP. Sinn Féin made gains, winning just one seat fewer than the DUP. The prospect of losing its place as the biggest party, entitled to provide the First Minister, will not have made the DUP more amenable.

The collapse of the Executive registers a collapse of the DUP’s and Sinn Féin’s will to operate it. That is the most important thing about it.

On the other side, so the Irish Times reports, is some Sinn Féin recoil from the extremes of kow-towing to the British Establishment by the Republican leaders, as when Martin McGuinness, who died in March 2017, ran over to London for the unveiling of a portrait of the Queen by an Ulster artist.

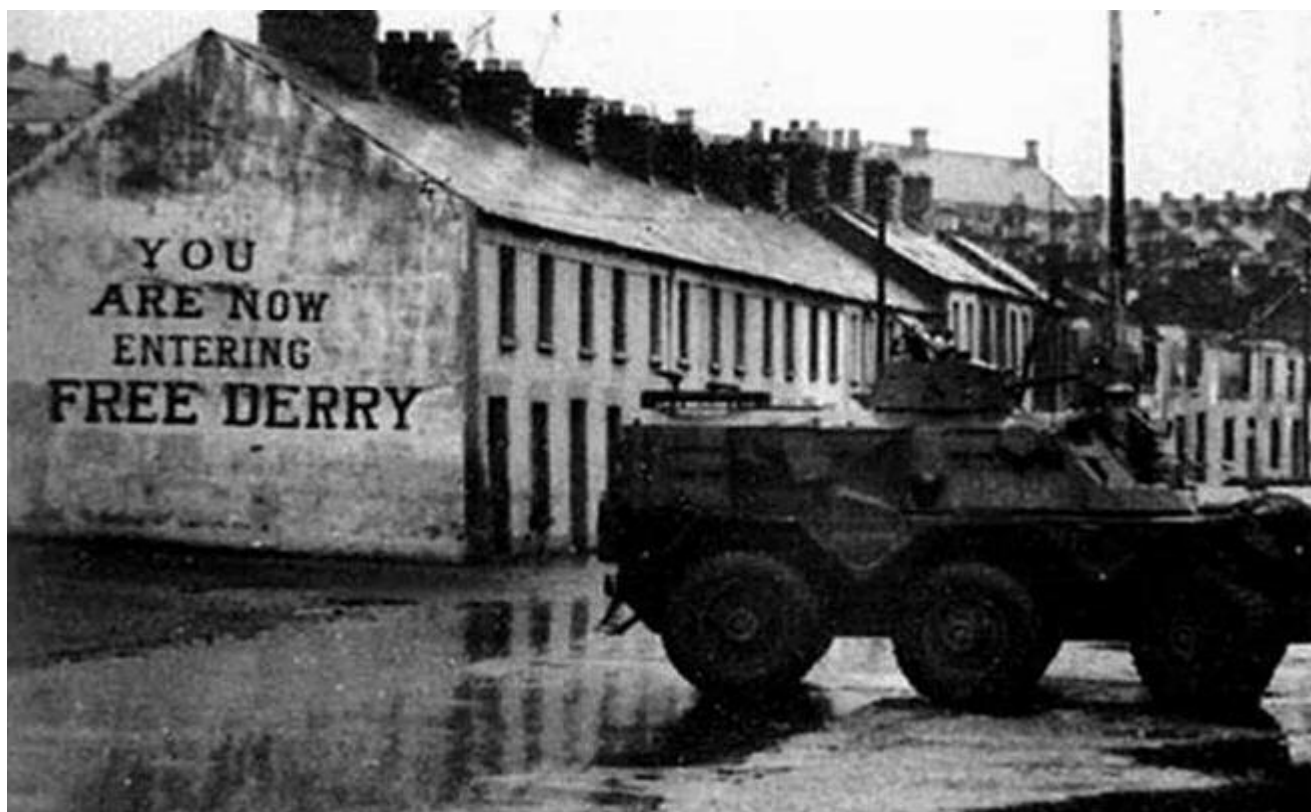
In truth, the old picture of DUP leader Ian Paisley and Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness (both now dead) doing their laughing-and-joking “chuckle brothers” act, and the picture of Gerry Adams of Sinn Féin bowing to Elizabeth II and hobnobbing with her son Charles have seemed surreal.

In short, Northern Ireland affairs seem to be ebbing back into the old channels. Republican militarists are comparatively weak, but they are active.

The explosion of justified Nationalist-Catholic discontent in Northern Ireland that led to the Provo war will not be repeated. Things are vastly different now. But the space for militarism will increase with a regeneration of a hard border.

A united Ireland, with special rights for the British-Irish minority in the north-east, is the only democratic way forward now. It is possible because of the shifts in Northern Ireland opinion and the economic and cultural changes in the 26 Counties.

**Socialists should advocate it.**



# What's wrong with the Six Counties?

**There are two distinct peoples in Ireland, who see and define themselves differently and antagonistically, the Catholic “Irish-Irish” Nationalists and the Protestant “British-Irish” Unionists.**

Ireland, which had been ruled by England since the 12th century, was partitioned in 1920-21 into Six and 26 Counties entities. The border dividing the Six and 26 Counties does not coincide, or even approximate to, the geographical location of the two distinct Irish peoples/ identities. It cuts right through them.

There is a large Catholic-Nationalist population in Belfast, but broadly the Protestant-Unionists are concentrated in the North east of the Six Counties, while large areas along the border with the 26 Counties, amounting to about half the Six County territory, are heavily Catholic Nationalist.

This was so in 1921 and now, as a result of population movements, it is more so than ever.

These are the central, all-shaping facts about Ireland and, specifically, Northern Ireland. They are the reason why the northern six county sub-state in 1969 broke down into the beginning of civil war — which the British army smothered.

The goals of an independent and a united Ireland have, for the last 150 years, proved incompatible.

The independence demanded by the Catholic national majority implied not a united Ireland but a partitioned island; a united Ireland implied continued unity with Britain, or at best only a very limited form of Irish Home Rule.

Partition was not the result of a democratic agreement between Catholic-Nationalist and Protestant-Unionist Ireland to organise their co-existence as best they could. The unviable six county entity was imposed by an alliance of Irish Protestant-Unionists and the British imperialist government.

That was a Liberal-Tory coalition government, with the Liberal Lloyd George as Prime Minister, but consisting overwhelmingly of Tory-Unionists. Identifying very strongly with the Protestant-Unionists of Northern Ireland they worked to win as much for them as the British state could impose on Catholic Nationalist Ireland.

Partition was imposed by war and the threat of escalated

war. The British Prime Minister threatened the representatives of Catholic-Nationalist Ireland — Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith and others — that if they did not accept what Britain was offering, the result would be a renewal of war, of “immediate and terrible war”, between Nationalist Ireland and Britain.

It is known now that Britain had contingency plans to do in Ireland what had been done to the Boers of South Africa two decades earlier — intern much of the Catholic population who sustained the guerrilla fighters against the British occupation forces.

In the UK General Election of November 1918, the Republican Party, Sinn Féin, headed by survivors of the 1916 Dublin Easter Rising, won approximately three-quarters of the Irish seats.

It had asked for a mandate for its elected MPs to secede from the London Parliament and set up an Irish Parliament in Dublin. It did that in January 1919, declaring Ireland a Republic. A war for independence followed.

From January 1919 to July 1921 that war was fought by an Irish guerrilla army on one side and British forces acting as an army of occupation on the other. The British forces behaved as such forces have always behaved when faced with a hostile population and guerrilla soldiers indistinguishable from the rest of the population. They committed atrocities — shooting at random, killing captured prisoners, hanging POWs, and so on.

The Partition imposed on the Catholic-Nationalist Irish people drew the dividing line between the two Irelands arbitrarily, to give maximum advantage to the Protestant Unionists. About a third of the Six County population then was Catholic-Nationalist, and they were the majority in about half the Six County territory. That part of the Six County population felt themselves to be a conquered people, and their areas along the border to be “British-Occupied Ireland”.

Against the Catholic-Nationalist demand for “self-determination” for the people of Ireland, from the mid 19th cen-

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# Timeline

## 1914

25 May: Westminster passes Home Rule Act for Ireland. But, over three decades of struggles around previous Home Rule Bills, a vehement and armed Unionist opposition to Home Rule has developed, with a compact base in north-east Ulster and strong allies in the British Tory Party. The Home Rule Act is "suspended" on outbreak of World War 1 and never comes into effect.

## 1916

24 April: Easter Rising in Dublin declares an independent Irish republic. Suppressed by British troops; but nationalist militancy grows sharply in the next two years with the attempt of the British government to introduce wartime military conscription in Ireland.

## 1919

21 January: Sinn Féin MPs elected in December 1918 Westminster election meet in Dublin and declare that they are constituting an independent Irish Parliament, Dáil Éireann. The Irish War of Independence begins, a guerrilla campaign, almost all in the south, against the British administration.

## 1920

11 November: the Westminster Parliament passes the Government of Ireland Act, providing for separate Home Rule Parliaments in Northern Ireland (Six Counties) and in the southern 26 Counties. The Northern Home Rule Parliament runs until 1972, but the Act's clauses for the South are overtaken by the War of Independence.

## 1921

24 May: First Northern Ireland general election. Ulster Unionists win 40 out of 52 seats. They will keep a majority through the whole life of the Northern Ireland Parliament.  
11 July: Truce ends War of Independence  
6 December: Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in London.

## 1922

7 January: Dail ratifies the Treaty.  
28 June (until May 1923): Civil war in 26 Counties between pro-Treaty government and anti-Treaty forces.

## 1937

A government of Fianna Fáil, formed by people from the anti-Treaty side in the Civil War who have gone into Dublin parliamentary politics, introduces a new constitution for Ireland. Most of the restrictions on the independence of the 26 Counties from the 1921 Treaty have by now been removed. The 26 Counties will be neutral in World War 2.

## 1956-62

"Border Campaign" by the IRA

## 1958

Dublin government starts to move away from economic protectionist policies of the 1930s.

## 1965

15 December: Anglo-Irish Free Trade Agreement.

## 1967

January: Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association formed, campaigning for civil rights in Northern Ireland for the Catholic minority.

## 1968

5 October: Northern Ireland police (RUC) attack civil rights march in Derry.

## 1969

August: Violent clashes between RUC and Catholics in Derry. Catholic areas of Derry "secede" and form "Free Derry", behind barricades. After similar clashes in Belfast,



British troops are sent onto the streets, and will remain the core of state power in Northern Ireland until the early 21st century.

Later in 1969: British government (under the Hunt report) takes effective control of administration in Northern Ireland.

## 1970

Early: IRA and Sinn Féin split: "Provisional" Republican movement formed. From early 1971 it will start a guerrilla military campaign which, with some temporary ceasefires, will continue until 1994.

## 1972

March: British government abolishes Northern Ireland Parliament and institutes direct rule.

## 1973

January: UK and Ireland (26 Counties) both join the EU, then called EEC.  
December: London and Dublin governments, and some Northern Ireland political parties, reach "Sunningdale Agreement" for power-sharing government in Northern Ireland.

## 1974

January: A Northern Ireland power-sharing Executive formed.  
May: Power-sharing collapses under pressure of a Protestant workers' general strike.

## 1975

May: elections to Northern Ireland Constitutional Convention. It will be dissolved in March 1976 without reaching agreement.

## 1981

1 March to 3 October: hunger strikes by Republican prisoners demanding political status, during which ten of them die. Provisionals begin a "political" turn.

## 1985

15 November: Anglo-Irish Agreement (between London and Dublin governments) gives Dublin a formal say in the governance of Northern Ireland.

## 1994

31 August: IRA declares a ceasefire, which holds, more or less, in Northern Ireland.

## 1995

From about 1995, the economy of the Republic grows

rapidly, with many multinationals siting operations there, and economic output per head in the 26 Counties becomes higher than in the Six Counties.

24 November: Republic votes 50.28% in referendum to legalise divorce.

## 1998

10 April: After two years of intensive talks, the Good Friday Agreement for institutionalised power-sharing in Northern Ireland is signed.

15 May: The Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) declares an "unequivocal ceasefire". The group hoped this would encourage people to vote against the Belfast Agreement.

25 June: Northern Ireland Assembly elections held under Good Friday Agreement.

22 August: Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) declares a ceasefire.

## 2000

11 February: Direct rule reinstated and the Northern Ireland Assembly suspended

29 May: Devolution restored to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

## 2001

4 November: Old Northern Ireland police force (RUC) replaced by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), with 50% Catholic, 50% Protestant recruitment.

## 2005

15 October: N I Executive suspended again; direct rule reintroduced.

## 2006

11-13 October St Andrew's Agreement (supplement to Good Friday Agreement): full acceptance of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) by Sinn Féin, restoration of the Northern Ireland Assembly and a commitment by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to power-sharing with Sinn Féin.

## 2007

7 March: Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, followed by new power-sharing executive in Northern Ireland, which runs to 2011.  
31 July: The British military's Operation Banner in Northern Ireland officially ends.

## 2009

Early months: banking crisis in Republic. Banks nationalised, part-nationalised, or bailed out. Severe social cuts and an economic slump follow, with economic recovery from about 2014.

## 2011

5 May: New N I Assembly elections. Third power-sharing Executive formed, with DUP First Minister and SF deputy.

## 2014

23 December Stormont House Agreement (further supplementary agreement, covering flags, parades, fiscal policies, welfare "reform")

## 2015

17 November Fresh Start Agreement (further supplementary agreement, covering implementation of Stormont House Agreement and devolution of corporation tax powers)

## 2017

9 January: NI deputy First Minister McGuinness (SF) resigns over Renewable Heat Initiative scandal. (McGuinness will die on 21 March). Executive collapses.  
2 March Snap election for N I Assembly. No Executive formed. Direct rule continues.

## 2018

25 May. Referendum in Republic votes 66% to overturn constitutional ban on abortion.



From page 3

tury, Irish and British opponents of Home Rule had argued that if democratic principle entitled the Catholic Nationalist Irish majority to Home Rule separate from the majority of the UK, then in logic and in justice the Irish Protestant minority could demand Home Rule from the Irish majority.

Practically, this might encounter difficulties — where was the dividing line? — but logically and politically it was irrefutable.

Catholic-Nationalist arguments against it revolved around denial that the north-east population was a distinct people. They argued from selective history. Hadn't the Protestant people of the north-east led the Irish Nationalist movement for independence at the time of the French Revolution — the United Irishmen? And so on.

All such arguments counted for nothing against the obdurate fact that the north-east Ulster population now were not at one with the Irish majority. That they saw themselves as a distinct people and proclaimed their readiness to go to war to resist being put in a Home Rule Ireland under Catholic-Nationalist majority rule.

Partition became an issue again because in their 1909-10 conflict with the House of Lords on the Budget, the Asquith Liberals lost their own majority in the House of Commons and came to depend for a majority on the Irish Home Rule party.

There was now a Liberal-and-Home-Rule-party majority in the London parliament in favour of Home Rule. And the House of Lords no longer had an absolute veto on decisions of the House of Commons.

The proposed Irish Home Rule state would not give Ireland independence; the proposed Dublin government would have very limited powers. Even so, Irish Protestants rejected it, organised their own army — the Ulster Volunteer Force — to resist Home Rule, and prepared to set up their own Ulster Government if the London Parliament tried to put them under a Dublin parliament.

The Tory Party openly supported the Protestant rebels. The Tory MP, Edward Carson, led the Irish Protestant movement; the Tory leader, Andrew Bonar Law, proclaimed the right of the Irish Unionists to revolt against London and Dublin. Their cause, he insisted, was just. A Liberal majority at Westminster could not change that: there are "things stronger than Parliamentary majorities", the Tory leader insisted, and set about proving it.

### THE 6-COUNTY OPTION

**In 1914 both the Liberal government and the Irish nationalist Home Rule Party, faced with the Six County Unionists' preparation for armed revolt against London and Dublin, accepted Partition.**

There were three possible options for partition, differing radically in the amount of territory the Protestant Unionist entity would have. These would separate either four, six, or nine of the existing counties from Home Rule Ireland and Dublin rule.

Division by county was a very crude tool. For example, Derry City — a place of great historical and symbolic importance to Protestant Ireland — has a big Catholic majority, is two miles from the border with the 26 Counties, but is in a heavily Protestant-Unionist county, Londonderry. Yet it was in terms of counties that Partition was discussed.

A four counties partition would involve north-east Ireland, where Protestant-Unionists were the compact majority. In this entity there would still be Catholics — in Belfast, most notably — but the overwhelming majority were Protestant-Unionist.

A nine county option would include the whole province of Ulster and Protestants would be only a bare majority there.

Those who imposed partition did so in the name of securing Protestant-Unionist rights against the Irish Catholic-Nationalist majority. They rejected the nine counties option, because the Protestant majority would be small and possibly precarious. They rejected the four county option because it would give the Protestant area too little territory and involve the loss of important towns such as Newry and Armagh.

A six county option would still include a big Catholic minority (one in three, then) but also a Protestant-Unionist two-thirds majority. That is what they finally chose.

The Catholic Nationalist leaders of the time, the Home



**The "Black and Tans" were notoriously brutal special constables recruited to try to put down the Irish independence movement**

Rule Party, called a convention of Ulster (nine-county) Catholic-Nationalists early in 1914 and persuaded them to assent to partition as a "temporary measure", believing that the Six and 26 Counties would soon be reunited.

Catholics were a bigger proportion of the Six County population than the Protestants of the whole island were of the total population.

In 1921 — after the 1916 Rising, the 1918 election won by Republicans, the secession of Dail Eireann, the proclamation of an Irish Republic in January 1919, and the Anglo-Irish war that followed — Britain conceded to Dublin not the limited Home Rule over all Ireland that had been contemplated in 1914, but the fullest measure of independence then available within the British Empire, Dominion status, such as Australia, Canada and other states had.

But only for 26 Counties. The Irish nationalist leaders agreed to that as a temporary measure — under great pressure and, as we saw, the threat of a renewed war from the British forces still occupying the whole of Ireland.

The injustice of a partition involving six counties was recognised by Britain. It was stipulated that a Boundary Commission made up of London, Belfast and Dublin government representatives would meet to redraw the boundaries.

In logic and in justice that would mean that Dublin would get the Catholic majority territory along the border, thus reducing the Nationalist state to the Protestant-Unionist heartlands. In effect, to the four country option.

The Catholic-Nationalist leaders saw the inclusion of such a large minority of Catholics and of Catholic majority territory in the Six Counties as ultimately to their advantage. Things could not settle down in the "Protestant State" with this issue unresolved.

They saw the decision which they expected from the Boundary Commission as a future bargaining tool with which to promote a United Ireland. They thought the removal of the Catholic areas would render the northern Protestant state unviable and push things towards Irish reunification.

During the negotiations in late 1921 the British government encouraged the Catholic-Nationalist leaders to think that. At the same time they told the Northern Irish leaders that what

they had under the Six/26 County partition, they would be able to hold. And hold it they did.

A high degree of coercion was necessary to impose partition on the Catholic-majority areas of Northern Ireland. From the beginning an apparatus of coercion over the Catholics was a necessary feature of the northern state. Protestant-Unionist special para-military police forces were set up to "contain" the Catholics.

Repression of Catholics would be a feature of Six County life until the Six County state broke down into near civil war 50 years later, in 1968-9.

All sections of Catholic Nationalist Ireland ruled out attempting to coerce the Northern Unionists into a United Ireland.

They believed that an attempt at coercion against the Six County Protestants could at most move the border north and east, with the Catholic majority territory becoming part of the Catholic state and the "four county" option, as a hard, impermeable Protestant-Unionist state.

Those controlling the Dublin government — Michael Collins, Arthur Griffith — ruled out coercion. The Republicans who opposed the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and who would soon fight a year-long civil war against the Dublin government (1922-23) also ruled it out.

The major points of conflict in the debate in Dail Eireann in December 1921 and January 1922 on the treaty with England centred on such things as the oath of allegiance to the King of England then required under the British Empire, of which the new Irish state was to be a part. Northern Ireland did not become a central issue.

When the Boundary Commission met in 1925 the British and Protestant representatives ganged up on the Dublin representatives — led by the great Gaelic scholar and disastrous nationalist politician, Eoin McNeill. They proposed only a small secession of territory, by Dublin to Belfast! Some millions of pounds were given to Dublin as "compensation", and McNeill returned to Dublin proclaiming that he had made "a good bargain".

The Catholics boycotted the institutions of the Six County state. The Unionist rulers saw the Catholics as a "disloyal", permanent threat. They created a Protestant-sectarian special



police to “control” them, and they gerrymandered local election boundaries. Even where — in Derry City, for example — the Catholic-Nationalists were a big majority, they got only a minority of council seats.

The Unionist rulers systematically discriminated against Catholics in jobs. They discriminated against Catholics in the allocation of social housing. (A restrictive local government franchise, which Britain had abandoned, continued in Northern Ireland, so that a council house also meant a council vote.)

Two parallel societies existed in the Six Counties. Politics in Northern Ireland became a matter of sectarian head-counting. Each community had its own political catch-cries, its own ethnic-sectarian account of Irish history.

Catholic church insistence on running Catholic schools for Catholics meant that from early childhood the communities were segregated.

Political parties — except the Communist Party and, in some periods, the Northern Ireland Labour party — were sectarian entities, in which not only sectarian politicians but also Protestant and Catholic priests thronged.

The Belfast government had only limited Home Rule. The convention came to be that the London Parliament, which legally held the supreme power in Belfast, did not discuss Northern Irish affairs. The Six County Protestant Unionists were left to rule in their own way. Majority rule there was Protestant sectarian rule.

### ONE-PARTY UNIONIST RULE

**For half a century, until London abolished the Belfast Parliament in March 1972, there was one-party Unionist-sectarian government.**

IRA para-military activity in Northern Ireland was feeble, ineffective and counter-productive, serving only to justify repression of Catholics. The IRA “Border Campaign” of 1956-62 consisted entirely of raids from the South on military and police targets in the Six Counties.

What became the mass Catholic base of the war which the Provisional IRA launched in March 1971 was aroused in the late mid 1960s, in the first large scale political mobilisation of Catholics in the history of the Six Counties, as a Catholic civil rights movement.

Catholics demanded equality with Protestants — an end to boundary-manipulation in elections and anti-Catholic discrimination in housing and employment. At first they secured the support of Protestant trade unionists and students for Catholic equality.

It was a generation of Catholics that had grown up in the welfare state created by the 1945 Labour government. Some of them who had had a university education emerged as leaders. They said they wanted “One man [sic], one job; one man, one house; one man, one vote” and “British standards” in Northern Ireland.

Some of the civil rights leaders proclaimed themselves no less hostile to the “Green Tories” who ruled the South than to the “Orange Tories” who ruled in the Six Counties.

The most prominent leaders were socialists, some of them Marxists. The Catholic Civil Rights movement was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement of black people in the USA and modelled on it to a great extent. They sang US Civil Rights movement songs on demonstrations, such as “We Shall Overcome”.

The main, behind-the-scenes, organisers of the Civil Rights movement were Northern Irish Stalinists, people who held leading positions in the Northern Irish labour movement, and Stalinist Republicans.

The IRA and the Republican movement was then under Stalinist and quasi-Stalinist control. The Republicans saw the Civil Rights movement as the preliminary to a new movement for a United Ireland. (The leading Stalinist Republican then, Dr Roy Johnstone, later publicly testified to that.)

In fact, however, they did not need to manipulate things in that direction. The logic of the situation did it for them.

The root civil right which the Northern Irish Catholics lacked was self-determination. Their lack of everything else they demanded — one man [sic], one vote, etc — flowed from their lack of that right, from their position as second class citizens in the “Protestant State”.

The whole logic of a Catholic mobilisation for civil rights inescapably pointed to a re-raising of “the national question.” And the fact that the Catholics were an artificial minority who then saw no hope of ever being a Six Counties majority

pointed inexorably to IRA militarism.

It was not the leaders of the Civil Rights movement who first raised the question of Partition. The Republicans and Stalinists in the Civil Rights movement thought the time as yet unripe for it. Other socialists — in the main, sympathisers of the International Socialists, the name of the SWP then — did not want to raise it at all. They proclaimed that there could be no talk of a United Ireland under Dublin “Green Tory” rule — not before Ireland became socialist.

It was sections of the Protestant establishment and fringe Protestant militants, such as the Reverend Ian Paisley then was, who saw the logic of the Civil Rights movement and inferred that there was a hidden, conspiratorial, Nationalist and Republican purpose to it. They roused a strong Protestant backlash against the Civil Rights movement. That shaped what happened next.

The Northern Ireland Home Secretary, William Craig, banned a Civil Rights march in Derry. When the ban was defied, he set baton-flailing police on to the demonstrators. The TV cameras’ pictures of the West Belfast MP, Gerry Fitt, being batoned to the ground went around the world, and broke the embargo on British involvement in the internal affairs of Northern Ireland.

Civil Rights marches continued. On the streets, Paisleyite counter-demonstrations attacked Civil Rights marchers.

In the first eight months of 1969 clashes between Civil Rights activists and Paisleyites and between Civil Rights activists and police multiplied.

On 12 August 1969 the Northern Ireland state began to break down into war. Serious fighting erupted in Derry between members of the elite Orange Order, the “Apprentice Boys”, other Orangemen and police on one side and, on the other, Catholic youths objecting to the “traditional” Orange march around the walls of the city.

Barricades were thrown up at the entrance to the Catholic ghetto, the Bogside. The Catholics repelled the massed ranks of Orangemen and armed police who tried to invade, using stones and petrol bombs.

After two days of that, fighting erupted in Belfast, where Catholics were then in the minority, and not as in Derry, the majority. Catholic streets were set on fire and their residents driven out. It was the beginning of what was then the greatest population movement in Europe since the aftermath of the Second World War. It was the start of erupting civil war.

On 15 August the British army was sent in to take control of Belfast and Derry and put an end to the fighting. British “non-interference” in the internal affairs of the Six Counties was at an end. The British Army would play a central role in Northern Ireland for the next 35 years. The British Army “operation” on the streets of Northern Ireland formally ended on 31 July 2007.

The soldiers were welcomed by the Catholics — by those for whom, as for many generations before them, Britain was the traditional great enemy. Catholic leaders called for the abolition of Six County majority rule and for direct rule from London.

Behind the scenes, senior British civil servants were sent to supervise the running of Northern Ireland. Barricades remained up in Catholic Belfast and Derry — British soldiers with rifles and machine guns posted on one side, Catholics armed with hurleys and clubs on the other, friendly but wary and suspicious.

A Commission of Inquiry under Lord Hunt had been set up in response to earlier violent clashes, to inquire into the reasons for the “breakdown of law and order”. The Hunt Commission reported in October 1969, proposing the abolition of the Protestant special police, the B-Specials, the disarming of the RUC, and reforms to eliminate the grievances of the Civil Rights movement.

Protestant outrage at the British government’s acceptance of Hunt’s recommendations led to a running gun-battle between Protestants and the British army in the Protestant heartland of Belfast’s Shankill Road. The Catholic barricades came down peacefully. British Home Secretary Jim Callaghan was welcomed enthusiastically when he visited Catholic Belfast and Derry. A deceptive period of calm followed.

An IRA scarcely existed then. It was no more than a rump, controlled by Stalinists intent on moving it away from its traditional reliance on “physical force on principle” and refusal to sit in Parliaments. The IRA had proved helpless to defend the Catholics in mid-August.

Now the backlash of traditional Republicans against the

Stalinists split the IRA and Sinn Fein. It led in December 1969–January 1970 to the establishment of a breakaway, which called itself Provisional IRA, and Provisional Sinn Fein. (An “official” IRA and Sinn Fein, Stalinist-controlled, remained active for much of the 1970s.)

The Provisionals were devoutly Catholic, politically primitive, physical-force-on-principle, traditional Republicans. They prepared for an offensive war.

Early in 1971 they started shooting British soldiers and setting off bombs in Northern Irish towns and cities, often with much carnage.

The polarisation between Catholics and Protestants now again reached near-civil-war level, kept under simmering control by the British Army.

As the logic of sectarian-communal civil war worked itself through, the “extremes” on both sides set the pace and the tenor of politics. They gained military control in their communities.

Protestant workers who had supported civil rights and Catholic equality within the Six Counties now began to feel themselves threatened with conquest and forced incorporation into an Irish Catholic state. Belfast shipyard workers marched to demand internment — that is, imprisonment on suspicion of IRA membership, without charge or trial — as a means of fighting the IRA.

In August 1971 the introduction of internment, exclusively for Catholics, proved to be more petrol on the fire, lining up Catholics en masse behind the IRA.

The killings of soldiers and RUC people, and the bombings, escalated.

The Ulster Defence Association developed as an open, legal organisation, with a large-scale Protestant underground movement which assassinated Catholics picked at random or because of suspicion of IRA membership. Hundreds of Catholics died at their hands.

This was Catholic-Protestant sectarian civil war, half-smothered and regulated by the British army. The British army was by no means impartial. The IRA was their central enemy, and the Protestant militias loosely if independently on their side. The army, police and intelligence services often colluded with the Orange “underground” against their common enemy.

Even so, the British army and the RUC moderated and stifled the Catholic-Protestant civil war and prevented it from escalating into large-scale massacres and mass “ethnic cleansing”, as distinct from the butchery and limited-scale ethnic cleansing which did occur on both sides.

In March 1972 Britain abolished Protestant majority rule in the Six Counties. London openly assumed the control it had begun to assume behind the scenes since August 1969. Protestant workers in Belfast struck and marched in protest.

It was recognition that the Six Counties was, as a nationalist politician put it, a “failed entity”. Protestant Home Rule, to secure which Ireland had been partitioned into two states, had proved to be sectarian-Protestant rule, and had at the end led to the breakdown into Catholic-Protestant civil war that even the British army could not entirely suppress or control.

Before World War 1 the Protestants had gained a veto on all-Ireland Home Rule. Now the Northern Ireland Catholics had gained a veto on Protestant-Unionist rule in the Six Counties.

Instead of recognising that the Six Counties, whose existence created a second, Catholic, artificially-created Irish minority; which recreated the minority-majority problem on the island within the Six Counties, on a smaller scale and with the minority and majority roles artificially reversed: instead of tackling the problem at its roots, Britain, with the active collaboration and support of Dublin, set out to reform the Six Counties.

A statelet designed to let Protestants rule was to be reformed in such a way as to abolish majority rule, and in its place put institutional power-sharing — guaranteed by law — between Catholic and Protestant parties.

In the 47 years since majority, Protestant, Home Rule was abolished, stable power-sharing has, again and again, proved an impossible task. The 2017 collapse of the power-sharing government in Belfast is only the latest in a long list of failures.

In March 1973 a referendum was held in Northern Ireland: join a united Ireland or stay in the UK? Republicans boycotted it. An overwhelming majority voted for staying in the UK.



On 30 January 1972, 28 unarmed civil rights protesters were shot by the British Army Parachute Regiment during a Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association march. 14 died.

### SUNNINGDALE AGREEMENT 1973

In late 1973 the first attempt at power-sharing was agreed upon by Northern Irish political leaders and by London and Dublin — the Sunningdale Agreement.

The “moderate” Protestant and Catholic politicians would share power; Britain would ensure that only power-sharing governments could rule Northern Ireland. There would be a Council of Ireland, loosely linking Dublin and Belfast.

Caught between the communal conflict and British pressure for reform, the once-monolithic Ulster Unionist Party shattered into fragments. Some tried to do Britain’s bidding, others said they would die to defend Protestant majority rule. Large numbers of Protestant workers began to support Ian Paisley’s Democratic Unionist Party. Paisley was a long-time and sometimes populist critic of the Unionist-Orange establishment.

An election in which the pre-March 1972 Northern Irish Prime Minister, Brian Faulkner, seemed to promise not to share power with Catholics, produced a power-sharing majority in a new Belfast Assembly, with Faulkner as Prime Minister and SDLP leader Gerry Fitt as Faulkner’s deputy. That government would last five months.

Though a majority of Protestant Assembly members were Faulknerites and in favour of power-sharing, their electors considered them tricksters and turncoat traitors. In February 1974 an unscheduled British General Election allowed outraged Protestants to express their feelings. Of the then 12 Northern Irish seats at Westminster, 11 were won by opponents of power-sharing. The exception was West Belfast, held by Gerry Fitt.

The moral and political position of the Faulknerites was fatally undermined. An attempt to activate the clause in the Sunningdale Agreement stipulating that a Council of Ireland would be set up triggered an Orange General Strike in May 1974. UDA coercion played an important part in getting it going, but then it gained its own momentum.

After nine days the government resigned. Power-sharing was dead.

Britain now decided to set up an elected Constitutional Assembly. The people of Northern Ireland were asked to choose

representatives who would thrash out a constitution acceptable to both Protestants and Catholics within the artificial framework of the Six Counties.

The Faulkner Unionists were wiped out in the election to this new Assembly. The Constitutional Assembly dragged on for a year — with the IRA on ceasefire for most of it — but agreement was not possible. The Orange politicians would not have powersharing and a Council of Ireland. They would not even have voluntary, as distinct from statutory, power-sharing.

When the former Northern Ireland Home Secretary, William Craig, leader of a strong quasi-fascist movement, Vanguard, proposed voluntary power-sharing, his standing as a prominent Orange Unionist leader was destroyed.

Britain finally shut down the Constitutional Assembly. The next sustained attempt to set up power-sharing government would not come until after the Good Friday Agreement 22 years later.

The Provisional IRA resumed its war. The British Labour government began to take back the de facto status as political prisoners which jailed IRA members had won in the early 70s. Refusing to wear prison uniform, IRA prisoners spent years naked except for blankets.

In 1981, ten of them were allowed to starve to death, seeking political prisoner status.

The tremendous Catholic support for the prisoners which the hunger strike generated led Sinn Fein to stand one of the hunger-strikers, Bobby Sands, for a Parliamentary seat in a by-election, which he won. The hunger striker, who went on fasting, died a member of the British Parliament.

From that experience grew a new IRA-Sinn Fein policy of combining politics with war — the Armalite rifle in one hand and the ballot in the other, as they expressed it.

In November 1985 an Anglo-Irish Agreement was signed which gave Dublin a direct political say, though not Executive power, in the running of Northern Ireland. A sharp Protestant backlash failed to remove it.

During the long war, the IRA evolved politically. They became mildly left-wing. Slowly they moved away from some of the dogmas of physical-force-on-principle Republicanism.

When they decided in 1986 to take seats they might win in the Dublin Dail Eireann, the founding leaders of the IRA, Rory Brady, David O’Connell and others, split off to form the Continuity IRA. The war continued.

Secret talks between the British government and the IRA, with the SDLP leader John Hume (a member of the quasi-secret Catholic cult, Opus Dei) as sponsor and broker, led the IRA to a ceasefire in August 1994. Though it broke down for a while in Britain — Canary Wharf and the centre of Manchester were blasted — the ceasefire held in Northern Ireland.

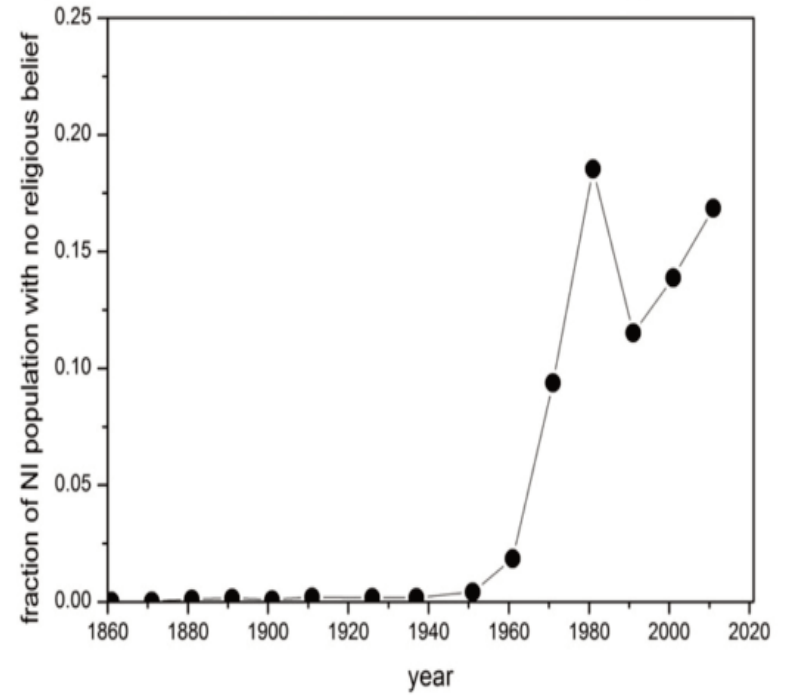
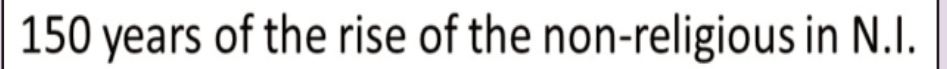
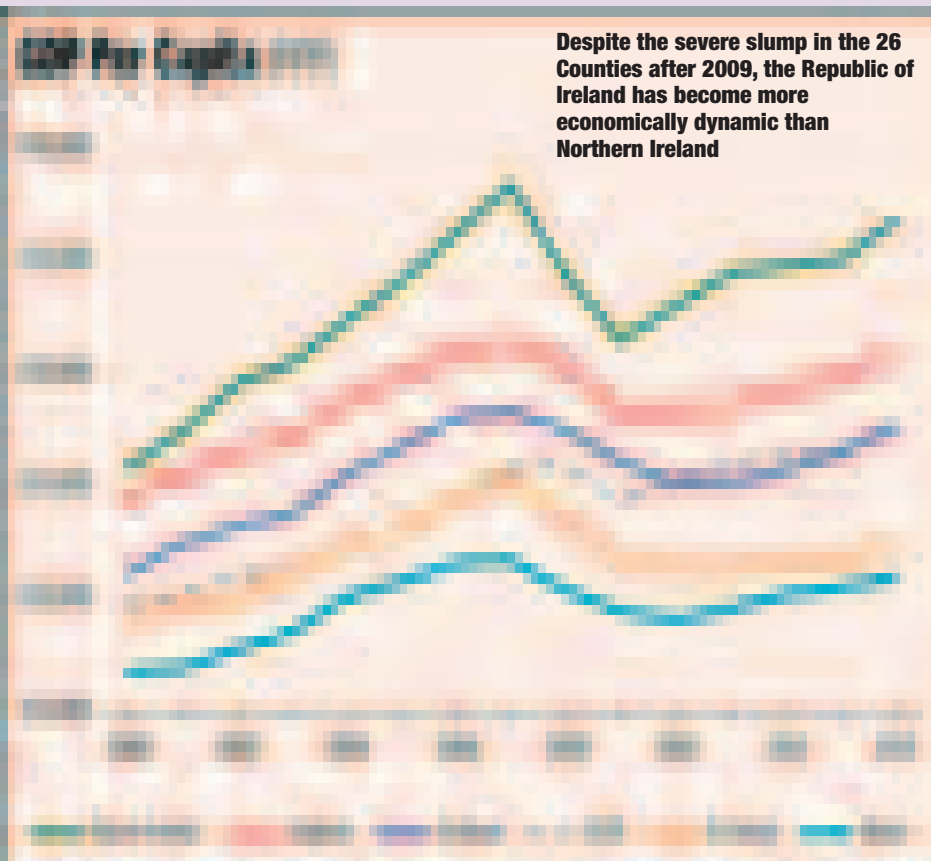
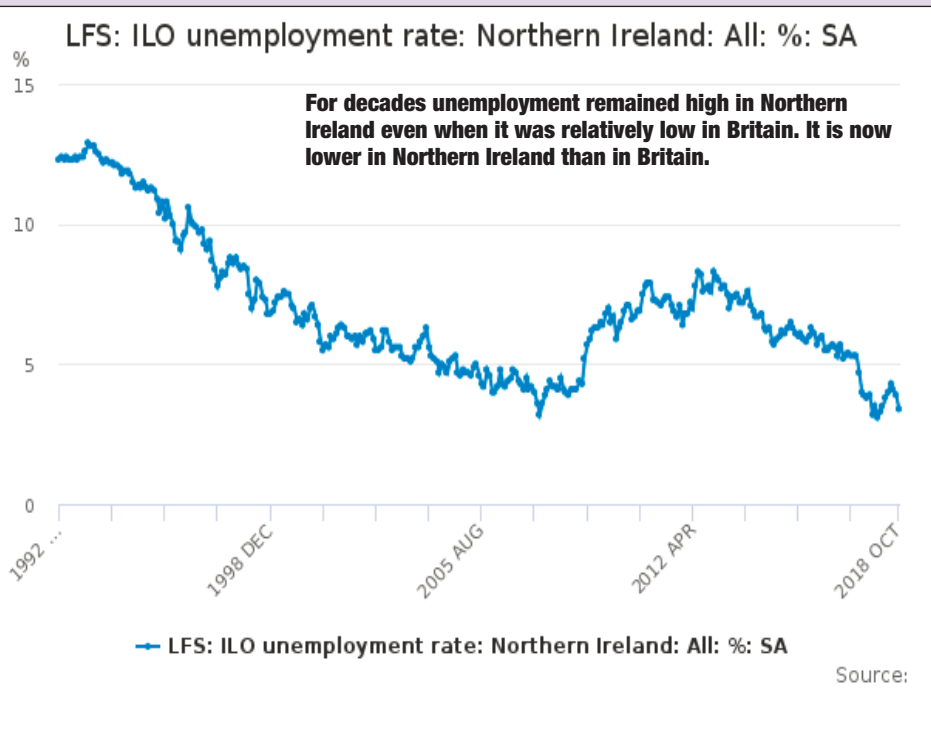
The Good Friday Agreement followed four years later, on 10 April 1998. The Good Friday Agreement differed from Sunningdale in that it was to be not power-sharing by some of the political parties, but mandatory power-sharing between all of them. Where Sunningdale had relied on the centre against the “extremes”, the Good Friday Agreement looked essentially to agreement between the extremes.

A central consideration of the Sinn Fein-IRA in agreeing to the Good Friday Agreement was the belief that the Catholics would, because of a greater natural increase, outbreed the Protestants and, within a decade or two, be the majority in the Six Counties. Then the Good Friday Agreement would commit Britain to hold a referendum and to comply with the wishes of a majority should it vote for a united Ireland.

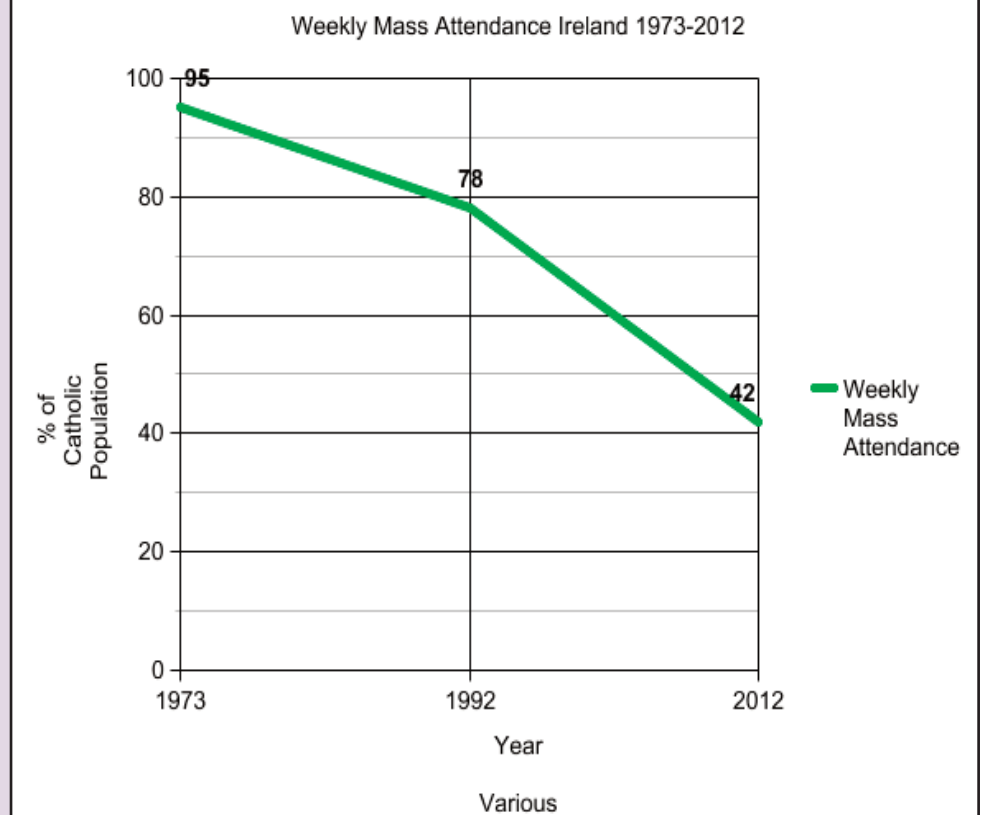
The absurdity of the Six Counties and of the political system of juggling an artificially demarcated Catholic minority and a Protestant majority is even more clear if we contemplate such an eventuality.

When a Six County majority wants a United Ireland (as the decisive majority in the island once wanted Home Rule and then an independent Republic) will the Protestants, reduced to a minority in the Six Counties, accept it? That is one of the questions posed by Brexit.

**The Protestant minority on the island may proclaim that their own identity is more important than a “democratic majority” dominated by people of a different national identity. The democratic response is a program for a federal united Ireland with autonomy for the Protestant north-east.**



The anomalous data point for 1981 is a result of a 'protest' census return during the 1981 IRA hunger strikes



## Key statistics



# The mind of Irish Republicanism

*"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..."*

James Connolly, *Workers' Republic*, July 1899.

*"He is no Social-Democrat [Marxist] who forgets... that we are obliged for that reason to expound and emphasise general democratic tasks before the whole people, without for a moment concealing our socialist convictions. He is no Social-Democrat who forgets in practice his obligation to be ahead of all in raising, accentuating, and solving every general democratic question..."*

Lenin, *What Is To Be Done?*

What follows is an attempt to sketch an overview of the political-ideological lineaments and history of Republicanism in 20th and early 21st century Ireland, and to explain how the physical-force-on-principle trend which the "Real IRA", "New IRA", etc. embody emerged and became a constant element in Irish politics.

## EASTER RISING 1916

Three events shaped the mind of 20th century Irish republicanism, creating an outlook in which belief in political miracles occupies a central place. The first was the Easter Rising in 1916.

"In the springtime of the year 1916", Connolly, Pearse, Mellowes, 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.

What they had planned was 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 One. At the last moment the official head of the Volunteers, Professor Eoin MacNeill, called off the manoeuvres by putting advertisements in the Easter Sunday papers.

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 (so Connolly believed) 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 immediate 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, as the Famine was drawing to an end, 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, the no-nonsense working-class revolutionary, had written about such things with bitter scorn in his book *Labour in Irish History* (published 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 a bad situation.

And so they turned out in Dublin on Easter Monday, 1,300 or 1,400 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



1916: The Citizen Army outside the headquarters of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union.

war with Germany 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 seized 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. The Rising was part of the process by way of which they won a democratic mandate, in the election of late 1918.

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 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 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 declaration of the Republic appealed to the living in the name of the dead: "In the name of God and of the dead

generations..." The minority acted in the name of the nation and called on the nation to follow, hoping to spark a revolutionary 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.

## 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 votes cast: they won many seats without a contest) 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 those 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 captive leaders were killed, and then came the magical transformation — the resurrection. Soon there was enough of a victory to vindicate the minority, and retrospectively vindicate the insurgent tradition, the big rising of the 18th and 17th centuries and 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 a great political force. Yeats wrote the most powerful version of the myth of a blood sacrifice:

*“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.”*

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.

Sensible people do not believe in miracles. When something looks like a miracle, you 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 and interests. 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: there was nothing inevitable about it. We know from what he wrote on the eve of the Rising that 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 there has been no shortage of republican heroism or of epic events with the power to overwhelm 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, the whole context, rule it out.

## CIVIL WAR 1922-23

**The second event that shaped 20th century Republicanism was the civil war of June 1922 to May 1923.**

The Treaty was imposed on Collins and Griffith by the credible British threat of “immediate and terrible war”.

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. So did the Catholic Church, which did much to line up people behind the Free Staters.

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, among Republicans, there was the inchoate and dimly felt millenarianism of large numbers of people, especially in the West and perhaps especially among youth, 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.

But in all the labour and small farmers’ struggles during the war of independence, the IRA had acted as a force defending the status quo and defending and securing private property on the land and elsewhere. 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 6/ 26 County division of the island. Implicitly (and some of them, explicitly) they accepted that the North could not be “forced” and that there should be no attempt to force it. The North, amazing as it may seem, had little part in the considerations of Dail Éireann on the Treaty in December 1921 and January 1922. The division of Ireland was a fact, and discussion focused on things like the Oath of Allegiance. On Northern Ireland, the Republicans of that time stood at the opposite pole to the Republicans today (and since the late 1930s).

The IRA drifted into a civil war thinking that the gun and intransigence were enough. Born at that point was what might be called “Carbonari Republicanism”, after an early 19th-century underground revolutionary sect — archaic, sterile, conspiratorial republicanism. In its “revolutionary” period, it had no political programme to match its revolutionary aspirations; when it moved into government, as successive strands of it repeatedly would, it adopted a straightforward conservative bourgeois political programme, as we saw Adams and McGuinness do with the Provisional IRA.

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, in jail for six months, was shot out of hand in December 1922, along with three other Republican leaders.

The writer’s sympathies are with the republicans, with the young lads and young women 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 Dail 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 other 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, in the process of becoming a political fetish — a large part of

the revolutionary energy of plebeian Ireland. For decades Carbonari republicanism would act as a lightning conductor, as one of bourgeois Ireland’s safety devices.

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 social conditions. After 1922 Republicanism 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 terrorist 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-21st century, sort — for one based on the working class, using politics and trade unionism normally, treating questions of the state and armed force rationally and empirically rather than making a fetish of any particular form of action, organisation or struggle.

## STALINISM AND THE DISSIPATION OF CONNOLLY’S TRADITION

**The third crucial development, allowing Carbonari republicanism to survive and helping to shape and perpetuate it, was the fate of revolutionary working-class socialism in the world and in Ireland.**

First, the dissipation in Ireland of Connolly’s political tradition, and then the degeneration of the communist movement and its replacement by Stalinism.

Connolly had followed the tactics advocated by Marx, and later to be advocated by the Communist International, on the proper relationship of socialists to “revolutionary nationalists” — act together, organise and propagandise separately. But politically Connolly was swallowed up by his bourgeois and petty-bourgeois allies; despite the wide sentiment for “Connolly’s Workers’ Republic” that existed, socialism 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 working-class politics into a multi-class national entity, or, as populist republicans do, the enlistment of labour and social issues as a means of gaining support for the national (military) struggle. He saw the national question and the social question as flowing together, and full national liberation as the victory of the working class.

“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 accompanies 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”. He wrote that in 1910, in *Labour in Irish History*, and though he came to be caught up in the purely national struggle in 1916 there is no reason to think that Connolly changed his mind on what, for socialists, the national struggle was about.

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”, as Trot-



sky put it in his theory of “permanent revolution” and as Connolly formulated it above (and elsewhere), was ruled out by the Nationalist/ Unionist 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 this division in the Irish working class, and in the unions, that paralysed the labour movement in the war of independence. It organised two general strikes as part of the political-military struggle, but it left politics to the bourgeois factions, unionist and republican: otherwise, the unions would have split.

The second flaw in Connolly’s plans, which shaped his posthumous fate 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 came to be a captive of nationalist forces.

“Connollyism” was reduced to a vague aspiration, his hard Marxist ideas immediately subjected to working over and political mastication by “left-wing” priests and others to assimilate them to Catholic Nationalist Ireland. Connolly’s “Workers’ Republic” was blurred into and merged with vague notions of a return to an (essentially mythical) ancient Celtic Irish communism. James Connolly and his writings would be a wild care in the Republican movement. The widespread popularity of such ideas 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.

During the war of independence, talk of a Workers’ Republic merged with Catholic mysticism and vague “back to the socialist clan system” millenarianism to provide a plebeian aureole for the republican struggle against Britain. Connolly’s legacy dissolved into a vaguely socialist and populist wing of nationalism.

## 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 the USA, and led the breakaway from the Irish Transport and General Workers’ Union, the Workers’ Union of Ireland. (Both ITGWU and WUI are now merged into SIPTU).

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” — that is, 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.

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 and appropriated 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 gombeen mockery of the past struggles 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 insurrectionary sectism 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.



**Roddy Connolly (centre right) and Éadhonn MacAlpine (far left), Irish delegates to the second congress of the Communist International.**

## THE COMMUNIST INTERNATIONAL

**The Communist International’s Fifth Congress of June-July 1924 — reflecting the interests or the perceptions of the ruling bureaucrats in the Soviet Union — began the process of substituting other politics for the working-class, communist politics of the first four congresses of the International.**

The Stalinising 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 Chiang 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, 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 early, Lenin-Trotsky, Communist International had 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 — form part of the bedrock of modern Marxism.

Yet no major Communist International document analysed Ireland. The nearest approach was a couple of weighty pieces by young Roddy Connolly in the Communist International’s magazine on the current situation in the light of history. 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.

In Ireland/Britain, as in for instance Croatia/ Yugoslavia (the most powerful Balkan state), nationalism was utilised to make difficulties for important states that were formidable enemies of the USSR. Catholic Ireland’s nationalist tradition fitted well with Russian needs to counter Britain and the resultant 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. (See [bit.ly/lenin-ir](http://bit.ly/lenin-ir)).

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 Stalinist “Communists”, manipulatively, merged themselves politically with republicans moving left.

Abstract Republicanism, with its fetish of physical-force methods which to others were, or were not, a means to an end, could (and at various times did) assume virtually any social programme, from fascism to Stalinism.

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 Ireland.

At its most benign, that culture looked to a British-Irish bourgeois deal over the heads of the Irish Protestant minority on the island: 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, no more than there is now to Adams-McGuinness and the SDLP in the Six Counties.

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 an Irish-bourgeois/capitalist-imperialist crime.

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 and were the compact majority in north-east Ulster, though not in the whole Six Counties.

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

The sine qua non 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 on the island — 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 work to develop the Irish working class and its 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 (thus: the need for a “bourgeois revolution” — another bourgeois revolution! — in Ireland before anything socialist could be done) so as to elevate the concerns of Catholic nationalists above everything else. Irish working-class political independence was snuffed out by the development of Stalinism in the Communist International. In Ireland, Carbonari Republicanism was nourished and reinforced. For instance, the Irish Stalinist parties — the Northern and Southern Stalinists divided in 1941 and did not reunite until 1970 — commemorated James Connolly’s 100th anniversary in 1968 by



publishing a small pamphlet of his military studies on the eve of 1916, with on the cover a drawing of Connolly in military uniform.

### STALINIST CATHOLIC NATIONALISM

**Revolutionary working-class politics under Stalinists control came to be dressed up in Catholic-nationalist costume.**

In this way, the most “revolutionary” politics in Ireland came to be symbiotic with old Catholic nationalism, and even Catholic communalism.

The political errors and weaknesses that in Connolly were episodic came to be systematised in a “communist”-republican hybrid. The result was an inchoate and unstable nationalist populism which repeatedly span off or reinforced 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.

Some of the republican programme was absolutely 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 De Valera’s 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. That peasant and small-farmer ownership was, essentially, the work of the Tory-Unionist party, carrying through the “bourgeois revolution in Ireland” from above. 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 in the civil war 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 indepen-

dence.

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

### THE RECURRENT PATTERN

**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 a communistic, socialistic, left-wing republicanism;

but this was in fact a populism in which the working class was seen as the necessary “instrument” of nationalist victory, rather than “nationalist” issues being judged for how they contributed to working-class liberation.

The pattern would be repeated again and again in the 20th century, beginning with the Collins-Griffith Irish Republican Brotherhood and Cumann na nGaedheal faction of Sinn Féin (1917-21). What the Provisionals have done in the last decades is yet another example of the recurrent drift into mainstream bourgeois politics.

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 British state-organised transfer of land, and took part in international Stalinist junketings such as those of the Anti-Imperialist Fronts and the Krestintern, 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 national-populists and then Stalinists.

If it were not for the 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 and from Irish history — the Stalinists’ ideas of “completing the Irish bourgeois revolution” would never have had much of a hearing among serious people.

In fact the Stalinist pseudo-Republican dogmas about the all-shaping need to “first complete the bourgeois-democratic revolution” (unite the island) threw militants moving from nationalism back to nationalism, now conceived of as part of a higher world-historical cause. Irish nationalism blended into Stalinism’s pseudo-Marxist imaginary map of history.

Little bits of Lenin’s casual journalism were misused to justify Catholic communalism (see [bit.ly/lenin-ir](http://bit.ly/lenin-ir)). 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 fetishistic military 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 a powerful and serious movement. Two hundred of its people volunteered to fight in the Spanish Civil War, and 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 first uniting the working class.

In practice the Stalinist 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 struck the keynote of Irish Republicanism with the words: “break 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 Fáil and was meant by its proponents to appeal to the Fianna Fáil 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 L R James and, maybe, at the start, with the soon-to-die American Trotskyist Tom O’Flaherty) joined the Labour Party.

By this stage Fianna Fáil 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 Fáil: 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 Fáil turned on the republicans and started a slow build-up of the repression that was to crush them in World War Two.

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 Fáil: 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 in an Ireland alienated from the British side in that war. By the time war came, populist republicanism had shrunk to virtually nothing. Tragically, no class struggle-based revolutionary socialist movement had taken its place: this left it the possibility of reviving.

The 26 Counties retained its neutrality — thus proving to anyone who needed proof that it was indeed independent of Britain — and the Communist Party, actively pro-German 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 De Valera Fianna Fáilers 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 (lethal) bombs in British cities.

### THE RIGHT WING IRA

**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 political 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 with Flemings in Belgium and Croats and Slovenes in 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 hardcore Stalinist among republicans, was captured fighting in Spain for the Republic. He then spent much of the war representing all the republican factions as a working guest of Hitler’s government, helping by providing analysis of Irish politics. He died, peacefully, in Dresden in 1944.

The IRA was not dead, because Catholic Ireland’s sense of itself was still outraged by the partition, because Northern Ireland Catholics were confined to second-class citizenship in the Six Counties, because the 26 County 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 Northern Ireland 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, to repeat, not far from fascism.

A splinter group launched the first attack, 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 effectively died long before that.

### 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, this Clann na Poblachta joined a coalition government with the then two Irish Labour Parties and... with Fine Gael, the Free-State party in the Civil War and after, and the fascistic Blueshirt party of the 1930s!

The pattern Connolly outlined thus reasserted itself, 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 the 26 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 en-

demical diseases and a great killer, especially of the poor.

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, and subservient to the bishops and priests.

### THE BIRTH OF THE PROVOS

**The physical force republicans of 1956-62 went through almost exactly the same evolution as earlier had 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 a diluted variant of the nationalist populism of the 1930s: “republicans need social policies to build a base”. They turned to politics and took up social agitation. They moved towards abandoning the characteristic dogmas of physical-force republicanism which forbade entry into the Westminster, Dublin, or Belfast parliaments. They had won four seats in the Dail in a Republican upsurge triggered by their raids on the North. (They refused to take the seats).

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 was in the Dublin government until it merged into the Labour Party in 1999.

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.

In March 1971, this group of “Carbonari Republicans”, committed on principle to physical force and boycott of parliaments, launched all-out guerilla war to forcibly unify Ireland. They brought to the project political blindness, fetish-mongering, and their belief in political miracles of the sort that followed 1916. 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.

Basing themselves on the Northern Catholic minority — who had been roused up and made ready to back them by agitation for Catholic equality and civil rights in the Six Counties state — 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. And rouse it they did.

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 away from militarism to social agitation, though some of them had the intention of returning to militarism once they had built support.

In August 1969, British troops took control when serious Catholic-Protestant fighting broke out, first in Derry and then in Belfast. The demobilised “left-wing” IRA counted for little in all this. During the Northern fighting in August 1969 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. 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 conveyed in song and story and historical mythology and nourished by living experience and grievances, among the people who had lost out most in the crude partition settlement of fifty years before.

The Provisionals launched a military campaign in March 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. For 26 years after that, all attempts to replace it by Catholic-Protestant power-sharing failed. The most serious attempt was destroyed in May 1974 by a tremendous Protestant general strike.

In the course of their long war, remarkable things happened to the initially pure physical-force, “politics-is-a-snare” 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, but without the connection to Stalinism.

They moved away from the quasi-religious fetish of militarism, of the purifying and redeeming power of blood. Having established, by a 23-year war, that war could not succeed, they declared a ceasefire in August 1994, and negotiated the Good Friday Agreement by early 1998.

These changes reflected 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 came the Provisionals’ scarcely-disguised communalist character. They had been locked into a war waged by a minority of the Northern Catholic minority. They became the ultimate *reductio ad absurdum* of Carbonari republicanism — its furthest point of travel away from the republicanism of Wolfe Tone and James Connolly.

The Provisional IRA’s war had been rooted in and explained in terms of the middle-class Catholic nationalist account of Northern Ireland, as “British-occupied Ireland”.



Ian Paisley (left) of the DUP and Gerry Adams (right) of Sinn Féin

That is the poisoned root of everything that followed.

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 Northern Irish towns and blew up and shot Irish people in the RUC and UDR. These were “traitors”, “collaborators”, “Orange supremacists”, but Irish people nonetheless, and representatives of an Irish minority entitled to have its rights treated with respect by honest Republicans.

Over time, Six Counties people inevitably came to the fore of the Provisionals’ leadership, and they, moving towards bourgeois *realpolitik*, knew that their enemy was fundamentally the Northern Irish majority, the Irish Unionists. In 1981, the Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin had dropped their old talk of a federal Ireland. In other words, they moved explicitly to leave themselves even in remote theory no possible relationship to the Irish minority except to demand of them that they surrender unconditionally and agree to be submerged in an Ireland based on what was then plainly a Catholic confessional state. (It is not so now, after spectacular shifts 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-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. Since then would-be successors to the Provos have justified the shooting of two men delivering pizzas to the Army on the grounds that they were “collaborators”.

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 Irish “left”, paradoxically, was less restrained — from Michael Farrell’s early 1970s theorising about the Irish Protestants in the light of the experience of Algeria (maybe one million French were driven out in 1962-3) to INLA’s unashamed attack on Protestants picked at random as Protestants, paralleling the activities of Loyalist murder gangs who did 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 nonsensical 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 whose war

was backed by perhaps a third of the Six Counties Catholics, could maim and kill as many of the one million Irish Unionists as whim, exigency and military or sectarian logic suggested to them. The “left-wing” INLA could go into a Pentecostal church in Darkley and open fire with a machine gun on the worshippers (1983); the Provisional IRA could blow up an 11 November commemoration day Protestant service in Enniskillen (1987).

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.

### THE PROVOS GO CONSTITUTIONAL

**By the mid 1990s, after all that had happened in the previous 30 years, it was impossible to pretend that the problem was only or mainly a matter of “British-occupied Ireland”.**

The keystone of the Provisionals’ entire political strategy was still the idea that the Six Counties was “British-occupied Ireland”, but now they understood it to mean that Britain was to blame for not “persuading” the one million Irish Protestants into a united Ireland.

These “Irish nationalists” and “Irish republicans” self-righteously denounced Britain because Britain would not force one million Irish (or Irish-British) people into an independent Irish Republic for them!

The Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin came to look to not an intra-Irish but a British-imposed settlement. They killed 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 — had been twisted in the course of the war into the demand for the demonised British not to get out until they had 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 did not believe in an Irish solution. They believed in a British solution to the problem of relations between the two people on the island. The logic of reality had forced the Provisional IRA not only to accept that the root problem was not “British occupied Ireland” but to look to the British military occupying forces to “solve” the real problem, the fact that one million Irish people would fight, guns in hand, against submitting to the Provisionals, and if necessary will carve out their own “self-determination” against Catholic Ireland. The Provisionals had blundered and stumbled on to the ground of traditional Unionism! That is what the talk of the British becoming “persuaders” of the Protestants really meant.

Thus, the Provisional Carbonari-republicans, having donned much of the old clothing of Stalino-populist republicanism, reduced 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. Their final phase before their move into mainstream bourgeois politics was a pledge to go on bombing and killing (mainly Irish people) until they got the British solution they favour. Until they got Britain, the great Satan of Irish history, to compel the Irish minority to “unite.”

Yet that approach was 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” 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.

There was no democratic — that is, no republican — case for the attitude to the Protestants of the Provisionals in the last stage of their military campaign. The only case was a Catholic-chauvinist one. If Wolfe Tone’s republicanism started with the call to end sectionalism, the nadir of Carbonari republicanism was reached in the Provisionals’ use of republican catchcries in the pursuit of sectionalism and sectarianism.

Almost a million of Ireland’s people — natives of the island of Ireland, and descendants of people who have lived in Ireland for hundreds of years — 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.

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 the territory where they do not have majority support, that is, to oppress the people of another identity living there.

These accumulating political and social absurdities combined with the impossibility of military victory to change the Provisional IRA. They moved in the 1980s towards using politics to supplement small-scale war. Thus they coined the slogan, “A ballot paper in one hand, and an Armalite [rifle] in the other” to sum up a two-track approach.

Tentatively they moved away from war, declaring a unilateral ceasefire in August 1994. They resumed attacks in Britain a year later, but their war ended finally in a 1997 ceasefire. They negotiated the Good Friday Agreement, accepting the need for Protestant consent to political change, and agreeing to work a power-sharing Six Counties system with the Protestant Unionists.

At the same time a Council of Ireland was set up, giving an all-Ireland dimension. The economic boom in the South seemed likely to knit together North and South economically to an unprecedented degree. After much to-ing and fro-ing, the Provisional IRA first disarmed and then — more or less — disbanded its structures, merging in fact with Sinn Féin.

What the Provisionals did from the mid-1990s amounted to a damning condemnation of everything they had done from 1973 onwards. Everything that the Provisional IRA accepted in the Good Friday Agreement had been there, an in a more flexible system, in the Sunningdale Agreement of November 1973, under which for five months (January to May 1974) a power-sharing government existed in Belfast.

It took a two-decade war to transform the Provisional IRA into constitutional nationalist. The splinters from the Provisionals in the 80s and 90s, the “Real” and “Continuity” IRAs, stood and stand on the old Provisional IRA ground, adopting the attitude to the Adams-McGuinness organisation that the Provisionals in the late 60s and early 70s took to the populist-Stalinist “Official” IRA and Sinn Féin. They have the politics, and the contradictions, of the Provisionals in the 1970s.

The Six Counties is not a sane or legitimate arrangement of Irish affairs. From this fact the new IRAs draw their political strength. By the underlying facts also — the fact of the Protestant majority in north-east Ireland — they are forced into the position of reactionary utopian nationalists, devotees of a nation that does not exist as they define it.

They appeal to the mystical unity of Ireland, the irrational conception of the sacred unity of the island. The nation is defined as the island — not as people, but as geography and a

mystified and myth-ridden history. About this attitude Connolly long ago said all that needs to be said: “Ireland as distinct from her people is nothing to me”.

The acceptance by many on the left for many years of the activities of the Provisional IRA as a progressive, or possibly progressive, response to the oppressive conditions under which many Six Counties Catholics suffer, meant allowing myth to eclipse politics.

Not to ask what, if anything, the activities of the Provisional IRA had, and those of the dissident IRAs have now, to do with the ideals of either Wolfe Tone or with the republican socialism of Connolly; not to measure what they actually did against historic Irish republican ideals; not to ask yourself whether the shards and fragments of “Tone republicanism” or “Connolly republicanism” the Provisionals deployed and their would-be successors now deploy were or are being abused — that is to refuse to think about the issues.

In fact, many left-wingers simply bowed down before a fetish: the Provos had guns, the Provos fought, therefore they were revolutionaries against the establishment — therefore they were to be supported. Some of the most fervid of the Provophiles in Britain showed utter indifference to what happened to ordinary Irish people. They submitted themselves to massive depoliticisation on the Irish question. They 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 dispensed 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 took on a mystical significance and assumed an all-transforming quality. Many left-wingers, especially in Britain, became vicarious Carbonari republicans.

Faced with the outright bourgeois Sinn Féin/IRA of the last two decades, none of them, as far as I know, has ever drawn up a balance sheet of their time as cheerleaders for “the IRA”. They were what might be called “Fifth Comintern Congress Trotskyists”! Trotsky was not. The “Fifth Comintern Congress Trotskyists” faced 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.**

# The mind of Irish socialists

**P was a member of the Army Council of the IRA, its supreme authority, and would soon be a founder member of the breakaway “Provisional” IRA.**

He had been regaling us with an account of the ridiculous stories which the then leaders of the IRA, Republican Stalinists, had given to the Army Council as explanations for their inability to organise the defence of Northern Ireland’s Catholics during recent (August 1969) pogroms, which it had taken the deployment of British troops on the streets of Belfast and Derry to stop.

They had lent the organisation’s guns to the “Free Wales Army”! Now to show us that things were changing, that the real Republicans, the people who meant business, were getting organised, he opened the glove compartment of the car (we were in the centre of Dublin) and took out a gun. One hand on the steering wheel, without looking round, he handed it back to my companion in the back seat, Liam. “Feel the balance of that”.

Liam took the heavy revolver, and after balancing it in his hand, spinning the chamber and admiring it, handed it to me so that I too could feel its latent power. I did, and handed it back to L, who weighed it in his hand again, still admiring it. Liam and P continued to discuss it with enthusiasm for a while. With enough guns, in the right hands, everything would be all right. Solutions, security, power, political seriousness — they all, to misquote Mao Zedong, grew out of the barrel of a gun.

Liam was a veteran of the IRA “Border Campaign” un-

leashed at the end of 1956. Disabused of the then very right wing Republican movement’s oversimplifications, about Ireland and about everything else, he had come to London, joined the Communist Party, and then turned to Trotskyism. He was a knowledgeable, thoughtful man in his mid 30s, who took his Marxism seriously. Unusually among us exiles, he had had some sort of college education. He had taught himself Russian.

P, younger, had also been in the IRA, and in London he too, together with a number of other Republicans, had become a Trotskyist of sorts. Back in Ireland he had reverted to Republicanism, of his Trotskyism retaining little more than a concern with the labour movement and a loathing of Stalinism — focused now on the Stalinists who in the mid 60s had taken over the leadership of the rump IRA.

That incident stuck in my mind as a symbol of the archaic character of “revolutionary politics” in Ireland then, out of which soon would come the Provisional IRA and its military campaign.

Reading a comment by Eamonn McCann in *Socialist Worker* on a 2005 crisis around the Provisional IRA brought this incident to mind. McCann appealed for republicans who rejected Gerry Adams’s course of immersion into bourgeois politics to turn to “socialist ideas, which alone can carry the struggle forward”. The old question was re-raised of how Republican militants can be recruited to authentic Marxism — and if they can.

McCann was saying the same sort of thing in the 1960s in

the pages of the Irish Workers Group paper, *Irish Militant*. He seems to have learned nothing from the Provisional IRA’s “Long War” or from the “left” militarists, Saor Eire, INLA, IPLO., etc. But if he was capable of learning the Marxist ABCs, and remembering them beyond the next turn in the road, what would he be doing in the first years of the 21st century in the camp of the Sharia Socialists of the SWP, then bag-carriers to the clerical fascist Muslim Brotherhood in Britain?

A couple of months after the incident of the gun in the glove compartment, the IRA and Sinn Féin split into a “left” Stalinist-led majority (the “Officials”) and a right-wing traditionalist breakaway, the “Provisionals”. The Provisionals did not lack guns, or bombs, or the reckless will and ability to use them. They started to shoot soldiers and policemen, and set car-bombs off in crowded streets. They launched what was in fundamentals a Catholic-Protestant civil war, half-smothered by the British state forces, who sometimes used the Protestant paramilitary forces against their “main enemy”, the Provisional IRA.

For the first year, up to the British abolition of the old majority-rule (in practice, Protestant-sectarian-rule) Belfast parliament in March 1972, the military campaign made some — not a lot, but some — sort of Catholic-nationalist, anti-Unionist sense. It shattered the old sectarian political carapace under which, for the previous 50 years, partition had imprisoned Northern Ireland’s large, artificially-created Catholic minority.



It forced the British to rethink Northern Ireland. It won de facto partnership with Britain in Northern Ireland affairs for Catholic-nationalist Dublin. It won the “Sunningdale” agreement, under which the first power-sharing Belfast government was set up for five months in 1974 (until an Orange workers’ general strike destroyed it).

The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 offered nothing — except a more rigid and intricate form of power-sharing — that had not been available to Northern Ireland’s Catholics and the Provisionals for the previous 25 years.

In 2005 there was a crisis in which the Provisional Republican movement was forced to choose between shedding its military wing and exclusion from the lucrative (in the political and every other sense of that word) official political structures in which it has come to thrive.

And the pseudo-left, on cue, was there to tell those Republicans who will choose to reject politics in favour of militarism that they are the real revolutionaries whose politics need only a little adjusting.

The premise is that those who will not want to give up the gun are more serious, more adamantly committed to their cause. If only they can be got to understand that their goal, Irish unity, can not be achieved except as part of achieving a socialist working-class Ireland, then they can be won over to revolutionary socialist politics.

Everything about this line of argument is nonsense. The long, rich history of the interaction of Marxist socialists and Irish republicans proves it to be nonsense.

The truth is that the most adamant militarists are, in their politics, also and almost always the most recklessly chauvinistic; or the most unreconstructed devotees of the mystique of violence; or old-style Republicans who have gone along with Adams so long as politics has been twinned with militarism (“a ballot box in one hand, and an Armalite rifle in the other”), but fundamentally still believe in “armed struggle” either on principle or as the “serious”, “effective” way of doing things.

The crux of the revolutionary left’s thinking on Irish Republicanism has been the belief or implicit assumption that traditional, militarist Republicanism is intrinsically revolutionary; that their militarism bestows an identity and a status on its devotees and practitioners that is lacking in the mere political Republicans, even when the political ideas, programme, and goal of the militarist and politico are identical.

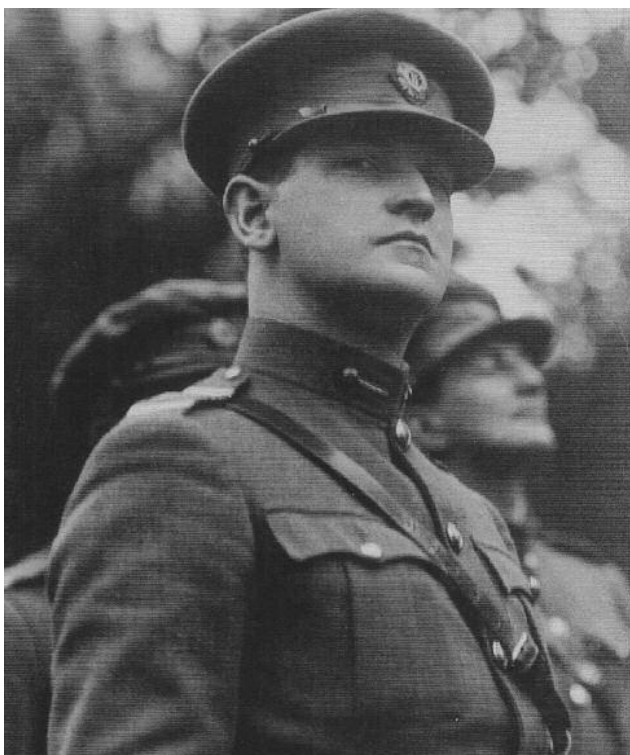
If only they would turn to the right politics! To help them do that, they are told that only socialism can win their old goals — Irish all-island unity.

It is the cuckoo’s egg approach to straightening out the relationship between Catholic nationalism and socialism in Irish politics. The socialist cuckoo’s egg is discreetly placed in the nationalist nest, to be hatched out. But the socialist eggs hatch out as nationalists! Over the years, as a result of this approach, far, far more socialists have gone over to militant republicanism than republicans to socialism.

Very, very few militarists have ever made the transition to working-class politics. In the 1920s a lot of Irish Republicans did go over to communism, ranging from Patrick Pearse’s secretary Desmond Ryan, who became the first biographer of James Connolly, to the widow of the Lord Mayor of Cork who died on hunger-strike in 1920, Terence McSwiney, and to Bill Gannon, one of the men who shot dead the much-loathed — and admired — Free State government minister Kevin O’Higgins on his way to mass one Sunday morning in 1927.

This “first draft” became real communists in the age of Lenin and Trotsky. Desmond Ryan stayed in the Communist Party until the Stalin-Hitler pact. Others became Stalinists. The later “drafts” were won over not to communism but to Stalinism. These did not cease to be Irish nationalists. The last thing the Stalinist puppet-masters wanted was that they should. The Stalinists pioneered the idea that nationalist goals could best be won as part of a “communist” revolution. Ireland was not free, they insisted, unless the island was united in one state. Only socialism could win that.

The Kremlin and its “communist” movement exploited Irish nationalism as a weapon against one of the USSR’s main enemies, Britain. To do that they concocted and maintained an ersatz ahistorical version of Irish nationalism that refused to take account either of contemporary historical development — of the 26 Counties becoming in the mid-1930s a fully independent state — or of “complications” like the fact that the block to a united Ireland was primarily the Protestant-



**Michael Collins fought the British in 1919-21, and then fought the Republicans to impose the agreement that the British had dictated to him**

unionist Irish minority in north-east Ulster which defined itself as British.

It is one of the great strange things of 20th-century Irish history that though priests and bishops railed against “communism” from pulpits and Catholic Truth Society booklets, and though a Dublin mob led by priests set fire to a Communist Party building in Dublin in 1933, and another broke up the Stalinist bookshop in Pearse Street, during the Hungarian Revolution of 1956, nonetheless Stalinist “communism” became a force in Catholic-Irish politics, in the 1930s and again in the 1960s and after — Stalinists dressed up as Republicans.

The Irish Republicans who went to the Stalinists did not have to cease to be nationalists, or even, some of them, chauvinists. If they had, they would have been no use to the USSR in using Irish nationalism against Britain.

The Stalinists’ ersatz Irish nationalism fed back into the Republican movement and made it more irrational than it need have been — for example, in the 1960s, when the Stalinists took over the leadership of the IRA.

Some Stalinists made the reverse journey — like Joe Deegan, the long-time president of the Communist Party Irish front “Connolly Association”, who went home to Belfast and ended his days as a member of Sinn Féin (though Joe was no chauvinist).

In the aftermath of the 1950s IRA campaign of attacks on customs posts and police stations along the Six/26 Counties border, some Republicans in England became communist-Trotskyists. The best of them was Liam Daltun, the man in the story above.

There is a remarkable similarity between the “story” Trotskyists tell — of the betrayal of the Russian Revolution by part of its leadership, around Stalin, and the bloody butchery they did on those who remained loyal to the revolution, Trotsky and others — and the story the die-hard Republicans told of their own movement’s history.

Their story of politics told of the betrayals of Republican leaders like Michael Collins who, in 1922, set up the Irish Free State, and then of those around De Valera who, in 1932, became the government of the 26 county state. It recounted the slaughter the Collins traitors inflicted on the Republican loyalists around De Valera in the civil war (when 77 Republican prisoners of war, most of them raw country and country town youths, were shot out of hand), and then the repression, by way of hangman, firing squad and concentration camp, inflicted by the De Valeraites on the German-allied IRA during World War Two.

The Continuity IRA, Real IRA, etc. have added the names of Adams and McGuinness (etc.) to their list of traitors.

Republicans bred on such a story could readily understand the Trotskyists’ “narrative”. It was a comparatively easy transition, but usually it was only a superficial one.

In the early 1960s the Trotskyist organisations did demand of the ex-Republicans that they turn to the working class and

abandon militarist conceptions. But in the Irish socialist exile groupings in London, to which most of them gravitated, they easily reverted to equating militarism with militancy, and life-staking commitment with effective revolutionary politics — the vaguely “Trotskyist Irish Workers Group no less, indeed, perhaps more, than others.

They rediscovered the literature of the early 1930s Irish Stalinist movement, which embodied the incoherent left populist-nationalism created then by the Stalinist-Republicans. They took their cue from that, changing it only a little, the “Trotskyists” re-branding the Stalinist and Stalinist-Republican focus on “completing the National democratic revolution” as a variant of Trotsky’s “Permanent Revolution”.

Where the Stalinists insisted that the “bourgeois stage” of revolution in Ireland — by which they meant Irish unification and British withdrawal from the North — had to be completed before the working-class socialist revolution could be advocated, the Republican-Trotskyists invoked “permanent revolution” to argue that there could be an unbroken revolutionary transformation that began with a nationalist-populist mobilisation and went on without interruption, to the working class socialist revolution. Unfortunately, though it sounded “revolutionary” and anti-Stalinist, it had no purchase on Irish reality, where the bourgeoisie ruled both sides of the border and where Irish disunity was rooted not in British “occupation” but in the existence of two peoples, of distinct identity and nationality, on the island.

In the era of the Provos, all over the world “Trotskyists” holding such ideas would make themselves into apologists for such things as the Provisional IRA’s thinly disguised sectarian slaughter of Protestant workers, in the name of “permanent revolution”.

Militarism in Ireland is not the same thing as being effectively “revolutionary”, in any socialist sense. It isn’t; it wasn’t all through the 20th century: it cannot be.

The nationalist Irish political culture is saturated with the celebration and glorification of violent revolution. In Britain, an understanding that socialism requires the violent overthrow of the state means acceptance of a large part of revolutionary socialist politics. In Ireland, it is nothing of the sort. British socialists who gauge Irish activists by this measure are simply getting in their own light.

The second is to break from the idea that working class socialism is or can be the road to achieving the goals of Irish nationalism. The goals for which progressive Irish nationalists and republicans have fought in the past — freedom of development and freedom from oppression — are not the same thing as the unification of the island, the goal of the Provisional IRA/Sinn Féin. Socialists who pander to the idea that socialism will deliver the united Ireland the Provisionals want, and argue that therefore serious Republicans, to achieve their nationalist goal, should become revolutionary socialists, are more likely to confuse themselves than to convert Irish Republican militarists into consistent revolutionary socialists.

They need not to be pandered to, but to be educated out of the Catholic chauvinist-nationalism that denies the right of the Protestant community to any degree of self-determination.

There will be a time for guns and armed action in the winning of socialism — the time at which an educated, organised and mobilised working-class movement is faced with quelling the armed resistance of the bourgeoisie and its state. We are not there yet, nor near it.

Mystifications about “the armed struggle”, and confusion of commitment to such a struggle now — or as soon as the damage done to physical force Republicanism by the defection of Adams and McGuinness can be repaired — with revolutionary politics can only in the future do what they did in the past — hold back the development of genuine revolutionary working-class politics in Ireland.

And my companions in the car at the beginning of this article — what of them? A couple of years later, Liam Daltun would kill himself. He jumped off a bridge in London on “Bloody Sunday”, the day in January 1972 the British army in Derry shot dead 14 unarmed demonstrators.

P would have a glittering career in the Irish labour movement, in and around the Provisional IRA, and later... in banking and similar money-making pursuits.

**Amongst earlier associates he retains the reputation of being a decent man, which, quite likely, he was and is...**