Violence and Identity in Northern Ireland
- a preliminary research report

Nils Zurawski, University of Münster, Germany
August 2000 - July 2001

Introduction

Between August 2000 and July 2001, I conducted fieldwork in Derry and Belfast / Northern Ireland, on the subject of violence and identity. Throughout the year I interviewed people with respect to their experiences with physical violence in connection with the ongoing socio-political conflict, also known as the *Troubles*, the term used for the time between 1969 and 1994. I recorded 28 interviews with 55 people (over 20 hours of taped material). I hereby want to thank all the individuals that helped me during my research, ie. these whom I interviewed, all the people that assisted me in contacting individuals for interviews, as well as the academics and community workers that were there to discuss my work and research with me. I also want to thank all the people at **INCORE** in Derry (www.incore.ulst.ac.uk), who hosted me so kindly and the **German Academic Exchange Service** (DAAD, www.daad.de) who provided the funding for this project.

This report intends to highlight some of the findings of this research although it is important to point out that this research is a work in progress. The purpose of this report is not to provide final answers to problems that arose during the research, but rather a paper to reflect on the work and to facilitate further thinking on these issues. Last, but not least, this report is also intended to provide some feedback to the people who were involved.

The researched groups

I interviewed **55** different individuals in **28** separate interviews. I tried to cover as many ‚groups' as I could, to grasp the whole spectrum of experiences and viewpoints on the subject of violence. These groups can be categorised in various ways. Many, if not all of them, belong to more than one of the following categories:

- **Paramilitaries / ex-prisoners**
  - Republican
  - Loyalist   - UVF
                 - UDA/UFF
- **Community activists**
  - Republican
  - Loyalist
- **Victims**
  - with affiliation to paramilitaries
  - without affiliation to paramilitaries
- **State**
  - RUC
  - Prison Officers
- **Members of the Orange Order**
- **Youth** (14-18)
  - Catholic
  - Protestant
- **Community Restorative Justice Projects**
  - Republican/Catholic
  - Loyalist/Protestant

I have established these categories to orientate myself and to find a tool for analysing the interviews and structuring statements. The categories do not represent existing statistical entities, but are based on my research.

Aim of the study

My aim was to collect oral histories from both, people who have experienced violence and those who have no personal involvement with violence, and their assesments of violent events/incidents. My intention was to understand the role, function and historical development (personal as well as communal) of violence in conflict in general and in Northern Ireland in particular ... and thus to contribute to the discussion of alternative ap-proaches for dealing with conflict and the impact of violence, ie. to find non-violent answers and strategies towards violence and political and social conflict in general.

Findings

The data has yielded a number of interesting issues and questions which will be examined here. My approach was to look at the material in terms of common issues or themes that ran through all or many of them. On the one hand individual accounts of the *Troubles*, they can be seen as a collective set of data, which shares similar themes from different angles and per-spectives. On the other hand the different experiences of violence can be subsumed under these different themes, thereby pointing out particular problems on which further discussion might be focused or on which policy recom-mendation could be made.

Order and control

The loss of order and the wish and will to regain or maintain control appear in almost every account. Despite this it has to be stated that the objectives and the desired means differ quite considerably.
The state and its agents, most noteably the police and sec-urity forces see the loss of order as being caused by the rise of crime which they attribute to paramilitary organisations. Paramilitary organisations est-ablished surrogate policing str-uctures within their respective com-munities which threat-ened the security of the state. Control had to be regained over the paramilitaries and their destructive actions against the state and to fill the vacuum that was produced by the almost total loss of authority and respect towards the state among many people from republican and loyalist communities.

On the other hand, the paramilitaries and other people that could be associated with either side of the communal divide, likewise complain about a loss of control in their communities and in the state in general. It is the paramilitaries and others in the community that try to tackle crime, like drug-trafficing and anti-social behaviour, such as joyriding, harassment of communities and other, within their structures and authorities. The report by Knox and Monaghan on *Informal Criminal Justice Systems in NI* (2000) gives some insight into the custom of punishment beatings and shootings, which are part of the alternative justice systems.

Order is felt to have been eradicated through the vacu-um created by the Troubles. and people call for a restoration of order and a control of the criminal/anti-social elements. As there is a question as to who shall be trusted with this task, the issue in itself can not be resolved and this remains an obstacle in the peace process. Order that has been established by the paramilitaries means a loss of control to the police and security forces. Violence seems always to be associated with either the loss of control or the restoration of order depending on the perspective. This theme highlights an important pro-blem, created by the *Troubles*, which is intrinsically linked to violence as the prime means to restore order and gain control.

It seems apparent that it is not so much the issue of policing itself that is the most important, but the com-munities wishes for and per-ceptions of order and control and their ways of dealing with it. This has to be addressed and acknowledged by the police and other state agencies in order to find solutions to violence and to improve the community-state relationships.

Community Restorative Justice programmes (CRJ) on both sides of the communal divide are trying to find new ways of establishing an order and to act as mediators between the police and other statutory agencies and the paramilitaries and their informal justice. Their approach also aims at em-powering and strengthening the communities, as it is them that suffer the violence from both sides.

Criminality

Normally a rather uncontested area in terms of what is criminal and what is not, criminality becomes a ‚hot‘ issue in Northern Ireland. Closely linked to the theme of order and control, it is about perceptions of others and self and thus a way to legitimise violent action against or in the name of a group. Although criminality is a central issue in many of the interviews, there are a wide range of issues associated with it. Within the communities, ie. when asking people about their day to day life, crime is seen as a problem that is yet to be solved. Young people have to take the blame for most of it. Taking on these complaints are the para-militaries who in turn try to restore order and control by means of violence. The police however are deemed incom-petent and excluded in most working class areas, which leaves the communities largely (as the police are not entirely absent) with the informal justice systems.

Whilst the paramilitaries and the people in local communities are identifying certain individuals as criminals, the police and other state agencies regard the paramilitaries as criminal subjects, thus denying their overall goal and original purpose. Action against cri-minals then legitimises vio-lence against this

group and their environment. A personal or institutional responsibility cannot develop as the action of these 'criminals' is not seen in terms of a reaction, but again as a threat against an order, which has to be restored by the state, albeit with drastic means. Again violence is disguised as order, as a necessity, which again leaves only victims and deepens the already existing cleavages.

Defense and retaliation

Violence, although pre-emminent throughout the 30 years of the *Troubles,* was mainly seen as a means to defend one's community ag-ainst attacks from the British, the Loyalists or the IRA, depending on the perspective. Attacks, bombings and killings from the paramilitaries ori-ginate in this narrative of defence, as such acts were seen as retribution and therefore justified. Also the state, ie. the British and local authorities, felt that they and their order were under attack and reacted accordingly. Arguments of collective self-defense, although individually justified and not denied, become a difficult obstacle in the process of negotiating a peace and ac-ompanying pro-cedures to stre-ngthen any inter-com-unal re-lationships on a political and social level.

Arguments for violence as de-fence bypass the issue of vio-lence and responsibility, both individually and collec-tively. Active violence becomes jus-tified and is no longer seen as a form of neglecting human rights, or simply as wrong. It is to note here that the state sees violence as 'necessary' force and thus legitimise its use.

The relationship between Loy-alists and the state does not invoke the theme of defense and retaliation very often. Their relationship is more concerned with the issues of order and control and the related theme of criminality.

Defense and retaliation prac-tices always leave behind vic-tims, who are also caught in between these

arguments. To be victim it is generally neces-sary to identify a perpetrator, almost always identified as a collectivity, whether it be Republicans, Loyalists, or the state (police or army). The competition of victims is the result, as violence is seen as being acted upon oneself by another group. A mutual un-derstanding between the vic-tims to be part of a group of pe-ople suffering the same pro-blems, leaves them without the possibility to see beyond their hurt and empathise with each others suffer separately. Re-aliation may become part of their thinking as well, al-though with different means and not necessarily in the form of direct violence - therefore ex-cluding the possibility of cre-ating any basis for a mutual acknowledgement on a collect-ve level.

It is especially in relation to the victims that the theme of justice is emerging. The search for truth as a need for justice and reconciliation represents a central issue, which at the moment too often stands behind much political rhetoric and the structures of violence. But without truth and justice of some sort, there will be no solution for a cross communal peace.

Community - collectivity - individual

References to the 'community' were made by almost all interview partners. Being ‚under attack' or 'being neg-lected', were seen in the context of one's community, which differed in scope and reach ac-cording to the event, per-spective or the indivdual. The problem that surfaced here was the relationship between in-dividuals and a collective, either defined by that individual or by others and forced onto the individual. Phrases such as "my com-munity has been under attack, therefore I had to......" or "they acted against the [their own, our, that particular] community, so we had to deal with it....." were often offered.

Although much respect was occasionally given to people from

‚the other side' in-dividually, there was almost always a mutual aversion, mis-trust and sometimes hatred at the collective level. Individual acts are mostly seen in a collective context. Para-mil-itary violence against the state or other paramilitaries is argued for with reference to the community and the attacks they were under - 'defenders of the community'. Violence within their own groups was used to gain control and restore a collective order. This order was threatened by any individual act and thus in-dividuals are never perceived as single entities, but rather as collective agents.

Whilst respect is expressed in-dividually, violence is seen as collective act, emerging from a group and as being inherent in this group. This also became clear from non-paramilitaries, except that for them it was easy to blame it on the per definition violent groups, without re-cognising or acknowledging that they use the same line of argument.

State agents, such as police and prison officers, are generally perceived as a collectivity and not always met with an individual respect. Even when the respect is given, it was expressed in terms of respect for the community of police or prison officers. In turn they positioned themselves against groups, especially the para-militaries and saw their duty in the name of the community, referring to the law abiding people on all sides. Prison officers more than police officers saw themselves as ac-ting directly for the state, while the police more often expressed to work for the people in the communities, which they (the police) protected against the 'criminals' and or para-militaries.

Reference to a community and the emphasis on the collective makes it easy to argue for violence, as it gives the impression that violence ori-ginated totally from within such an entity and cannot be individually accounted for. Thus responsibility is trans-cribed from

the individual to the collective and sidelined.

Conclusion

It became clear in the discussion of the identified themes that none of them can be discussed in isolation, but must be seen in the wider context. Nonetheless, by iden-tifying these themes, I wanted to draw attention to fun-damental issues that are relevant to all groups and which also underlie more specific debates about policing, reconciliation, trust, crim-inality and social order and control (eg. parades, anti-social behaviour, drug related crime).

Violence is hidden behind these issues, disguised as a just retaliation, a necessary means to gain control or restore order, to prevent a public disorder, to tackle criminality. Taking responsibility and admitting that violence was chosen for exactly what it was, becomes difficult. This cannot be seen as an intended strategy, but an argumentative line, which allows its use while at the same time allowing negotiations on an individual level, where violence is less prominent and easier to discuss.

For further information, please contact me under:

Dr. Nils Zurawski
Feldhoopstücken 43a
22529 Hamburg
Germany
tel. +49 - 40 - 58 978 370/371
fax. +49 - 40 - 58 978 369
zurawsk@uni-muenster.de