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psychology of Irish
Republicanism:
Three events that
made the IRA

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"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.

[1916](#)

[Victory in defeat](#)

[Civil war](#)

[Connolly's socialist republicanism](#)

[The Communist Party of Ireland](#)

[The Communist International](#)

[Stalinist Catholic nationalism](#)

[A recurrent pattern](#)

[The right wing IRA](#)

[Clann na Poblachta](#)

[The birth of the Provos](#)

[The Provos go constitutional](#)

The Real IRA and the Continuity IRA are groups of ex-Provisional-IRA Republicans who disagree with the Provisionals' turn in the mid-90s to exclusively parliamentary-political activity. They include some of the key founders of the movement, such as Ruarai O'Braidaigh, who split with the Adams-McGuinness faction in 1986 when the Provisionals decided to take any seats they might win in Dail Eireann, thus breaking with a six-decades-long tradition of boycotting the "Partitionist" parliament in Dublin.

The intention of those who shot dead two British soldiers on 7 March [2009] and one Police Service of Northern Ireland cop on 9 March is to destabilise the far from rock-solid power-sharing system in the Six Counties, which took a decade after the signing of the Good Friday Agreement (1998) to "embed" itself. They have already scored a political "hit" by forcing Adams and McGuinness (who is deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland) to declare themselves on the side of the state and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (now a strictly inter-communal, Catholic-Protestant, police force) against their former comrades.

McGuinness declared the die-hards to be "traitors to the entire island of Ireland. They have betrayed the political desires, hopes and aspirations of all of the people who live on this island. They don't deserve to be supported by anyone".

All this is an implied condemnation of everything the Provisional IRA did after 1973, when the Sunningdale Agreement was signed, giving everything to the Northern Ireland Catholics that the Good Friday Agreement gives, and in a more flexible form.

That there is widespread antipathy within the Catholic nationalist population to what the Continuity IRA and Real IRA are trying to do to Northern Ireland, and no appetite for a return to war, is widely attested. That could quickly change if the Real IRA trigger Protestant sectarian attacks on Catholics, which is one of the things they are trying to do.

The Real IRA has already been responsible for the single most bloody deed of the Republicans in the whole "Long War" — the Omagh bombs in August 1998.

In fact that bombing unintentionally rendered great service to the "peace process". The horror engendered by Omagh rallied Catholics even more behind those who wanted the war ended for good. The Real IRA engendered an environment very hostile to their attempts to resume the war.

The Real IRA and the Adams-McGuinness Sinn Fein (incorporating the Provisional IRA) are now, so to speak, dancing around each other in patterns set in modern Irish history, patterns that have been repeated over and

over again for nine decades: the former physical-force Republicans now in office confront former comrades who refuse to make peace and enter the "corridors of power" with them and who think them traitors and turncoats in a long line of traitors and turncoats.

Bloody repression of the dissenters by, or with the connivance of, those who have abandoned the armed struggle has again and again followed. That is what Adams and McGuinness seem to have committed themselves to now.

There is, however, a very great difference between this and the past confrontations between ex-physical-force former Republicans and irreconcilables. They were all conflicts within the 26 Counties. This one is in the Six Counties — where the balancing between the two communities and the interaction of the Real IRA and the Protestant para-militarists makes the situation more unstable than the South has ever been.

The "peace" which has reigned in the Six Counties since the ceasefire of August 1994 — despite a brief IRA resumption of war on Britain in 1995-7, in which a number of large bombs were exploded — has brought great benefits to the peoples of Northern Ireland. It has not changed the basic reality out of which the Real IRA and the Continuity IRA emerge.

"Peace walls" still criss-cross Belfast, a maze of small but high "Berlin walls" designed to give Protestant and Catholic areas protection from each other. There are now about sixty of them, more than during the Provisionals' war. They symbolise the political system in Belfast, which is an intricately structured edifice of entrenched and bureaucratic Catholic-Protestant sectarianism.

Partition remains what it has been for nine decades, highly artificial. That is one of the key reasons why opposition to Partition makes imperative sense to those who express that opposition in doctrinaire and intransigent traditional Republicanism.

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 and the Continuity IRA embody emerged and became a constant element in Irish politics.

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.

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

They had planned a simultaneous rising in a number of centres throughout Ireland. The rising was to have been launched under cover of "manoeuvres" by the legal nationalist militia, the Irish Volunteers, which had been established during the Home Rule crisis on the eve of World War 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 great bitterness and 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, 1300 or 1400 of them against the might of the British Empire, in the Empire's second city — most of whose people, even those who wanted Irish Home Rule, supported the Empire and its war 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 and 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 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.

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 Fein 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 Fein, offering most of Catholic Ireland Dominion status — substantial independence, the same as Canada and Australia had — within the British Empire.

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

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

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

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

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

After Sinn Fein 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 Fein, 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-farmer 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 division of the country. 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 Eireann 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 on 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 strands of it repeatedly would, it adopted a straightforward conservative bourgeois political programme, as we have seen 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 was shot out of hand in December 1922.

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 Eireann 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 Ireland’s safety valves.

With its social base among small farmers, and rural and small-town labourers, the republican movement was separated from the organised labour movement in Catholic Ireland not so much by ideals as by method. Republicanism took shape as an “outsider” revolutionary movement. It defined itself as revolutionary by its commitment to minority action, to armed struggle on principle and as soon as possible. It saw military action as something sufficient to itself, dependent for success more on military logistics than ripe 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 century, sort — for one based on the working class, using politics and trade unionism normally, treating questions of the state and armed force rationally rather than making a fetish of any particular form of action, organisation or struggle.

The 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 of Connolly's political tradition, and then the degeneration of the communist movement into Stalinism.

Connolly had followed the tactics advocated by Marx, and later to be advocated by the Communist International, 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 the working-class interest 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 struggle. He saw the national question and the social question as flowing together, and 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 Trotsky put it in his theory of "permanent revolution" and as Connolly formulated it above (and elsewhere), was ruled out by the split in the Irish working class, and by the relative weakness of the Catholic working class vis-a-vis the rest of Catholic Ireland, which was, essentially, a peasant country. The "national question", as defined in most of Ireland, cut off the majority of the working class, who saw themselves as British.

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

The second flaw 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 was 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. 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 forces of revolutionary socialism had to recompose themselves, and this was attempted as the war of independence was ending by the creation of a Communist Party, linked to the Communist International.

Tiny and led by very young people, among them James Connolly's 20 year old son Roddy, it had little weight, and politically it let itself become a satellite of the physical-force republicans in the civil war.

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

Ireland. (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” — i.e., the Stalin school — in Moscow, Betty Sinclair, Sean Murray, Brian O’Neill, Michael McInerney 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 gommeen mockery of the struggle of 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.

From 1923-4 the Communist International veered to the right. Its Fifth Congress — reflecting the interests or the perceptions of the ruling bureaucrats in the Soviet Union — began the process of substituting other politics for 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 enemies of the USSR. Catholic Ireland’s nationalist tradition fitted well with Russian needs 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 “Lenin on Ireland” in *Workers’ Liberty* nos. 22 and 23).

For the post “Fifth World Congress” Irish communists, the task was first to “complete the bourgeois revolution” before then proceeding to socialist concerns, and for the Communists as for the least enlightened Catholic nationalists that came to be identified with unifying the island. On that basis the Communists, 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: 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.

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 the development of the labour movement, not on nationalist myth.

In fact, however, from the fifth world congress of the Communist International, Irish communism was morally disarmed before Catholic nationalism. Its analysis of the situation was utterly false, marrying narrow nationalist and Catholic-nationalist concerns with mechanical Stalinist-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 “irredentist” concerns of Catholic nationalists above everything else. Irish working-class political independence was snuffed out by the development of Stalinism in the Communist International and in Ireland, and Carbonari Republicanism was 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.

In this way, the most “revolutionary” politics in Ireland came to be symbiotic with old Catholic nationalism, and even Catholic communalism. Revolutionary working-class politics under Stalinists control came to be dressed up in Catholic-nationalist costume.

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

A bourgeois Catholic Ireland developed in which — especially after the Free State Land Act of 1923; but,

essentially, long before that — working peasants and labour-exploiting bourgeois farmers owned the land. 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 Fein, 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 Fein, led by Eamonn De Valera, refused to recognise the Dublin or Belfast parliaments or to take the seats they won in Dail Eireann. 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 Fail, taking most of the old anti-Treaty forces with him. Sinn Fein 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 Fail entered the Dublin parliament. Hard-line republicanism had lost its major force. Fianna Fail formed a government in January 1932 with parliamentary backing from the small Labour Party, and won a majority of its own at the end of the year. It brought in a weak version of Roosevelt’s New Deal, and pushed the 26 Counties along the road it had travelled since 1922, towards effective independence.

Fianna Fail 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 Fail betrayed — explains nothing.

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, Cumann na nGaedheal, faction of Sinn Fein (1917-21). What the Adams faction of the Provisionals has done in the last 15 years 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 Eire (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 Paedar O’Donnell who were, however, first nationalists and then Stalinists.

If it were not for the prevailing pervasive Catholic-nationalist middle-class analysis of Ireland, which has always fed physical-force republicanism — sometimes feeding young men and women ideas and then jailing them from drawing logical physical-force conclusions from those ideas and from Irish history — the Stalinists' ideas of “completing the Irish bourgeois revolution” would never had 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 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. 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 Fail and was meant by its proponents to appeal to the Fianna Fail rank and file against De Valera. The Stalinists were the backbone of the “Republic” faction. Perhaps symbolically, James Connolly's children Rory and Nora were with the “Workers' Republic”.

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

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

An era of reaction and Catholic oppression descended on the South. The left populist republicans declined. Leaders like O'Donnell and Gilmore dropped into political inactivity by the late 1930s. Essentially they had had their thunder stolen by Fianna Fail: in so far as they had anything different to advocate, it was their Stalinist predilections and international affiliations. As war approached, those became more and more of a liability 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 Failers with guns, they lacked a role. What should they do? Various plans were mooted, including an invasion of the North. They finally decided to issue an ultimatum to Britain to vacate the Six Counties and to declare war on Britain if the ultimatum was rejected. The “war” they unleashed in 1939 consisted of a few bombs in British cities.

This group, led by Sean Russell at this stage, entered into a formal alliance with Nazi Germany.

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

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

The IRA 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 Fein.

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 Fein's goal was to build up arms and recruits until it was strong enough to relaunch a campaign against Britain. It raided police barracks occasionally for guns.

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

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 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 these 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 endemic diseases and a great killer.

The test for the government came when Browne tried to bring in a rudimentary health service, following the lead of the Labour government in Britain, and came up against the opposition of the arrogant Catholic bishops who had over 25 years of independence grown accustomed to telling governments what to do. When Browne refused to be told, he was destroyed: abandoned by his comrades, and most implacably by the recent ex-republicans, he was forced to resign.

After the 1951 election, Clann na Poblachta suffered a quick and catastrophic decline, its support flowing back to Fianna Fail. Like Fianna Fail's, its leaders, once out of "revolutionary" physical-force costume and in mainstream politics, had shown themselves to be timid bourgeois and petty-bourgeois politicians, time-serving, and subservient to the bishops and priests.

The physical force republicans of 1956-62 went through almost exactly the same evolution as MacBride and his friends. Defeated, they decided that they needed a social dimension to gain support.

Quickly, they fell under the influence of Stalinists peddling a diluted variant of the nationalist populism of the 1930s: "republicans need social policies to build a base". They turned to politics, took up social agitation, and moved towards abandoning the characteristic dogmas of physical-force republicanism which forbade entry into the Westminster, Dublin, or Belfast parliaments.

They shed the organisation that became the Provisional IRA (December 1969 and January 1970) and later (1977) what became the INLA and the IRSP, and evolved into a "left" constitutional party. They differed from their predecessors in adopting many of the trappings of a Stalinist party and in accepting subsidies from Moscow. When the USSR collapsed, they split, and their spin-off, the Democratic Left, led by Proinsias De Rossa, who was interned in the 1950s, 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 the Six Counties they agitated for civil rights among Catholics suffering job discrimination, gerrymandered local government, and unfair treatment in provision of social housing. Modelling themselves on the US civil rights movement, they were encouraged by the British Labour government's unprecedented "interference" in the internal affairs of the Six Counties, which until 1972 had its own Protestant-supremacist Belfast government. A Protestant backlash followed.

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 Fein 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 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, shooting some of the populists in transit.

They moved away from the 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 were and are 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”. 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 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 in the tradition of Wolfe Tone and James Connolly.

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 Fein 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 now less so, 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. Now the 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 British-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 (from 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 nonsensically inadequate explanation that the Protestant-Unionists were all traitors, collaborators, anti-nationalists came in time to amount to a “republican” version of the idea that there were two Irish nations, or peoples.

The Protestants were a bad, non-legitimate, Irish nation; and so the Provisionals, in effect a private army 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 Dalkey and open fire with a machine gun on the worshippers; the Provisional IRA could blow up an 11 November commemoration-day Protestant service in Enniskillen (1987).

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.

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 Fein 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.

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

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.

It took a decade to get the present Paisleyite-Sinn Fein tandem administration.

At the same time a Council of Ireland was set up, giving an all-Ireland dimension. The pre-slump 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 Fein.

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, 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 Fein. They have the politics, and the contradictions, of the Provisionals in the 1970s.

The Six Counties, where the Catholic minority is in fact the majority in not much less than half the territory, 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 Northern Ireland — they are forced into the position of reactionary utopian nationalists, devotees of a nation that does not exist as they define it.

The 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 "Real" and "Continuity" 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 Fein/IRA of the last decade, 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" face reality blindfolded by ideology. Marxist socialists and republicans

in Tone's and Connolly's tradition look reality straight in the face. That is the only way to change it for the better, not to let it dominate you and impose its own age-old patterns on you even while you struggle against it.

Table of Contents

The political psychology of Irish Republicanism: Three events that made the IRA

2