

Politics, Protest, and Bloody Sunday

Parliament Square is consistently home to protestors on a broad spectrum: for or against Brexit, reminding the general public to stop using plastic, or playing the bag pipes with the stark contrast of Westminster Palace in the background, there is always at least one person expressing themselves and their political beliefs. The Saturday our class went to tour Parliament was no exception. Witnessing politics and protest first hand is what inspired my topic for this essay: whether or not the soldiers who killed Northern Ireland civilians on Bloody Sunday should be prosecuted 47 years after the fact.

After witnessing and interviewing protestors first hand, a basic understanding of Bloody Sunday needed to be established in neutral light for someone uneducated in British and Irish relations and history. A basic, unbiased understanding of Bloody Sunday, British-Irish relations over Northern Ireland, and The Troubles, or Northern Ireland Conflict was necessary.

Starting with the facts. Looking deep into British Imperialism and colonization of Ireland, maltreatment of the indigenous Catholic Irish people started in the eighteenth century when English and Scottish plantation owners started settling in Ireland. The British settlers had the most success in Ulster out of the four traditional provinces in Ireland. Overtime Protestant settlers outnumbered the Catholic Irish in Ulster, and these English and Scotsmen clung to their British identity, avoiding assimilation at all costs. During the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921), the British government utilized the British Protestant voices in Ulster, also known as loyalists, as a means to still have some control and influence in Ireland; the British government enacted the Government of Ireland Act, splitting the emerald isle into what would become known as Ireland and Northern Ireland. This division led to Protestants gaining a majority control in Northern Ireland which was disproportionate to the rest of the Irish population. Loyalists clung to their newly developed power and gerrymandered their way into the best jobs and created a government they would be unchallenged in. This was incredibly frustrating to the Catholic population, or nationalists, who had moved to Northern Ireland for the economic opportunities that had been developing in Belfast before the Government of Ireland Act. Catholic and Protestant arguments were not about theological differences as they were around the rest of the world, but more so about politics and culture grounded in faith, which most Catholics claimed was being attacked under this Protestant leadership. Starting in 1968, nationalists had had enough and The Troubles began. As names are appropriately indicative, loyalists wanted to remain a part of the United Kingdom (UK) and nationalists wanted to become a part of the republic of Ireland. During this time nationalist organizations like the Irish Republic Army (IRA) believed that the fight to join Ireland needed to be won

in the form of guerilla warfare on the streets; loyalists viewed IRA activity as terrorism. 1968-1998 relations between Ireland and Great Britain over what to do with Northern Ireland has all of the characteristics of civil war. And like all civil wars, The Troubles had a darkest day: Bloody Sunday.

In August of 1971, the Northern Ireland government introduced a new law to detain people without trial indefinitely, also known as internment. In response, nationalists took to the streets of Londonderry on January 30th 1972 to protest their unjust discrimination at the hands of the government, even though large gatherings and protesting was prohibited. What was meant to be a peaceful demonstration organized by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association, would become the infamous Bloody Sunday. The British Army's Parachute Regiment met this crowd of protestors, blockading them from their planned destination around 3:00pm. By 4:00pm protestors took to throwing stones, the army retaliating with rubber bullets, tear gas, and a water cannon. By 4:07pm, soldiers moved into the crowd and started to arrest Northern Ireland nationalists. Three minutes later, 21 soldiers started to fire what would be 108 rounds into the crowd of protestors killing thirteen people that day, wounding another fifteen people, one of whom would die months later as a result. These soldiers walked away from the day and were later cleared of blame, as were the British authorities, through the Widgery Tribunal.

It took decades of campaigning by the families of the victims to finally have Bloody Sunday and the unjust and brief trial the soldiers faced to finally be reopened and investigated. In 1998 the prime minister at the time, Tony Blair, started the Saville Inquiry which was open till 2010 and ultimately found that the casualties were non-violent and there had been no justification for members of 1 PARA of the British Army's Parachute Regiment to shoot. The Saville Inquiry also found that there was no warning given before soldiers started to open fire. After the report was released the Police Service of Northern Ireland began a murder investigation which took years to accumulate but by the end of 2016 was finally submitted. Prime Minister David Cameron issued an apology on behalf of the British people and Soldier F was charged with murder of James Wray and William McKinney as well as attempted murder of three other individuals. This is where current protests come into play.

Where some people see an attack on old servicemen long after the fact, some see justice finally being served; it brings into question an ex post facto, or after the fact, prosecution and if the British government has done all they can to compensate and apologize for what happened on Bloody Sunday. Most would argue that an apology in 2010 in parliament 38 years after the events of Bloody Sunday is not going to cut it. Looking from the outside as an American coming into the world of British history and

trying to understand all the tension that led up to Bloody Sunday, creates different opinions and perspectives, as does listening to what protestors had to say before doing background research.

Curious to know what all the protesting going on around us was for while we waited to enter parliament, I approached two older gentlemen and asked what their protest was about. The first one laughed and said “you want to explain it this time, this’ll be my third one today,” to which the second man turned to me and asked if I knew what Bloody Sunday was. With a vague idea of it at the time, I simply nodded my head as he carried on to explain that “the British government has just now decided to prosecute the soldiers who were there at Bloody Sunday. What they are completely ignoring is that these soldiers were just following orders, for prosecution coming so long after the fact is pathetic considering these men were 17 and 18 when it happened and now they’re in their 70s and 80s, what good is it to prosecute old men? If anyone is to blame it should be the men who gave the orders, not soldiers following command. What would happen if they do prosecute these old men for the rest of the retired servicemen community who’ve killed someone in active service?” The previous quote covers all the points the two men made to me while surrounded by “I support soldiers A-Z” flags. They admitted Bloody Sunday was an awful event, but seemed to be protesting the blame being carried out on retired soldiers.

In doing the research and the math, soldiers who were 18 in 1972 are now 65, just hitting retirement age, not necessarily as old as protestors made them out to be. Walking back to my group of peers to the sound of bagpipes and as we headed into parliament I remember seeing a sign contradicting what the old men had said. As learned in my background research, 21 men had open-fired on the crowd of civilians in a predominately Catholic area and the sign recited the alphabet excluding five letters, announcing that it cared about the prosecution of the 21 letters to blame, not the other 5 that had nothing to do with the assault. It is also clear in the articles I looked at, the family members of the ones who died deserve justice for the loved ones they lost and in order to keep happier relations between Ireland and the United Kingdom, believe more should be done to honor and recognize the horror that is Bloody Sunday.

Within this protest you essentially have three points of view. The first group being made up of the Northern Irish people, Catholic nationalists, and Irish citizens that still focus on this topic and what they see as a lack of due respect and honor. They want soldiers to be prosecuted for the manslaughter of innocent protestors, seeing that it was bypassed the first time with British officials; this group of people do not want the soldiers to get away a second time. Then there’s British servicemen (more of the

older and retired soldiers that is) and their families who believe it is wrong to prosecute soldiers long after the events of Bloody Sunday and/or believe the soldiers should not be prosecuted at all because it is the fault of their leaders and their leaders' orders to shoot at the crowd not the soldiers. Finally you have the British government, who is an especially tight spot with Ireland right now as the emerald isle threatens to create a hard boarder between Ireland and the Northern bit that is still a part of the United Kingdom if Brexit were to go through. From my understanding the British government is trying to find a delicate balance in pleasing Northern Ireland, who is always on the brink of leaving the UK anyways, and Ireland while also not upsetting retired servicemen and potentially ruling on something so major and setting it as a precedent that cannot be undone. Not only are there all three of those points of view within this current politics and protest (and debated among the people looking at the prosecution of the Bloody Sunday soldiers more closely), but a whole other debate on if soldiers are still their own people who have a grasp of their own actions is brought up.

It has been argued since World War II when Nazi Germany soldiers got off easy from prosecution with the reasoning that they were brainwashed into committing the heinous crimes that they did during the Holocaust, not really knowing what they were doing. Is that to say as soon as you are subordinate to a general or lieutenant you also have no control of your actions or thoughts? Yet if that were the case, the entirety of the unit have fired at the civilians, not just 21 out of the however many men served in 1 PARA of the British Army's Parachute Regiment? All of this is just scratching the surface of a very intertwined and historical protest with decades of history and politics riding on top of it, helped me better understand the complexity in British-Irish relations and an important part in history for the United Kingdom.