'I ran away'? The I.R.A. and 1969: the evolution of a myth

Between 13 and 15 August 1969 communal violence in Belfast saw seven people killed and over 400 treated for injuries.[1] Nearly 2,000 families were forced from their homes.[2] British troops were deployed on the streets to prevent further violence, events usually seen as the starting point of the modern Irish Troubles. In 1972 the *Sunday Times* Insight Team's *Ulster* set the tone for commentary on the role of the I.R.A. during this period. It claimed that the organisation had been 'largely an irrelevance' in Belfast during August 1969 and as a result 'I.R.A. – I Ran Away was scrawled derisively over the walls of the Catholic Ghettos'.[3] Conor Cruise O'Brien soon asserted in *States of Ireland* that when violence erupted 'the I.R.A. had very few weapons and very few people trained and ready to use them. Their prestige in the Ghettos went sharply down. People wrote on walls I.R.A. I Ran Away.'[4] Echoing these statements twenty-three years later Tim Pat Coogan in his book *The Troubles* stated that 'the I.R.A. posed very little threat to anyone during those days. So little that the disgusted inhabitants of the area, used to regarding the I.R.A. in the traditional role of "the defenders" wrote up the letters I.R.A. on gable walls as Irish Ran Away.'[5] Similar assertions are found in a wide variety of the literature, both popular and academic, dealing with the outbreak of the Troubles.[6]

There are a number of explanations given as to why the I.R.A. was found so wanting. Brendan O'Leary and John McGarry suggest that the organisation was 'practically extinct' in 1969. They claim that the I.R.A. 'had become explicitly Marxist-Leninist by the late 1960s, but had largely abandoned the goal of a national liberation war. Its leaders believed in a Stalinist three-stage theory of Revolution.'[7]

---

[1] *Irish Times*, 16 Aug. 1969.

[2] Government of Northern Ireland, *Violence and civil disturbances in Northern Ireland in 1969: report of tribunal of inquiry* [hereafter 'Scarman report'] (Belfast, 1972), part XII, 'Social cost'.

[3] *Sunday Times* Insight Team, *Ulster* (London, 1972), pp 114, 177.

[4] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *States of Ireland* (London, 1974 edn.), p. 193.

[5] Tim Pat Coogan, *The Troubles: Ireland's ordeal 1966–1995 and the search for peace* (London, 1995), p. 89.

[6] See for example Marc Mulholland, *The longest war: Northern Ireland's troubled history* (Oxford, 2002), p. 78; Brendan O'Leary, 'Mission accomplished? Looking back at the I.R.A.?' in *Field Day Review*, i (2005), pp 217–46 at p. 226; Thomas Hennessey, *A history of Northern Ireland* (London, 1997), p. 171; Kevin Kelley, *The longest war* (London, 1982), p 122; Sabine Wichert, *Northern Ireland since 1945* (London, 1999), p. 121; Jack Holland, *Too long a sacrifice* (New York, 1981), p. 43; Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: a history* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 511.

[7] John McGarry and Brendan O'Leary, *Explaining Northern Ireland: broken images* (London, 1995), p. 259 and pp 66–7.

Jonathan Bardon explains that I.R.A. chief of staff, Cathal Goulding, was engaged in 'steering his movement towards quasi-Marxist political activity and away from violence'.[8] Hence contemporary republican involvement in social agitation was part of an increasingly non-military strategy. That is a view broadly shared by commentators such as Ed Moloney in his *Secret history of the I.R.A.*[9] These assertions have contributed to the notion that those behind the left-wing shift were, in Roy Foster's words, 'woolly radicals dreaming of a national liberation front' rather than serious revolutionaries.[10] This trend continues in Matt Treacy's *The I.R.A. 1956–69: rethinking the Republic*, where the involvement of Marxists is seen as key in the I.R.A.'s lack of preparation for military action.[11]

Republican involvement in the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (N.I.C.R.A.) formed in January 1967, is seen as part of this process of demilitarisation. Henry Patterson contends that for Goulding the 'priority was the reform of the Northern Ireland state, not its abolition'.[12] This echoes the assertions of some 1960s republican veterans, especially those associated with the Official I.R.A. after the 1969 split. Eoghan Harris, a young participant in the early stages of the civil rights movement claims that 'by 1966 I had moved closer to the new Marxist thinking in Sinn Féin. Like Cathal Goulding, the leader of this pre-split Sinn Féin, I saw the Civil Rights Movement not as a step towards a United Ireland, but towards a united working class.'[13] The republican objective then 'was to democratize, not destroy the Northern State' and Harris claims that it was stressed that the civil right movement would fall apart at the 'first sound of a bomb'.[14] There are similar arguments from significant figures such as Roy Johnston, then I.R.A. director of education, and Anthony Coughlan, a close collaborator with the movement.[15]

Yet the I.R.A.'s contemporary journal *An t-Óglach* carried quite a different message. In December 1967 it reiterated that the I.R.A. needed 'men that are capable of leading the people in an armed struggle. For of this last let there be no doubt, there will be an armed struggle against the forces who are at present in control of this country.'[16] So in May 1967 and January 1968, *after* N.I.C.R.A.'s formation, the I.R.A. bombed British Army recruiting offices in Belfast and Lisburn.[17] The attacks were part of what the I.R.A.'s Belfast commander Liam (Billy) McMillen called a 'happy blend of political agitation and military activity'.[18] McMillen had been a

[8] Jonathan Bardon, *A history of Ulster* (Belfast, 1992), p. 675.

[9] Ed Moloney, *The secret history of the I.R.A.* (London, 2002), pp 52–73.

[10] Roy Foster, *Modern Ireland, 1600–1972* (London, 1988), p. 589.

[11] Matt Treacy, *The I.R.A. 1956–69: rethinking the Republic* (Manchester, 2011), pp 63–87.

[12] Henry Patterson, *Ireland since 1939: the persistence of conflict* (Oxford, 2006), p. 199.

[13] Eoghan Harris, 'My secret life' in *Britain and Ireland: lives entwined* (Dublin, 2005), pp 66–81.

[14] Eoghan Harris, 'Portrait of a party hack' in *In Dublin*, 7 Jan.1988.

[15] Roy Johnston, *Century of endeavour: a biographical and autobiographical view of the 20th century in Ireland* (Dublin, 2006); *Saoirse-Irish Freedom*, May 2006.

[16] *An tÓglach*, Dec. 1967, quoted in Brian Hanley, '"Agitate, educate, organise": the I.R.A.'s An tÓglach, 1965–68' in *Saothar*, xxxii (2007), pp 51–62.

[17] *United Irishman*, June 1967; *Irish News*, 15 Jan. 1968.

[18] Liam McMillen, 'The role of the I.R.A., 1962–1967', lecture, June 1972, in Deasún Ó hAgáin, *Liam McMillen, separatist, socialist, republican* (Dublin, 1975), p. 8.

member of the first N.I.C.R.A. executive. In response to arrests of republican activists during July 1968 the I.R.A. lured police to Cyprus Street off the Falls Road with a false '999' call and then attacked them with a hand grenade. The R.U.C. thereafter referred to that area as 'Nogoland' and patrolled it in force after dark.[19] So military activity had continued in the North, *after* the beginning of the civil rights campaign and *before* the outbreak of inter-communal violence in 1969. Indeed at an I.R.A. officers meeting during August 1967, several months after the establishment of N.I.C.R.A., McMillen had emphasised 'the need for the army to hit the British'. Clearly for him, and others, support for civil rights and armed action were not mutually exclusive.[20] There was no doubt however that militarily the movement was in a poor state. According to a report given to the meeting the I.R.A. had just 614 volunteers and 'enough ammo. for one good job, [and] a very limited amount of arms and explosives'.[21] How to rectify that situation remained a problem for the I.R.A. over the next two years. Nevertheless they moved to ensure greater involvement by their volunteers in political activity.

Within N.I.C.R.A. republicans had pushed for a strategy of protest marches though McMillen recalled that 'the younger members of the Belfast Republican movement were deeply committed and took part in all of the subsequent Civil Rights marches, as much for the excitement and action these occasions afforded as for any other reason'.[22] The existence of the republican movement across the North gave it a presence lacking in the smaller protest groups. As People's Democracy (P.D.) leader Michael Farrell explained in 1969, 'republicans have also been of very great organisational assistance, both to P.D. marches [and] to the Civil Rights and P.D. meetings in towns, where they have often provided the stewards'.[23] Indeed by July 1969 the R.U.C. had access to intelligence suggesting that two-thirds of the executives of local civil rights associations were controlled by republicans.[24]

But was reform really the key element in the I.R.A.'s strategy within the civil rights movement? Appealing for support for the first Dungannon march, republican and N.I.C.R.A. executive member Kevin Agnew had also predicted the 'end of British rule in the not too distant future'. Agnew stated that if the Unionist leaders Terence O'Neill and James Craig and 'others of their kind wanted to go with them [the British], good luck to them. We can do without them here in this part of Ireland. Captain O'Neill is mistaken if he thinks any man or woman who loves Ireland is going to give loyalty to a British Queen in return for a wee job.'[25] At the Dungannon march itself 'Orange bigots' were roundly condemned from the platform, the police described as 'black bastards' (by Gerry Fitt M.P.) and marchers sang 'A nation once again'.[26] Prior to the next march, on

[19] Scarman report, 'West Belfast', 18.6; interview, Seán Curry, Belfast, 9 Sept. 2004.

[20] Minutes of national I.R.A. officers meeting, 29 and 30 Aug. 1967 (private source, copy deposited in U. C. D. archives).

[21] Brian Hanley, *The I.R.A.: a documentary history 1916–2005* (Dublin, 2010), pp 150–1.

[22] *United Irishman*, Dec. 1970.

[23] 'Discussion on the strategy of Peoples Democracy' in *New Left Review*, i, 55, May–June 1969.

[24] Royal Ulster Constabulary (R.U.C.) report, 7 July 1969, (P.R.O.N.I., HA/32/2/28).

[25] *Irish News*, 5 Aug. 1968.

[26] R.U.C. report, 29 Aug. 1968, (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/9B/1205/7).

5 October in Derry, McMillen later explained how 'Belfast Republicans had been instructed, in the event of the parade being halted by police cordons, to push leading Nationalist politicians or other dignitaries … into the police ranks'.[27] One of the first people arrested on the day was Martin Meehan, an I.R.A. man from Ardoyne.[28] During the People's Democracy march from Belfast to Derry in January 1969 armed I.R.A. members guarded the marchers while they stayed overnight in south Derry.[29] I.R.A. members were prominent in vigilante committees set up in Derry city in the rioting that followed the attack on the marchers at Burntollet.[30] Goulding himself stated publicly in February 1969 that 'if the civil rights movement fails there will be no answer other than the answer we have always preached. Everyone will realize it and all constitutional methods will go overboard.'[31] He would later reflect: 'I was one of the formulators of the ideas and it was never visualised that democracy would be achieved in the North. That it would be demanded, yes, that it would organise people around these demands and split the Unionist party, which it did, and eventually caused the collapse of the Six-County government, [that] was the main objective.'[32]

Contrary to assertions that it barely existed in 1969, official reports put I.R.A. strength in the Republic of Ireland at between 1,100 and 1,200. In reports presented to ministers, veteran civil servant Peter Berry explained the evolution of the I.R.A. over the previous seven years.[33] After the end of its 'border campaign' in 1962 the I.R.A. leadership was said to be 'dispirited' with 'little funds' and 'no public support worth talking of'. In these circumstances they had become 'very receptive' to suggestions 'from left-wing sources' for a change in policy. During 1965 'intellectuals with marked communist histories' had become attached to the movement. The I.R.A. had decided that 'social unrest would be exploited' to make themselves a 'dynamic political force on whom workers and small farmers could alone depend for improved social conditions'. The leadership still understood however that in order to 'establish and stimulate the interest of young or new members' it was necessary to 'hold meetings and parades of a military character and instruction classes in the use of arms'. By 1967 the leadership were 'openly advocating the establishment of a "Workers Republic" and the eventual resort to arms for that purpose'.

Since May 1968 the I.R.A. had carried out a number of 'serious crimes' including bomb and arson attacks during housing and land disputes.[34] There was also the 'commando style' raid on a cash-transit van at Dublin airport, the first such robbery by the organisation since the 1940s. Also of concern was that I.R.A. statements were carried without comment in the press. Most newspapers no

---

[27] McMillen, 'The role of the I.R.A.', p. 9; Gerry Adams, 'A republican in the civil rights campaign' in Michael Farrell (ed.), *Twenty years on* (Dingle, 1988), pp 39–53; interview, Bobby McKnight, Belfast, 1 Sept. 2004.

[28] Fred Heatley, 'The early marches' in *Fortnight*, 5 Apr. 1974.

[29] *United Irishman*, Feb. 1969.

[30] Government of Northern Ireland, *Disturbances in Northern Ireland: report of the commission appointed by the governor of Northern Ireland* (Cameron report) (Belfast, 1969) p. 86.

[31] *Irish Times*, 7 Feb. 1969.

[32] *Sunday Tribune*, 2 Sept. 1984.

[33] *Magill*, June 1980.

[34] *Irish Times*, 30 May, 2 Aug., 8 Oct., 9 Oct. 1968; *Irish Press*, 17 Mar., 12 June 1969.

longer used the official designation 'illegal organisation' to describe the I.R.A., but accepted its self-styled title. The department of justice recommended that a government campaign aimed at exposing the I.R.A.'s links to communism might have a beneficial effect as 'in different parts of the country units of the I.R.A. (and Sinn Féin) are uneasy about the new left-wing policy of their leadership and about the violent methods that are being adopted in the destruction of private property. Their uneasiness needs to be brought to the surface in some way with a consequent fragmentation of the organisation' or 'a split … and the communist element would become discredited.'[35]

I.R.A. activity had also drawn commentary from the media. The *Irish Press* noted how the I.R.A.'s tactics were not only 'new … untypical [and] not traditional' but a 'Warsaw Pact minded onslaught on the E.E.C., NATO and the issue of foreign investment generally'. The paper's editorial asked if this was the result of communist influence and concluded that what it called 'Johnston's motor car'[36] would 'not deposit us at a viable future, but will literally land us in the red, both politically and in terms of the shedding of Irish blood and reputations'.[37] In early August the *Irish Press* again suggested that 'the burning of buses … [and] other sinister incidents … indicate a growing sense of lawlessness … the kind of behaviour that one associates with the last days of the Weimar Republic.' The paper warned that this could lead to the reintroduction of internment.[38] On 6 August taoiseach Jack Lynch met the R.T.É. Authority and informed them that his government intended new security measures in response to I.R.A. activity in the south. He also asked that R.T.É. desist from reporting I.R.A. actions in ways that served to glamorise the organisation.[39] Far from being 'extinct' the Irish government and media were well aware of, and somewhat worried by, increasing I.R.A. activity in 1969.

For their part British Intelligence estimated that the I.R.A. had 500 members in Northern Ireland in the spring of 1969. They considered that while the morale of the republican movement was 'good', arms and ammunition were 'in short supply' and money was scarce. The British believed I.R.A. strategy was that involvement in 'semi-constitutional activity' would help 'create a political situation favourable to a military takeover'.[40] Publicly at least there seemed to be increasing confidence among northern republicans, with the numbers attending Easter commemorations the biggest in several years: 5,000 in Belfast alone.[41] McMillen later claimed that there were just 120 I.R.A. volunteers in the city. This figure does not include the young teenagers, male and female, who were active in the Fianna, the junior I.R.A., perhaps numbering another hundred. I.R.A. strength was concentrated in the Lower Falls, the traditional centre of Belfast republicanism.[42] There were much

---

[35] Memorandums for government in relation to I.R.A., 18 Mar., 14 July, 1969 (N.A.I., DJ 2000/36/3).

[36] A play on the title of a republican song and the name of the supposed Marxist theorist within the I.R.A., Roy Johnston.

[37] *Irish Press*, 12 June 1969.

[38] *Irish Press*, 4 Aug, 6 Aug. 1969.

[39] Robert J. Savage, *A loss of innocence: television and Irish society, 1960–72* (Manchester, 2010) pp 367–8.

[40] Joint Intelligence Committee memorandum, 16 June 1969, (T.N.A., CAB, 186/3).

[41] *Irish News*, 7 Apr. 1969; *Derry Journal*, 8 Apr. 1969; *United Irishman*, May 1969.

[42] Interview Seán O'Hare, Belfast 30 Aug. 2004; Curry interview.

smaller I.R.A. units in north and south Belfast and in the newer housing estates like Ballymurphy. The dominance of the Falls was somewhat resented by republicans elsewhere in Belfast. But it was clear that the I.R.A. not only existed in the city but that there was also a broader milieu within the nationalist community that would attend commemorations and other public republican events.

Late April 1969 saw what the *Irish News* called the 'most devastating wave of violence and civil strife since the 1930s'.[43] There was intense rioting in Derry on 20 April during which over 200 people were hurt. Police badly beat a number of local people, one of whom, Samuel Devanney, was critically injured. In response N.I.C.R.A. called for solidarity demonstrations across Northern Ireland.[44] In what he called 'an effort to draw off the large force of police who were laying siege to the Bogside' McMillen authorized I.R.A. units to firebomb ten post offices and a bus station across Belfast. The attacks were carried out over a two-hour period and caused considerable chaos.[45] (Ironically the I.R.A.'s actions coincided with loyalist bombs on the same night which many also, wrongly, attributed to republicans.[46]) On 21 April, 2,000 people took part in a protest march on the Falls called by the republican-led Belfast Housing Action Committee. Hastings Street R.U.C. station was stoned and clashes with riot police took place.[47] On B.B.C. radio Cathal Goulding warned that 'if our people in the six counties are oppressed and beaten up … then the I.R.A. will have no alternative but to take military action against the police force … [we] have no alternative but to protect our people or allow them to be slaughtered and we are not going to allow them to be slaughtered.'[48]

Goulding's rhetoric implied that the I.R.A. were ready to intervene militarily. But as British Intelligence had noted, arms were in short supply. McMillen claimed the I.R.A. in Belfast had just twenty-four weapons, most of which were pistols.[49] Senior I.R.A. figures attest that there were few modern weapons available.[50] Much of the I.R.A.'s training took place with ageing weaponry. Nevertheless all recruits were still undergoing weapons classes. The 1968 I.R.A. Convention had pledged to make a 'maximum effort' to acquire modern equipment and to seek contact 'with international Socialist underground revolutionary groups and Socialist Governments anywhere, to investigate the possibility of obtaining arms and finance unconditionally'.[51] Money was a major problem. Hence the raid at Dublin airport in May, planned by Goulding and his allies to fund both arms purchases and political agitation. The I.R.A. netted almost £25,000 but within a few weeks this money was recovered and two men jailed.[52] The department of justice claimed that Gardaí had managed to prevent a

---

[43] *Irish News*, 21 Apr. 1969.

[44] R.U.C., report, 10 Aug. 1969 (P.R.O.N.I, HA/32/2/28).

[45] McMillen, 'The role of the I.R.A.', p.10; *Irish News*, 22, 23 Apr. 1969.

[46] Thomas Hennessey, *Northern Ireland: the origins of the troubles* (Dublin, 2005), p. 209; *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 Apr. 1969.

[47] *Belfast Newsletter*, 21, 22 Apr. 1969.

[48] *Irish Times*, 22 Apr.1969.

[49] McMillen, 'The role of the I.R.A.', p. 10.

[50] Interview, Mick Ryan, Dundalk, 2 Apr. 2005.

[51] Resolutions of 1968 General Army Convention (private source, copy deposited in U.C.D. archives).

[52] *Irish Times*, 15–16 May and 22–24 May 1969.

number of further raids but that the I.R.A. was 'very short of money and it is likely they will try again'.[53]

Despite these setbacks in July the republican movement mounted a major public show of strength when the bodies of Peter Barnes and James McCormack, executed in Birmingham during 1940, were returned to Ireland. Uniformed I.R.A. volunteers paraded in Dublin, escorting the cortege from the city. Volleys were fired by unmasked men at the graveside in Offaly. The department of justice was angry that this 'parade in commando-style uniforms and the firing of shots' were allowed go ahead and described by the press as 'I.R.A. operations'.[54] Because of a speech by Belfast republican Jimmy Steele, the funeral is usually seen as evidence of the growing divide within the I.R.A. Steele, who had been active in the republican movement since the 1930s, told the 10,000-strong crowd that Barnes and McCormack's methods had not been those of 'politicians' and derided the fact that 'one is now expected to be more conversant with the thoughts of Chairman Mao than those of our dead Patriots'. But Steele does not seem to have referred to the situation in the North itself. Fellow Belfast republican Billy McKee, commander of the I.R.A. in the city until his replacement by McMillen in 1963, allowed Peter Taylor to listen to a tape of the address during the research for Taylor's book, *Provos*. Taylor wrote 'surprisingly, there was no reference to the growing crisis in the North and the increasing threat to the nationalist communities in Belfast and Derry. Nor was there mention of the I.R.A.'s traditional duty to protect those areas from loyalist attacks'.[55] The speech caused leadership consternation but was seen as a 'vicious' attack on the Left by traditionalists, not as a warning of trouble in the North.[56]

Steele's lack of stress on defence contrasts with later assertions by Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, then a member of the army council, that he and Seán MacStiofáin, the I.R.A.'s director of intelligence, had raised the issue at a meeting in May that year. Ó Brádaigh claims that Goulding answered that 'it is not our job to be Catholic defenders' and that the I.R.A. would 'put it up to the official forces, the British Army and the R.U.C., to defend the people'.[57] Anthony Coughlan also claims that it was republican policy to force the British state to intervene in the North; 'Goulding saw the attacks as an opportunity for bringing about a confrontation between the British authorities and ultra-Unionism'.[58] If Goulding was intending to 'put it up' to the state to defend nationalists then this was not stated I.R.A. policy, nor does it seem to have been transmitted to his officers in Belfast who certainly did not wait for the state forces to 'defend' them in August. Goulding's later explanation for not sending 'extra' weapons to Belfast was that the I.R.A. leadership were unsure whether violence was going to break out and if it did, whether their weapons might have been in the wrong place; 'we felt that if we previous to the Twelfth [of July] had sent them into Belfast, into Derry, into

---

[53] Memorandum for government in relation to I.R.A., 14 July 1969 (N.A.I., DJ 2000/36/3).

[54] Ibid.

[55] Peter Taylor, *Provos* (London, 1997), pp 45–6.

[56] Sinn Féin coiste seasta minutes, July 1969, Dublin (courtesy of Workers Party of Ireland).

[57] Robert White, *Ruairí Ó Brádaigh: portrait of an Irish revolutionary* (Bloomington, IN, 2006) pp 143–4.

[58] *Saoirse-Irish Freedom*, May 2006.

Newry … there might not be any real fighting' and the weapons might be lost to the police or unavailable if trouble broke out elsewhere. The leadership believed that the 'best way for people to engage the police and B-Specials was the way that things developed in the Bogside', in other words through mass protests, barricades and street fighting. But Goulding admitted that as it transpired 'the only defence was armed defence'.[59]

Whatever the truth, sectarian tension was rising during July, especially in Belfast where both Catholic and Protestant families left their homes claiming intimidation. A particular flashpoint was in Ardoyne, a local priest Fr Marcellus Gillespie attesting that during July 'Catholics were as much to blame as Protestants' for the clashes.[60] There are sharply divergent claims as to the I.R.A. leadership's response to events. I.R.A. members were placed on defensive duty in Ardoyne and at Unity Flats during July.[61] The R.U.C. noted the presence of I.R.A. officers Frank McGlade and Jim Sullivan in these areas.[62] One account suggests youths at Unity Flats were disappointed when Sullivan arrived with a van containing pickaxe handles rather than guns.[63] McMillen later claimed that he resisted pressure to release weapons because 'we realised that the meagre armaments at our disposal were hopelessly inadequate to meet the requirements of the situation and that the use of firearms by us would only serve to justify the use of greater force against the people by the forces of the Establishment and increase the danger of sectarian pogroms'.[64] He would also assert that 'despite the growing signs that some sort of a Unionist backlash was imminent the sheer savagery and ruthlessness of the attacks on Catholic areas which took place on August 14 and 15 took everyone by surprise'.[65] Nevertheless he was to order attacks on 13 August, again influenced by events in Derry.

In Derry during July a Citizens Defence Committee had been set up by republicans (I.R.A. officer Johnnie White was secretary) to prepare for the Apprentice Boys parade on 12 August.[66] Rioting began during the parade and the fighting swiftly developed into the 'Battle of the Bogside'. Former Derry I.R.A. officer Finbar O'Doherty claimed in 2009 that republicans had planned such a development; 'the I.R.A. made a decision to attack the Apprentice Boys march to provoke the R.U.C.'.[67] Again N.I.C.R.A. called for solidarity demonstrations. On 13 August McMillen ordered republicans to organise demonstrations to 'get people on the streets' and take the 'pressure off Derry'.[68] I.R.A. members (usually identified as Anthony Dornan and Joe McCann) led a march of 1,000 people to Hastings Street R.U.C. station. Republicans believed that police were due to

---

[59] *This Week*, 7 Aug. 1970.

[60] *Sunday Press*, 24 Aug. 1969.

[61] Henry Patterson, *The politics of illusion: a political history of the I.R.A.* (London, 1997), p. 124.

[62] *Irish News*, 15 Apr. 1970; Scarman report, 9.21.

[63] Gerry Bradley with Brian Feeney, *Insider: Gerry Bradley's life in the I.R.A.* (Dublin, 2009), p. 37.

[64] McMillen, 'The role of the I.R.A.', p. 11.

[65] *United Irishman*, Dec. 1970.

[66] Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *From civil rights to armalites: Derry and the birth of the Northern Ireland Troubles* (London, 2005), pp 99–104.

[67] *Derry Journal*, 14 Aug. 2009.

[68] Curry interview; O'Hare interview.

leave there to go to Derry and 'the idea was to keep them occupied for as long as possible'.[69] It was hoped to draw the R.U.C. into clashes and preparations had been made for street fighting. When the R.U.C. attempted to disperse the crowds by driving armoured cars into Leeson Street, McMillen described how 'a group of marauding policemen were dispersed by a volley of revolver shots and a hand grenade'.[70] Rioting intensified and McMillen authorised members of the Fianna to attack Springfield Road R.U.C. station with petrol bombs. The R.U.C. opened fire on the republicans, wounding two. There was another attempt to firebomb the station later.[71] Large crowds from the loyalist Shankill looked on but did not join the rioting, which on 13 August, in west Belfast, was between nationalists and the R.U.C., not nationalists and loyalists. However in Ardoyne, where again nationalists had attacked police to divert resources from Derry, the combustible sectarian atmosphere had seen Protestant crowds burn down a Catholic-owned pub and betting shop.[72]

On 14 August McMillen and his adjutant Jim Sullivan ordered all I.R.A. members onto defensive duties, sending small groups to various areas.[73] Clashes developed along the streets that led to the Shankill and by evening serious rioting was taking place. As loyalist mobs encroached into Catholic areas, the I.R.A. exchanged fire with the police in Conway and Divis Streets.[74] The R.U.C. forced Catholics back towards Divis Street and mobs of Protestants followed, setting fire to houses as they progressed.[75] As the loyalists approached from Dover Street, four young I.R.A. men in the grounds of St Comgall's school opened fire, killing Herbert Roy, a 26-year-old from the Shankill and wounding several R.U.C. men. The R.U.C. then sent Shorland armoured cars, equipped with Browning heavy machine guns, into Divis Street. They were pelted with petrol bombs and opened fire, killing nine-year-old Patrick Rooney in his home in Divis Flats. B-Specials were deployed and four more civilians would die from police gunfire over the course of the night.[76]

Amid the confusion the R.U.C. seem to have believed that the I.R.A. were heavily armed and proceeded very slowly. A contemporary republican account claimed that 'skillful use of the revolver' saw I.R.A. members 'hidden in doorways and around street corners' fire their weapons into R.U.C. armoured cars at close range.[77] At least three I.R.A. members were wounded, one taking the 'full blast of a machine gun'.[78] In the chaos and confusion there were rumours that the Irish Army had crossed the border and taken Newry. Early on the morning of Friday 15 August I.R.A. weapons were dumped in a house in Slate Street.[79]

[69] Curry interview.
[70] McMillen, 'The role of the I.R.A.' p.11; *Irish News*, 30 May 1970; Scarman report, 18. 25–6.
[71] Interviews Belfast I.R.A. 16 Mar. 2006; Rogelio Alonso, *The I.R.A. and armed struggle* (London, 2006), pp 46–7.
[72] *Sunday Press*, 24 Aug. 1969; Scarman report, 17.8–10.
[73] Gerry Adams, *Before the dawn* (London, 1996), p. 104.
[74] Scarman report, 21.30–4; Curry interview; O'Hare interview.
[75] *Irish News*, 3 Nov. 1970.
[76] *Irish News*, 14–16 Aug. 1969; *Belfast Telegraph*, 14–16 Aug. 1969.
[77] *Republican News* (Cork) Sept. 1969.
[78] Ibid; Curry interview; O'Hare interview.
[79] O'Hare interview.

McMillen and Malachy McGurran (a member of the I.R.A. leadership) were
arrested and charged with possession of handguns and illegal documents.[80]
Nineteen other republicans across the North were also held under the Special
Powers Act. British troops were now on the streets but had been unable to react
to the clashes around Clonard on the afternoon of Friday. Protestants moved onto
Bombay Street in large numbers and drove Catholics back, burning houses. A
number of I.R.A. men were present but unable to drive back the attackers.
Fifteen-year-old Fianna member Gerald McAuley was fatally wounded by
gunfire. Despite this Gerry Adams later wrote that the I.R.A.'s actions had been
'crucially important' in halting the loyalists at 'decisive times' over the previous
two days.[81] With McMillen in jail, Jim Sullivan, who had played a 'notable part'
in the fighting, winning 'open praise' from local priests as a result, took over as
commander while other officers were sent south to obtain more weapons.[82]

Elsewhere in Northern Ireland there had been fighting after civil rights rallies
in Coalisland, Newry and Dungannon. In Armagh B-Specials killed a local man.
In Newry republicans used stolen lorries to close off the town's main streets,
while crowds had battled police. When B-Special reinforcements arrived the
local I.R.A. withdrew across the border, burning down a customs post as they
fled. (Local I.R.A. man Colman Rowntree was badly injured in this incident.[83])
In Dungannon armed I.R.A. members had been on the streets following shooting
by the B-Specials but locals convinced them that their returning fire would make
the situation worse.[84]

Among the I.R.A. leadership in Dublin there was genuine confusion.[85]
Goulding had been taking part in a documentary about the I.R.A. being filmed in
the Dublin mountains when news of the events in Belfast began to come in.[86]
Nevertheless republicans organised several protest rallies. Four thousand
marched on the British embassy on 13 August and over following days there were
several thousand people protesting each evening in Dublin's O'Connell Street.
On 14 August Sinn Féin president (and army council member) Tomás Mac Giolla
told protesters that 'when the guns came out and people were being shot the only
ones who could protect [them] were the I.R.A.' He challenged the 'Free State
Army' to use their weapons to defend the people in the North and that if they
would not, then they should 'give them to us'.[87]

The I.R.A. leadership had also met on 14 August and ordered 'all available men
and arms' to the border. Small groups of I.R.A. men, with varying amounts of
weapons were sent to Donegal, Leitrim and Monaghan. The presence of Dublin
I.R.A. members in these areas was widely known and even remarked on in the
Tyrone Democrat.[88] Their orders were to prepare to attack police stations and

[80] *Irish News*, 5 Sept. 1969.
[81] Adams, *Before the dawn*, p. 105.
[82] *Magill*, May 1980; McKnight interview.
[83] *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Aug. 1969; *Newry Reporter,* 21 Aug. 1969; *The Plough*, June 1974.
[84] *Irish Times*, 23 Aug. 1969.
[85] Ryan interview.
[86] Sean Swan, *Official Irish Republicanism, 1962–1972* (Lulu, 2007) pp 296–7.
[87] *Irish Times*, 16 Aug. 1969.
[88] *Tyrone Democrat*, 21 Aug. 1969; *Irish Times*, 23 Aug. 1969; interview, Jer O'Leary, Dublin, 29 Aug. 2004.

border posts to 'take the heat' off Belfast. On Sunday 17 August an I.R.A. unit opened fire on Crossmaglen R.U.C. station, though a van containing explosives they left at the station failed to ignite.[89] As the situation in Belfast calmed, orders came to refrain from offensive action. On 18 August Goulding issued a statement on behalf of the I.R.A. He claimed that his organisation had 'been in action' in Derry and Belfast and had now sent 'fully equipped units' to the North. He also warned British troops that if they allowed themselves 'to be used to suppress the legitimate demands of the people' then they would 'have to take the consequences'. The I.R.A. leader urged the 'Dublin government' to 'immediately use the Irish Army to defend the persecuted people of the six counties'.[90] Reaction to Goulding's statement ranged from unionist delight that republicans had accepted the blame for the violence to frantic nationalist denials of any such influence.[91] The *Irish Press* condemned what it called a 'clumsy attempt' by the 'illegal organisation' to claim credit for the actions of the 'heroic defenders' of the Falls.[92] But on R.T.É.'s *Seven Days* programme a few days later Goulding reiterated that his organisation had the 'right to kill' B-Specials and 'Paisleyites' if they attacked nationalist areas.[93]

Security forces on both sides of the border were also weighing up I.R.A. involvement. Irish military intelligence believed that 'some element of [the] I.R.A. was certainly in action in Belfast during [the] night of 14th August, including some men from Dublin'. Now 'as in [the] Bogside, [the] I.R.A. now seem to be in control of barricade defence in Belfast'.[94] An R.U.C. report dated 18 August noted that the wave of violence had 'caught the I.R.A. largely unprepared in the military sense'. Nevertheless 'their Units are on "active service"' and had been 'responsible for numerous recent "actions"'. The R.U.C. felt that the arrest of twenty-one republicans had affected the I.R.A.'s capacity though 'in Belfast and Derry those we failed to collect for internment are inaccessible but armed behind the barricades or otherwise "on the run"'.[95] By early September the British Army were aware of renewed I.R.A. activity, with the stockpiling of weapons behind the barricades, and suggested that the release of detainees would further bolster the organisation.[96] Most of the weapons that the I.R.A. had were sent to Belfast, as were donations from other sources, a process facilitated, according to both Peter Berry and I.R.A. members themselves, by government ministers in the South.[97]

Both the press and the state were aware that the I.R.A. was active in August. Several newspapers reported that Jack Lynch had met editors and asked them to downplay the I.R.A.'s activities. Interestingly, given the department of justice memorandum in July, newspapers gave 1,200 as the figure for I.R.A.

[89] *Irish Times*, 18 Aug. 1969.

[90] *Irish Times*, 19 Aug. 1969; *United Irishman*, Sept. 1969.

[91] *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 Aug. 1969; *Irish Times*, 19 Aug. 1969.

[92] *Irish Press*, 19 Aug. 1969.

[93] *Irish Press*, 23 Aug. 1969.

[94] English, *Armed struggle*, p. 104.

[95] R.U.C. report, 18 Aug. 1969 in Scarman report, Appendix, pp 53–4.

[96] War Office and Ministry of Defence: Army Unit Historical Records and Reports, Headquarters, Northern Ireland Command, 1 Sept. 1969 (T.N.A., WO 305/3758).

[97] Peter Berry to Jack Lynch, 8 June 1970, (N.A.I., DJ 2001/6/10); John Kelly, 'How urgent the need?', *The Blanket*, 17 Aug. 2005; Hennessey, *Northern Ireland*, pp 337–55.

membership, and claimed that Lynch had stressed the need to use the term 'illegal organisation' when reporting on the I.R.A.[98] The fact that weapons were being transported to the North was also public knowledge. By late August *Hibernia* magazine considered it 'unlikely that any policing force could now forcibly penetrate Bogside, Ardoyne or the Falls without first meeting the opposition of automatic weapons'. Indeed the magazine speculated that a planned government clampdown on the I.R.A. in the South had been prevented by the violence in the North.[99] On B.B.C. television in late August an I.R.A. spokesman insisted that if it had not been for them 'the people in the Divis St area would have been massacred'. He estimated that the I.R.A. in the Falls area had possessed two machine guns, four rifles and fifteen short arms on 14 August.[100] Cork's *Republican News* put the figures at 'less than a dozen short arms, two Thompson guns and a few rifles'.[101] The September *United Irishman*[102] described events in detail from the I.R.A.'s point of view. It claimed that 'the pogrom in Belfast started about 10.30 pm on the night of Thursday August 14' when 'the R.U.C. and Specials launched attacks on the barricades guarding the Falls area'. It was then that 'gunfire was returned for the first time from within the Catholic area'. The I.R.A. continued firing 'until all ammunition was spent' and though 'weak … in comparison to that of the combined U.V.F., R.U.C. and B-Special forces … I.R.A. firepower slowed up the advance of the rampaging mobs'. (The report also claimed that Herbert Roy was 'a prominent member of the U.V.F.'.) All the republican accounts ignored the fact that rioting had taken place on Wednesday 13 August as well and that the I.R.A. had fired on police then.[103]

Following the violence, barricades remained in many areas for over a month. Defence committees were set up, involving a cross section of nationalist opinion, including clergy, labour and business figures. These committees organised vigilante patrols and maintenance of essential supplies, a pirate station (Radio Free Belfast) and an open-air festival behind the barricades. Jim Sullivan became chairman of the Central Citizens Defence Committee. In that capacity he met the British Army G.O.C. General Freeland on a number of occasions and travelled to Westminster as part of a C.D.C. delegation, along with M.P.s Paddy Devlin and Gerry Fitt.[104] The British Army knew Sullivan not just as 'head of NOGOLAND committee' but also as a 'known I.R.A. leader'.[105] Indeed Sullivan told the *Belfast Telegraph* that 'automatic weapons, revolvers and rifles' were being held behind the barricades and he warned that British troops should not be used to repress the people or they would face resistance.[106] In August and September 1969 the I.R.A.'s media profile was extremely high and discussion of its role very open.

---

[98] *Belfast Newsletter*, 25 Aug. 1969.

[99] *Hibernia*, 29 Aug. 1969.

[100] *Belfast Telegraph*, 26 Aug. 1969.

[101] *Republican News*, Cork, 1969.

[102] The monthly republican newspaper, published in Dublin.

[103] *United Irishman*, Sept. 1969.

[104] James Callaghan, *A house divided: the dilemma of Northern Ireland* (London, 1973), pp 102–03; *The Times*, 8 Sept. 1969; *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 Sept. 1969.

[105] War Office and Ministry of Defence: Army Unit Historical Records and Reports, Headquarters, Northern Ireland Command, 2 and 12 Sept. 1969, (T.N.A., WO 305/3758).

[106] *Belfast Telegraph*, 8 Sept. 1969.

How does the imagery of 'I Ran Away' fit in here? If the I.R.A. had been humiliated by the events of August how could one of its best known officers have attained such a prominent position on Belfast's main defence committee? Most of the Dublin and Belfast daily newspapers ran extensive features on the so-called 'city of barricades' in late August and early September.[107] There were numerous photographs of walls in Belfast bearing slogans such as 'The Falls will never fall' 'R.U.C.– S.S.', 'B-Men keep out', 'This is Free Belfast' and 'Join the I.R.A.'.[108] But one slogan, surely irresistible to any news photographer, was conspicuous by its absence: 'I ran away'. According to the *Irish Independent* there were 200 newsmen from three continents in Belfast in August 1969.[109] One contemporary I.R.A. member, wounded during the fighting in August, asserts that 'I never saw it written on a wall. That wasn't the attitude. People fell in behind the I.R.A. [That] was not painted on a wall in West Belfast, [if it had been it] would have been the talk of the place.'[110] Others believe that the slogan originates from a taunt used by B-Specials during the border Campaign; 'if anyone wrote it, it was Protestants …'.[111] In fact the slogan 'I.R.A. – Irish Ran Away' was painted by British soldiers on walls in Kenmare, County Kerry during 1920 – perhaps where a variant of it may have originated.[112]

As debate over the role of the I.R.A. went on during the winter of 1969 evidence of 'considerable resentment' of the I.R.A. did emerge.[113] The current affairs magazine *Nusight* described Goulding's August statement as 'incredibly pompous' and claimed the I.R.A.'s performance was 'amateur and uncertain'.[114] The *United Irishman* reacted angrily and claimed that a more sympathetic piece had been rewritten by *Nusight* editors Vincent Browne and John Feeney.[115] In contrast Goulding's position was defended by Pádraig Ó Snodaigh in the Irish-language monthly *Comhar*.[116] By December there were reports of growing schisms in the Belfast I.R.A. and *Hibernia* claimed that 'many residents blamed the republicans for failing to defend the Falls and Ardoyne'.[117] But none of these articles, whatever their opinion, report the use of the phrase 'I ran away'. Journalist Max Hastings's account of the violence, *Ulster 1969*, appeared during 1970, the first such account in book form. He noted graffiti such as 'No R.U.C. Here' and 'Long Live Free Belfast' but there was no mention of 'I ran away'.[118]

It was not until 29 April 1970, when Fr Gillespie from Ardoyne gave evidence to the Scarman tribunal, that the phrase appeared in print. Gillespie claimed that after the events of August a number of men went looking for guns in the homes

[107] *Belfast Newsletter*, 8 Sept. 1969.
[108] *Belfast Telegraph*, 21, 23 Aug. 1969; *Irish News*, 11 Sept. 1969; *Irish Independent*, 10 Sept. 1969; *Belfast Newsletter*, 17 Sept. 1969.
[109] *Irish Independent*, 26 Aug. 1969.
[110] O'Hare interview.
[111] Curry interview.
[112] Letter from Tim Horgan in *History Ireland*, xviii, no.2, (Mar./Apr. 2010), p. 13.
[113] *Hibernia*, 29 Aug. 1969.
[114] *Nusight*, Sept. 1969.
[115] *United Irishman*, Oct. and Nov.1969.
[116] *Comhar*, Meán Fómhair/Sept. 1969.
[117] *Hibernia*, 5–15 Dec. 1969.
[118] Max Hastings, *Ulster 1969: the fight for civil rights in Northern Ireland* (London, 1970) pp 141, 167.

of local republicans but were unsuccessful and that 'after this in the Ardoyne area the I.R.A. were called "I Ran Away"'.[119] In the aftermath of the fighting in August the priest had given an interview to the *Sunday Press* but had not made this claim then.[120] Nevertheless his evidence points towards considerable anger in Ardoyne. But there is no contemporary reference to walls in the area bearing the slogan. Local I.R.A. man Martin Meehan would later claim that 'in early August, the then I.R.A. leadership decided to move any weaponry held in North Belfast into a central pool in the west of the city … It was to cause a lot of resentment later.' Meehan claimed there was just one rifle available locally on 14 August.[121] The I.R.A. on the Falls seem to have had access to what arms there were from 15 August and a long-running division between north and west Belfast was given a sharper focus. Meehan became an early member of the Provisional I.R.A. But neither of the Provisional publications *An Phoblacht* (published in Dublin) or the Belfast *Republican News* mentioned 'I ran away' during 1970, instead blaming a 'Marxist-dominated leadership' for being 'more concerned about Vietnam' than Belfast nationalists.[122]

By the 1990s however 'I ran away' had become a standard motif of Provisional memoirs. Brendan Hughes joined the I.R.A. after August 1969 and later became commander of the Provisionals in Belfast. He would claim that in 1969 the Official I.R.A.[123] 'had deserted the people and left them at the mercy of Orange mobs' and that angry nationalists 'took to painting "I ran away"' in response. But in the same article he stated that in his native Lower Falls during 1971 the Officials 'had the bulk of the weaponry and in the area the majority of the support'.[124] Given that Lower Falls saw some of the heaviest fighting in August 1969 how could that have remained the case?

An 1984 Provisional internal education document *The Split* offered a more nuanced account of what had occurred, arguing that 'capable of supplying only a limited defence' in 1969 the I.R.A. 'came in for concerted criticism, some of it unjustified, from many Belfast republicans who flocked back to the Movement after, in some cases, a lengthy absence'. Indeed the document admitted that 'there was justifiable resentment that some of the most strident criticism came from those who had left the movement'. As a result of the violence large numbers of new recruits joined the I.R.A. which meant there was now an 'added element – Volunteers who were out of step (and in some cases out of sympathy) with the politicisation that had taken place in their absence'.[125] Ironically this new recruitment helped facilitate the split as many of these volunteers had little loyalty to the traditional Belfast I.R.A. structure, the majority of which remained supportive of the Dublin leadership. In his own memoir of those years Gerry Adams makes similar observations stating that he was 'perturbed and perplexed

---

[119] *Irish Times*, 29 Apr. 1970.

[120] *Sunday Press*, 24 Aug. 1969.

[121] *An Phoblacht/Republican News*, 19 Aug. 1999.

[122] *An Phoblacht*, May 1970; *Republican News*, Oct. 1970.

[123] Meaning the pre-split I.R.A. The term 'Official' did not come into use until after January 1970.

[124] Brendan Hughes, 'I.R.A. volunteer Charlie Hughes and the courage of the brave'in *The Blanket*, 10 Sept. 2002.

[125] Sinn Féin education department, republican lecture no.1, *The Split* (Dublin, 1984).

to find that extreme criticism of the Belfast leadership was being expressed most of all by republicans whom I didn't know or had only recently met'.[126] Neither Adams's account nor the Sinn Féin document mention the term 'I ran away'.

So when did the slogan enter popular discourse? In April 1971, a year after Fr Gillespie's testimony to Scarman, *Time* magazine referred to a claim that some people in 1969 sneered that 'the initials I.R.A. really stood for "I Ran Away"'.[127] By 1972 the slogan appeared in the *Sunday Times*'s *Ulster* and O'Brien's *States of Ireland* and from then on became a regular feature of writing on the origins of the Troubles.[128] Its popularity has been aided by how neatly it fits into several narratives. Northern Irish nationalists see the events of August 1969 as an unprovoked pogrom. As journalist Robin Livingstone argues 'loyalist mobs poured down the streets that connected the Shankill and the Falls and systematically began burning Catholic families from their homes in the largest displacement of civilians seen in Europe since the end of the Second World War. They were enthusiastically assisted in their endeavours by the R.U.C. firing Browning machine guns from revolving turrets atop armoured cars.'[129] The role of the I.R.A. in attacking police prior to these attacks on the Falls is ignored, largely for fear of giving credence to unionist claims that republicans caused the violence. Most accounts do not mention that sectarian clashes had been occurring since April, and Catholics and Protestants had already been leaving their homes prior to August. Nor do they note the extent of organisation behind the mobilisations in support of the Bogside.

But in 1969 these facts were openly discussed. The *Irish Press* noted the 'ease [with] which petrol bombs became available in Bogside, [and Strabane and Coalisland]' lent 'weight to the theory of some degree of pre-planning' behind the disturbances. Indeed the paper soon reported that civil rights leaders 'admitted that there had been a pre-arranged plan' to 'relieve the pressure on the people fighting in Derry'.[130] The *Irish Times* also described how on 13 August the Lower Falls area had been 'under the control' of youths and men who led marches to Hastings Street R.U.C. barracks and constructed barricades.[131]

The idea of widespread Catholic anger at an I.R.A. that had failed to defend the community inevitably became tied up in the politics of the republican split. The Provisional I.R.A. traced their roots to the lack of defence offered in 1969 and had a stake in arguing that the 'Official' I.R.A. was uninterested in defence. Critics of the Goulding leadership contended that it was 'silly, eyes elsewhere socialist policies' that had left the I.R.A. 'unable to defend the Catholics of Belfast when the Orange mobs struck'.[132] But the assertion that Belfast Catholics expected the I.R.A. to be able to defend them, and that the I.R.A. in Belfast had always seen this as part of its role, while taken for granted in most accounts, is untested in terms of evidence. It should be asked just when the Belfast I.R.A. had

[126] Adams, *Before the dawn*, p. 126

[127] *Time*, 5 Apr. 1971. However eight years later the magazine would claim it was British soldiers who first used the slogan in 1969: *Time*, 19 Nov. 1979.

[128] *Sunday Times* Insight Team, *Ulster*; O'Brien, *States of Ireland*.

[129] *The Guardian*, 24 Oct. 2001. A more nuanced recent account is Simon Prince and Geoffrey Warner, *Belfast and Derry in revolt* (Dublin, 2012).

[130] *Irish Press*, 13–15 Aug. 1969.

[131] *Irish Times*, 14 Aug. 1969.

[132] *Irish Press*, 10 Aug. 1971.

performed this role in the past, as its record on occasions of sectarian strife between 1920 and 1922 and in 1935 was very mixed.[133]

The widespread acceptance of these ideas was aided by the lack of contrary testimony from those involved in the I.R.A. at the time.[134] Most of the leadership of the Belfast I.R.A. prior to August 1969 supported the Official I.R.A. after the split in December that year. Initially the Officials contested the claim that Belfast's nationalists had been let down. At Easter 1970, noting that they had 'been much criticised' for their 'alleged failure to defend the people of Belfast' they argued that during the 1960s 'our efforts to re-equip ourselves … did not always get the co-operation even of self-styled Republicans, many of whom are now free with their criticism'. But the Official I.R.A. praised the 'heroic manner in which the Belfast volunteers fought in the peoples defence with what weapons were available … but for the fight put up by these men against enormous odds there would have been many repetitions of Bombay Street'. It appealed for financial support so that it could 'equip itself with modern weapons, to ensure that it will never again ask men to face armoured cars with short arms'.[135] Later that year McMillen re-stated that in 1969 'the meagre armaments in the hands of the Belfast units were put to their most effective use and, it can be safely said, prevented even more widespread death and destruction'.[136] So in 1970 the Officials were eager to claim credit for defending nationalists. But that was to change.

In May 1972 the Official I.R.A. declared a conditional ceasefire and by 1976 ceased issuing statements and maintaining a public existence. The political party associated with the Official I.R.A., Official Sinn Féin, went through a series of name changes before eventually becoming the Workers Party (W.P.) in 1982.[137] By the 1980s the W.P. took 'a more sceptical line about irredentist nationalism in general and verbal anti-partitionism in particular, than any other party in the Dail'.[138] The party staunchly opposed the Provisional I.R.A.'s campaign and by 1991 its party president (and former I.R.A. internee) could state that 'we support the security forces in Northern Ireland'.[139] The Workers Party argued for a greater understanding of Ulster unionism, earning praise from unionist politicians as a result.[140] This meant however that the party was eager to play down the role of the Goulding-led I.R.A. in 1969, preferring to remember a 'peaceful' civil rights campaign. What had once been a Provisional taunt, that Goulding's supporters had no interest in defending Catholics, was now tacitly accepted by the Workers Party, who denied ever having any interest in communal politics.

---

[133] Robert Lynch, 'The people's protectors? The Irish Republican Army and the "Belfast pogrom," 1920–1922' in *Journal of British Studies*, xlvii, no. 2 (Apr. 2008), pp 375–91; Brian Hanley, *The I.R.A., 1926–1936* (Dublin, 2002), pp 145–60; Kieran Glennon, *From pogrom to civil war: Tom Glennon and the Belfast I.R.A.* (Cork, 2013).

[134] There is little evidence of any effort to interview veterans of the pre-1969 Belfast I.R.A.

[135] *Irish News*, 30 Mar. 1970.

[136] *United Irishman*, Dec. 1970.

[137] Brian Hanley and Scott Millar, *The lost revolution: the story of the Official I.R.A. and the Workers Party* (Dublin, 2009), pp 336–587.

[138] Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 584.

[139] Proinsias de Rossa, *Irish Times*, 4 May 1991.

[140] *Irish Times*, 18 Apr. 1988.

The presumption that the politics of the 1980s' Workers Party guided I.R.A. thinking during the late 1960s has strongly influenced historical writing.[141] To some the Workers Party's hostility to the Provisionals suggested a similar opposition to political violence in the 1960s. But this ignored the Officials' own rewriting of the history of their movement.[142] Cathal Goulding provides some outstanding examples of this. In 1969 he had publicly threatened aggressive action against Northern security forces and the British Army. In 1970 he was eager to claim that during the previous August 'arms were used, and used to very good effect, by members of the I.R.A.'.[143] By 1984 however he was blaming nationalists for having stirred up the initial trouble, even claiming that they burned down a Catholic school in Derry in order to create tension.[144] (There is no record of such an event in Derry during August 1969.) In 1992 Goulding denied that the I.R.A. had ever had any interest in defending Catholics from Protestant aggression, as this would have been implicitly sectarian.[145] But these assertions had more to do with the development of the Workers Party than the actions of his organisation in 1969.

There is no doubt that the I.R.A. was badly equipped in 1969 and seems to have been genuinely surprised by the ferocity of the violence in Belfast. This contributed to an internal crisis that helped split the organisation. But the I.R.A. was not 'extinct' or 'irrelevant'. It was active in political agitation, north and south, and was increasing its armed activities during 1969, something noted by the department of justice in Dublin. The crisis in the north accelerated rearmament but did not begin it. In Belfast itself the I.R.A.'s actions on 13 August played a role in the intensification of violence. There is no contemporary evidence to support the contention that angry nationalists painted 'I Ran Away' on walls in August 1969. Instead this idea has been used to avoid dealing with uncomfortable realities about the events and been too readily accepted by historians and writers.

BRIAN HANLEY

---

[141] See Paul Bew, *Ireland: the politics of enmity 1789–2006* (Oxford, 2007), p. 503.

[142] During 2010 the Workers Party published a pamphlet commemorating the role of the Official I.R.A. during the 1970 Falls curfew. This was the party's first public acknowledgement of the Offical I.R.A.'s military actions since the mid-1970s: Workers Party, *The story of the Falls curfew* (Dublin, 2010).

[143] *This Week*, 7 Aug. 1970.

[144] *Sunday Tribune*, 2 Sept. 1984.

[145] Goulding in 'The sparks that lit the bonfire', *Timewatch*, B.B.C.2, 27 Jan. 1992.