

# THE IMPACT OF CIVIL ACTION ON LEVELS OF VIOLENCE: COMPARING COMMUNITIES DURING NORTHERN IRELAND'S TROUBLES

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Violence varies in intensity across intrastate conflicts. During Northern Ireland's Troubles, the district of Dungannon experienced intense violence while the neighboring Omagh district was much less affected.<sup>1</sup> This difference raises a crucial question: what effect did civil action have on violence in these communities? I answer this question by examining the process of violence in each district, utilizing declassified military records, government reports, and news archives as evidence. I find that while the IRA, loyalist paramilitaries, and members of the police and military perpetrated violence, the degree of civil action in interactions between these groups and civil rights protesters, counterprotesters, politicians, and community members impacted the districts' trajectories and levels of violence. In Dungannon, uncivil action in the form of police collusion with loyalist counterprotesters drove community polarization, subsequent republican and loyalist radicalization, and the resultant escalation of retaliatory violence. In contrast, Omagh experienced more civil action in the form of temperate interactions between police, protesters, and counterprotesters, minimizing polarization and radicalization and containing the level of violence. These findings have important implications for policymakers seeking to interrupt or slow escalation in conflict situations ranging from public protests to civil war.

## TRAJECTORY OF VIOLENCE

When the Northern Ireland civil rights movement expanded in the late 1960s, Dungannon and Omagh had similar histories of prejudice and injustice, with disenfranchised

Catholic voters, gerrymandered districts benefitting Protestant Unionist party officials, and discrimination in public housing allocation and employment (Gallagher 1957; CSJ 1969; Northern Ireland Parliament 1969; NICRA 1972; Darby 1976). Yet, Dungannon became polarized through uncivil action between protesters, loyalist counterprotesters, and partisan and repressive Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and Ulster Special Constabulary (USC) police forces, leading to strong republican radicalization. Conversely, Omagh experienced more civil action in the form of temperate interactions between protesters, counterprotesters, and the police, containing polarization and radicalization.

### *Dungannon*

The district held Northern Ireland's first civil rights march in 1968 between the towns of Coalisland and Dungannon, followed by many protests and meetings that attracted large antireform Protestant crowds. Loyalist politician Ian Paisley's supporters would sometimes organize counterprotests, which included people who were armed and people believed to be paramilitary members (see Boulton 1973). Polarization was set in motion as suddenly groups were shouting slogans, songs, and insults through walls of armed police.

Throughout these events, protesters saw the police response as overtly partisan. During some confrontations, police allowed counterprotesters leeway to throw stones and attack protesters (Northern Ireland Parliament 1969). Protesters also noticed off-duty USC members in the crowds at one of these events, publically exhibiting their partisanship (ibid.). Tensions escalated as the state was giving implied

<sup>1</sup> From 1971-76 the Dungannon district had sixty-three murders and the Omagh district had twenty (McKittrick et al. 1999). For conciseness, the Dungannon and Omagh districts are called "Dungannon" and "Omagh," while the "town of Dungannon" and "town of Omagh" refer only to the towns.

permission to loyalists while indicating to protesters that state forces would not protect them (see *Dungannon Observer* 1969). Polarization increased and biased actions continued through the August 1969 disturbances, when local police on one night baton-charged Catholic crowds in mainly Catholic areas of town and on another night USC members brought firearms against orders and fired on protesters (Northern Ireland Parliament 1972). Then, after the British Army deployment and the beginning of internment the following year, which unjustly detained many nationalists in the towns of Dungannon and Coalisland, a local politician noted how the area was now alienated from the military (*Ulster Herald* 1971, August 14; *Dungannon Observer* 1971, October 9). This was a peak moment of polarization and many district residents adopted a more radical position through supporting the IRA (*Dungannon Observer* 1971, October 9; *Dungannon Observer* 1971, October 2).

Dungannon became a center of radicalization, with the East Tyrone Brigade focusing attacks in the district (Assistant Chief Constable (South) and Brigade Commander 3 Infantry Brigade 1980). The Brigade began bombing government and commercial establishments and attacking security forces or anyone employed to support them, committing forty-one district murders from 1971 through 1976.

### *Omagh*

In contrast, as regional protests expanded in 1968, Omagh's local movement and counter-movement were active but limited in strength. The majority of protests occurred in the town of Omagh. These events were smaller than protests in Dungannon and counterprotesters were not present at several events, limiting the potential for volatility. Crowd size may have been impacted by a history of informal intergroup engagement (Varshney 2002), with the district's large geographical area also potentially a factor (Assistant Chief Constable (South) and Brigade Commander 3 Infantry Brigade 1980). A long-time resident indicated farming and market cooperation influenced positive Catholic and Protestant relationships and others have cited the cordial relationships between residents of the town of Omagh and the local long-established military encampments (*ibid.*; *Tyrone Constitution* 1972, February 11; Poole 1990).<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, while historically good relations may have

affected residents' interest in protesting, interactions during protests restrained potential escalation.

Both protester and police action contained tensions. At a large march in April 1969, civil rights stewards kept discipline over marchers and 400 police formed lines three deep to separate protesters and counterprotesters and pushed back loyalists trying to break police lines (*Ulster Herald* 1969, April 19). Police remained relatively impartial and even acted against counterprotesters at this and other events (see also *Ulster Herald* 1970, August 15), signaling that state forces would protect protesters. Even after the August 1969 disturbances in which police baton-charged local protesters and fired shots in the air, a few months later a judge described how "relationships between the sections of the community in Omagh...were good" after those two nights (*Tyrone Constitution* 1969, November 14).

Consequently, the army did not raid the town of Omagh when internment was introduced. The area remained on the periphery of major hostilities, and local IRA members were largely oriented toward the outer reaches of and outside the district. The nearest IRA brigade was centered in Dungannon. Its 2nd Battalion did organize around Carrickmore, a district village, but its operational area included three other districts with more polarized towns (Coogan 2002; O'Callaghan 1998; Magee 2011). The IRA was thus more limited in its ability to operate locally, particularly in the security-heavy town of Omagh, and depended on extralocal assistance for operations (Assistant Chief Constable (South) and Brigade Commander 3 Infantry Brigade 1980; O'Callaghan 1998; Headquarters 3 Infantry Brigade 1973a). After an IRA bomb killed five civilians in 1971, two years passed without an IRA murder, with thirteen additional murders occurring through 1976. The IRA did conduct nonlethal bombings of commercial and government buildings, but even this campaign was more limited than elsewhere.

### **LEVELS OF VIOLENCE**

With differences in republican radicalization and outbreak of violence, Dungannon and Omagh experienced divergent reactions. In Dungannon, the IRA threat against Protestant residents instigated loyalist radicalization and security force collusion. This response created a retaliatory cycle of IRA and loyalist violence against civilians perceived

<sup>2</sup> County Tyrone resident, email message to author, 20 January 2013.

to be associated with one side or the other (Valentino 2004). A sectarian, community-wide conflict developed as paramilitaries targeted civilians based on identity and residents, particularly Catholics, refused to support state security efforts given fears of collusion, inadvertently benefiting the paramilitaries. However, in Omagh, the lesser threat produced more limited loyalist radicalization and collusion, containing violence.

### *Dungannon*

In Dungannon, the dynamic of sectarian killings was rooted in the IRA's targeting of local Protestant security forces. Thirteen of the first fifteen murder victims were members of the police and military killed by the IRA. Targeting security forces, even those off duty, was a crucial aspect of IRA local strategy, claiming they were valid targets as crown representatives (Assistant Chief Constable (South) and Brigade Commander 3 Infantry Brigade 1980; Shanahan 2009). Protestants saw attacks on UDR and RUC members as sectarian since they were locally recruited, lived off base, and worked part-time (see Patterson 2010; *Dungannon News & Tyrone Courier* 1976).

Consequently, local loyalists felt the state was unable or unwilling to contain the IRA threat and began a campaign against Catholic civilians intended to defend against the IRA, pressure Catholics to force the IRA to end its campaign, and thwart political compromise (Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights 2003; Headquarters 3 Infantry Brigade 1973c). As a result, loyalists murdered nineteen Catholic civilians. The Ulster Volunteer Force's (UVF) Mid-Ulster Brigade was the most active local paramilitary and depended on their connections in the Glenanne group, comprised of members of the UDR, RUC, UVF, and people with both state security and paramilitary memberships (The Pat Finucane Centre 2013; Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights 2003; Cassel et al. 2006).<sup>3</sup> Glenanne members and firearms were linked to many of the nineteen loyalist murders, and bullets in certain killings were traced to the army (Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights 2003; Cassel et al. 2006; *Tyrone Democrat* 1975, November 27). This collusion between loyalists and security forces sparked IRA responses against security forces and seven Protestant civilians.

<sup>3</sup> UVF and UDA paramilitary membership overlapped in the Dungannon/Armagh area. See The Pat Finucane Centre (2013).

<sup>4</sup> Also, former County Tyrone security force member, interview with author, Northern Ireland, 20 July 2011.

Though many Protestants and Catholics pleaded for peace, the paramilitaries could continue attacks because of the inadvertent effects of civilian self-protection efforts. The state depended on residents to provide intelligence; paramilitaries depended on residents to support them or acquiesce. Many Catholic residents refused to assist in security efforts, accusing the security forces of collusion in murder (*Tyrone Democrat* 1975, November 27; Faul and Murray 1975). Catholics and Protestant residents would not give evidence to directly identify a suspect, and security forces noted how slowly information arrived from the public (Assistant Chief Constable (South) and Brigade Commander 3 Infantry Brigade 1980; Headquarters 3 Infantry Brigade 1976). The IRA also threatened civilians to keep quiet about their activities, and loyalists threatened Protestants not to participate in government community relations' efforts (Headquarters Squadron 16th/5th The Queen's Royal Lancers 1972; Dungannon Community Development Team 1972). Consequently, this environment of alienation, fear, and self-preservation strengthened the paramilitary positions, and these groups murdered twenty-nine civilians based on sectarianism. The conflict pervaded Dungannon and the area became known as the Murder Triangle (*Tyrone Democrat* 1975, August 7).

### *Omagh*

Conversely, Omagh did not experience the reprisal dynamic, with one murder considered retaliatory. Coinciding with the IRA's more limited activities, loyalist activities and collusion were similarly small-scale. Two local newspapers with unionist and nonunionist perspectives had few reports on non-state loyalist activities. Military reports also indicate the UDA and UVF were not very active (Headquarters 3 Infantry Brigade 1973b). Further, there are indications that a Protestant norm against paramilitarism existed (McDonald and Cusack 2004; Gardiner 2008).<sup>4</sup> Collusion within the security forces was not as extensive as in Dungannon, with evidence of conflict between the UDR and other forces (RUC Special Branch and the British Army) (*Ulster Herald* 1974, December 14). Fewer publicized complaints about security force behavior occurred and the reported complaints mainly regarded mistreatment (see, for example, *Ulster Herald* 1975, December 6). Thus, Omagh experienced only one retaliatory civilian murder of a

Catholic politician by loyalists (*Impartial Reporter* 2001). The eighteen local IRA-perpetrated murders were accidental or based on the victim's identity as a current or former security force member. With little sectarian retaliation and on the periphery of more hostile areas, the Omagh district had a relatively low level of violence.

### **ADDITIONAL EVIDENCE OF UNCIVIL ACTION: CIVILIAN DENUNCIATIONS**

Dungannon may also have moved toward violence through the uncivil action of denunciation, in which civilians denounce other civilians to armed actors in order to settle private quarrels (Kalyvas 2006). In this action, civilians provide specific non-public information to armed groups, who use the information to selectively target victims. IRA and loyalist perpetrators specifically targeted nineteen civilians, and given that most of the deaths occurred outside of victims' homes or at their workplaces, other civilians may have provided information such as addresses and schedules. For instance, in the murder of a Catholic couple, activists determined that "[t]he assassins were waiting at the back of their house at midnight. This indicated that they were local people or had been well instructed by local people" given the timing and location (Faul and Murray 1975, 6). In many loyalist murders, the weapons and bullets were tied to the police and military, suggesting that security forces could have provided perpetrators with government information (Joint Committee on Justice, Equality, Defence and Women's Rights 2003; Cassel et al. 2006; *Tyrone Democrat* 1975, November 27). It is unclear how perpetrators obtained private information, but the circumstances of many murders indicate that denunciation may have affected Dungannon's violence. Conversely, the open source data on Omagh's twenty murders does not include evidence that civilians denounced other civilians, and private information would not have been necessary to target any of the victims.

### **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Identifying how actors are jointly involved in the process of escalating or containing violence can offer insights into how to interrupt or slow down escalation. This research has relevance for a range of recent conflict situations, from states that have experienced volatile contention involving protesters and police, such as the United States, Venezuela, and Turkey, to states in which violent episodes have shown evidence of

state collusion with perpetrators, such as Kenya, Burma, and Afghanistan (Kenya National Commission on Human Rights 2008; Human Rights Watch 2011, 2012). The implications of this research may prove useful to policymakers seeking to prevent violent escalation of protests, to influence violence levels in an established conflict, or to implement effective post-conflict reforms.

First, this study determined the importance of state forces maintaining their roles as mediators of conflict. When local security forces have the space to behave in a partisan way and align with radicals, they increase the likelihood of threats to the state. However, if high-level state officials can disrupt and prosecute lower level collusion, they can minimize radicals' strength and the resultant threats. Governments should focus on building more accountable local security institutions, which would not only create disincentives for partisanship but also strengthen officials' identification with their state role relative to other affiliations, further decreasing the potential for collusion.

Second, seemingly small incidents during protests can have big consequences for containing or escalating polarization when they are seen, reported on, and replicated. Actions such as stewards at a rights march forming a barrier between opposing groups or protesters peacefully handing a petition to troops build on each other (*Ulster Herald* 1969; *Ulster Herald* 1971, August 7). Just as security agencies should focus on holding lower level officials accountable, civil resistance leaders can take measures (such as the presence of stewards at every event) to encourage order in their movements and prevent more minor incidents like rock throwing from escalating quickly and contributing to lasting community polarization.

Finally, uncivil action in one community can broaden and prolong the national conflict, so it may be advantageous for any governmental or NGO conflict resolution effort to concentrate resources on particular communities. Because of Dungannon's dynamics, the IRA and loyalists thrived, allowing them to conduct attacks outside the area and contributing to the collapse of efforts toward a political solution. Thus, intervention efforts in a "hot-spot" may have knock-on effects for the larger conflict. If resources are limited, a more concentrated intervention may actually provide a larger contribution to peace than spreading the resources among many areas.

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