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Red Dawn Over Derry: A History of Socialist Republicanism and Radicalism in the Troubles



*Fig. 1 Photo of Joe McCann following the defense of the Markets neighborhood, with the Starry Plough flag flying behind him. Inglis Bakery, Markets District, Belfast, Co. Antrim, Northern Ireland (Photo by Ciaran Donnelly for the Daily Mirror, August 10, 1971.)*

## **Part I: Rethinking Militant Republicanism**

*“He wandered through the streets of Belfast, there was a big price on his head / He organized and he taught the people, never two nights in one place stayed / Internment came but they did not take him, ‘go to the South,’ his good friend said / ‘Our days of running, they are over, we’ll fight at the barricades instead!’” - The Freedom Fighter, by The Men of No Property<sup>1</sup>*

On the night of Monday, August 9th, 1971, intense violence poured across the city of Belfast in response to the British Army’s introduction of internment without trial. The Army raided hundreds of homes, arresting over 300 Catholic men, and four days of arson, bombings, shootings, and hijackings ensued, leaving 23 dead and hundreds injured. In the early hours of Tuesday, August 10th, 1971, Official IRA (OIRA) volunteer Joe McCann – alongside the few members of his active service unit – fought off a

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<sup>1</sup> The Men of No Property. *The Freedom Fighter*. Folkways Records, 1977.

huge force of British soldiers from inside the Inglis Bakery in the Markets district of Belfast. He and the rest of his men escaped the remaining soldiers who had moved in to capture or kill them; their action was forever immortalized as the heroic defense of the Catholic neighborhood in the photo of McCann (Fig 1), M1 Carbine in hand and the Republican Starry Plough flying behind him, amidst the flames and destruction.<sup>2</sup> The song lyrics above are extracted from a song written by Belfast activists, commemorating him as “The Freedom Fighter,” which remembers that night, as well as the life of the man that produced one of the most iconic figures of the Troubles in the Republican psyche. McCann was a former bricklayer from Belfast’s Turf Lodge, a member of the Republican movement since 1963, and was quite the figure, even before his legendary night in the Markets. He was known for his quick wit, ability to judge situations quickly, and his boisterous and wild nature – there are many anecdotes of the tall, skinny IRA man.<sup>3</sup> In 1969, during the historic civil rights march from Belfast to Derry, which was continually brutalized by police and Loyalist (largely Protestant, pro-British) counter-protesters, he was arrested for commandeering and driving a Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC – the ruthless police force of Northern Ireland from 1922-2001) vehicle into the canal in Newry.<sup>4</sup> While on the run following the defense of the Markets, McCann would frequently return to Belfast in disguise despite the serious manhunt underway, even walking his pet wolfhound around a British Army base, just to show off. Another time, he was with a friend in Belfast, waiting to see a movie, when he pulled out his handgun and spontaneously opened fire on a nearby army checkpoint, running off laughing, with his friend left to chase after him.<sup>5</sup> At around 3:15 PM on April 15th, 1972, after returning to Belfast to attend a friend’s wedding on the Falls Road, he was shot down by British Paratroopers and killed, aged just 24. He was so well-known and respected by the people of Belfast that when news of his death spread, mass violence erupted: the British Army claimed to have been attacked 84 separate times in the Divis Flats area of Belfast alone in the two days following his death. His funeral, a massive affair, received respects from many figures, including even the leader of the UVF, the most prominent Loyalist paramilitary, commending him for his “humanity,” referencing an incident where he had let free three loyalist civilians who were kidnapped in retaliation for the raiding of an OIRA arms dump by the UVF.<sup>6</sup> By all accounts, Joe McCann was a charismatic man, perhaps impertinent, but highly respected amongst his comrades and the people of Belfast alike, contributing much to the struggle in his abbreviated life. He was just one of the many larger-than-life icons in the long history of Irish rebellion, Republicanism, and revolution. More than his legacy however, his story may

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<sup>2</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 164-166; Ciaran Donnelly, *Photo of Joe McCann (title unknown)*, *Daily Mirror*, August 10, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 45.

<sup>4</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 108.

<sup>5</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 166.

<sup>6</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 177-178.

serve to provide a human face to the many men and women who fought in service of the dream of a sovereign, united, socialist Ireland. There are more of these figures to meet, more that will not be included in the breadth of this paper, and more yet to come.

Much ink has been spilled in the pursuit of portraying the Troubles as an issue of terrorism, such that the common conception seems to be of IRA car bombs and senseless violence, explained away at best by a both-sides approach and at worst by a one-sided polemic against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA). Most also seem content to think of conflict as being decisively ended in 1998 by the Good Friday Agreement, where the PIRA laid down arms, but in reality Northern Ireland remains a hotbed of violence in the UK and Europe as a whole, with the region fluctuating between a MI5 rating of ‘severe’ and ‘substantial’ in regards to the risk of terror attacks to this day.<sup>7</sup> To many of the Catholic, Nationalist, and Republican communities across Ireland, both North and South, the current situation in the North remains that of an “unfinished revolution,” a region that cannot hope to avoid violence so long as it remains partitioned from the South.<sup>8</sup> The goal of this paper is to provide a humanizing perspective of the militant Irish left over the years from the 1960s to the 1980s, to understand and critique them on their terms, using their own words where possible, for the sake of the people of that beautiful island, and the revolution that, to them, began with the dreams of a radical few in 1916 and which remains unfulfilled to this day.

The prevailing current in historical research regarding the Troubles and the IRA weighs heavily on the side of telling the PIRA’s story, predominantly from a critical perspective which largely caters to the political mainstreams of America and the United Kingdom. This point of view finds itself exemplified in Richard English’s *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, updated in 2008. Despite its bias, it is a comprehensive history of the roots of Republicanism and the PIRA, and as such will be utilized mostly for the second part of this paper to shed light on the background of the Republican movement, as it does not include much on the organizations other than the Provisionals. Slightly more attention – mostly in recent years – has been paid to the leftward swing of the IRA following its failed Border Campaign from 1956-1962, as well as the different outcroppings of the Republican movement through the period of the Troubles. This can be found in the seminal text on the ‘Official IRA,’ the historical body that the PIRA split from in 1969: Brian Hanley and Scott Millar’s *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers’ Party*, from 2010, which is a fairly objective and thorough monograph that draws on a wealth of sources, including some interviews with members of the movement. This paper’s third part will rely heavily on this text, in order to paint a picture of Socialist Republican militants in the lead-up to and conflagration of the Troubles. The bulk of this paper, in its fourth part, will then focus on the Irish

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<sup>7</sup> Associated Press, “MI5 hikes Northern Ireland terror threat level to ‘severe,’” *Associated Press*, March 28, 2023.

<sup>8</sup> Lasair Dhearg, “Connolly Commemoration Held at Arbour Hill,” 2022.

Republican Socialist Party (IRSP) and its armed wing, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), which split from the OIRA and Official movement in 1975, resulting in a bloody feud. Most of the information on this period and the INLA will be drawn from Adrian Cormican's 2011 PhD thesis at the University of Limerick, *The Origins and Development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party and Irish National Liberation Army 1972-77*. This is another fairly objective text, especially useful for the use of oral history interviews with actual INLA militants. He notes that the perhaps more well-known text on the subject, *INLA: Deadly Divisions*, 1994, lacks this crucial layer. *Deadly Divisions*, by Henry McDonald and Jack Holland, also suffers from a bias towards the Officials as Cormican claims they have connections to former OIRA and Official movement members.<sup>9</sup> In the fifth and final part, this paper will attempt to provide critiques of these groups from a variety of sources, such as their offshoots, as well as from this author's own opinion.

Because of the constraints on time and the length of this paper, many shortcomings are present. For one, the inability to access in-person archives on the subjects at hand means that much of the information present has had to come through secondary sources and the few primary sources available online, thanks almost entirely to the incredible online resource, the *Irish Left Archive*. Along these lines, the secondary sources chosen are limited, but this author believes they represent the best and most up-to-date possible scholarship on this history. Furthermore, there are many aspects of the history that will be left out from this narrative: this includes, but is not limited to, the majority of the Republican prison struggle, more in-depth discussion of the PIRA and socialists within it, more extensive discussion of the question of religion and interrogation of the Protestant/Loyalist/Unionist side, of even the Officials – especially after the IRSP split, and that study of the OIRA and INLA will stem mostly from the publications made by their legal, political arms, otherwise coming from secondary sources. Still, the goal of this paper stands. Through extensive reading of available materials produced by the Officials, the IRSP, and other militant left-wing groups, as well as the secondary literature and left-wing critiques of this contentious historical moment, the conclusion to be drawn is that the militant Irish Republican Socialists, bred in the flames of struggle against British imperial rule and reactionary Loyalist violence, represent some of the most advanced and prescient thinking amongst the English-speaking and wider Western left, and have made irreplaceable contributions to the body of international revolutionary thought and practice. The Irish revolutionaries of the Troubles, in keeping with their Republican ancestors, saw their struggle as one of all Ireland, never one of simply the North, but the conditions of Northern Ireland, with the British occupation, its Loyalist settler population, and the resulting economic relations brought continual conflict. Through this conflict's highs and lows, many came to combine the legacy of armed struggle with

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<sup>9</sup> Adrian Cormican, "The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party and Irish National Liberation Army 1972-77" (Doctoral Thesis, University of Limerick, 2012), 3.

revolutionary politics, and this development, arising out of and intermingling with their involvement in the North's aforementioned conditions produced a unique and deep understanding of what it means to fight for liberation and revolutionary change. Despite clear differences, this struggle can even offer those of us in the United States seeking similar change lessons on tactics, organization, and how to understand the situation we find ourselves in.

## **Part II: Irish Republicanism and the Official IRA**

*“Our independence must be had at all hazards, if the men of property will not support us, they must fall: we can support ourselves by the aid of that numerous and respectable class of community, the men of no property.” - Theobald Wolfe Tone<sup>10</sup>*

### *The Roots of Republicanism, from Wolfe Tone to World War II*

To understand the Irish Republican psyche, one must understand their heroes and history. Republican culture is made up of a wide environment of important figures, texts, dates of commemoration, songs, sayings, and other transmitters of a collective understanding that, as Bobby Sands said, “there can't be peace in Ireland until the foreign, oppressive British presence is removed,” and that connect Republicans to a long history of rebellion, all with the sole goal of a ‘32 County Irish Republic.’ Also integral to the culture of Irish Republicanism is a perennial returning, reinterpreting, and reviving of these ‘transmitters.’ Of vital importance is the revered forefather of Irish Republicanism, Theobald Wolfe Tone, a Protestant Irish rebel who in 1798 attempted to free Ireland from British rule on the basis of a secular, liberal bourgeois revolution like the one taking place contemporaneously in nearby France. He was executed the same year, and his legacy cannot be understated: of incredible importance to the Republican movement through to the present are yearly commemorations at Bodenstown, County Kildare, where he is buried. The Society of United Irishmen, of which he became the leading figure, became the name of a number of IRA newspapers over the years, all called the *United Irishman*. To skip ahead quite a few years, another point of similarly vital importance is the 1916 Easter Rising.

Amidst Britain's involvement in WW1, Irish revolutionaries planned a rebellion, as had been attempted many times before: since Wolfe Tone, there had been uprisings of various sizes in the early 1800s, in 1848, in 1867, and the 1880's. Planned between the Irish Republican Brotherhood – which had members across Ireland, the United States and even some in Australia – the Irish Volunteers, a nationalist militia, Cumann na mBan, a women's organization led by another vital figure, Constance Markiewicz, and people from the trade union movement's Irish Citizen Army (ICA), led by yet another figure central

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<sup>10</sup> T. W. Moody and R.B. McDowell, *The Writings of Theobald Wolfe Tone 1763-98: Volume II*, edited by C.J. Woods (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1998.

moreso to the Socialist Republican movement, James Connolly. It began Easter Monday 1916, and while it had been planned to be nationwide, it was largely restricted to Dublin, seeing Dublin's General Post Office (GPO), along with other buildings perceived to be key points in the city captured by "over a thousand rebels," but it failed within the week. At 12:45 PM on April 24th, 1916, Padraig Pearse, a well-known poet, nationalist, and educator read the Proclamation of the Irish Republic to a small crowd in front of the GPO, which became one of the documents of the Republican canon. It declared, for the first time, the establishment of "the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic" as a "Sovereign Independent State," and sought to establish "the right of the people of Ireland to the ownership of Ireland," guaranteeing "religious and civil liberty, equal rights and equal opportunities to all its citizens."<sup>11</sup> Although it was a small affair, the British repression following the rebellion's defeat was intense and radicalized many across the island.<sup>12</sup> Almost every single leader of the Rising, each well-respected in their own right by masses of the Irish people, was executed by the British, including Pearse and Connolly, who were killed on May 3rd and May 13th, 1916, respectively. Newspapers published the executions as they were happening, and Richard English cites one man who joined the IRA in the wake of them as saying that "when they shot McDermott [Mac Diarmada], who was basically a cripple, and then put James Connolly into a chair to shoot him because his leg was gangrenous and he couldn't stand, well, that was it for me. I was utterly appalled and just had to do something."<sup>13</sup> In a similar dynamic to the events that would happen nearly 60 years later, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a Loyalist militia, was created in 1913 to arm a largely Protestant base in direct opposition to the slightest advance of Irish autonomy, the Home Rule movement, which sought only to give Ireland its own parliament under the British crown. In reaction to this, the aforementioned Irish Volunteer Force was formed, which later became the Irish Republican Army, or *Óglaigh na hÉireann*, the Volunteers of Ireland.<sup>14</sup> 15 In 1917 Sinn Féin reorganized, and became the head of the Irish Republican movement. Following an electoral victory, they established the Dáil Éireann, an independent Irish parliament, in 1918. As English writes, "this First Dáil became, for republicans, the truly legitimate authority in Ireland," and alongside the 1916 Proclamation, became the basis of Republican ideology through the Troubles, with many official documents calling back to this very moment as the source of their legitimacy (include a primary source). On the 21st of January, 1919, the Dáil met for the first time in Dublin, and declared Irish independence from Britain, beginning the Irish Revolution.<sup>15</sup> From then on, Ireland was locked in a war for independence that would last until 1921, with

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<sup>11</sup> CAIN Web Service, "Proclamation of the Irish Republic, 24 April 1916," <https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/issues/politics/docs/pir24416.htm>

<sup>12</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.

<sup>13</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, 10.

<sup>15</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, 15.

the IRA being the primary military force of the fledgling Irish state. By the middle of 1921, both forces were at a stalemate: the IRA could not sustain its campaign, being a relatively irregular army, and the British were keen to wrap up the fighting and focus on rebuilding after World War I.<sup>16</sup> In July of 1921, a truce was established, and terms were to be set on the cessation of hostilities. Despite the wishes of their leader, Eamon de Valera, Irish delegates, “under intense British pressure,” signed the Anglo-Irish Treaty of December 6th, 1921. This treaty stipulated that Ireland would gain restricted independence: the Irish Free State was established as part of the British Commonwealth, made up of 26 counties. This excluded the vast majority of the historic Ulster plantation where in the early 17th century the British crown had colonized the North of Ireland, settling predominantly Protestant Scots ‘planters’ and transforming the land, culture, and economy. The acceptance of this treaty on January 7th, 1922, which was seen as a betrayal of the values of the 1916 Rising and of Irish independence and Republicanism as a whole by a section of the IRA, caused an irreversible split in the IRA, leading to the outbreak of the Irish Civil War. On June 28th, 1922, the pro-Treaty forces now at the head of the Free State, with British support, attacked those in the IRA who were aiming for what they saw as full, unadulterated independence. The anti-Treaty IRA were defeated in less than a year, leaving the Free State victorious by May of 1923 – still, this anti-Treaty IRA survived, and became the base of the subsequent generations of Republicans, existing albeit in changing forms through to the PIRA-OIRA split of 1969, where a veteran of the 1916 Rising was still present.<sup>17</sup> The years following their defeat was rough on the organization, but it persisted, seeing ups and downs, through World War II, where it experienced somewhat of a rightward swing, courting Nazi Germany as the IRA had done in the previous World War, seeing the enemy of Britain as a friend to their struggle.<sup>18</sup> Still, the organization continued on, conducting operations in a rather diminished manner until the 1950s.

### *The Border Campaign and a Leftward Swing*

The IRA, suffering through the memory of the loss of the Civil War back in the 20’s, to the largely failed S-Plan (Sabotage Campaign) of 1939-1940, to a generally dismal period of attempted collaboration with the Nazis, had much to rethink – beginning the post-war years demoralized and needing a breath of fresh air. In September of 1948, there was a convention – a biennial stipulation of the IRA’s constitution, where delegates nationwide came together to elect a new Army Council, and three new members out of the new seven would come to define the IRA’s policy until the early 1960s, playing a

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<sup>16</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, 16-18, 21.

<sup>17</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, 29-31, 35; Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution: The Story of the Official IRA and the Workers’ Party* (Dublin: Penguin, 2009), 145.

<sup>18</sup> Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, 44, 53.

large role in the 1956-1962 Border Campaign. Through the latter years, the old guard was increasingly sidelined as leftist tendencies rose, culminating partly in Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis – their annual party conference – of November 1967, where Cathal Goulding, IRA Chief of Staff, pushed an amendment to add the goal of a '32 County Democratic Socialist Republic' to the party constitution.<sup>19</sup> A world in flux following the events of the Second World War caused many to rethink things – both internally, amongst Sinn Féin and the IRA, and externally, in the rest of Ireland. More than being seen always as an all-Ireland struggle, it is crucial to understand that the Republican movement was solidly locked in an internationalist context from its very outset: international events had always influenced domestic events, especially due to the very fact that Ireland was, to the chagrin of the Irish, linked to the world's predominant colonial empire. Wolfe Tone was inspired by bourgeois democratic revolutions in France and America; the Easter Rising was brought about by World War I. International events indeed led quickly to a heating up of conditions in the North in the 1960s, and with increased tensions and heightened conflict in the North came corresponding developments in ideology and practice.

Stepping back into the years after World War II, the IRA's new leadership in 1948 looked to resuscitate that old political party: it was determined then that Sinn Féin answered primarily to the IRA's Army council. The next year, IRA volunteers were ordered to join Sinn Féin, and the party paper, the *United Irishman*, was revived, but the party practiced a long-held cornerstone of Republican ideology, that of abstentionism.<sup>20</sup> In the mid-fifties, a man named Sean Cronin, who had been in the Irish Army, returned to Ireland from the US, and quickly made his way up in the organization due to his practical military knowledge. In keeping with the influence of international events, Cronin pushed for a guerilla strategy, influenced by the ongoing campaigns in Cyprus and Algeria – and he became the head of an operation that would take shape to “hit enemy strategic strong points [and] strike at their supplies and their administration” in Northern Ireland.<sup>21</sup> Operation Harvest, also known as the Border Campaign, began in December 1956, and would last until 1962. In the early stages of the campaign, attacks were made on British Army barracks, bridges were blown up along the border, and an 18-year-old named Séamus Costello led a unit in County Derry that destroyed a local courthouse.<sup>22</sup> Throughout 1957 the IRA maintained pressure on British targets, but much of the inertia lessened, and many in the movement were growing weary of the operation. Still, Cronin was able to keep it going, and saw it, as some other Republicans would later mirror, as both maintaining the organization in keeping its veterans active and

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<sup>19</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 1-2, 91.

<sup>20</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 2-3; Richard English, *Armed Struggle*, 23. English gestures to at least part of the insistence on abstentionism may have stemmed from Pádraig Pearse, who abhorred parliamentary involvement.

<sup>21</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 11-12.

<sup>22</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 14.



nurturing the next generation of Republicans. At this time, internment was introduced by both British and Free State governments, and many IRA members were gaoled (jailed), including a man named Sean Garland. In Crumlin Road Gaol (Jail), Garland became the prison's IRA Officer Commanding (OC), and many of the imprisoned volunteers, with time on their hands, got to talking about the direction of the movement. At some point, one of the men gave a lecture on James Connolly and his socialist principles, but this "almost came to blows." By February 26th, 1962, after much anguished deliberation, the Border Campaign was called off and the IRA leadership issued a command to dump arms, with eight dead, including eleven Republicans, five of which occurred in combat.<sup>23</sup>

After the failure of Operation Harvest, many in the IRA were left to another period of rethinking – but some of the most important figures of the Republican movement in the years to come were forever changed by it. The 1960s would see the IRA make a strong shift to the left: Sean Garland, Cathal Goulding, and Tomás Mac Giolla, integral to what would become the Official movement, all participated in the Border Campaign, and the young Séamus Costello gained the nickname 'the Boy General' for his command and accomplishments during those years. The IRA had been staunchly anti-communist in both leadership and rank-and-file since at least the years following World War II, stemming in part from a generational divide, but the divide between left and right wings of the organization was not entirely based on age. In the mid-1960s, Seán Mac Stíofáin – who would go on to be one of the leaders of the Provisional split – attempted to have Roy Johnston, a communist who wrote for the *United Irishman* and was in the IRA, kicked out, arguing that his "membership was in contravention of the organization's standing order against communists being volunteers."<sup>24</sup> Still, in 1962, the IRA held their biennial convention, and the new Army Council was elected: Cathal Goulding reluctantly assumed the most senior role in the IRA, the Chief of Staff, succeeding one of the other of the most important members of the future 'Provo' split, Ruairí Ó Brádaigh. Tomás Mac Giolla became chairman of the Army Council, and was also president of Sinn Féin, a role he would maintain for years, and Séamus Costello, now 24, was appointed Adjutant General by Goulding. The militant group's organizational structure was largely maintained in most Republican factions throughout the Troubles, and had its root in the IRA's earlier history: Dublin General Headquarters (GHQ) oversaw the day-to-day, including the *United Irishman* and Sinn Féin, and regional bases had their local commands, the hierarchy of which replicated the roles of the national Army Council: Chief of Staff, Chairman, Adjutant General, Quartermaster General, and two others. Units, known as Active Service Units (ASUs) answered to a local Officer Commanding (OC) that in turn answered to the regional command, and upwards from there. OCs were appointed by the local

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<sup>23</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 17-19.

<sup>24</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 21-24, 40-42. Roy Johnston was a member of the IRA and OIRA for years and was involved at times with the Communist Party of Ireland.

Chief of Staff, but they were generally popular locally.<sup>25</sup> Cathal Goulding had been growing in importance in the IRA since at least 1951, and continued moving up following his promotion to OC of Crumlin Road Gaol during the Border Campaign.<sup>26</sup> Goulding, as a child, had seen firsthand a period of “radicalization” in the 1930s, when left-wing IRA officers split and formed the Republican Congress, which *The Lost Revolution* explains “left an indelible mark on left-wing republican thinking, not least due to its ability, however fleetingly, to overcome the Northern sectarian divide: Congress supporters from Belfast’s Protestant Shankill Road famously carried a banner inscribed ‘Break the connection with capitalism’ at the 1934 commemoration at Bodenstown.” In this period, Goulding and other members of the Army Council were in contact with a Protestant Republican Congress founder, who shared his experiences with them.

Just a year after the Border Campaign, with all of this change underway, Goulding saw an opportunity to unite the IRA while simultaneously pushing the organization to the left: 1963 marked two hundred years since the birth of Wolfe Tone.<sup>27</sup> It is here that Tone’s life and body of work, including his quote regarding the “men of no property,” came to be re-thought, and formed a centerpiece in Republican Socialist ideology. In the growing revolutionary and decolonial atmosphere, Republicans began to understand more deeply the meaning of the statement “if the men of property will not support us, they must fall.” In 1964, Sinn Féin ran in elections in the North as ‘Republicans,’ and amidst protests and clashes in Belfast, James Connolly’s youngest daughter Ina said that Sinn Féin’s cause was her “father’s cause.”<sup>28</sup> These years saw a proliferation of leftist groups, both within the Republican movement and without. In 1966, a group calling itself the Irish Revolutionary Forces set up a bookshop in Cork, and critiqued Republicanism for “having, in their view, neither a military strategy nor clear revolutionary politics,” and as “no longer an Irish Republican body in the traditional sense” an indictment shared by later groups which, as the reader will see, holds some water. The IRF specifically criticized Ó Brádaigh, calling him a “petty bourgeois reactionary,” as well as Mac Giolla, presumably for the aforementioned lack of clear revolutionary politics.<sup>29</sup> In the late 1960s, many Protestants in the South were joining the IRA due in part to its new direction, and at the 1968 Army Convention, Goulding and his supporters pushed for a “fundamental restructuring” of the organization. The policy of abstentionism came into question, and Mac Stíofáin is quoted in *The Lost Revolution* as later complaining that the leftist leadership was “obsessed with parliamentary politics and Marxist debates,” feeling that he was being marginalized.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 24-26.

<sup>26</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 28.

<sup>28</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 33-35, 27-29.

<sup>29</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 61; IRF, *An Phoblacht* 1, no. 6 (July 1966).

<sup>30</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 67-68.

Despite the fact that this was coming from one of the foremost representatives of the anti-communist, right wing of the IRA and later PIRA, he was still a man who had spent long years in service of the movement, and considered in the proper context, this can be marked down as another valid critique. Internationally, the 1960s were years of intense developments on the historical stage: *The Lost Revolution* makes note of Che's death in October 1967, the initiation of the Tet offensive in Vietnam at the beginning of 1968, and the May 1968 uprising in France as being inspirations for the new leftist IRA leadership, as well as the American civil rights movement, which was of vital importance to developments in the North.<sup>31</sup>

### *The Troubles Ahead*

While the IRA was enjoying a revival in their popularity throughout the 1960s, tensions were stirring up in the North – in late November of 1966 and then again in late January, 1967, meetings were held in Belfast that led to the establishment of NICRA, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association. This, along with a growing wider movement, was heavily modeled on the struggle for civil rights in the USA, as well as the movement against apartheid in South Africa, with the first meeting and impetus for NICRA's creation hosting a speaker involved in the latter. *The Lost Revolution* makes note that in these establishing meetings, IRA members were ordered to attend and told whom to vote for, “to ensure a republican and Communist presence on it,” implying some sort of condemnable authoritarianism on the part of the Republicans.<sup>32</sup> It seems more likely that the military organization would want to coordinate and vote as a bloc to make sure their interests were represented in NICRA, a fairly reasonable action especially considered from their point of view. The next few years were to be bloody, as the slightest threat, however peaceful and mild in its demands, to British rule and Loyalist supremacy in Northern Ireland was met with the utmost violence. It was then that sectarianism came to the fore, that the North and the IRA were radicalized further, and amidst a rapidly changing organizational landscape, that the socialist left of the IRA would begin to sharpen its ideology and practice.

In 1966 at Trinity College Dublin, the left-wing Republican Club was formed in an atmosphere of growing leftist student organizing on the campus. This would go on to be one of the primary bases of left-IRA student support and activism, even selling the *United Irishman* on campus. In early 1967 when they were declared illegal by the Southern Irish Minister for Home Affairs – at least partly in fear of commemorations of the 1867 Fenian Rising – their popularity only grew.<sup>33</sup> In November of the same year, Sinn Féin had their yearly Ard Fheis, where Séamus Costello attempted to push to end the policy of

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<sup>31</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 93-95.

<sup>32</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 84.

<sup>33</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 82-85.

abstentionism, something that would be a personal crusade for him for years. He had been appointed by the IRA Army Council to oversee IRA members in Sinn Féin's voting, coordinating their bloc as votes were put in for the party's Ard Chomhairle – their National Executive – but had substituted their list of names for one of his own to help ensure the end of abstentionism. This was found out and he was court-martialed and suspended from leadership for a limited period, although he had been elected to the Sinn Féin Ard Chomhairle the previous year and maintained a position within the party.<sup>34</sup> In 1968, another important group would be set up: another student-based radical organization largely from Queen's University Belfast called People's Democracy (PD), an eclectic group committed to the struggle for civil rights but influenced also by the events of May 1968 in France and tended towards anarchist and radical socialist ideologies. One of the most enduring and important figures from the Troubles would arise from PD: Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, then 21 and attending Queen's University. At the beginning of 1969, PD would organize a peaceful march from Belfast to Derry, inspired by the civil rights march in America among other things, that met immediate harassment from local police and Loyalists, often going hand-in-hand. The brutality the marchers faced was symbolized on January 4th, 1969 at Burntollet Bridge, just outside of Derry as the march was coming to its close: "Loyalists led by Major Bunting, including off-duty B-Specials, attacked the marchers, injuring dozens." News of this quickly carried, and the Bogside neighborhood of Derry exploded in fierce rioting, leading to the building of barricades and the establishment of "Free Derry," a zone free of police, Loyalists, and later British troops, lasting for three years. Republicans continued to aid the march, even providing armed guard to the marchers as they rested in at least one location. The repression faced by civil rights marchers in early 1969 was only a taste of things to come, and many of those present were radicalized by this experience, with many growing quickly disillusioned with the nonviolent approach.<sup>35</sup>

In February 1969, Stormont – Northern Ireland's parliament – held elections that saw more hard-line Loyalists coming to power. There was also a by-election in Westminster caused by the death of a local Unionist MP in Mid-Ulster. Séamus Costello and another man were sent by the IRA to "sound out" Bernadette Devlin (not yet McAliskey), as she ran for the position. Local Republicans did not hold her in high esteem, but Costello wanted Sinn Féin and the IRA to back her, which they refused to do, following abstentionist policies. Still, she won and became the youngest MP in Westminster, gaining huge recognition. Simultaneously, Derry in April was covered in intense rioting, and in response the Belfast OC of the IRA, a man named Billy McMillen, would authorize IRA units to firebomb post offices and a bus station. Interestingly, *The Lost Revolution* makes note of a grandson of Connolly's, Brian Heron, who

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<sup>34</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 91-92, 78-79.

<sup>35</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 105-108. "B-Specials" was a common nickname for the Ulster Special Constabulary, which would be abolished in 1970 and replaced by the military formation known as the Ulster Defence Regiment.

was in California organizing with Cesar Chavez and the UFW during the grape strike looking on at events in his homeland. In the same year of 1969, he founded the organization Citizens for Irish Justice, which led to the creation of the National Association for Irish Justice, NICRA's US support group, while in San Francisco, inspiring other similar groups across the country. In line with the usual international connections, left-wing Republicans were attempting to create a "National Liberation Front" in the style of the ongoing Vietnamese struggle, and it would not be a stretch to assume this was also in light of the success of the Algerian FLN – National Liberation Front – who had inspired many in the IRA since the beginning of their revolution in the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> This led to the middle of 1969, when tensions were coming to a head between IRA members who wanted to maintain their nationalist identity and those who had been pushing the organization left, coinciding with the true explosion of sectarian violence in the North. For most of the spring and summer, things had been heating up, but in Derry, the Catholic Derry Citizens Defence Association (DCDA) was set up in preparation for a parade on August 12. This parade was to be conducted by the Loyalist 'Apprentice Boys,' a marching organization which, much like those that occur in the North presently, relied on commemorative marches as an excuse to send incredibly provocative parades through Catholic neighborhoods, celebrating historical British and Protestant victories over the local Catholic Irish. This of course was never going to go over well, and the DCDA set up barricades, while locals prepared petrol bombs. The IRA was put on defensive duty. When the 12th of August rolled around, some youths in the Bogside, which the march was going through, began throwing stones at the parade, to which the Apprentice Boys retaliated, initiating the Battle of the Bogside.<sup>37</sup>

This marked the beginning of the Troubles, if there was any: Catholics, Protestants, and the RUC clashed in brutal fighting across Derry which quickly spread across the North to Belfast, Coalisland, Newry, Dungannon, Armagh, to name a few. Nationalists in Belfast began attacking the RUC to try and take pressure off of Derry, which led to Loyalist rioters burning down a Catholic pub and betting shop; the predominant pattern of conflict was that of the IRA alongside local activists and residents trying to hold back RUC and B-Specials, alongside Loyalist rioters, who would enter Catholic neighborhoods following the security forces' push against Nationalist rioters and burn down homes. On August 14th, the British Army was deployed in Northern Ireland. The Dublin IRA was called up to "take the heat" off of Belfast, resulting in a statement published by Cathal Goulding as head of the IRA on August 18th, 1969.<sup>38</sup> This statement announced the official beginning of IRA hostilities in Northern Ireland, and claimed the IRA's Army Council was "acting in its capacity as the Provisional Government of the Irish Republic proclaimed in arms in 1916, and ratified by the universal suffrage of the Irish people in 1918." The IRA was making a

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<sup>36</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 111-115.

<sup>37</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 122-125.

<sup>38</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 126-129.

direct reference to the Easter Rising's 1916 Proclamation and the First Dáil of 1918, staking their legitimacy in those moments. It called upon "all Irishmen and Irishwomen, both at home and in exile, to [...] stand in unity against the forces of British imperialism," echoing the 1916 Proclamation. This statement helps to demonstrate at least the left of the IRA's understanding of the conflict as it was taking shape in 1969: the IRA had "been in action in defence of [...] the people which have been attacked by *deliberately fomented sectarian forces*, backed up by the B-Specials, with the aim of destroying the natural solidarity and unity of working class people." The statement notes that "because of the intransigent stand of right-wing Unionism, and their meeting of moderate demands with terrorism and violence, we have been reluctantly compelled into military action."<sup>39</sup> It also highlighted the Southern government in Dublin's lack of support provided for the situation, attacking its legitimacy, and calling on it to stage a military intervention, as well as using its seat at the UN to bring up the ongoing issues: "The Irish delegation at the United Nations must talk about Ireland for a change, after years of talk about Tibet and Peru."<sup>40</sup> Although this statement represented for a very short time the opinion of the IRA as a whole, we can see clearly the strands of left-wing thinking that had been gaining prominence in the organization, grappling with questions that would recur perennially as the conflict wore on: what is the role of the Northern Loyalist working class in the future of Ireland? How does British imperialism operate in the region? What is the solution to sectarianism, and what is the process by which the IRA could bring about peace and unity? The answers to those questions at this point, for Goulding, were becoming more clear: the IRA needed to step in as a defensive force, to support the movement for civil rights in Ireland in hopes of peaceful reform, and move for a unified Ireland with proportional representation, severed from its link with British imperialism. To them, this political development would bring about peace, "for a united, independent, democratic Republic is the only possible constitution within which Protestants and Catholics can live together in friendship."<sup>41</sup> To Goulding, the Loyalist "murder gangs" attacking Catholics were "terrorist forces of reaction," being supported by Northern police and British imperialism to crush any prospect of working-class unity, the only chance at peace. The document calls for, following the establishment of an independent republic, the eventual establishment of a "socialist workers' and farmers' Republic for the whole country," echoing an understanding of the process by which the IRA would succeed in its goals that would later be cause for controversy.<sup>42</sup>

Cathal Goulding's announcement of hostilities was not too popular, however, even in the moment, and exemplified to the nationalist right wing of the IRA the leadership's departure from the organization's traditional values. Responding to Goulding's call for the Irish Army to get involved, they

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<sup>39</sup> Cathal Goulding, "Irish Republican Army Statement," (August 18, 1969) 1.

<sup>40</sup> Cathal Goulding, "Irish Republican Army Statement," 2.

<sup>41</sup> Cathal Goulding, "Irish Republican Army Statement," 1.

<sup>42</sup> Cathal Goulding, "Irish Republican Army Statement," 2.

did offer some limited support on the condition that certain members of the IRA leadership were expelled, including Goulding and Costello, two of the arch-leftists on the Army Council. In September 1969, as the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) was ramping up sectarian violence, the pitch of conflict was trending towards sustain. In the same month, a small ‘gang’ of left-wing radicals, the Saor Éire Action Group, was formed. By the end of 1969, the split between the left and the right of the IRA was inevitable, and contentious events were to be an extraordinary Army Convention that had been called, as well as the upcoming Sinn Féin Ard Fheis. Costello, still trying to rid the organization of abstentionism, was seen as “arrogant,” and was later blamed by Goulding and his allies for pushing people away from his camp, although he was expressing a view shared by much of the younger membership that “those who disagreed with the movement’s direction should just leave.” In December of 1969, a Provisional Army Council was formed by Ruairí Ó Brádaigh and Seán Mac Stíofáin, going public on the 28th. At the Ard Fheis in January, the Provisional camp walked out, making the split official: their reasons were listed as the organizations’ “recognition of foreign parliaments, their cooperation with radical groups, the NLF policy, their adoption of ‘extreme socialism’, undemocratic internal methods, the ‘let down of the North’ and the opposition to abolishing Stormont.”<sup>43</sup> While some of these issues were quite unreasonable, there were valid criticisms present. These echoed earlier issues, as when Mac Stíofáin had criticized the leftist leadership for being too heavily focused on parliamentary endeavors, and we shall return to these ideas later – the issues with internal structure, the lack of action in the north, and coziness with parliamentary politics would continue to arise and plague the movement, leading to further fracturing. This was not new to the IRA, as we have seen in the case of the Republican Congress and the IRF, and there were other splinter groups, as well as a tendency for internecine feuding and subordination by those who wanted to provoke military action: earlier in 1969 at an Easter Rising commemoration in Derry, the local IRA defied an organization-wide ban on flying the Irish tricolor so as to not spark tensions.<sup>44</sup> In 1963, a deep division was sown in a similar case, where a Belfast unit felt they were humiliated by not being able to fly the tricolor at a parade for a commemoration of Wolfe Tone.<sup>45</sup> Finally, but certainly not the only other case, in July of 1964, one of the original leaders of the IRA in the postwar period was believed to have been killed due to his opposition to Goulding’s leadership. Although much of the younger militants were against the newly formed Provisionals, it was again not an entirely generational gap, and by 1970 the press had introduced the terms “Official IRA” and “Regular IRA,” coming to be more commonly known as the Official and Provisional movements, or the OIRA and PIRA.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 138, 143-146.

<sup>44</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 111.

<sup>45</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 32-33.

<sup>46</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 147-149. From here on all references to Sinn Féin will be discussing ‘Official Sinn Féin’ unless stated otherwise.

*Out for Blood*

With the Provisional split cemented, the newly christened Official movement was left to its devices – not completely, as the Troubles were now on, but there was certainly a vacuum to be filled, as many senior officers had just departed, and the Officials were now free to pursue its leftist development. The 1970s were set to be a period of bloody and swift change: the OIRA would continue its involvement in the conflict to come, and new conflicts would begin. Still, through all of this, and often directly related to their up close and personal involvement in the ongoing fighting, the Officials pressed on and built up their organization and ideological understanding. Following split Easter Rising commemorations in 1970, truly the moment of the split's formalization, the Officials handed out sticky-backed Easter Lily pins, earning them the nickname 'stickies,' much to their chagrin. The split quickly turned bloody, with Belfast seeing fighting between the two sides, largely originating from the side of the 'Provos,' as they came to be known, but this was quickly met with retaliation from the Officials, as former brothers-in-arms began to target each other. At least on the Official side, this was quickly understood to be a bad look and intensely damaging to their goal of building a revolutionary mass movement, but nevertheless it persisted. The Provisionals quickly gained popularity – and went on to overtake the Officials in numbers and reputation.<sup>47</sup> This was, as some Officials recognized early on, largely due to the conservative nationalist nature of the Provisionals: they were much more concerned with retaliatory strikes on Protestant communities, seeing themselves as a Catholic defense force, and as such, they were much more immediately popular with embattled Catholics. As a part of this more traditional IRA ideology, the Provos had upheld a plan proposed in part by Ó Brádaigh in 1966, that of 'Eire Nua,' or New Ireland, based much more on a capitalist-federalist system to be established upon the removal of British forces.<sup>48</sup> The Provos' ideological position, being much broader, less specific, and more heavily based on the prevailing mainstream culture of Catholic Ireland, on top of their aforementioned thirst for action above all else, made joining them a much more appealing choice, at least in the short run. This did not stop the Officials from maintaining strong membership and being active – although the leadership's attempt to practice restraint in the face of sectarian violence was not well-accepted by many who chose to stick with the organization.

In the more theoretical realm, as on-the-ground developments were occurring in rapid succession, radicals the island over were trying to think through the events they were witnessing. Day by day more Catholic homes were burned, more Protestants were shot in Provisional retaliatory tit-for-tat attacks, more Loyalist paramilitary bombings occurred, and more police and British military violence was brought

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<sup>47</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 150-151.

<sup>48</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 159, 201.



down on predominantly Catholic populations, although Protestant and Loyalist groups clashed with them as well.<sup>49</sup> In 1970, PD began to criticize NICRA, accusing it of reformism, seeing it as restraining its struggle to an ineffective and mewling plea to Northern Ireland's oppressive overlords to perhaps stop-brutalizing-us-if-you-please. They threw their support behind the Provos, and "began to argue that the Protestants represented a reactionary colonizing bloc, like the French in Algeria."<sup>50</sup> This is a vital concept to note: could the situation in Northern Ireland be considered through a lens of settler-colonialism? The radicals at PD weren't necessarily putting it in these terms just yet, but they were making a clear link once again to the case of Algeria, and trying to understand the violence on those terms. They certainly had a point, as the Protestants in the North *were* a population settled there by a colonial overlord with the explicit goal of oppressing and even replacing the local indigenous population, stamping out their culture, bending the land to their will, and they *did* make up a privileged class. Whether or not this is an appropriate mode of interrogation will be dug into deeper in the final section of this paper. Still, the point stands – people were trying to make sense of all of this violence.

Correspondingly, in the summer of 1971, the Officials' party, now known generally as Official Sinn Féin, published the first issue of their theoretical journal, *Teoiric*, which simply means "theory." Although it states that it cannot be taken to represent the opinions of the Official movement, we can still see clearly the kind of things they were thinking about and influenced by. This first issue contains four articles, two of which are of interest here, the first and third, the second being entirely in Irish, although it seems to be on Frantz Fanon and quotes at length from *The Wretched of the Earth*. The fourth and final seems to be from a NICRA member on strategy for their organization. From here we can see them thinking through questions of "Revolutionary Strategy," the title of the first article, and "Imperialism and the Struggle for Irish Freedom," the third. It begins with a preface that states that it is aimed at remedying the mistakes of the Republican movement and thinking through pressing issues. The first article looks at the movement's history, trying to determine the necessary tactics and strategies to adopt heading into the future. They affirm their dedication to national liberation and socialism, and launch into a survey of the IRA's history, grappling with ideas of state, revolution, and the shortcomings of IRA leadership, primarily in their lack of looking to the people of Ireland for leadership as opposed to its bourgeoisie.<sup>51</sup> The writer identifies all capitalist societies as "a mass of contradictions and gross inequalities, a powder keg of discontent only waiting for that spark." Here, they're thinking through ways to raise class consciousness,

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<sup>49</sup> The distinction being made here is between largely Protestant civilian populaces and Loyalist paramilitaries – non-affiliated Protestants still certainly held reactionary views and participated in violence, but as a whole the Protestant community is not to blame. The separation is made so as to distinguish civilian elements from the armed groups such as the UVF that claimed to represent those communities.

<sup>50</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 205.

<sup>51</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 1-4.

and discussing the example of May 1968 in France as an example, especially as it was started by a small student protest – to keep in mind, this is before the rather routine nonviolent protest in 1972 that led to Bloody Sunday and a further proliferation of the Troubles.<sup>52</sup> They then transition to thinking through what leadership looks like: “A movement will never succeed until it learns to discipline its individual star performers and makes them work together [...] no movement can be led by a clique, at least not for very long, anyway, for it carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction.” Based on their experiences and analysis, the conception of the revolutionary movement's leadership “must be an inclusive and not an exclusive selection” – deliberately keeping “the door open all the time for the inclusion of new people,” being and being seen as “a widely democratic representation of all the movement.”<sup>53</sup> This would not necessarily prove to be the case of the Republican movement in the years to come, especially not when it comes to the Officials. In any case, the third article begins with their understanding of Irish history:

The Reformation represented in political terms part of the struggle of the new capitalist merchants against the old feudal aristocrats. Henry 8th's policy of 'surrender and regrant', by which Irish chieftains were induced to handover the clan lands they did not own to Henry in return for receiving them back from him as personal possessions, represented the overthrow of native Irish law and the imposition of a foreign law and an alien economic system that was the basis of that law. [...] Early Imperialism wanted colonies in which the imperialist countries could settle their surplus population (these surpluses were often the result of artificial clearances as in the Highlands of Scotland or Ireland of the famine days) and whose produce and wealth could be milked for the benefit of the 'mother' country. In this regard Ireland was England's first colony," where "the Irish people were subjected to the needs of the British economy." "Under this system, for example, money from Britain or America is invested in Ireland, not with the intention of increasing the prosperity of the Irish people but to extract the maximum profit out of Ireland. [...] In relation to the exploitation of Ireland, there is no appreciable difference between the 6 and the 26 counties: the 6 is a direct colony while the 26 is an indirect neo-colony.<sup>54</sup>

To the Official writing this, and surely to their comrades, they could see clearly how the South of Ireland was still under the thumb of British colonial rule, linking it directly with their history in a manner uniting the partitioned states on the island – and once again noting the settler-colonial context of that land. Also take note of the idea that British colonialism supplanted a more egalitarian political system indigenous to the island: the writer is still heavily influenced by Irish Republican nationalism. They write later that “the Conquest [of Ireland] really meant the replacement of a native, democratic, system of social ownership with an alien, aristocratic system of feudal ownership.”<sup>55</sup> With this under their belt, they dive into their analysis of Ireland's conditions, discussing the struggle for national liberation and the predecessor to the EU, the European Economic Community (EEC), as a tool of imperialism. They reiterate that the South is a neo-colony, citing Countess Markiewicz and Connolly as explaining that unless Republicans set as their goal a socialist republic, going beyond simple national liberation, “their efforts would be all in vain.” To

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<sup>52</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 5-6.

<sup>54</sup> Official Sinn Féin, *Teoiric: Theoretical Journal of the Republican Movement* 1, vol. 1 (Summer 1971), 14-15.

<sup>55</sup> Official Sinn Féin, *Teoiric* (Summer 1971), 16-17.

them, “neo-colonialism was a way of deflecting a national liberation struggle.” Clearly, they’ve been reading Fanon and grappling with the current decolonial moment, producing a kind of foresight that many in this period would take decades to come to terms with. The British in their colonies, the French with theirs, and the policy of the United States after the period of high empire, were one and the same – indirectly colonize the rest of the world, even grant them their ‘independence,’ so as to maintain the same systems of capital extraction without having to worry so much that they will rise up and throw off their yoke. To them, this was exactly what was happening in the North, which they compare to “the U.S. intervention in the Dominican Republic, the Cuban blockade and, above all, the Viet Nam war.”<sup>56</sup> This document’s highlight is a truly prescient analysis of the threat posed by the EEC:

The common market represents an alliance between the governments and monopoly concerns of Western Europe so that they may be better able to withstand the competition and capital penetration of American big business, as well as maintaining their present position of dominance over the economies of the underdeveloped nations, amongst which Ireland must be included. [...] The EEC will mean an acceleration of the depopulation of rural Ireland. [...] It will mean the steady worsening of the position of industrial workers, as more unemployed look for fewer jobs. It will eventually mean emigration for large numbers of workers and rural unemployed, who will compete in the Ruhr with the masses of Turkish and other migrant workers for the industrial jobs there. It may well mean race-riots in German and Belgian cities as the Paddy fights to gain a few inches on the ladder. [...] The existence of the common market, or of the British Empire, has not meant any great improvement in the living conditions of the people of the common market countries or of Britain. The steady inflow of migrant workers faces native workers with constant competition, and helps hold their wages down.

This incisive analysis, only possible through the surveying of their historical moment and involvement in the struggle in Ireland, allowed them to see through the threat that was the EEC – it was being used as a tool by the powerful capitalists of the imperial countries of Europe to unite their interests further. This is not an anti-immigrant sentiment, nor is it a statement against the unity of the working classes of different countries, including those outside of the proposed EEC. In reality, it predicts with terrifying clarity of thought the issues that now plague the EU in the current day. To this author, this document anticipates the right-wing reaction in Europe following the events in so-called ‘Middle Eastern’ countries during the 2010s, a reality we are very much living with to this day, as fascist parties gain more and more traction on the basis of far-right nationalist and anti-immigrant hatred. Hatred stirred up not solely for those refugees being accepted into EU member countries – not out of the goodness of their hearts, rather for capital gain – but also those immigrants coming from the poorer countries within the EU, like the Polish workers that face intense spite from Brexiteers in England. It is from their standpoint that they could see the reality of the EU before it came into place, as a supra-national body designed not to unite the region but rather to exploit it better, to better scab local workers, to coordinate efforts to crush labor and to better imperialize the rest of the world. From there, they explain that the liberation of Ireland must come from a working-class leadership, pointing to the structure of the Vietnamese NLF for guidance, stating that

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<sup>56</sup> Official Sinn Féin, *Teoiric* (Summer 1971), 15.

Ireland will not be able to move towards a socialist society so long as there is “outside interference in their affairs.” Their argument is summed up in the conclusion, saying that the job of the Republican movement is “simple at this stage: to unite the Irish people against imperialism to build an independent united democratic republic that will be anti-imperialist and lay the grounds for building a socialist society in a free Ireland, in which the Irish people will be able to achieve their centuries’ old aim: the Reconquest of Ireland.”<sup>57</sup>

As Orange marching season – the time in which Loyalist bands held in-your-face commemorations of historical Protestant victories – rolled around in 1970, OIRA units were mobilized with orders to avoid sectarian violence, even being ordered to prevent local Catholics from attacking Protestants, coming to define their military policy, which was known as “defence and retaliation.” The summer of 1970 was to see yet another turning point in the conflict: in July, the Falls Curfew was put in place, seeing British troops raid neighborhoods across Belfast. Where before, Northern Catholics had maintained some hope for the British Army, believing they could fulfill their role as a potentially mediating force, their hatred for them was now cemented in 36 hours of intense fighting. The Provisionals took the opposite position to the Officials, stoking the flames of sectarian violence, seeing major successes in that regard, and their feuding continued across the island. After the Falls curfew, Joe McCann, at that point the Officials’ OC of the Markets district in Belfast, recruited a member of PD: the Protestant Ronnie Bunting, son of Major Ronald Bunting, who had led the charge against the civil rights marchers back in 1969. Later, he had three Loyalists kidnapped from Sandy Row, outside Belfast, threatening to shoot them if weapons were not returned from a UVF raid on an OIRA arms dump – they were ‘literally wetting themselves’, but Joe McCann decided to release them without harming them. In the summer of 1971, internment without trial was introduced by the British government, leading to the massive riots where McCann’s legendary photo was taken. Loyalist paramilitaries were joining in the fighting much more, having pitch battles with both IRA groups: “on internment night both Officials and Provos were engaged in almost continuous exchanges of fire with the UVF in the Springhill/Springmartin area” Internment marked yet another turning point, where the PIRA and OIRA saw massive boosts in membership, and the rest of 1971 would see a massive increase in Loyalist paramilitary violence. Despite their restrained campaign in comparison to the Provos, the Officials would continue actions through 1971, targeting establishment figures, but one member of their GHQ described the situation at the turn of 1972 as being engaged “in an unplanned chaotic armed struggle without having decided to be in one.” By this point, violence in most northern cities had become sustained – Free Derry was still giving the OIRA space to breathe, but through all of this violence, the straw that broke the camel’s back was just to come. On

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<sup>57</sup> Official Sinn Féin, *Teoiric* (Summer 1971), 17-18.

January 22nd, 1972, a civil rights protest in Derry had been subject to “serious army violence,” and NICRA called for another march the following Sunday. That day, the 30th of January, 1972, would go down in memory – as the marchers made their way through the city, unarmed protesters were fired upon by British troops, killing thirteen and being remembered bitterly as Bloody Sunday. The reaction was instant: IRA members of both sides retaliated, and Séamus Costello served a ‘notice to quit’ to the occupants of the British Embassy in Dublin amidst a protest where OIRA members attempted to “blow down the embassy door.” The face of the conflict was forever changed, and following the Bloody Sunday massacre, Stormont was abolished and direct British rule was imposed on Northern Ireland for the next few decades.<sup>58</sup>

### **Part III: Birth Pangs – The IRSP and INLA**

*“We recall the warning of Karl Marx who pointed out that all political groupings are merely ‘moments in the history of the working class.’ No individual or collective political ego can ever have pride of place over the needs of the workers.” - The Socialist Republican, 1988<sup>59</sup>*

#### *Séamus Costello, Republican Socialist*

Séamus Costello was born in Bray, County Wicklow, just outside of Dublin, in 1939. During the IRA’s Border Campaign, he joined up and, as an 18-year-old, distinguished himself in his leadership of a local active service unit, earning himself the nickname ‘the boy general.’ He dedicated his life to political and armed struggle in the Republican movement, splitting off from the OIRA in 1975, resulting in a bloody feud initiated largely on the part of the Officials, resulting in his assassination in 1977. He is remembered fondly. In the meantime, Costello was at Sinn Féin’s Ard Fheis in December 1968, giving a speech supporting Sean Garland’s amendment to set up a commission that would investigate strategy regarding the political developments in the North. In his speech, he continued to rail against abstentionism, much to the annoyance of the leadership who, sensing the impending Provisional split, wanted to avoid contentious topics.<sup>60</sup> Costello was a local councilor in his hometown of Bray, crusading for housing rights, the rights of Irish fishermen, and, in a more lighthearted tone, for the public use of the local Brittas Bay beach – which involved protests and clashing with local Gardaí (the Southern Police force). Upon the campaign’s victory, the local Sinn Féin members and townspeople celebrated with a barbecue on the beach. Earlier in 1968, Costello had run for Teachta Dála (TD – a member of the Irish parliament, the Dáil) in Wicklow after the death of the previous one, but the leadership of Sinn Féin and

<sup>58</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 155-173.

<sup>59</sup> SRC, *Socialist Republican* 1, no. 1 (1988), 2.

<sup>60</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 106, 176.

the IRA was suspicious of his subordination, especially in light of his attempt to replace the IRA's voting list with his own the year before.<sup>61</sup> Eternally committed to the political struggle above all else, Costello continued pushing for the contestation of TD seats, as well as seats in the North, and warned that not participating in local elections was ruining the morale of local Republican sympathizers.<sup>62</sup> In late 1969, still committed simultaneously to the armed struggle, he was in charge of appointing officers in the IRA to acquire arms, which led to a series of bank robberies in Belfast, Omagh, and Dublin in the latter months of the year. The issues of arms and funds procurement would plague the IRA and subsequent organizations, and the solutions Costello and others came up with would similarly affect the movement. In the wake of the Provo-Official split, Costello was tapped to help fill the power vacuum left in the Official movement, and assumed the role of Director of Operations, as he had been a junior member of the Army Council since at least 1962 when Goulding appointed him Adjutant General.<sup>63</sup>

OIRA policy following the Provisional split and the intensification of hostilities in the North was generally one of restraint, although they were still engaged in continuous action. In comparison to the Provisionals, however, many of the members felt they were being held back from participating in the defense of the Northern populace, and although the PIRA ran rampant, it seemed to many – especially those on the ground – that they were at least doing something. Orders of discipline and restraint coming from the Official leadership were frustrating the rank-and-file, and this came to a head following Bloody Sunday. In retaliation to the massacre, the OIRA conducted a bombing inside the British Army's barracks in Aldershot, England, on the 22nd of February, 1972. The action consisted of a car holding 200 pounds of explosives being driven inside the barracks, parked outside the officers' mess, and detonated. This killed "five women cleaners, a gardener and an army padre."<sup>64</sup> The OIRA had already called off attacks on the RUC and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), but following Aldershot, on May 29th, 1972, they announced an indefinite ceasefire, with the stated purpose of avoiding a full-scale civil war in the North.<sup>65</sup> Costello dissented to this – he was among the disgruntled fighters who sought to continue hostilities, but although the ceasefire was subject to continuous violation for the next few years, the OIRA stuck to it, much to the consternation of a growing section of their membership. By the Officials' Army Convention of October 1972, anti-ceasefire opposition "began to coalesce around Costello," centered generally on the criticism of their military policy, but some, like Ronnie Bunting – now the OC of Turf Lodge – were critical also of the Officials' political direction. Costello and Sean Garland had formed a tenuous alliance around the idea that the 'National Question' should be the primary focus, put simply, that national

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<sup>61</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 98, 110, 91-92.

<sup>62</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 119.

<sup>63</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 142, 149, 175.

<sup>64</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 175.

<sup>65</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 178-180.

liberation should come first and then questions of socialist revolution. On the other side of the leadership, Goulding and Mac Giolla were convinced that civil rights were more important, as well as the question of maintaining Protestant support. A second convention was held in the run-up to Sinn Féin's Ard Fheis of 1972. Late in the night of December 9th, 1971, delegates of the OIRA argued the direction of the movement. Costello and Garland argued their point, and the priority of the 'National Question' won out – then, Costello pushed a document on a new military strategy, seeking “a return to more aggressive military activity.”<sup>66</sup> At a meeting between the Provisionals and Officials, Costello showed up uninvited. The Provos simply wanted the war to go on, and the Officials were seeking for harassment to end as feuding continued through the early 1970s, but Costello pushed for a joint campaign. He had been vehemently critical of the Provisionals, but in keeping with what would become a hallmark of his thought, he desired a more united resistance against the British. The talks resulted in a joint statement saying that efforts were being made to lessen “friction and hostility” between the two groups.<sup>67</sup>

Costello, in criticizing the Officials' policy, had “stressed that [...] James Connolly [...] had concluded that British state interference in Ireland must be removed as a prerequisite to wider social change,” and the assertion that a struggle for national liberation was of the highest priority gave a specific political tinge to the growing opposition to Official leadership. The Officials' approach, represented largely by Goulding and Mac Giolla, eventually developed into what would be referred to disparagingly by parts of the growing opposition bloc as 'stageism,' or stage theory – put simply, the prioritization of a united Catholic and Protestant working class for socialist revolution. At this point, much of the IRA's internal politics were still quite scattered, and accusations of Stalinism and Trotskyism were being hurled from either side. In reality, many of the 'militarist' tendency continued to be influenced by the struggle of the FLN in Algeria, the PLO in Palestine, and the growing success of the Vietnamese revolutionaries.<sup>68</sup> In December of 1971, Costello was behind a proposal in Sinn Féin to create a Republican Industrial Development Division (RIDD) as the leadership had wanted to “intensify their involvement within the unions.”<sup>69</sup> As a movement-wide initiative for deeper internal political education led by Sean Garland was underway, RIDD began to be dominated by “hard-line” proponents of stageism, centered around Eoghan Harris, closely tied to a growing bloc of like-minded Republicans centered on Eoin Ó Murchú. Debates between Ó Murchú's group and Costello's supporters began to rage on in the Dublin branch of Sinn Féin's monthly meetings.<sup>70</sup> At this point, an American Trotskyist named Gerry Foley returned to Ireland for a second time. He wrote for a publication by the Trotskyist Fourth International in the US, and ended

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<sup>66</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 186-187.

<sup>67</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 192.

<sup>68</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 220-221.

<sup>69</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 243.

<sup>70</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 248-250.

up interviewing much of the IRA leadership, including Goulding and Mac Giolla, still IRA Chief of Staff and president of Sinn Féin, respectively. He also grew close to Garland and Costello.<sup>71</sup> In an article titled “Problems of the Irish Revolution: Can the IRA meet the challenge?” he begins: “for almost four years one of the most acute social crises in the Western world has existed in Ireland, concentrated in a few relatively small communities in the northeast corner of the island that remains under British political control.” Among many other things, his understanding was that Northern Ireland was “created to block the Irish people from achieving their full national aspirations and to maintain the religious caste system that has been the bulwark of British rule for more than three centuries.”<sup>72</sup> In it, he is quite critical of the Republican movement and the policy of the OIRA, which may have resulted in his eventual use in antagonistic propaganda published by the Officials. In late 1972, Ó Murchú was removed from his position as the editor of Sinn Féin’s paper, the *United Irishman*, as he had been using it to push stage theory and a growing fear of ‘ultra-leftism.’ Harris, now at the head of RIDD, agreed with Ó Murchú that “‘Trots’ were attempting to infiltrate the movement,” and he was known by those who worked closely with him to polemicize about the infiltration of the movement by Trotskyist elements relentlessly.<sup>73</sup>

Finally, Garland and Costello’s alliance fell apart, as Garland remained closer to Goulding and his associates, and was hesitant to go along with Costello’s insistence on armed struggle. By the end of 1972, Goulding was being pressured to resign from his position as Chief of Staff, but it wasn’t known who would replace him, with Costello and Garland being considered. The militarist bloc, grouped around Costello, was being increasingly isolated as the bulk of the movement’s leadership moved away from armed struggle – especially in light of the Aldershot ceasefire. Apparently, Costello had once “expressed the view that ‘shooting Unionists, if you shoot them because they are Unionists, is not sectarianism.’” This, on the nose, sounded alarming, especially to the leadership, but stepping beyond the initial shock, Costello was making a political statement. If armed struggle was sustained by a disciplined political objective, that of the ‘32 County Democratic Socialist Republic,’ it was not sectarianism but political violence that would prevail, and the ‘Conquest of Ireland,’ as it were, could be won. Suddenly, things began to crumble: Costello was accused of taking money for himself, and in March 1973 he had threatened to resign as the vice president of Sinn Féin. In October, meetings were held in Sinn Féin to discuss documents regarding the future of the movement, and Costello spoke out against ideas such as the practice of democratic centralism within the party. Dissidents began to gather in Costello’s bases, his home of Bray and the north of Munster. He then went to Derry and discussed the direction of the

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<sup>71</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 253.

<sup>72</sup> Gerry Foley, “Problems of the Irish Revolution: Can the IRA Meet the Challenge?,” *Intercontinental Press* (August 1972), 3.

<sup>73</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 256-257, 263, 267-268.



movement and the leadership with local activists.<sup>74</sup> Although Costello was growing isolated amongst the leadership, he still had massive support in the rank-and-file. The growing division was never a simply personal one – Costello was known to be a bit antisocial already, but he and Goulding had been close for years at this point, with him even being the best man at Costello’s wedding.<sup>75</sup> At the Officials’ 1973 Ard Fheis, he pushed an amendment to reject support of a reformed Northern Irish police force, which passed with overwhelming support. The conference saw more accusations of Trotskyism thrown around, and by the end of it, some members believed that the leadership had rigged the votes. Prominent Republicans were dropping out, and the “leadership began to move against Costello.” As 1974 was beginning, Costello was facing investigations from the OIRA and Sinn Féin, and OIRA units were receiving lectures on all of his supposed offenses. He asked for a full court martial hearing, where he was accused of “engaging in conduct that undermined the IRA, misappropriating army funds and faction building.” After having called next to none of the defense witnesses, the three judges found him guilty on all charges and he was summarily dismissed “with ignominy.” Still a member of Sinn Féin, he was subject to a party inquiry in late April 1974 where at least two of his judges were members of the OIRA. Two men were “ordered to give testimony that they had received voting lists from Costello,” and the Ard Chomhairle (National Executive of Sinn Féin) found him guilty and suspended him for 6 months. On May 21st, Costello announced that he’d be running as an Independent Sinn Féin candidate, and in June he was re-elected to the Urban District Council and County Council of Bray. In response to this, the Ard Chomhairle dismissed him on July 13th, and the OIRA Army Council ordered volunteers not to associate with him, and he and his supporters were subject to an attempted purge, but some of his supporters continued dissenting from within until the 1974 Ard Fheis. *The Lost Revolution* makes note that the vacuum created by this allowed Ó Murchú’s bloc to “fully indulge their obsession with the threat of Trotskyist infiltration.”<sup>76</sup> Costello had now been forcibly broken off from the Republican movement.

*The IRSP/INLA – “the most sinister and dangerous organisation that has ever appeared on the Irish scene”*

At the end of 1974, Séamus Costello made his last attempt to be reinstated in Sinn Féin. It was defeated by a vote of 197 to 15. The week after the December Ard Fheis, the entire Wicklow Comhairle Ceantair (‘area council’ – the regional executive), three cumainn (‘association’ – the smallest unit, below the Comhairle Ceantair) in north Munster, and assorted Republicans in Dun Laoghaire and Dublin resigned from Sinn Féin, mirroring Costello’s complaints: a lack of internal democracy and the rigging of

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<sup>74</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 257-259.

<sup>75</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 26.

<sup>76</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 268-273.

the Ard Fheis, among other things.<sup>77</sup> Through late 1974 and early 1975, the OIRA leadership was becoming more and more alienated from its rank-and-file, possibly due to the hard line being taken against perceived Trotskyist infiltration, but also largely stemming from their strict adherence to the ceasefire.<sup>78</sup> In August of 1974, Costello had quietly been laying the groundwork for the birth of a new organization, and on December 8th, at the Spa Hotel in Lucan, County Dublin, around 45 people attended a meeting where he formed a new military organization. Those present included Ronnie Bunting, Seamus O’Kane, Johnnie White and Teresa Gallagher - Costello was elected Chief of Staff, and White Adjutant General. This grouping, early on, claimed actions under the name ‘People’s Liberation Army’ (PLA), eventually becoming known in 1976 as the Irish National Liberation Army – the INLA. In the North, most of the Derry OIRA defected to the PLA, and many in Belfast were sympathetic as Costello, “unlike many of the national leadership, personally took part in Republican Clubs activity” in the city, but only the Divis Flats unit defected en masse. Despite that, most of the defectors in Belfast came from OIRA veterans, including some of Joe McCann’s former comrades, striking a disproportionate blow to the Officials there. Paranoia prevailed, with both the Officials and newly inaugurated IRSP/PLA fearing infiltration from their opponents.<sup>79</sup>

Hours after the creation of the PLA, a larger group of 80 delegates – from Belfast, Armagh, County Derry, Derry City, Donegal, Wicklow, Cork, Clare, Dublin, Limerick, and Tipperary – were present for the first meeting of a new political formation, known as the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP). The party was named after James Connolly’s 1896 ‘Irish Socialist Republican Party,’ and “the word ‘Republican’ was deliberately put first to emphasise the struggle for national liberation.”<sup>80</sup> At the IRSP’s first Ard Fheis in May 1975, sixteen delegates were elected to the Ard Comhairle, including Séamus Costello, Mick Plunkett, Johnnie White, Séamus O’Kane and Bernadette McAliskey. Costello was elected Chairman, Plunkett was the party’s General Secretary, and White became the Organizing Secretary.<sup>81</sup> People’s Democracy had publicly supported the creation of the new party, and some members joined alongside their comrade McAliskey, one of the most important figures in radical Northern politics at the time.<sup>82</sup> One of the topics at the Ard Fheis was the question of women’s liberation – an uncommon topic amongst Republicans, but one that would remain a constant in the IRSP, especially as three on the Party’s new Ard Comhairle were women, and women would continue to play a vital role in the party for years to come. Although Costello was regrettably against reproductive freedom, a resolution was still

<sup>77</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 282; IRSP, *The Starry Plough* 1, no. 1 (Dublin: April 1975), 2.

<sup>78</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 308.

<sup>79</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 280-285.

<sup>80</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 283; “Seamus Costello: One of the Greatest Leaders in 800 Years” in *Revolutionary Works*, 112; *Starry Plough* 1, “I.R.S.P.: The Way Forward,” pg. 1

<sup>81</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 205-206.

<sup>82</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 285.

passed by the party thoroughly “demanding social, economic and sexual rights for women including the right to abortion.”<sup>83</sup> Upon the IRSP’s establishment, it was “unanimously agreed that the object of the Party would be to ‘End Imperialist Rule in Ireland and Establish a 32 County Democratic Socialist Republic, with the Working Class in control of the Means of Production, Distribution, and Exchange.’”<sup>84</sup>

One of Costello’s other qualities was that his prior political reading had been limited primarily to the *United Irishman* and the works of James Connolly, influencing the IRSP declaration that “we’re not Trotskyite... Connolly, Lalor, Davitt and Pearse are good enough for us.”<sup>85</sup> This can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, his principles and convictions were highly adapted to the material conditions of Ireland, rooted in his own struggle. On the other hand, lack of sufficient theoretical study was disabling: as was written in *Teoiric* back in 1971, “the activist who scorns theory is like the rifleman who scorns the sights. He can make a lot of noise without even hitting his target.”<sup>86</sup> Just after the formation of the IRSP, Costello was interviewed by an Italian journalist. When asked if there was a comparable situation to the events unfolding in Northern Ireland, he said that “there may be some general examples,” and that “an example perhaps, although not identical but with certain comparisons, would be the French in Algeria. They saw their allegiance to France as a means of preserving their privileged status. Therefore they fought to maintain French domination in Algeria. There are some parallels, but in my opinion none of them is essentially identical.”<sup>87</sup> He explains the IRSP’s political line on the Troubles and how to remedy them:

If the British presence in the country were ended, and if the loyalist working class in the North were convinced that it was ended and finished forever, we feel that the natural tendency on their part would be to think in terms of class politics within this island. [...] They would want those civil and religious liberties protected, and they are entitled to have them protected. They are entitled to have a constitutional arrangement in this country which does protect them. They are also entitled as workers to have their standard of living protected.

If national liberation were to be achieved, and a fair system to be imposed, the logic was that the Catholic and Protestant working class would then unite around the issue of “who controls the wealth and resources.”<sup>88</sup> He continues:

British policy must be viewed in light of their attitude towards Ireland as a whole—not just towards the six counties. What Britain wants is to maintain her influence here over the whole island. Her military and political intervention in the North is simply a means of maintaining this influence and this control. Britain knows that if she is compelled to withdraw from the North, she loses all control over the economy, the wealth and the resources of this country. She knows that there is a good possibility of the creation of a socialist state. Britain and the EEC countries also would be conscious of the effect of a socialist state in

<sup>83</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 206.

<sup>84</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough* 1, no. 1 (April 1975), 1.

<sup>85</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 286.

<sup>86</sup> Official Sinn Féin, *Teoiric* (Summer 1971).

<sup>87</sup> Séamus Costello, “Aims, Principles, and Policies” in *Revolutionary Works: Seamus Costello* (Utrecht: Foreign Languages Press, 2018), 62.

<sup>88</sup> Séamus Costello, “Aims, Principles, and Policies,” 65.

Ireland on the western European working class, in France, in Germany, in Italy, in Belgium, and in Holland. A socialist revolution in Ireland would be an inspiration to people all over Western Europe. The EEC countries have a vested interest, as well as Britain, in ensuring that there is no change in the status quo in Ireland.<sup>89</sup>

This is quite a powerful statement, and something we have seen before, such as in the leader of the People's Revolutionary Government of Grenada, Maurice Bishop, who said his country's revolution of a predominantly English-speaking group of people of African descent were a direct threat to America.<sup>90</sup> A revolution so close to home would easily resonate with embattled black communities in the States, even more so when there was no language barrier. Likewise with England and Ireland, as well as the rest of the region. It was this that the IRSP was committed to – but it was never going to be so simple. Just as the party was getting off the ground, it would be dragged into the second IRA feud in less than a decade.

A few days after the IRSP's foundation, a party meeting in New Lodge, Belfast saw OIRA members pistol-whipping the attendees, and throughout early January of 1975 IRSP supporters were being harassed throughout the city.<sup>91</sup> This marked the start of a bloody feud that would last for the better part of the 1970s, defining the new party's nascent months and crippling them just as they were trying to get off their feet. Much of the view of this period will be seen through the eyes of the IRSP's monthly newspaper, *The Starry Plough*, as well as a few other publications. In the paper's first issue, which was released in April of 1975, Séamus Costello was interviewed and asked about the feud, where he claims that members were kidnapped the day of the party's formation in December 1974, and since then reported having experienced dozens of members kidnapped, beaten, shot, and members' cars and homes being burnt and petrol bombed, respectively. The paper has multiple sections taken out to pay respects to 19-year-old Hugh Ferguson, leader of the Whiterock Craobh ('branch' – in County Down) of the IRSP, who was murdered by Officials on the 20th of February, 1975. Although the existence of the PLA was not yet public, it participated in retaliatory attacks on Official property, and a few days later an OIRA quartermaster was killed in Belfast.<sup>92</sup> Gerry Foley published an article in February of 1975 regarding the feud, called "'Officials' Split Over Stalinist Power Play," making clear his continued angle, but he concluded that "because of their inability to find their way forward to a consistently revolutionary perspective, the 'Officials' are no longer a major force in Irish politics. They no longer include anything like a majority of socialist-minded activists."<sup>93</sup> At the beginning of March, an attempt was made on Sean Garland's life, as he was still in the OIRA leadership; he was shot six times, but miraculously survived.

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<sup>89</sup> Séamus Costello, "Aims, Principles, and Policies," 66-67.

<sup>90</sup> Maurice Bishop, "Maurice Bishop Speaks in NYC at Hunter College," filmed July 6th, 1983. <https://archive.org/details/maurice-bishop-speaks>

<sup>91</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 287.

<sup>92</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough* 1, no. 1 (April 1975), 4; Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 287.

<sup>93</sup> Gerry Foley, "'Officials' Split over Stalinist Power Play," *Intercontinental Press*, February 24, 1975, 251.

Hours later, an Official was shot in Belfast, and the next few days would see tit-for-tat violence until the IRSP closed its Belfast branch temporarily. The rest of the month was calmer, but on April 1st, the IRSP re-formed in Belfast and violence instantly reignited, with an IRSP member being “seriously wounded” the next day and a Republican Club (organizations of the Officials’ in the North) being firebombed by the PLA in response on the 3rd. Near midnight on April 4th, 1975, the second IRSP member was murdered – Danny Loughran, an 18-year old from Divis Flats, Belfast, and through the month, feuding continued. On the 28th of April, a teenage IRSP member, Gerard Steenson and one other spotted the Officials’ legendary OC of Belfast, Billy McMillen, upon which they shot and killed him.<sup>94</sup> In May’s *Starry Plough*, an article called “Feud – or Fascism” was published, announcing Loughran’s death and attempting to explain the situation from their side, saying that the IRSP’s split and ensuing feud came from a lack of internal democracy in the Official movement, and calls on their rank-and-file to unite in opposing British imperialism, saying the Officials’ leadership refuses mediation or talks despite many IRSP attempts. In a separate article on McMillen’s death, they cite a woman at a ‘Peace Women of Turf Lodge’ meeting in Belfast, attended by over 300, as saying the Official IRA was to blame for the violence as it was “determined to eliminate the new splinter group, because of the effect its first splinter group – the Provos – had on its organization.”<sup>95</sup> By the beginning of May, the Officials’ recently restructured Operations Department got to work immediately with an attempt on Costello’s life – in retaliation for the killing of McMillen and in hopes of ending the IRSP – on the 7th, which ultimately failed, leaving him only slightly injured.<sup>96</sup> Still, the *Starry Plough* went on discussing other topics that would become common themes for the paper. An article was published celebrating the recent victory of the Vietnamese National Liberation Front, as well as an interesting bit on the Khmer Rouge’s united front and their victory in the Cambodian Civil War. They discuss the administration in Vietnam’s newly liberated zones, as well as looking fondly on “militant struggles” in Southeast Asia and Europe, such as that of the Laotian communists. The writers impugn the pope and Irish press for fuelling ‘anti-commie’ and anti-immigrant sentiments, and other articles were written on domestic Irish politics such as a Criminal Justice Jurisdiction bill, issues of Irish farmers and fishers, and strikes in the industrial sector. The paper includes an address where the reader can purchase booklets by Marx, Engels, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh, and Desmond Greaves, as well as Connolly and other Irish writers – a list that would only grow with time.<sup>97</sup> The same month, the Officials’ United Irishman fired back in an article called “Liam McMillen REVOLUTIONARY” to honor the life of the Belfast OC, quoting a valid point in light of the IRSP’s continued denial of the presence of an armed wing: “the Irish Press in an editorial poses the question: ‘how does the non-military IRSP propose to be

<sup>94</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 288-295; *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2.

<sup>95</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough* 1, no. 2 (Dublin: May 1975), 2, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 298-300.

<sup>97</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough* 1, no. 2 (May 1975), 2, 5.

more militantly revolutionary than the armed Officials?’” However, the tirade they go on following this is more indicative of their lapsing grasp on reality, claiming that the attacks they have suffered “have been carried out by full-time paid killers, mercenaries, whose purpose is to smash our organisation” and that they “travel quite openly in cars, carrying weapons, unhindered by the so-called Security Forces,” concluding that “Sinn Féin is now convinced that Seamus Costello and Bernadette McAliskey are caught up in some Kitsonian plot,” possibly in reference to the British General Frank Kitson, “architect of the British army’s intelligence operations during the early Troubles.”<sup>98</sup> On May 16th, 1975, Gerry Foley interviewed Costello on the IRSP and its feud with the Officials, which was published later that July. In it, he presents his party’s line on the events transpiring up to that point. Costello explained that he believed the Officials’ leadership was “completely in control of the situation,” and that if they wished to call off the feud, they could. At the time, he would only admit to the existence of the PLA as an organization of Republicans that wanted to protect IRSP members, but threateningly, he notes that he was confident there would be “no difficulty whatsoever” in ensuring PLA attacks would stop if requested. At this point, Costello stressed that there was “absolutely no political debate, and no communication” between the two feuding sides other than ongoing peace discussions, and that if said discussions were to fail, “the only way [he could] see the conflict being stopped is through exhaustion, exhaustion on the part of both organizations.” From the perspective of the long-time IRA member, who had stuck with them through the Provisional split, it had become clear that the Officials were more interested in preserving their organizational structure than maintaining popular support. To that end they were willing to do anything, and the result of that decision was the ongoing feud. Foley asked some leading questions about Stalinism within the Official movement, to which Costello seemed to respond somewhat in kind, agreeing that it was a Stalinist tendency in the leadership that fostered a new sort of “worship of the apparatus,” in Foley’s words.<sup>99</sup>

### *The Long Mid-Seventies*

As 1975 wore on, feuding continued, but the IRSP persevered and pushed on, trying to continue its task of building a new Republican movement. June’s *Starry Plough* explained that talks were finally underway between them and the Officials, claiming that the IRSP had accepted nine separate intermediaries, where the Officials had only finally accepted the most recent one following a call from

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<sup>98</sup> Official Sinn Féin, “Liam McMillen REVOLUTIONARY,” *United Irishman* 33, no. 5 (Dublin: May 1975), 8; Seamus McKinney, “Former British officer Frank Kitson left ‘terrible legacy’ in north,” *The Irish News*, January 4, 2024.

<sup>99</sup> Gerry Foley, “The Need to End the Feud Between 'Officials' and IRSP: An Interview with Séamas Costello,” *Intercontinental Press*, July 21, 1975, 1024-1026.

Mac Giolla to end the conflict.<sup>100</sup> The IRSP continued to tow the anti-EEC political line, including an editorial on why the North should reject it; a fascinating article on the Carnation Revolution in Portugal warned that the military organization at the head of toppling the fascist government could bring about ‘another Chile;’ articles were published on IRSP organizing, successful May Day celebrations, and other local political happenings.<sup>101</sup> An article on the history of the Provisional movement, “THE PROVOS: background to the truce,” was written in light of their recent ceasefire with Britain that proves to be quite incisive and accurate. In it, the writer unknowingly predicts the Provos’ further leftward swing as the Troubles wore on, explaining that despite their leaders’ reactionary positions, in administering some areas of the North they were forced out of a purely military role, requiring from them “something they had practically disregarded before i.e. involvement in community politics.” This meant that they were forced to, on the one hand, “placate the left wing elements in the organisation,” and on the other, “issue statements and policies which seemed to reflect a swing to the left” in order to actually solve problems in the ‘no-go zones,’ however nominal the nods to socialism may have been. The exposé concludes that the Provo ceasefire demonstrates that they cannot win – that they “see the the situation being resolved at a round the table conference with the Brits,” when the solution is a united front against British imperialism, led by the Irish working class, for the “successful birth of the Irish Socialist Republic.”<sup>102</sup> In July, *The Starry Plough* seemed to focus largely on the mechanisms of sectarianism. The front-page story, called “Unite Now!” claims that a Loyalist takeover of Northern Ireland was in progress, fully backed by the British military.<sup>103</sup> This is a bit sensational, but examined more closely, it offers a profound understanding of the situation: the writer makes clear that the distinction to be made in the North was that between Nationalist and Loyalist, rather than Catholic and Protestant. That is, those committed to the struggle for national liberation and those against it. More than this, additional articles linking the S.A.S. and British forces to Loyalist paramilitaries made clear the IRSP’s position that said paramilitaries constituted a fascist reaction to the civil rights movement – one that was being utilized by the colonial power essentially to do their dirty work. This “Loyalist fascism” allied with British imperialism also drove a wedge into what the IRSP believed to be the only chance to rise above communal violence – the national liberation struggle – and as such the paramilitaries were also the instigators of sectarianism at the behest of Britain to protect its interests in all 32 counties. To them, echoing earlier thought, such as in the first issue of *Teoiric*, “Britain and her Irish slave managers don’t see any border but one big factory and one workforce to exploit.”<sup>104</sup> July’s issue also included an article on the Basque resistance movement in

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<sup>100</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 3 (Dublin: June 1975), 1.

<sup>101</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 3 (June 1975), 1-8.

<sup>102</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 3 (June 1975), 4.

<sup>103</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 4 (Dublin: July 1975), 1.

<sup>104</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July 1975), 1, 3-4.

Franco's Spain, an expression of continued commitment to women's liberation in the Republican movement by a female IRSP member, and continued reports on Irish politics and IRSP formations.<sup>105</sup>

By August 1975, the feud with the Officials seemed to be on the outs, and *The Starry Plough* celebrated an apparent cessation of hostilities after the death of another young IRSP member, as IRSP members returned to work in Belfast. A small section is taken out for a little "Belfast humour," where it is explained that Divis Flats had become known as 'planet of the IRPs' as a play on 'planet of the apes,' as it had come to be dominated by IRSP/PLA members and their supporters.<sup>106</sup> In that month, Costello and White went on a tour, visiting America – most notably speaking at a college in Amherst, Massachusetts. Another member of the IRSP's Ard Chomhairle, Peter Pringle, visited Europe in a trip sponsored by the West German Irish Solidarity Committee, alongside representatives from PD and the Provisionals. This resulted in a bit of a funny story where the Mayor of Osnabruck, West Germany, "thinking that perhaps they represented the Irish version of the Social Democrats," invited them to the room where the treaty to end the Thirty Years War was negotiated and let the group sign "the famous Golden Book of Osnabruck."<sup>107</sup> On Costello and White's return in September, a celebratory article was published in that month's *Starry Plough*, alongside continued articles exposing British collusion with Loyalist paramilitaries, sectarianism, Irish politics, and international happenings, such as another long analysis of the continuing situation in Portugal. Despite lessening violence between the Officials and the IRSP, the middle of the year would see further rhetorical battles taking place in their publications. A man named Eamon Smullen had previously become the head of economic research in Sinn Féin, and although he had originally been instated to curb RIDD's influence, he was close with its leader, Eoghan Harris. We have access to a second publication of *Teoiric* in 1975 – possibly from August or September – where an article by Smullen was published and shown to the movement's rank-and-file, entitled "What is the I.R.S.P.?"<sup>108</sup> From the beginning, the article makes it clear that they believe the IRSP is part of an admitted strategy of reactionaries and the "establishment," once again embodied in General Kitson, to "disrupt serious revolutionary movements from the 'left.'" Smullen also accuses the Provisionals and their split of being orchestrated by Fianna Fail, "the biggest of Ireland's capitalist parties," who "made common cause with right-wing elements within the republican movement who were dissatisfied by the new socialist policies of the movement" in an "openly right intervention." He then indulges in the antagonistic propaganda against Gerry Foley mentioned previously in this paper, explaining that a "serious effort" was being made by "ultra-left elements" to infiltrate the movement, from Britain, the USA, and locally. Of particular

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<sup>105</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 4 (July 1975), 1-8.

<sup>106</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 5 (Dublin: August 1975), 3.

<sup>107</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1975), 7; Cormican, "The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party," 230.

<sup>108</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 303-304.



interest was the “Trotskyist from the United States,” who engaged in “several years of damaging activity against [the] movement” that was “organised by a person sent to this country to do this work for the establishment.” Smullen continues tirading against ultra-leftist infiltration in collusion with the “establishment,” and includes a potshot taken at PD, dismissing them as a students’ organization with no “firm organisational structure.”<sup>109</sup> September’s *Starry Plough* returned volley with two articles – one, an excerpt from a Dublin meeting where Mick Plunkett discussed accusations of ‘ultra-leftism’ made by Mac Giolla against the IRSP, and another directly responding to the *Teoiric* article, titled “s.f. slander abroad.”<sup>110</sup> In the former, Plunkett questions the basis of the Officials’ accusations:

Due to [their] reformist nature any Republican or Socialist organisation whose policies are more radical than theirs are castigated and branded as Ultra-Leftists,” leading to a situation where “their calls for ‘left wing unity’ to end sectarianism [are] completely meaningless due to the fact that they rule out co-operation with almost every anti-Imperialist organisation. We publicly call on the Officials to name the organisations of the left they are prepared to work with. Having deemed the Provisional movement, the IRSP and almost every other anti-Imperialist and Left Wing organisation as either ‘militaristic’ or ‘ultra-leftist’ their choice is somewhat narrowed.”<sup>111</sup>

In response to the *Teoiric* article, the IRSP took to task the claims of “international ultra leftists [converging] on Ireland to destroy the Officials,” especially in reference to Foley, by revealing the fact that he had spent time with Goulding, Garland, and other members of the Official leadership. They throw the indictments of collusion with the ‘establishment’ back in the Officials’ face, saying this accusation sounded a lot to them like the National Press. Also in the article, Smullen had used the trip to Europe as further evidence of this collusion, to which the IRSP writer replied that this conference was really an example of their commitment to the united front against imperialism the Officials loved to talk about.<sup>112</sup> The IRSP’s September publication also included a second piece on Chile, concluding that “for all its mistakes, the Portuguese Communist Party is the vanguard of resistance to a right wing takeover,” and an article on women’s liberation explains that the term “has been bastardised to mean anything but what it actually means.”<sup>113</sup> The next month’s issue in October 1975 demonstrates the party’s growth, containing some of the best analysis and writing, but this was only on the surface. Beyond the rhetoric, tensions and organizational issues were beginning to bubble further and further up. Still, *The Starry Plough* in October contained another thorough article on women’s liberation and its necessary connection to socialist politics, as well as more reporting on British collusion with Loyalists, solidarity with the Basque separatist movement, connecting it to Irish history, and more local politics. One of the highlights is an article on Ireland’s broadcasting company, RTÉ, which they lovingly refer to as “Radio Teilifis England.”

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<sup>109</sup> Official Sinn Féin, *Teoiric: Theoretical Journal of the Republican Movement* (1975), 1-3.

<sup>110</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 6 (Dublin: September 1975), 2, 3, 7.

<sup>111</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 6 (September 1975), 2.

<sup>112</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 6 (September 1975), 2, 7.

<sup>113</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 6 (September 1975), 3-4.

Quoting from a man named Conor Cruise, the article says that “television is a much more powerful agent of acculturation than the bayonet” – the IRSP here is thinking about cultural hegemony and colonialism, and the role of technology both in those processes and in its potential use in revolutionary politics: “television, if used correctly, can be an important aid to decolonisation. [...] It is only within a Socialist Republic that a broadcasting system in the true interests of the Irish people can be established.”<sup>114</sup> The other major article of note is yet another on Chile’s fascist dictatorship, titled “chile: 2 years of terror,” ending with a poignant but learned critique:

It is not enough to mourn the dead or demand the release of Chilean prisoners. We must also learn the lessons of the Coup. Under capitalism, democracy is a mask. When capitalist power is threatened in Ireland, Chile, or anywhere else, the mask comes off and the result is mass murder, torture and concentration camps. Capitalism is built on violence and exploitation and it is useless to delude ourselves, as Allende did, that it will ever surrender its ill-gotten gains without a fight.<sup>115</sup>

The IRSP’s political understanding was only continuing to develop, as evidenced by its newspaper, *The Starry Plough*. Progressing from a shoddy recreation of Sinn Féin’s *United Irishman*, it came to be a sleekly-designed periodical covering a massive range of topics and providing fascinating insight on events both internally and externally. Reading this paper makes clear the IRSP’s view of Ireland – it was never a case of only violence in the North, or only political shenanigans in the South. It was, to them, always a question of the entire island, and more than that, of the entire world, with constant references to the political milieu of 1975. Through the paper we can see their genuine commitment to thinking about topics like women’s liberation, fishing and farming rights in Ireland, often connected to the anti-EEC sentiment from the Official movement prior to their split, the role of Loyalist paramilitaries and British troops in trying to stem the struggle for national liberation, and so much more. Unfortunately, this is where the archive gives out somewhat, and we don’t have access to another issue until January of 1976. This makes some sense: the next few months were to be contentious.

Sectarian violence was persistent throughout the year of 1975, and despite the Officials’ ceasefire declared back in 1972, they were still pursuing a limited campaign of ‘defense and retaliation.’ They were also continuing to participate in robberies for funds, and still engaging in actions against the Provisionals, security forces, and Loyalist paramilitaries.<sup>116</sup> On October 29th, 1975, 31 Officials were attacked in the span of an hour across Belfast, leaving one dead and 19 wounded. Following their ceasefire with Britain earlier in the year, the Provisional IRA had just initiated what the Officials viewed as a ‘pogrom,’ seeing around 100 gunmen targeting people that were, for all intents and purposes, engaged in a struggle for a shared goal. Over the next 16 days, there were “over 100 armed attacks, 11 deaths and some 50 injuries,” mostly on the part of the Officials, some of whom thought this was evidence of Provisional-British

<sup>114</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 7 (Dublin: October 1975), 4.

<sup>115</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 7 (October 1975), 7.

<sup>116</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 310-312.

collaboration in the wake of the ceasefire. This was the turning point for the Officials – and *The Lost Revolution* makes it clear that at this point, the policy of ‘defence and retaliation,’ which had hitherto referred to the British Army and security forces, was now being directed primarily at the Provisionals.<sup>117</sup> The Officials from here on out continued to lose relevance and it is here that they largely drop out of our story, although they persisted in organizing within Official Sinn Féin, which later became The Workers’ Party, and continued sporadic actions in the following decade.

### *The Tragedy of Séamus Costello*

Séamus Costello was quite popular in the south of County Derry because of his actions during the Border Campaign. A rural landscape, two future Chiefs of Staff from the INLA originated from the area, and by the spring of 1975, the PLA was beginning its campaign against British security forces. The south of Derry in those years became “one of the most treacherous areas for [them] to operate in as during that time at least one policeman or soldier was killed every month by either the PLA/INLA or PIRA.”<sup>118</sup> To Costello, however, the key was Belfast. Although, as mentioned before, the PLA did not receive many defectors in the city, they *did* gain some key members, and by August of 1975, the Belfast PLA began their campaign – as soon as feuding with the Officials was coming to a close.<sup>119</sup> Still, the new sector of the Republican movement that had struggled and finally gotten onto its feet was due to stumble yet again. In September, when Costello and White returned from their trip to the United States, trouble was brewing. On the one hand, there were the military men, especially a small but vocal group from Belfast including men like Ronnie Bunting, who joined the IRSP largely on the premise of continuing armed action and a promise of more weapons – the feuding had delayed that massively. On the other side were the more political-minded members, who had joined largely because of their dissatisfaction with the lack of a true revolutionary streak in the Officials, centered largely around members like Bernadette McAliskey, who were pushing for the party’s military wing – still being called the PLA – to be subordinated to the party’s central executive. This was very much against the rubric that had been laid out in the IRA all those years ago when they were trying to revive Sinn Féin: the party was to be the arm of the military, not the other way around. Early in May of 1975, the party’s first Ard Fheis had resulted in an intense debate on this topic where, despite their under-representation on the Ard Comhairle, those also on the new Army Council won out and the armed wing was left untouched by the party’s authority. The majority of the party’s executive, representing what Cormican refers to as the ‘left faction,’ or those more concerned with politics, wanted to push the organization towards a more openly Trotskyist formation, trying to have it

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<sup>117</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 315, 320-322.

<sup>118</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 220-223.

<sup>119</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 225-226.

join the Fourth International. The Belfast IRSP had coordinated marches with PD and the Revolutionary Marxist Group in August, even forming a committee and organizing a conference to build a “broad front” of anti-imperialist groups. Although this broad front was one of Costello’s major ideas, this was not his idea – he did not want to be associated with “the politically irrelevant parties on the far left of Irish politics” and upon his return from America, he forced his Belfast members to leave the committee.<sup>120</sup> By November, things were becoming untenable, and at a meeting in Monaghan, the question of the hierarchy between party and military resurfaced, alongside a discussion on internal democracy. This intense debate resulted in a fray where many of the ‘left faction,’ including Bernadette McAliskey, would walk out and not return. Costello, close with McAliskey and many others who left, was admitted to have been trying to mend the split right through to the very end, and even re-admitted some members who had left with no qualms.<sup>121</sup> At some point, he was interviewed about the split, to which he responded that:

We don't regard the resignations as a serious blow at all, because the people who resigned don't reflect any serious body of opinion within the IRSP. It should be understood that their resignations have arisen basically because of their disagreement with the current policy of the IRSP as democratically decided at its Ard Fheis last April and May. In particular, our policy on the National Liberation struggle. The policy of the IRSP is that the National Liberation struggle and the struggle for Socialism in Ireland cannot be divorced from each other, they cannot be treated separately. And, these people refuse to accept that policy, they feel that the struggle for Socialism can be treated in isolation from the National Question in Ireland. And of course, any serious socialist revolutionary in Ireland knows that this just isn't possible.

When asked if the party can survive having lost so many, he had this to say:

Well in some respects, the resignations over the weekend may be advantageous to the party, because one of the problems we've had over the last few months is that the people who have resigned have spent more time within the organization trying to change the democratically decided policies than they have in the implementation of policy. The fact that they are now gone means that the party can settle down to pursuing its programme throughout the country.<sup>122</sup>

And Costello was not entirely wrong – also in November, the PLA finally began using the name it would hold for the next few decades.<sup>123</sup> The IRSP would head on into 1976, having survived a bloodbath at birth and yet another split within a year of its creation.

The last issue of *The Starry Plough* that we have access to comes from January 1976, and announces the existence of the Irish National Liberation Army, or INLA, which was really just the PLA. In line with their previous publications, new reports were given on sectarian killings and British involvement in them, farmers’ struggles in the South, IRSP organizing, and other contemporary events<sup>124</sup>. The highlight of this publication is yet another section on international events, focused on separatist

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<sup>120</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 230-232; IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 5 (August 1975), 2.

<sup>121</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 234-235, 241-242.

<sup>122</sup> Republican Socialist, “Seamus Costello interview 1975,” YouTube video, published January 31, 2021.

<sup>123</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 240.

<sup>124</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 10 (Dublin: January 1976), 5, 1-8.

struggles across the world, but particularly in Europe, coming after an interrogation on “The National Question” in Ireland. They note an upswing of national liberation movements in the 1960s, noting “England, Euskadi (Basque land), Brittany, Alsace, Scotland, Wales and Catalonia,” and specifically that they were “inspired partly by the success of the Algerian Revolution.” They reference the Border Campaign, saying that just as the IRA “swung to the left” after its defeat, many of the separatist organizations the article talks about “moved away from pure nationalism to understanding that they could only achieve national independence in the context of a socialist society.” It then launches into a survey of different groups, offering critical support to them, and concludes that “while supporting their struggles, Irish republicans and socialists must show the inadequacy of any group which advocates 'independence' without also calling for a complete political and economic break with imperialism. [...] It is to be hoped that other nationalities will learn the lesson of the defeat of the Irish Revolution 50 years ago.”<sup>125</sup> The IRSP’s repeated commitment to the policy of seeking socialist revolution through national liberation was developed through its members’ involvement in the Irish situation, but it is deeply rooted in internationalist thought, especially evidenced by their continual application of the thought in other contexts, as well as their clear references of inspiration from third-world liberation movements in Vietnam, Algeria, and elsewhere. This approach really became standard practice amongst communist parties in colonized countries during this period, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine’s 1969 work by Ghassan Kanafani, *Strategy for the Liberation of Palestine*, which draws similar conclusions in a different context. In 1976, Costello remortgaged his family home to help purchase a consistent headquarters for the party in Dublin, and the party saw an influx of new members, allowing for some breathing room and a semblance of normal party proceedings. The Officials’ loss was the gain of the IRSP and Provisionals, and accordingly many from the OIRA and Republican Clubs defected to the INLA and IRSP. The Officials also discontinued Na Fianna Éireann, their youth wing, which left “approximately 250 youngsters with military training and the build-up of energy and the expectation that accompanied it with nowhere to go,” and accordingly many ended up joining the INLA.<sup>126</sup> This wave of relief was not to last long, however, and tensions with the militarists from the North would begin to tear the party apart.

Following the purchase of a party headquarters, Dublin’s Pembroke Lane came to be the home for many Northern members either on the run – like Ronnie Bunting – or simply in need of housing. It was already a rough neighborhood where landlords rarely dared to go, but festering issues in the IRSP also made it a dangerous place for their own party leader. Pembroke was now known as “Bash Street,” and when Costello would visit, he was often met by beer bottles being thrown over walls at his car. The

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<sup>125</sup> IRSP, *The Starry Plough*, vol. 1, no. 10 (January 1976), 7.

<sup>126</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 241-242.

majority of this discontent came from the consistent lack of new weaponry for the INLA, which had always had a much higher membership than the IRSP.<sup>127</sup> The issue of arms had been around for a while: in the early 1970s, Joe McCann would constantly complain about the lack of arms being sent North, even getting into a “shouting match” with the leadership’s Quartermaster General. It wasn’t until 1974 that the Officials finally received a small arms shipment from the Soviet Union, which they had been in dire need of for a while. That same year, Costello had already been operating semi-independently trying to organize against the ceasefire, conducting bank robberies and attempting to “utilize the Officials’ US arms network.”<sup>128</sup> Following the split and ensuing feud, the INLA had been eager to position itself as the more capable and more determined group, but they lacked modern weapons. Much of the initial attraction to the organization had been based on Costello’s promises to arm former OIRA members, where the Official leadership had been focused on trying to restrain violence and refused to issue any new arms. More and more the IRSP leadership in Dublin and the Belfast volunteers were growing apart, as they had “borne the brunt of the feud” and just wanted to get on with fighting the British. Another issue here was that many of the newer Northern recruits were less principled republicans and more young men who had seen their homes burnt down and friends and family murdered by Loyalist paramilitaries and British security forces, and as such were far more interested in blood than political struggle. This would add to the growing disconnect between them and their leaders. In any case, Costello knew that he couldn’t mess with the Provisionals’ arms smuggling lines in America, and that Irish-Americans were largely anti-communist anyway, so he had to look elsewhere; he began to make connections with other radicals in Europe and the Middle East.<sup>129</sup> In the summer of 1976, Sean Garland replaced Cathal Goulding as Chief of Staff of the OIRA, but this was not to be the only major change of high command: sometime that same summer, a meeting of senior INLA figures occurred, in which Costello was removed as the Chief of Staff. Their justification centered around his inability to procure weapons, and he was replaced by John Eddie McNicholl, the only man the Belfast volunteers would accept, largely because of his “operating abilities, not [...] his administrating abilities.” For the time, Costello still ran things from behind the scenes and complaints from the Belfast INLA continued, even resulting in one case where McNicholl hid in a wardrobe to avoid them. At the same time, financial troubles within the party had become so rampant that in 1976 the IRSP could not hold an Ard Fheis – this was also due to intense repression from the Southern police force. Costello’s fatal flaw was that he was trying to hold the party and military together single-handedly, and his prerogative caused him to prioritize the political struggle even though he insisted on maintaining control over the INLA.<sup>130</sup> In March of 1977, he was trying to follow through on his word

<sup>127</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 263, 288.

<sup>128</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 171, 195, 282.

<sup>129</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 264-267.

<sup>130</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 298, 269-273, 286.

and establish his broad front, holding a conference including the Provisionals, CPI, PD, Irish Sovereignty Movement, Conradh na Gaeilge, and some independent activists with the goal of forming an “Anti-Imperialist Front.” It fell through after the Provos insisted that the front’s binding document include explicit support for armed struggle in the North and the Communist Party of Ireland was insistent on the Provisionals signing an indefinite ceasefire. In autumn, Costello was trying once again to see if he could obtain arms from Irish-American sources, to little success.<sup>131</sup>

Just before noon on October 5th, 1977, Séamus Costello met with Osgur Breathnach, the editor of *The Starry Plough* at the IRSP’s headquarters in Dublin, and picked up some copies of the paper to distribute. While he sat in his car, reading a newspaper a little later on, a man came up to the window and fired three shots out of a sawn-off shotgun, hitting him twice in the chest and once on the side of his face. He was dead by the time he was brought to hospital. Cathal Goulding, Costello’s former comrade and best man of his wedding, reacted upon hearing the news, saying “Jesus Christ, I’m sorry to hear that.” Some thought at first that it had been the result of the growing internal dispute: the Belfast INLA had constantly threatened him. It turned out to be Jimmy Flynn, a member of the OIRA General Headquarters from Crossmaglen, who seemed to have thought Goulding had authorized the action. Even after the feud, the Officials still saw Costello as a major threat, although they claimed there was no standing order in 1977 to have him killed. His funeral became a massive show of force by the INLA, and among others, respects were paid by Bernadette McAliskey and Nora Connolly O’Brien, a daughter of James Connolly, who said that he “was the greatest follower of my father’s teachings in this generation and I hope that his example shall be followed and that his vision for Ireland will be realised in this generation.” That same month, *The Starry Plough* published an obituary honoring Costello’s life and achievements.<sup>132</sup> Over thirty years later, one of Costello’s main opponents in the INLA, Harry Flynn, would say that his killing was a “fatal blow” to the movement. The Irish police expressed internally a fear that his death would destroy the political core of the IRSP and push the organization towards unadulterated militarism, partially predicting the events that would follow in the next decade or so. On June 4th, 1982, an INLA active service unit tracked Costello’s killer, James Flynn, to a pub in Dublin. They caught him after he had met with members of the OIRA leadership, including Goulding, and as he was leaving he was shot three times. He died of his injuries in hospital, and was shot “just 100 yards away from where he himself had blasted Costello to death almost five years earlier.”<sup>133</sup> The first arms shipments were arriving to the INLA in 1977, and with Costello dead, the debate that had split the IRSP found closure in the army’s subordination to the party. The PFLP – which Ghassan Kanafani had been a part of until his assassination in 1972 – sent the INLA

<sup>131</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 296-298.

<sup>132</sup> IRSP, “Seamus Costello: One of the Greatest Leaders in 800 Years” in *Revolutionary Works: Seamus Costello*, (Utrecht: Foreign Languages Press, 2018), 104-115.

<sup>133</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 298-308.

weapons, and other connections were made with prominent militant left-wing groups in France and Germany.<sup>134</sup>

Following its establishment in late 1974, the INLA had been involved in some sectarian killings, but the organization was largely committed to its political line rejecting tit-for-tat retaliation and targeting Loyalist ‘fascist’ paramilitaries and British security forces. Much of the sectarian violence present in the INLA was restricted to Belfast, where one militant remembered, well... “You’re going to get it in Belfast.”<sup>135</sup> This was a city fundamentally changed in the past few years, embattled – and the violence was perhaps more personal than in other areas. As the 1970s wore on, some of the INLA’s most active areas were County Armagh, and the south of Derry. Despite all of the tensions within the organization during its formative years, in the late autumn of 1976, Ronnie Bunting and Costello had a meeting where it was decided that Bunting, who had been in Dublin, would return to Belfast as its OC. This was a huge benefit to the local INLA units as he was a well-experienced and quite motivated leader. By January 1977, McNicholl had been replaced as Chief of Staff by a man named Frank Gallagher, who had been the leader of the IRSP in Long Kesh prison. Through that year, the INLA was primarily focused on British Army targets: amushing patrols and sniping soldiers – but there was a departure from the customary Republican methods of funds procurement, which was generally robbery, the INLA raised funds for arms through two ransom kidnappings.<sup>136</sup> In March of 1979, the INLA assassinated UK Conservative Party spokesperson and Margaret Thatcher’s close friend Airey Neave, and by 1980 they were most heavily associated with the prison struggle - three of the 10 dead 1981 hunger strikers were INLA members. They saw some small successes in local government elections, but as Cormican notes, “the IRSP had regressed and as before, politics was subordinated to the body count.” In 1982, a man named Dominic McGlinchey became Chief of Staff, and this is where the INLA got its reputation for being “the most ruthless, most dangerous and least disciplined” in Northern Ireland. He had defected from a “formidable” unit in the PIRA active in the south Derry area. On December 7th, 1982, an INLA bomb killed 11 British soldiers and 6 civilians at a bar in Ballykelly, Co. Derry, providing a major boost to their image, but the mid-1980s were dominated by a series of supergrass – informants – utilized by the RUC, and rival factions in the organization were pitted against one another. The INLA continued activities in the lead-up to Good Friday, but it was dominated much more by criminal activities, and although the group rejected the peace talks, it ended up declaring its first and only ceasefire after a car bombing in the town of Omagh conducted by the ‘Real IRA’ left 29 dead in 1998.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 310.

<sup>135</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 273-275.

<sup>136</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 279, 271, 280-281.

<sup>137</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 310, 223, 312-314.



#### **Part IV: Costello’s Wake – The Future of the Irish Left, and What is to be Done?**

*“We believe that the connection with Britain is the source of all our evils and believe in ending it. [...] Freedom to us means among other things the evacuation of British troops from our country. We will not compromise on this question. No foreign troops under no matter what flag will ever garrison Ireland in peace.” - Séamus Costello<sup>138</sup>*

Although this slew of information may be lengthy, constraints and the nature of research are such that there are always things that have been left out. Before concluding, we shall take a brief look at two other stories that were swept away in the broad stream of the history of the Socialist Republican movement. Through viewing their critiques and reasons for seceding from the IRSP/INLA, we can better understand the shortcomings of the project, and be better equipped to critique it ourselves.

##### *The Independent Socialist Party*

Séamus Costello imposed some unreasonable demands on Eamon McCann – a longtime comrade of Bernadette McAliskey and member of NICRA from Derry – when he had been trying to join the IRSP in 1975. At least part of this stemmed from McCann’s day job as a journalist: as a stipulation of his membership, Costello wanted any article McCann wrote to be subject to review from the IRSP Ard Comhairle before publication and for *The Starry Plough* to get first pick. Some in the party viewed this as unfair, but others connected it to a trend of individualism to be seen also in members like McAliskey. At the Monaghan meeting in late November 1975, Costello voted in favor of the INLA keeping supremacy in the movement, but offered for McAliskey to join the Army Council. She refused and walked out with 10 other members of the Ard Chomhairle, splitting off and forming the Independent Socialist Party.<sup>139</sup> Thanks to the Irish Left Archive, we can take a look at their reasoning and issues with the Republican movement through reading some of their documents. The Political Executive of the ISP produced “The Independent Socialist Party: An Introduction” in January of 1977. The members that made up this party were the largely Trotskyist-leaning ‘left faction’ of the IRSP, mostly coming from student organizing in Derry with PD and NICRA. It shows: in their introduction, they say they “reject elitism, whether of the Republican or Leninist variety.”<sup>140</sup> A large crux of their argument is around this idea of ‘elitism’ within the Republican movement. They are highly critical of the prevailing Republican approaches to sectarianism and the Northern condition, denouncing the “socialist left in Ireland for “too easily [neglecting] theory for the superficial attractions of instant action.” They were clearly still on the same

<sup>138</sup> Séamus Costello, “Belfast Oration” in *Revolutionary Works: Seamus Costello* (Utrecht: Foreign Languages Press 2018), 21-27.

<sup>139</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 233-236.

<sup>140</sup> ISP, “The Independent Socialist Party: An Introduction” (1977), 1.

page as the IRSP about some things, continuing to discuss the ‘National Question’ and understanding the fight in Ireland to be one against British imperialism. Still, they take a position much closer to the stageists that came to dominate the Officials in regards to their view of sectarianism: they claim “the continuing division of the Irish people [...] causes all-class alliances to be formed within Republican and Loyalist sections, preventing the emergence of a separate working class unity and consciousness.”<sup>141</sup> To the ISP, the goal is to unite the Protestant and Catholic working class in the North, as well as the Northern working class with the South, in order to wage a successful socialist revolution. Despite this parallel, they are truly admonishing of the whole Republican movement, saying Republican fighters “must be won away from the dead end of Republican ideology.”<sup>142</sup>

In an internal document called “The Irish Left: For Revolutionary Regroupment,” the ISP gives their survey of, well, the Irish Left. Despite being of a tendency the Officials lovingly labeled as ‘ultra-left,’ the ISP isn’t afraid to throw that term around, saying that in the revolutionary movement, “individualism, romanticism and heavy doses of ultra-leftism ran riot, seriously hindering advancement towards a revolutionary party.” They sit firmly in their Trotskyist ideology, understanding the Bolshevik revolution to have degenerated after Stalin, calling the politics pushed by pro-Soviet Communist parties “distorted versions of Marxism.”<sup>143</sup> This document is meant to be internal, but it does not mince words about anyone: for instance, “P.D.’s North-centricity and obsessive pre-occupation with issues directly connected to the northern conflict [...] undermined the ability of socialists to engage in basic class struggle issues.”<sup>144</sup> They include themselves in this survey, placing the ISP in the “Far Left,” and claim to be “the most broadly based, geographically, of the existing groups.”<sup>145</sup> Their section on the Republican movement states in plain terms that “whether that Republic be called a ‘socialist Republic’ or ‘Eire Nua’ under the Republican ideology the working class will not achieve socialism.” Quite accurately, they view the left wing of the Provisional movement to be a “cover [...] for right wing politics and have had no serious influence on the direction of the armed struggle.” The Officials, following the IRSP split, had “moved rapidly to the right,” citing an article written by Smullens, and they write that their “total acceptance of Stalinism renders almost impossible the emergence of a revolutionary Marxist trend within their adult ranks.” Their section on the IRSP is short and to the point, calling it “an attempt to recreate the Officials of 1971” and politically impotent, harboring elitist and populist ideology. They conclude: “failure of the marxist element to wage a political struggle inside it prior to the resignation of almost half the national

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<sup>141</sup> ISP, “An Introduction,” 2, 4.

<sup>142</sup> ISP, “An Introduction,” 7.

<sup>143</sup> ISP, “The Irish Left: For Revolutionary Regroupment” (1977), 1.

<sup>144</sup> ISP, “For Revolutionary Regroupment,” 2.

<sup>145</sup> ISP, “For Revolutionary Regroupment,” 4.

executive in November 1975 left a demoralised and confused membership.”<sup>146</sup> The point of the document is to call for a “Revolutionary Regroupment,” and it proposes points of agreement for a revolutionary far left in Ireland, claiming that the acceptance of those points will differentiate the genuine left from “(a) the bourgeoisie (b) the social democrats (c) the republicans (d) the stalinists” and “(e) the ultra leftists (ie Red Republicans)” – likely referring to the IRSP.<sup>147</sup> Still, beyond all of their critiques, they state at the end of their “Introduction” that “whilst we may be critical of other groups it is our intention to work wholeheartedly for the unity of socialists.”<sup>148</sup> This enigmatic party did not last long, but McAliskey and others in it continued a long career of politics in Ireland. Despite their brief existence and interesting political inclinations, they do represent a valid perspective of critique – these *were* tested student organizers, who had already experienced the worst of the early days of the Troubles in the late 1960s and early 1970s. There is validity to their break with Republicanism and Costello – the man was insularly focused on Republican ideology and tactics, and dared little to think outside of this paradigm. As touched on earlier, this did breed a specific familiarity with the Irish condition, and while he was certainly looking elsewhere, he was not thoroughly investigating the theoretical and practical underpinnings of the revolutionary movement. His radicalism – along with every other flavor of Republican leftism – was restricted to the framework of Republican history, mythology, and ideology. This is most salient in each republican organization in the Troubles – for us, the PIRA, the OIRA, and the INLA – set as their goal the establishment of a ‘32 County Democratic Socialist Republic.’ Rarely do we ever see Republicans openly state a communist ideology, in part due to the conservative nationalism and militarism endemic to the movement. Limiting themselves to this goal never allowed them to develop much further beyond a base understanding of national liberation and socialism, increasingly restricted to parliamentary rather than revolutionary means. Costello’s obsession with ending abstentionism to a certain extent crippled the movement in relinquishing its fuel both literally and metaphorically. For one, the drain on funds in contesting elections would lead to many issues, and secondly, it also contributed to the destruction of the radical Republican principle of rejecting participation in governments deemed illegitimate, which helped nurture the movement’s successive generations in pursuit of armed struggle. Troubles with funding would also contribute to another defining issue of the republican movement: that of increasingly criminal elements within the armed organizations.

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<sup>146</sup> ISP, “For Revolutionary Regroupment,” 5-6.

<sup>147</sup> ISP, “For Revolutionary Regroupment,” 10.

<sup>148</sup> ISP, “An Introduction,” 14.

*The Irish People's Liberation Organization*

After the assassination of Costello and the INLA's heyday of the 1970s, the organization was still desperate for arms and funding. Factionalism was again on the rise and in May of 1981, Harry Flynn was shot and wounded in Dublin by another member of the INLA. By 1987, the group was almost destroyed by violent internal feuding, and a faction of the INLA decided there was no choice but to break with the organization, forming the Irish People's Liberation Organization (IPLO), presumably after the Palestine Liberation Organization. Between 1988 and 1994 the IPLO overtook the INLA in terms of deaths caused, and formed their own political wing, the Socialist Republican Collective (SRC).<sup>149</sup> *The Irish Left Archive* has the first issue of the SRC's newspaper, *The Socialist Republican*, from 1988. The first page sports large portraits of James Connolly and Séamus Costello next to each other, making it clear from the start their inclination. It contains an interview with the IPLO, where they explain their reason for splitting off from the INLA: "because, in our considered analysis, no other single organisation accepts the primacy of the working class as the agency of liberation AND the centrality of the National Question we had no option but to re-enter the political arena as a separate force."<sup>150</sup> When asked on their high standards for members, they say that "we set the standards we hope to build into our class. For too long our people have been contaminated by the cult of the personality; machismo; greed and the concept that only the strong survive. These values are the values of exploitation and theft."<sup>151</sup> The IPLO representative concludes with a statement on their organization and the future of the fight in the North:

While the battle remains inconclusive or unfinished 'STRUGGLE' is inevitable. The people who make up the IPLO will be engaged in that struggle. Parties and groups come and go, the class struggle has to have a WINNER - and a LOSER! At present we see our class forces scattered and our people unorganised. Socialism has been hijacked by the Dick Springs and Jim Kemmy's of this country and has been blunted. Nationalism as put forward by the Republican Movement presently offers only a change of management. These must be reclaimed and forged into a fighting ideology and practice to guide and lead our struggle. There is work for all of us to do in this; in many ways the REAL 'WAR' is yet to begin. And I say that because I believe WAR is the total combination of ALL our struggles - Political, Social, Economic, Cultural and Military.

This excerpt encapsulates a central theme of the Irish struggle – so long as the British imperialist occupation remains, there will inevitably be violence. Also present in the newspaper was an obituary for Gerard Steenson, one of the IPLO's founders who had killed Billy McMillen back in the OIRA-INLA feud, and met his end at 30 years old, likely by the INLA's hand:

At the age of 15 years old and having lied about his age he joined the IRA in the lower Falls becoming its Operations Officer within the year. [...] In just 22 short months between April 1980 and February 1982 Gerard reorganised and led the now corrupt and defunct Belfast INLA in its most active period ever. For

<sup>149</sup> Cormican, "The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party," 311-313.

<sup>150</sup> SRC, *Socialist Republican* (1988), 6.

<sup>151</sup> SRC, *Socialist Republican* (1988), 8.

the first time the INLA activity against the crown forces resulted in a successful and sustained campaign. True, Gerard did not suffer the fools or 'phoney' easily yet he always retained the respect of his comrades in the field and his courage and bravery are beyond dispute, even amongst his enemies. Those who took his life have no place in the history of our struggle for liberation. [...] His wish to see the corrupt and degenerate IRSP/INLA disbanded may have cost him his life. That our class should be robbed of such a man by such craven cowards is sickening in the extreme. Not one of them could ever stand in his shadow. Yet this is no place for bitterness and now one year after his murder, along with our mutual good friend Tom McCarthy, Gerard is still strong in my life.<sup>152</sup>

Although they bore an ideological reverence for the martyred Costello and perhaps even fetishistic ideas of “Scientific Socialism,” the IPLO were hardened political militants, and saw through many of the shortcomings of the Republican movement.<sup>153</sup> They recognized the chauvinism that plagued it, alongside the right-wing nationalism it engendered, and could even see the poisoning influence of individualism in the movement, pushing it towards criminalism. They were not free from this, however. Often, to pay for campaigns, arms, and other funds of running a militant group, Republicans would resort to crime. It began with bank robberies, then the INLA escalated it with ransom kidnappings, and by the late 1980s the INLA had “degenerated” into involvement with drugs and organized crime in Northern cities. This is an issue that continues to persist in the broader Republican movement today, with many groups being likened more to criminal groups and involved in disputes over drug-running.<sup>154</sup>

### *What is to be Done?*

The long and bloody legacy of the Irish Republican movement, through all of its splits, violence, and frustration, remains a tale of vital importance to the canon of revolutionary struggle the world over. Rather than callously dismissing the movement’s history as base terrorism and bloodlust, it requires thorough investigation, for the sake of its committed revolutionaries as much as that of international revolutionary thought. While this paper has overwhelmingly focused on the violence, it covers human beings who daily gave their lives in service of a dream of a liberated socialist Ireland, engaged in the tireless vicissitudes of political work and armed struggle. The Republicans were forever committed to internationalism, making connections across Europe, the Americas, and notoriously maintained strong friendships with the PLO and PFLP, supporting the struggle for Palestinian liberation.<sup>155</sup> Amidst bloody sectarianism, the OIRA and INLA included Northern Protestant Irish members that proved to be some of the most avid Republicans, such as people like the ever-enthusiastic Ronnie Bunting. The constant fraying of the movement is overall indicative of the tough issues its members were grappling with: deeply

<sup>152</sup> SRC, *Socialist Republican* (1988), 22.

<sup>153</sup> SRC, *Socialist Republican* (1988), 7.

<sup>154</sup> Cormican, “The origins and development of the Irish Republican Socialist Party,” 281-282; See Jake Hanrahan and Paulie Doyle, “Brexit, Bombs, and the New IRA,” Podcast, 2019.

<https://soundcloud.com/popularfrontcast/39-brexit-bombs-and-the-new-ira>

<sup>155</sup> Hanley and Millar, *The Lost Revolution*, 278, 188.

entrenched in the armed and political struggle, committed and genuine Republicans were endlessly thinking about what was right. Even the more conservative Provisionals had valid criticisms to level against the movement as a whole, citing issues with the internal hierarchy and a dangerous preoccupation with pursuing reformist tendencies over armed struggle. The Officials' focus on preserving organizational structure and a faulty understanding of the material conditions in Ireland and necessary direction for revolution left them unequipped to fulfill their seemingly genuine desire of stemming the sectarian tide. A lack of rigorous political education amongst these groups left them forever trapped within the framework of Republicanism, shading their eyes from the revolutionary solution and dooming them to internecine feuding no matter how earnest the call for a 'Socialist Republic' was. The perennial question of what to do with the hostile Loyalist working class of the North teaches us volumes about the strategy of revolutionaries in the post-colonial anglosphere. Although it is by no means identical to the conditions of the United States, we can see clearly the issues that face an armed movement attempting to build itself under the pervasive eye of highly-developed capitalist superpowers. Can the Loyalist question be interpreted through a settler-colonial lens? If so, it seems much more accurate to compare Northern Ireland to a place like America today, where colonial structures were implemented hundreds of years ago, rather than more contemporary projects like Nazi Germany or the state of Israel. This was certainly the case in the North, where settlers had stayed and established their own culture over centuries, culminating in a Protestant working class that was prone to fanatical settler nationalism. The IRSP accurately analyzed the Loyalist paramilitary forces as the extreme right-wing reactionary forces of the settler-colonial regime. In this context, the state likes to sit back and pretend as if it is the mediating force between fascist and communist terrorism, when in reality the interests of those fascist militants – whatever they may claim to represent – serve only the interests of the colonial and imperialist ruling class. Upon seeing concerted opposition to the rule of British imperialism, Protestant settlers who in spite of their working class status enjoyed a level of privilege within the Northern system were easily whipped up into fears of that privilege being disrupted. Their position within the power structure of the North was one of classic settler-colonial cooptation: the exploited working class section of settlers, which made up the majority, was given a certain level of legal and economic preference over the indigenous population so as to stymie class-based linkages. Protestants were conditioned by the Northern superstructure to associate with British imperialism, viewing an attack on this exploitative system as an attack on them. This resulted in the proliferation of reactionary politics and sectarian conflict, and many Protestant workers were needlessly pitted in deadly battles by the British state, fighting against the people best poised to bring about a beneficial change for all of Ireland. The added effect of Loyalist reaction was that of forcing the Republican movement into doldrums of feuding and gangsterism – rather than confronting British imperialism, they were stuck fighting against local fascist paramilitaries with civilian support. When they

tried to focus on the bigger enemy, its lap dogs would strike and embroil Republicans in deeper and more personal violence. British state repression contributed to infighting, pushing the militants towards worse and worse methods of acquiring funds and arms, which led to the degeneration of their organizations into criminal military formations. This leads into the primary issue facing the Socialist Republican movement: a lack of true revolutionary content. A traditionally conservative nationalist organization was, following the observation of international events as well as internal failures, forced to the left. Realizing that it could not simply pursue armed struggle with no eye for social policy and no vision for a united Ireland beyond unification, the IRA began its natural creep towards the left. As soon as it had developed to the point where it could state proudly the need for a socialist program, tensions in the North exploded as others in the area began to look leftward to solve their own issues, and the IRA was dragged into the fight, following their stated role as the true army of the Irish Republic. Although involvement in the Northern conflict honed their revolutionary position, it also distracted them from it, sinking them deeper into the blind militarism of their predecessors. We can respect and honor their contributions and their struggle, but we must also recognize that the IRA, the OIRA, and the INLA were never revolutionary organizations in the true sense of the term. While the military structures may have held some issues that hindered commitment to revolution, the problem lies much more squarely in the leadership: as the movement's fighters were mired in sectarian violence, no real attempt was made to build or maintain a revolutionary core to the organization. Attempts were made to bolster political education, but the reliance on the trappings of the historical IRA, stemming from a genuine respect for their predecessors, made sure that the organization never progressed into a fully revolutionary one. They could not escape the paradigm of Republicanism, even as they attempted to rethink it, and so they could not escape from a lack of principled revolutionary theory and practice. With all this said, the stories of the Republican fighters still show us, just as the Black Panthers and so many others have, the very complex yet very real possibility of building a movement for the realization of a better future, with all the ups and downs that come with it. One of the great lessons of the Republican movement is that explained so long ago by Karl Marx and referenced by the IPLO: all organizations are simply moments in the history of the working class. It is far more important to sharpen and forge a revolutionary understanding amongst a dedicated collective, far more important to ensure the content of the revolutionaries' positions than to protect the traditions, legacy, or structure of any existing organization. Formations are like pinecones. They are meant to burn. What truly matters is the commitment of genuine revolutionaries to struggle, analysis, and fundamental change. Amongst all of the bitterness and senseless violence, people of the highest caliber fought and lived to see a better Ireland, and a better world. Thank you for taking the time to sit with at least some of their stories.

*Tiocfaidh ár lá*

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