

Reading B

Children and the Northern Ireland conflict

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Bombs kill children too

Mention the impact of violence upon children in Northern Ireland and what immediately springs to mind is the psychological impact of violence on children. However, before going on to examine this popular and relatively well researched topic it is necessary to remember what people appear to have forgotten, that the violence in Northern Ireland kills children too. Perhaps this is something that people want to forget. It has been said that the greatest taboo subject of our modern technological age is death, particularly the death of a child. Maybe this accounts for the apparent lack of interest in the physical impact violence has had on children in Northern Ireland.

Another possible explanation for the lack of interest in this topic is the difficulty in obtaining information about the child victims of violence. Indeed, despite the fact that the Northern Irish conflict is perhaps one of the most intensely reported, most closely studied conflicts ever, no one knows exactly how many children have died, how many have been maimed, and how many injured. Murray (1982) has estimated that between 1969 and 1977 some 103 people under the age of seventeen years have been killed (or 8 per cent of the total) while the present author estimates that between 1969 and 1983 some 150 children under fourteen years have been killed or injured. These latter figures are at best however 'guesstimates'. The reason for this lack of hard data is, first, that official statistics do not give a breakdown of victims in terms of age (or indeed in terms of sex or religion). The only other possible source is press reports. But here, as indeed with official statistics, there are particular problems. Often, for example, a victim may be identified as a schoolboy or a schoolgirl without an exact age being given. A headline therefore that states 'Schoolboy shot in murder bid' could mean that a five-year-old has been shot or an eighteen-year-old. Yet another difficulty in compiling statistics in this area is deciding whether a child has really been a victim of the troubles or not. And finally there is perhaps the most sensitive issue of all, at least as far as local reporting is concerned, that is the question of attributing blame.

All these problems are well illustrated when one attempts to examine what information is available on children who have been killed and injured over the course of the last fifteen years. For example, even deciding who exactly the first child victim was is not a simple task. Was it, as some would claim, the five-year-old girl killed in February 1971 when she was knocked down by an army vehicle? Or was she simply the victim of a simple everyday traffic accident? Such accidents were of course by no means rare, particularly when at one time thousands of British troops, plus their vehicles (many of them gigantic armoured personnel carriers with restricted vision for the driver) were crowded into the narrow streets of Belfast and Derry. If this child was not the first victim then that dubious honour must fall to the seventeenth-month-old girl who, in that phrase which so well describes the position of children in Northern Ireland was, in September 1971, 'caught in crossfire' during an attack on an army patrol in Belfast. This incident illustrates the problem involved in deciding who to blame for such deaths.

Was this the fault of the army for opening fire when children were nearby, or was it the fault of the IRA for attacking the army in the first place? A sterile argument it

could be suggested, yet one which on many occasions has generated much heat in Northern Ireland, particularly where the deaths of children have been concerned.

Typical of this search for blame perhaps is the case of Brian Stewart. Brian was thirteen years old when he was shot in the head by a rubber bullet. He died six days later. At the time the army claimed he was part of a rioting mob which attacked a foot patrol of soldiers. Local residents however claim that when Brian was shot no rioting was going on. Since then his mother, aided by the National Council for Civil Liberties, has been urging the European Human Rights Commission to find that the British Government was in breach of the human rights convention by using rubber bullets (now replaced by plastic bullets) as riot control weapons. Once again this is not an isolated incident, several children have been killed or injured by rubber or plastic bullets often in contentious circumstances. Sadly, this case also illustrates another fact of life in Northern Ireland. And that is that in most cases, victims of the violence, be they adults or children, are soon forgotten by all except their immediate family. Only those children whose deaths in some way became a *cause célèbre*, such as Brian Stewart, are still remembered today ...

Sources of stress

For every child who has been killed or injured in the troubles there have been many more who at some time must have felt their life was threatened and more still who have had to witness the horror of death or injury inflicted upon others. Often the other has been a close friend or relative. This is because, as the pattern of violence has changed slowly but surely over the years, deaths and injuries have resulted less from street rioting or even bomb explosions and more from single acts of assassination. Many of these assassinations have taken place at the victim's place of work or, more often, in his (most victims have been men) own home. As a result hundreds of children in Northern Ireland have had to witness their father's murder. For example, according to press reports, the most recent assassination victim at the time of writing [mid-1980s] had just seconds before his death been holding his three-year-old daughter in his arms. On another occasion a whole classroom of elementary school children watched as their school teacher was gunned down and on more than one occasion school bus drivers – easy targets in the rural areas where they are employed – have been similarly dealt with in front of their young charges.

Not a lot of information is available about children who have been indirectly victimised in this way either by being forced to witness terror at first hand or by themselves being terrorised. Researchers are obviously sensitive to the fact that such children may, for some time, be in a delicate psychological state which probing or questioning could easily exacerbate. However, some information is available though often obtained by indirect means. For example, McKeown (1973) in the course of a survey of all post-primary schools in Northern Ireland asked the question, 'Has there been any harassment of pupils on their way to and from school?' Over 70 per cent of the 255 schools polled responded and of these 51 per cent reported that indeed such harassment had occurred. In fact forty-eight schools reported assaults on pupils including fifty seriously injured and one child killed.

Nor has harassment simply been confined to children coming and going to school. The most serious form of harassment during the early 1970s was centered around the place where children have the most right to feel safe – their home. With the outbreak of street violence at the beginning of the troubles many families found themselves living in the 'wrong' area – that is in an area where, in religious terms, they were in a minority. In this situation these families often became scapegoats for the intensely felt anger of the time. Thus 'intimidation' as it became known was for a time one of Belfast's most serious problems. This phenomenon has been graphically described by Darby and Morris (1973), who explain that in many cases intimidation took the form

of actual physical violence. Children or sometimes pets might be attacked, mothers or fathers beaten or jostled, eggs, stones, petrol bombs or bullets directed through windows or doors, homes ransacked, furniture piled up in the streets and burned and in some cases the actual houses themselves were burnt down. In other cases threats were simply used, perhaps in the form of anonymous letters or phone calls or slogans were painted on walls. More subtle intimidation might take the form of neighbours becoming less friendly, for example refusing to talk to housewives at the shops, not allowing children to play with their friends and so on.

The result of all of this was what Darby and Morris (1973) have described as 'the largest enforced population movement in Europe since the Second World War.' During the period August 1969 to February 1973 they estimate that somewhere between 8,000 and 15,000 families moved home as the result of intimidation. In other words, somewhere between 30,000 to 60,000 people were forced to leave their homes in the Greater Belfast area alone. Many of these refugees were children and Murray and Boal (1980) in their research attempted to focus specifically on families with children who moved home because of intimidation. To do this, they compared those households with children who moved home between 1969 and 1972 either because of intimidation, or for other more normal reasons. Of the 353 households in their study, about one third had moved because of intimidation, broadly defined. Of these intimidated families the majority (66 per cent) had moved because of direct attack or threat either to their home or members of their family. The remaining households in the group indicated that they had moved simply because of the general level of violence in their area. And if the results of this survey are representative then they suggest that children may have accounted for well over half of those forced to flee their homes at this time. This is because, while only 10 per cent of the 'ordinary' households had four or more children, 35 per cent of the intimidated families fell into this category. Further, the intimidated households, particularly those directly threatened, were more likely to be single-parent families and also more likely to be working-class families with younger children. Additionally while 'ordinary' movers tended to remain within the same local area within Greater Belfast, and therefore presumably closer to schools, family and friends, the intimidated more often than not were forced to move to another district often Murray and Boal (1980) noted, not even adjacent to their original district. Thus for the intimidated, due to a combination of having younger children and the great distance moved, a change of school was more often involved. Finally, and perhaps not surprisingly, the mothers of the families that were forced to move were more likely to express dissatisfaction with their new environment than did the mothers from other families.

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