A REPORT BY ALEŠ URBANCZIK, 1981

Don’t let the Irish prisoners die!

Coalisland to Derry, 25 May 1981



Eighty Thousand. The funeral procession of Patsy O’Hara, Derry, 25 May 1981. © Aleš Urbanczik

I

Coalisland, a small village in Northern Ireland's County Tyrone, where the population holds almost exclusively republican views and consequently gives the Irish Republican Army (IRA) strong backing. On 25 May, 7 buses leave Coalisland for Derry; the journey goes to the funeral of the INLA hunger striker Patsy O'Hara (the INLA, the Irish National Liberation Army, split off from the Official IRA, which had gone on ceasefire in 1972; the Provisional IRA cares 'only' about a united Ireland, the INLA about a united socialist Ireland; in practice, however, the two groups almost always work together). Here in Tyrone, two months ago, Bobby Sands, probably the best-known IRA hunger striker, was elected Member of Parliament for Fermanagh and South Tyrone to the House of Commons in London. The whole area mourns: black flags hang from every house, and the pictures of the four republican dead of recent weeks (Bobby Sands, Francis Hughes, Raymond McCreesh and Patsy O'Hara) adorn the windows; posters reading 'Wanted for Murder' with Margaret Thatcher's picture everywhere – "...another martyr for Old Ireland, another murder for the Crown..".[1]

1. The line comes from “Kevin Barry”, a widely sung Irish rebel ballad about Kevin Barry (1902–1920), an eighteen-year-old medical student and IRA volunteer whom the British hanged in Mountjoy Prison, Dublin, on 1 November 1920.

On the way to Derry I sit next to a construction worker from Coalisland, about sixty years old. Because of his dialect I understand only about two thirds of what he says. But that doesn't bother him much, and he tells me about the battles of the Irish against the British colonisers, and on the way through County Tyrone he shows me the fields where for four hundred years they have held out against English supremacy. When he hears that I come from Switzerland, he says: "That doesn't matter. You are one of ours today." He also tells me about the last twelve years in Northern Ireland, about 1969, when the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force, 97% Protestant (read: British), could no longer keep the attacks on the Catholic (read: Irish) population under control and in the end joined in the acts of terror itself. Back then British troops were called into the country, officially to restore order and protect the Irish population of Ulster, a claim most nationalists and republicans dispute. In January 1972 British paratroopers massacred thirteen people at a peaceful anti-internment march organised by the civil rights movement in Derry – Bloody Sunday. Today the army works together with the RUC and the right-wing Protestant paramilitary organisations to break the resistance in Europe's last colony. But the resistance grows; it grows with the death of every inmate of the former concentration camp of Long Kesh, now more genteelly called 'Maze Prison'; it grows in step with the ever harder stance of the Thatcher government, which flatly refuses to consider the demand for recognition of political status for IRA prisoners (which was abolished in 1976).

II

Our buses' journey is interrupted when we are stopped by a unit of the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), the regiment of Northern Irish soldiers within the British Army. An officer with a submachine gun in his hand and his face blackened for camouflage boards the bus and asks where we are headed – a pointless question, since the column of seven buses is obviously on its way to Patsy O'Hara's funeral today. A short but heated argument between our driver and the officer over whether the city is called Derry or Londonderry (it has officially been called Londonderry since the early 17th century, when London companies were granted land in the area under the Plantation of Ulster), a brief once-over of the people on board, and the comment: "You've certainly picked a nice day for travelling."

We are diverted along the way so that we don't have to pass through the Waterside, the mainly Protestant district of Derry (a hail of stones would certainly have awaited us there), and so we drive about 20 kilometres through the territory of the Republic of Ireland. The stony faces of the RUC and the British soldiers who wave us through on the side roads turn into the grinning faces of the Irish 'Gardai' as soon as we cross the border at Strabane. Along the road through the Republic, black flags again – the people of County Donegal mourn too; many stand in front of their houses and wave to us or raise a clenched fist in greeting. Brendan, a twenty-year-old unemployed man from Coalisland, tells me he went through the same spectacle the day before. Yesterday he was in Derry to see Patsy O'Hara one more time. "He is a martyr for Irish freedom", he says, and he is very proud to have touched Patsy one last time. The nationalism and pathos of the Irish are unsurpassable, 'mad Ireland'[2]. After twenty kilometres through the Republic, the border again, at Derry: the customs bunker is fitted out for war, an area of about 500 square metres is enclosed by walls 5 to 6 metres high, and some twenty British soldiers stand around with submachine guns at the ready. This border post is fairly isolated (still three kilometres to Derry) and therefore an easy target for the mortars with which the IRA, from the other side, has blown the bunker sky-high several dozen times in recent years. Accordingly nervous is the mood among the British professional soldiers, many of whom, given the high unemployment in England, had no choice but to

2. The phrase alludes to W. H. Auden's elegy "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" (1939), in which Auden tells the dead poet that Ireland's madness wounded him into writing. William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), Irish poet and dramatist, received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1923 and stood at the centre of the Irish Literary Revival.

join the army; the mood is especially tense these days, because six days ago five soldiers in an armoured car died when the IRA detonated a landmine beneath them near Camlough in South Armagh. The soldiers know exactly where our buses are going and wave most of them through – there would be a minor uprising if they made trouble so close to the destination. Twenty metres further on stands another group of officials photographing the buses and cars heading to the funeral. People are apparently used to this, and the bus passengers turn towards the camera and blow kisses to the soldiers. They have nothing to lose anyway, since the government on principle employs no residents of purely republican areas – security risk – and now that Ian Paisley's far-right Democratic Unionist Party (which rejects any participation of republicans in government) has emerged as the strongest party in last week's local elections, nothing will change about this rule.

The parliamentary elections serve as a prime example: Northern Ireland sends 12 MPs to the House of Commons, of whom only two or three each time belong to the opposition, and that with a nationalist share of the population of 45%. The (nationalist) left is divided; while the right-wing, colonialist parties join forces in electoral alliances, this doesn't work between the 'moderate' and the radical left. Among Catholics, though, the mood increasingly leans towards the radical side, and here too people no longer trust the Social Democrats: Gerry Fitt, the former Social Democrat leader from Belfast and, since the death of Bobby Sands (who was elected to the House of Commons during his hunger strike in Long Kesh), the only nationalist MP in Westminster, has lost his seat in the local elections. His stance on the hunger strike, and the fact that he refused to call in Parliament for a by-election in Bobby Sands' constituency (he waits obediently until Parliament has passed the law that will in future deny prisoners the right to stand for election), cost him dearly. For once, all of West Belfast stood behind the radical 'H-Block' candidate (see box) – after Bobby Sands' election, another embarrassment for social democracy.

H-BLOCK

The H-Blocks are H-shaped buildings in the Long Kesh concentration camp. The protesting prisoners of the H-Blocks, all of them republicans, demand the status of political prisoners for themselves. Since it is not granted to them, they refuse to use the prison's facilities: they wear no clothing (the clothes of 'ordinary' prisoners), do not wash, and so on.

III

We have reached our destination: the 'Bogside' of Derry – the atmosphere is demonic, half-destroyed houses as if after a war, and the houses that have not yet been bombed out are in a pitiful state. Yesterday BBC Television reported that an international commission ranks the condition of housing in Northern Irish working-class districts among the worst in Europe. From the windows today hang either black flags or the green-white-orange of the Republic of Ireland – the year when the Bogside was 'Free Derry' and neither police nor army were allowed to enter may be over, but the resistance of the population still prevents the removal of republican emblems or the painting over of the omnipresent 'Brits out!' graffiti. The majority of Ireland's population has always favoured independence for the whole island; this will showed itself clearly in the rebellions of the 18th and 19th centuries and in 1916 in Dublin. When the resistance grew too strong, the British imperialists made an offer following the familiar pattern of 'divide et impera': 'We'll give you 26 of the 32 counties, but we want the industrial areas around Belfast (the largest textile and shipbuilding industry in Europe at the time), where most of Ireland's British population lives anyway, as well as the fertile land of County Down, Armagh and Derry.' This territory of the 'six counties' was at the same time the largest possible area in which the British still held a majority, at that time 60 to 40%. Because of the higher birth rate in Catholic families, and because the Irish can hardly emigrate anymore (in times of recession unskilled labour is needed nowhere), the balance is slowly shifting in favour of the Catholics. Had the British also counted County Donegal in the

north-west, now connected to the Republic by a narrow strip of land, as part of the British colony, the majority would have been exactly the reverse. The consequence of Prime Minister Lloyd George's offer was the split of the republican movement into the wing that accepted the deal and the one that rejected it. Against this historical background, Margaret Thatcher's professions of keeping Northern Ireland as long as the majority of Ulster's population wishes it become ridiculous – if anything, the entire Irish population would have to be in favour of continuing the status quo! The consequence was a civil war that spread across the whole South, which the opportunist faction won thanks to the support of its former enemy.

On the other side of the border, the Irish government has managed to adopt a completely schizophrenic attitude. On the one hand, the constitution defines the territory of Eire as the whole island, and the inhabitants of Northern Ireland are thus entitled to an Irish passport and even to stand for election in the South; on the other hand, very little is done at the diplomatic level for the reunification of the two parts. Moreover, the IRA is banned in the South as well, which it uses as a retreat base, yet the prisoners there have political status – contradictions upon contradictions. The fact that Northern Irish people can stand for election in the South is likely to cause the Irish government difficulties in the parliamentary elections of 11 June, since the 'H-Block Committees' will probably put forward some of the Long Kesh hunger strikers or prominent figures of the northern republican movement as candidates. Bernadette McAliskey (née Devlin), the Northern Irish civil rights activist who a few months ago survived an assassination attempt by the **unbanned** Protestant paramilitary organisation (Ulster Defence Association, UDA), will probably stand in Dublin against Prime Minister Charles Haughey.

IV

Today Northern Ireland has become a loss-making business for Great Britain: for years British industry has been pumping billions into the province to keep it afloat. At almost 20% of the working population, the unemployment rate is the highest in the whole United Kingdom and at the moment also the highest since 1945 (BBC News, 28.5.81), and it almost goes without saying that a large share of these 20% are Catholics. British industrialists have always managed to divide the labour movement in Northern Ireland: even in times when Protestant workers were badly off, there was always a section of the workforce that was worse off still – the Catholics served as an industrial reserve army.

V

The Bogside slowly fills with mourners – buses and cars from everywhere; old and young, men, women and children are out in the streets today to accompany Patsy O'Hara on his final journey. I show the stewards my camera, say "Press" briefly, and am let through without further ado to my journalist 'colleagues'. The onlookers stand on the pavements and on the roofs of the houses along the three-kilometre route on which the coffin is carried through the Bogside. On the street itself there are only the stewards and the press: a privileged position – the IRA needs publicity. Applause ripples through the crowd as the 'Guard of Honour' of 12 men and women appears seemingly out of nowhere and takes up position around the coffin. The guard of honour wears the paramilitary uniforms of the IRA and the INLA, and for obvious reasons masks cover their faces. Although the IRA and the INLA are banned 'criminal' organisations, neither the police nor the army can afford to break up this demonstration by militant republicans, because the crowd surrounding the coffin is too large. The coffin is adorned with the Irish tricolour, along with Patsy O'Hara's black gloves and black beret. By now tens of thousands of people line the streets – I can't estimate the exact number, but the camera crew from ABC Television in the USA puts the number present at 80,000.

After about two and a half hours we reach the cemetery, and apart from the press only about 5,000 people are let in – security reasons; the IRA wants no trouble at the funeral. The republican funeral ritual takes its course. Along the way there had been a brief halt to slip weapons, which once again seemed to come out of nowhere, to three soldiers of the guard of honour. Patsy O'Hara's grave lies next to those of the dead of 'bloody sunday'. On arrival, amid the deafening applause of the crowd, the three soldiers fire the traditional nine salute shots into the air.

Ritual on the other side too, in Long Kesh, where a meal is set down for the hunger strikers three times a day, even though after weeks of fasting they could no longer take solid food at all, even when they have completely lost control over their organs, blind, deaf and vomiting blood, with no chance of a way out, for they do not want to stop, indeed they could not even if they wanted to, the IRA normally shoots its traitors, madness...

Ritual in the House of Commons as well, where on the day after Bobby Sands' death the Speaker announced the death of "Robert Sands, Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone", followed by a minute's silence – a minute's silence in the British House of Commons for an IRA terrorist... What an absurdity!

The minute's silence at Patsy O'Hara's grave is not so quiet, because two British Army helicopters roar over the cemetery – presumably to disrupt the speeches by the IRA and INLA spokesmen that follow.

VI

Many of those present will stay in Derry tonight to support the Bogside youths in the expected street battle with the police. Mainly children and teenagers take part in these street battles. The entire generation of the 60s has never known any condition other than civil war, in which they played their daily games with the security forces, for example spitting at soldiers in passing, etc. A boy of about 16 asks me which newspaper I write for. When I tell him a Swiss student newspaper, he says that if I came to such-and-such a place this evening around 7 pm, he could arrange for his friends to start a 'riot' for me so I could take some good pictures. Everyday life in Northern Ireland. I politely decline and wish him luck in not getting hit by plastic bullets today. There are deaths almost every day when the IRA and the British Army wear each other down in skirmishes – but there are deaths too in the big street battles, which comes as no surprise given the size of the plastic bullets, about 15 cm, leaving the gun barrels at more than 250 km/h (Sunday Times, 16.5.81).

As our buses head back towards Coalisland and we are photographed again at the border, the weight of the day's events slowly leaves me speechless. Thoughts of the dead, of the funerals to come, of the next hunger strikers, of the insane devotion of these people to Ireland's freedom, of the remark a young man made at the funeral when I told him I would soon be leaving the country: "That's a pity because in two or three months the real fun is going to start..." and of the words of Padraig Pearse, an Irish poet who lost his life during the struggle for independence around 1916: "Ireland unfree shall never be at peace."[3]

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3. Patrick Pearse (Pádraig Mac Piarais, 1879–1916), Irish poet and teacher, helped lead the Easter Rising of 1916 and died before a British firing squad in Kilmainham Gaol on 3 May 1916. The quoted words close his graveside oration for the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa at Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, on 1 August 1915. The Rising left a deep mark on the poetry of W. B. Yeats, above all in “Easter, 1916”.

APPENDIX

Number and percentage of Catholics and Protestants in the six counties, Belfast and Derry City

	1911				1961			
	Protestant	%	Catholic	%	Protestant	%	Catholic	%
Belfast	293,704	75.9	93,243	24.1	301,520	72.5	114,336	27.5
Co. Antrim	154,113	79.5	39,751	20.5	206,976	75.6	66,929	24.4
Co. Armagh	65,765	54.7	54,526	45.3	61,977	52.7	55,617	47.3
Derry City	17,857	43.8	22,923	56.2	17,689	32.9	36,073	67.1
Derry County	58,367	58.5	41,478	41.5	64,027	57.4	47,509	42.6
Co. Down	139,818	68.4	64,485	31.6	190,676	71.4	76,263	28.6
Co. Fermanagh	27,096	43.8	34,740	56.2	24,109	46.8	27,422	53.2
Co. Tyrone	63,650	44.6	79,015	55.4	60,521	45.2	73,398	54.8

Sources: Census of Ireland, 1911, Vol. 3, Ulster, Cd. 6051-I, HMSO, London 1912, and General Register Office, Northern Ireland, Census of Population 1961, County volumes, Tables XVI, HMSO, Belfast 1964.

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