

INTRODUCTION

MOVING ON AND LOSING OUT



Between 1969 and 1998 in Northern Ireland there were some 35,669 shooting incidents and 10,412 explosions; 11,483 firearms and 115,427 kilos of explosives were seized during 359,699 searches; from 1972, 18,258 people were charged with scheduled offences. Over three and a half thousand people were killed and over forty thousand people were injured as a result of the conflict.¹ The peace agreement (the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (B/GFA)) of 1998 brought much of this violence to an end – though some groupings of republican and loyalist terrorists (who were responsible for around 60 per cent and 30 per cent of the killings respectively) continue to target the police and members of their own organisations.

This book focuses upon one aspect of that violence – the experience of border Protestants. It has been written across the quarter-century anniversary of the B/GFA. As the acclaimed Spanish novelist Javier Cercas has pointed out, both Spain and Germany experienced significant reappraisals of the transition and the Nazi period around twenty-five years afterwards. Younger generations asking different questions than those their parents or grandparents asked, court cases or new historical evidence, and often, films such as *Holocaust* (which was broadcast in West Germany in 1979) led to new perspectives and a deepened awareness of the suffering endured during the dark periods of history – in those cases, of Fascist rule. For Cercas, that process of working through the past (what in Germany is termed *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*) was only belatedly initiated in both countries, and he complains that in Spain, it resulted in no more than a tokenistic endeavour:

victims will not be fully compensated and this country will never break with its past without making any effort to face it ... Or at least not until the past

comes round again. Except that when it comes back, it will already be too late, at least for the victims.²

As another celebrated novelist, George Orwell, (in)famously pointed out, calibrating what counts as history is crucial for political entrepreneurs attempting ‘reality control’: ‘Who controls the past ... controls the future, who controls the present controls the past.’³ This has been borne out by the memory wars fought between the left and the right in the US and the UK with increased vehemence since 2020. In fact, these battles are rarely really about the past ‘as it actually happened’ (the Rankean *wie es eigentlich gewesen*). Instead, they are essentially about the future and about trying to capture the liberal democracies in each country.⁴ It does not have to be a sinister or anti-democratic tactic; in Hobsbawm and Ranger’s coinage, it can involve ‘inventing traditions’ – nationalism, national identities, ways of belonging and the rituals and commemorations that give meaning to people’s everyday lives and foster community and solidarity across classes and through time.

But, as Hobsbawm was acutely aware – having fled from the Nazis (although Jewish, he was a British citizen and thus not technically a refugee) and having been a sapper trying to defend against a Nazi invasion, a committed Communist and, infamously, something of an apologist for Stalin as well as a first-rank historian – the shape of the past can change across time: ‘*even the recorded past* changes in the light of subsequent history’.⁵ Manipulation of the past is possible only if there is also neglect, and for a rewriting of history to be successful a key ingredient is disregard. As Tony Judt argues, neglect has often facilitated diversionary tactics including scapegoating – illustrated in the self-exculpatory narratives developed after the Second World War by a host of societies (Austria, France, Poland, Ukraine, the Netherlands) whereby they did not really collaborate with the Nazis and were, in fact, also victims.⁶ Appropriating the courageous stories of those who did resist, of course, helped to obscure the compromises that were made – symptoms of what the historian Henry Rousso diagnosed as the Vichy syndrome (see Conclusion). The self-exculpation of neglect and scapegoating are aimed at avoiding responsibility for either direct involvement or the many ways that terror and violence are enabled through common ideological beliefs. This avoidance of the links between ideas and murder becomes self-reproducing; as the historian John Dower points out, the political imperative to move on and to ignore and cover up the crimes of the past meant that many Japanese people took the lesson that if the Emperor

was deemed to have no responsibility whatsoever for the horrors and disasters that took place between his ascension to the throne in 1926 and the end of

the war in 1945, why should ordinary Japanese even think of taking responsibility on themselves? Emperor Hirohito became postwar Japan's preeminent symbol, and facilitator, of non-responsibility and non-accountability.⁷

Frequently, the politics of cover-up work to cultivate the situation similarly criticised by Judt – namely, calibrating the suffering of victims according to the ‘goals of the perpetrators’.⁸ That (moral) hierarchy, while at times politically unavoidable, works to facilitate perpetrators moving on while victims are left behind.

The normalisation of republican violence has been one of the principal themes of the post-1998 period (though as we point out, the groundwork was prepared well in advance). Republicans recalibrated the suffering they inflicted by suggesting that they did not really start the Troubles, they were instead responding to violence – the ‘war came to them’, in the words of Sinn Féin leader Michelle O’Neill. The ‘Brits’, against whom their campaign was nominally directed, perpetuated that violence through collusion and a refusal to negotiate – despite the many opportunities for political dialogue and progress and despite the fact that, again, as we emphasise, republican killings were sectarian and aimed at spreading terror among border Protestants and the entire Protestant tradition in the North of Ireland. Neglect of that actual historical record did not correspond directly to indifference, because the irredentist impulse of Irish nationalism meant that the coercing of that Protestant tradition into a united Ireland would continue – not through violence, but by a constant hollowing-out of the collective memory of the suffering caused by and the culture of resistance to republican terror.

Most nationalists claimed that the collaboration of voters with republican politics post-1998 was peace-oriented – a way of rewarding and recognising the decision to give up the armed campaign. A minority, however, were distinctly uneasy at the republican surge. As the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) MP Eddie McGrady told the journalist Malachi O’Doherty in March 2005:

I know in my heart of hearts from talking to people who voted for Sinn Féin that their mandate was not given for the purpose of enabling Sinn Féin and the IRA to continue with their criminality and all the other things they are doing on our society from day to day, the small stuff that is [m]ore insidious than the big stuff. I hope now they have come to realize that the vote they gave is now being interpreted not as a vote to cement the peace process but as a vote to justify the continued criminality.⁹

Naturally, Sinn Féin did not see things this way and has never disavowed the actions of the IRA. When McGrady retired at the 2010 general election, Sinn Féin was polling 25 per cent of the votes compared to the SDLP’s 16

per cent. The SDLP held McGrady's South Down seat (won by McGrady from Enoch Powell in 1987) until 2017, when it returned zero Westminster seats. The republicanisation of areas such as that constituency depended upon the types of avoidance mechanisms found in other contexts and the quotidian violence that people like McGrady lived through became time out of mind, just another episode in the story of unionism versus nationalism. McGrady died in 2013.

This book explores some of the experiences of the victims of that wave of violence who have been forced to deal with the exigent morality of moving on. Although Canute has been infamously misrepresented – trying not to stop the tide, but to illustrate to his courtiers that sovereignty and power have their limits – the book is a history and not predictive. It draws upon primary documentary sources and interview material that we see as being in danger of being swamped by the recalibration of nationalist collective memory. That material suggests that the everyday experience of Protestants on the border during the conflict was one of continued threat, suppression, a coercive impetus to 'keep your head down' and an awareness of a campaign of the eradication and cleansing of a tradition that went back generations. Attempted murders and atrocities punctuated that everyday tension with terrible regularity.

The book draws on forty-one loosely structured interviews, completed with a variety of interviewees: thirteen men, eleven women, thirteen retired members of the security forces (RUC and UDR) and four politicians. All were directly affected by terrorism in some way, having either been bereaved, injured, attacked, intimidated or forced out of their properties and businesses, or having simply lived in the midst of terrorism for many years. Each interviewee has been given a cypher to protect their anonymity as far as possible; hence the identity markers KF1 to KF41. Conducting this type of qualitative research makes anonymising the identity of the interviewee challenging, especially in highly sensitive contexts. Van den Hoonaard suggests that guaranteeing complete anonymity to participants can be an 'unachievable goal in ethnographic and qualitative research'.¹⁰ Nespor proposes that anyone in some way connected to a particular research setting will possibly be able to recognise the participants and the places to which they refer.¹¹ Many of the incidents discussed by the interviewees are accessible in open-access documents and other literature. Access was also given to interviews conducted by the victims' and survivors' organisation, the South East Fermanagh Foundation (SEFF), and where fragments of those interviews have been used, they are referred to as SEFF followed by the interviewee's initials. These interviews are contained within SEFF merchandise, and copies have previously been distributed among the community. They are also available from the SEFF website.

The book is structured around three main parts – Part A establishes the basic themes: collective memory, violence, ethno-religious boundaries and terror; Part B surveys the day-to-day litany of terror and trauma that characterised border Protestant experience; and Part C draws out some of the themes from that history and explores the legacies of displacement, trauma, neglect and irredentist rewriting of history and the republicanisation of the memory of those decades.

Notes

1. Sydney Elliott and W.D. Flackes, *Northern Ireland: A Political Directory 1968–1999* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1999).
2. Javier Cercas, *The Imposter*, trans. F. Wynne. (London: MacLehose, 2017 [2014]), 303.
3. George Orwell, *1984* (London: Penguin, 2008 [1949]), 37.
4. John Gray, *The New Leviathans: Thoughts after Liberalism* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).
5. Eric Hobsbawm, 'The Present as History', in *On History* (London: Abacus, 1997), 235, original emphasis.
6. Tony Judt, *Postwar: A History of Europe since 1945* (London: Vintage, 2010 [2005]).
7. John W. Dower, '“An Aptitude for Being Unloved”: War and Memory in Japan', in *Ways of Forgetting, Ways of Remembering: Japan in the Modern World* (New York: New Press, 2012), 125.
8. Judt, *Postwar*, 828.
9. Malachi O'Doherty, 'Last Stoop Standing?', *Fortnight*, March 2005, 11.
10. Will C. Van Den Hoonaard, 'Is Anonymity an Artifact in Ethnographic Research?', *Journal of Academic Ethics* 1(2) (2003), 141.
11. Jan Nespør, 'Anonymity and Place in Qualitative Inquiry', *Qualitative Inquiry* 6(4) (2000), 546–69.