

The Troubles 1968-1972

Tensions began to rise in Northern Ireland as people started to demand changes to the way in which Northern Ireland was run. Poor housing, high unemployment and institutionalised discrimination led to protests beginning. Perhaps inspired by the Civil Rights campaigners in America, the protest took the form of marches. The marches, whilst initially peaceful protests, triggered a series of violent clashes that brought about a rapid rise in the number of sectarian attacks within the province.

Timeline of the Troubles

October '68

Civil Rights march in Derry ends violently.

October '68

People's Democracy and The Derry Citizens' Action Committee established.

January '69

Peoples Democracy organise a march from Belfast to Derry. Riots start in Derry before the marchers arrive. The marchers are attacked by protestant extremists.

January-February '69

Catholics in Bogside barricade themselves in.

April '69

O'Neill resigns as Prime Minister.

April '69

Bernadette Devlin elected to Westminster, she warns of the consequences of sending the army to the province in her maiden speech.

July '69

Apprentice Boys march past Bogside in Derry, causing riots that the police become involved in.

July-August '69 'The Battle of the Bogside' Prolonged violence in the Bogside region.

August '69

Downing Street Declaration. Troops sent to Northern Ireland.

October '69

Hunt Report states that the B-Specials should be disbanded: Protestants furious at this prospect.

February '71

First British soldier killed by IRA in Northern Ireland.

August '71

Government introduces Internment to crush Terrorists: instead it leads to renewed IRA and UVF action.

December '71

UDA formed.

Source Material

Source A

"We refused to accept the politicians logic that the problems could be seen in terms of Catholic versus Protestant... the crowd at that... Civil Rights march was interested in people's needs." Bernadette Devlin, 1969

Source B

"Our investigations have led us to the unhesitating conclusion that on the night of 4-5 January, a number of policemen were guilty of misconduct which involved assault and battery, malicious damage to property in the streets in the mainly Catholic Bogside area." Cameron Report, 1969

Source C

"The decision was taken to search Catholic areas for arms. The arms searches were an attempt to crush the IRA before they became a serious threat, but they served only to increase IRA recruitment. In 1970 a 34 hour curfew was imposed on the Catholic Falls Road to allow arms searches to take place."
From 'Northern Ireland and its neighbours'.

Source D

"The army moved in and battered its way up the Shankill Road with a bloodthirsty enthusiasm. In the shooting two Protestants were killed and a dozen wounded. Many others were beaten or kicked unconscious. Who in the Bogside can doubt that at last law and order were being administered impartially?"
Eamonn McCann, writing about Riots in the Protestant Shankill Road in 1969.

Further background information

People from both the Catholic and Protestant communities initially supported the Civil Rights movement. Some Protestants however saw the Civil Rights movement as a catholic protest, with aims other than those being publicly stated. Protestant leaders such as Ian Paisley were quick to express their concerns, which led to some elements of the protestant population becoming extremist in their response to the marches. Such distrust led to violence on the streets and an increase in hatreds. Protestant violence, and the ineffectiveness (some say collaboration of) the police, led to the IRA being able to claim it was the only force capable of protecting the Catholic population. Government inaptitude and misinterpretation of events further complicated matters. Sending the army to Northern Ireland provoked further Catholic hatred and animosity, the curfew in the Falls road and the way in which internment was used confirming to many that the army was a Unionist force. Faced with this 'problem' the IRA sought to use force to evict the British from Northern Ireland. In turn this led to more Protestants being willing to partake in terrorist activities as both sides became convinced that they needed to protect themselves.

Activities

1. What, according to Bernadette Devlin, were the aims of the Civil Rights movement?
2. What does the Cameron Report tell us about the way that the Police treated Catholics in Northern Ireland at the time?
3. Read Source C. Using this evidence and other materials available to you, explain why the British Army was ordered to conduct arms searches on the Falls Road in 1970.
4. Look at all four sources. How did the actions of the British Army and the RUC (Police force in Northern Ireland) contribute to the escalating violence in the province in the period 1968-1972?
5. The increased violence in Northern Ireland during the late 1960's was the result of distrust and ignorance rather than renewed action by paramilitary groups such as the IRA and the UDF. How realistic is this claim?
6. Using all of the information on this sheet and making use of your textbook, explain why support for paramilitary groups rose in northern Ireland in the early 1970's.