My silence about the terrorists was only partly cowardice

Twenty years on from the SAS shootings in Gibraltar, memories in Belfast are selective

- **Ian Jack**
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About this article

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Twenty years ago a lethal chain of events began in Gibraltar that ended 13 days later in Belfast with eight people dead and 68 injured. It was one of the most vicious periods in the Northern Ireland conflict and none of three protagonists - Britain, Irish republicans, and Ulster loyalists - emerged with any credit. Briefly, this is what happened. On March 6 in Gibraltar, SAS troops shot dead Dan McCann, Seán Savage and Mairéad Farrell, who were all members of an IRA active service unit. On March 16 at their funeral in Milltown cemetery, Belfast, a loyalist gunman, Michael Stone, fired shots and lobbed grenades into the crowd, killing three and wounding many others. On March 19 at the same cemetery, the crowd attending the burial of Kevin Brady, one of Stone's victims, hauled two out-of-uniform British corporals, Derek Woods and David Howes, from their car. The two were then stripped naked, beaten, and finally shot dead by the IRA.

To be in Belfast and remember all this in the week of Ian Paisley's resignation announcement is to thank God for everyone, including the reverend, whose political compromises and horse-trades have secured a way of living in which people can see, if they choose to, that part of their history as a strange, disabling frenzy; an illness that has passed.

In fact, only Republican West Belfast chooses to remember: a selective memory, political memories usually are. Sinn Féin has organised several events to mark what it calls the Gibraltar/Milltown Martyrs Anniversary. On Thursday, several hundred people stood in the middle of West Belfast's roads holding black flags and pictures of the dead from the SAS and Michael Stone shootings. The same evening several hundred more packed a hall at St Mary's College to hear four panellists discuss Gibraltar. Twenty years ago I wrote a long piece for Granta magazine which did its best to examine the evidence set before the inquest into the deaths of McCann, Savage and Farrell and, like the Death on The Rock documentary, cast doubt on the British government's version of events. Because of that I was invited to take part in the debate at St Mary's.

When I saw the word "martyrs" I thought twice about going. On the one hand, the three IRA volunteers were unarmed and given no warning nor opportunity to surrender when they were shot - in this they were like Jean Charles de Menezes being pumped full of bullets at Stockwell tube station; nor (as the intelligence services surely knew) had they yet planted a bomb in Gibraltar. On the other hand, unlike De Menezes, they certainly had a bomb waiting in a car in Spain and nobody has ever denied that they intended to use it to kill and maim. The European court of human rights may have got the balance right when in 1995 it ruled that Britain had breached the convention by excessive use of force, while at the same time denying any claims for damages or costs, as the three had been engaged in an act of terrorism.

Twenty years ago I saw that a shutter came down if I mentioned "the other hand" to the relatives of the dead. Savage's sister, Mary, Farrell's brother, Niall, and her

boyfriend, Séamus Finucane - whose lawyer brother Pat was murdered by loyalists the following year - were the most direct and honest of people but what interested them was British acts rather than republican intentions.

Jonathan Aitken was prescient in 1988 when he said that the price of reconciling what he called "effective counter-terrorism" to the rule of law was "a huge smokescreen of humbug". Facts hardly mattered to the inquest; to secure a verdict of lawful killing all the government had to do was demonstrate that the SAS unit that killed the three had "a reasonable belief" that a bomb existed in Gibraltar which could be detonated at the press of a button - therefore ruling out a cry of "Stop" and the production of handcuffs.

In conversation, to go beyond contesting the sometimes-incredible evidence didn't appeal to the bereaved. There could be no "what ifs" about the success of a bombing because the potential perpetrators had died before they could act and were to be mourned as the innocent rather than reproved as the guilty, supposing reproof existed as possibility among people who believed they were fighting a war.

The intention - the bomb stored in Spain - has by now almost vanished from republican memories and I didn't raise it with the audience on Thursday night. They were polite and attentive and they had come to remember and grieve; Niall, Séamus and Mary were there, and many others who had known the dead. My silence came only partly out of cowardice and respect. The truth was that there was hardly time. Joe Austin, the Sinn Féin councillor who had accompanied the bodies back from Gibraltar, gave a moving but epic account of his journey. And then it was the turn of Carmen Proetta, the best witness to the killing of Farrell and McCann - whose testimony to the Death on The Rock team made her the primary candidate for government-inspired disinformation and libel, published mainly by the Sun and the Sunday Times.

For a few weeks in 1988, she was infamous. "The Tart of Gib" was the Sun's headline. How many of us have thought about her since? Frailer now, she flew from Spain with her son and made a short speech. "I told the truth about what I saw. I paid a very high price for that. It destroyed me. I'm not the same person anymore," said Proetta, who drew the warmest and most sympathetic applause. Then we were all shaking hands with Gerry Adams, who had been sitting quietly in the second row.

In such a situation, the attractions of republicanism are easy to see. Sinn Féin is "the movement" and therefore confidently going forward; a partner in government; on the front foot and not the back. In West Belfast, especially, it runs the show through webs of old and often military connections. The seats at St Mary's College were filled by families who knew one another well enough to make jokes about each other, suggesting the kind of intimate city life that has vanished in England. The Irish language is popular in schools and evening classes; there may now be more Gaelic speakers in West Belfast than Dublin. Money has been a great balm. The local paper, the Andersonstown News, was founded as a radical sheet in 1972 by the Andersonstown Central Civic Resistance Committee. Today, after considerable and controversial government investment, it's a thick bi-weekly brimming with property ads for terraced houses off the Falls Road for around £200,000.

All this, and yet Belfast remains an introverted city split into "nationalist" and "loyalist" settlements by "peace walls", where in the west you can make a pilgrimage to martyrs monuments and murals like inspecting the Stations of the Cross. Daniel, a young Sinn Féin activist, took me round the circuit - Milltown, Bombay Street, the gable end showing Bobby Sands - and displayed a lively and informed knowledge of every death. Fascinating, but the theme of grievance and injury stretching back to 1798 was also claustrophobic, like looking down a long tunnel of woe.

We went for some supper and I asked Daniel if the organising committee for the Gibraltar-Milltown Martyrs Anniversary had ever considered extending an invitation to the friends and relations of the British corporals Woods and Howe, whose deaths ended the cycle of March, 1988. Might not reconciliation be a more forward-looking programme than martyrdom? He said, "Yes, we could have done. Maybe we should have done." Perhaps next time they will.

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