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ABSTRACT

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**Abstentionism, Political Resistance, Armed Resistance
and Cooperation: the Strategies of the Irish National
Movement in Northern Ireland (1921-1998)**

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1. The Subject, the Key Questions and the Novelty of the Dissertation

The subject of the essay is the most important remaining problem of the Irish national question after 1921, the partition of Ireland and the Irish reaction to that both by the governments and the political forces of the motherland as well as the parties of the Catholic minority. The creation of the Irish Free State in 1921 meant only a partial solution for the Irish national question, as the 1921 Anglo-Irish Agreement, while it included all of Ireland, gave an option to Northern Ireland to opt out. Thus the „Catholic majority against the Protestant minority and the British” equation was transformed into a „Catholic minority against the Protestant majority (and the British)” equation within the smaller Northern Irish space.

The dissertation, through the exploration of certain key events aims to answer two basic questions:

- 1) How did the Irish Free State/Republic contribute to the defence of the interests of the Catholic minority, and what opportunities did it have to facilitate the attainment of the declared national goal, the unification of Ireland?
- 2) How did the strategies of the Irish national movement in Northern Ireland contribute to the defence of the interests of the Catholic minority and the attainment of the national goal?

The dissertation aims to explore these questions through analysing three historic traditions/strategies. The first one is the constitutional nationalist strategy, which aims for a negotiated settlement, through cooperation within the political system, in a peaceful manner. In my view it includes British-Irish diplomacy, and the Belfast-Dublin negotiations too. The second is the Republican “physical force” tradition that aims for the desired end-state through the means of violent resistance. The last one is passive resistance, which employs abstentionism from the political system, as well as the boycott of state institutions and civic resistance as a tool.

The timeframe of the dissertation is the de facto birth of Northern Ireland in June 1921 and the April 10 1998 Belfast Agreement, which ended the possibility of a military solution. The novelty of the dissertation lies in the fact that to the best of my knowledge, there is no similar analysis from the viewpoint of Irish national strategies encompassing this whole period.

2. The Structure of the Dissertation

Beyond the introduction and the conclusion, the dissertation consists of thirteen chapters that follow each other, with one exception, in a chronological order. Each explores a separate period in the Irish national strategies concerning Northern Ireland. The first chapter examines key questions of the thesis, shows its focus and terminology. The second gives an overview of the historical roots of the three major Irish traditions: constitutional nationalism, armed resistance and passive resistance, and explores the perceptions of the Irish elite concerning Northern Ireland, the protestant population, and Great-Britain. The third chapter deals with the situation after the birth of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State until the failure of the Border Commission in 1925. The fourth part deals with the period between the two world wars, with a special emphasis on the Northern Irish state from the perspective of the Catholic minority. The Second World War itself, with its unique opportunities for Dublin,

is dealt with in a separate chapter. Part six analyses the unfruitful period of the Irish national strategy between 1945-63 and shows how the failure of the propaganda campaign initiated by the Irish Republic led to new initiatives in both North and South. The topic of chapter seven is the short, but very eventful period between 1963-1969. This is the promising but ultimately unsuccessful era of the civil rights movement and Belfast-Dublin rapprochement, which reshapes the relations both within Northern Ireland and between North and South. Chapter 8 explores the violence at the end of the sixties, early seventies, the rise of new Catholic forces and their strategies. Chapter 9 is exceptional in a sense, since it breaks the chronological order to introduce the international dimensions of the Irish national strategy. The subject of the dissertation cannot be isolated from the outside world; it has, because of the extremely important role of the American Irish community, and later of the American diplomacy, a very important American connection. Because of this, that chapter deals mostly, but not exclusively with the United States, it also has analyses on the role of the Soviet Union, the Vatican, Libya and certain international organisations. Chapter 10 is also different from the others as it covers in great detail a relatively short period, a year leading to the Sunningdale Agreement, and the following five months. Sunningdale and its failure has a special message related to the key questions of the dissertation, which explains the thorough attention. The following politically less intensive six years are covered in Chapter 11, which contains, among other issues, a section highlighting the Protestant side, the viewpoints of the majority population. Chapter 12 explores the politically most difficult years of the whole examined period, starting from the 1980-81 hunger strikes, which is at the same time also the era of the first signs of the peace strategy. The peace process itself is dealt with in two chapters, and lacking archive sources, mostly based on the literature, memoirs and the press. The conclusion summarises the findings of the dissertation and tries to answer the key questions introduced in Chapter 1.

3. Findings of the Dissertation

In my view the dissertation has proved that the Irish Free State/Republic had very limited opportunities to integrate Northern Ireland, or even to defend the Catholic minority in the period between 1921-1939.

Between 1921-1923, military solution was made impossible by the presence of the British Army and the internal divisions of the Irish Free State. The most the armed strategy could have achieved was no more than keeping or taking some border areas, but most probably it would have led to the ethnic cleansing of the Catholic enclaves by the Protestants. The Irish Civil War was not about the Northern question, but it had a close connection to the problem of partition as it have helped the strengthening of the Northern state's position greatly. The death of Michael Collins had taken off the agenda the solution of the question by the armed forces of the Southern state, military means were ruled out by all Irish governments after that. Between 1921-1925 diplomacy was not promising Dublin more than the inclusion of smaller areas in the motherland by the Boundary Commission.

After the end of this volatile period, between 1925-1939, Dublin had no chance at all to change the status quo. Only the Second World War gave a real opportunity for the solution of the national question, the unification of Ireland. It is hard to say that the British offer for unification was realizable, but it is very likely that the position of the minority would have improved considerably due to the common war effort. It is an other question however, what price the Free State would have had to pay in war casualties. The propagandistic policy making of the forties and fifties was based on the wrong reading of both the international situation and the internal situation of Northern Ireland. It did not improve, in fact, it has

worsened the situation of the minority and the chances of the unification. The attempt to build bridges by Seán Lemass in the 1960s, however, was very promising. It could not have changed even on the long term the fact of the partition, but it contributed to the improvement of the situation of the minority.

After 1945, Ireland could not break the unionist resistance due to the power deficit vis-a-vis the United Kingdom, and there was no such historical vis major as the rise of the Third Reich. The development of democracy after the Second World War was even more important, as those times ended forever when there was a possibility for agreement over the heads of the two Northern Irish communities. The consent of all four centres was needed for an agreement, and all of them could block it, except perhaps the Irish Republic. It is hard to imagine a scenario, up until the end of the period examined in the dissertation, when London, Belfast and the Catholic minority agree on a United Ireland or power sharing, and Dublin vetoes it. Consequently the Irish Republic had a smaller role than previously between the 1960s and 1998, the national strategy was formulated to a larger and larger degree by the Northern minority as was the case with the initiative of John Hume to launch the New Ireland Forum, or the Hume-Adams process.

To the Catholic minority of Northern Ireland the period of 1921-1960s was the one, when its possibilities to act were very limited. From the strategies of the national minority, the easiest to judge is abstentionism within the wider strategy of passive resistance. In my view the research has proved, that the abstention from political life, the Griffith plan, was based on shaky foundations. The „Hungarian policy” could not be successful even in the context of a 32-county Ireland, as Dublin never had such a weight within the British Empire, as Pest-Buda had within the Habsburg Empire. After 1921 the situation turned for the worse, since the Catholics consisted only a third of the population of Northern Ireland. The failure of abstentionism, which was largely maintained from the birth of Northern Ireland until the 1960s as the most important strategy, was obvious from the 1920s. The Catholic community’s lack of participation at the creation of the system, and failure to form an effective political party further reduced its room for manoeuvre against the discriminating state-power. This room for manoeuvre was of course very small with the exception of a few years after the birth of Northern Ireland, as the protestant power was not ready for compromise. The other element of passive resistance, civilian disobedience led by the NICRA and PD was more successful in applying pressure and contributed to the decrease of state discrimination against the Catholics in the 1960s. But its usefulness was restricted by two factors. Civilian disobedience needed a certain level of democracy to be successful, which was not at hand before 1960, and after large scale violence broke out, it lost much of its leverage, as the loyalists responded with more powerful methods.

The most controversial is the usefulness of armed resistance measured against the strategy of constitutional nationalism. The political goal of the IRA, the unification of Ireland by violent methods, was unrealistic during the whole period of 1921-1998. At the same time it is a fact worthy of further exploration regarding the usefulness of armed resistance, that three years after 1969 there was no more autonomous Unionist-dominated Northern Ireland, and 5 years later, even if for a short period of time, the Catholics became part of the government. Republican resistance achieved (up to a large extent) for what the Nationalist Party was fighting for fifty years. It is an other question that the measures improving the plight of the minority, then the fall of protestant one-party rule and the power sharing system of Sunningdale was not the desired United Ireland, and the IRA did not accept the partiality of its victory, but still violence played a primary role in starting the process. It is hard to overestimate the importance of Sunningdale to the Catholic community, as the Executive created by it, with all its failings, was the first government of Northern Ireland in which the minority had a real voice. The violence, however, lost its instrumental role during and after

the Sunningdale process, the IRA was propelled forward by its momentum and the spiral of violence. At the end of the 1970's and early 1980's, the Irish Republican Army had no real plan to achieve the national goals. It placed its hope in the „long war” strategy, hoping that the British will be exhausted by it, and will withdraw. The long war however, as Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness has realized in the 1980s, was leading nowhere. Republican violence, however, did play a role in the 1985 Anglo-Irish Agreement and the peace process after 1990.

As for the strategy of constitutional nationalism, sheer parliamentarism had very little significance within Northern Ireland. Due to the facts of demography, the Catholic minority was pushed to the role of eternal opposition. Parliamentarism had even smaller impact in relation to London, than within the North. During the whole period between 1921-1998, the Catholics could play the (partial) role of kingmaker only once in Westminster, when in 1973/74 (with 319 seats) the Labour Party only had a majority of 3 MPs. The Unionists were the balance of power in Westminster far more numerous times. For example, the situation of Prime Minister Edward Heath was made untenable by anti-Sunningdale loyalists in 1974.

The reason for the relative failure of parliamentarism and the relative success of armed resistance was that within the four-centre conflict, the least compromising were the Unionists with their position of maintaining the status quo at all costs. They resisted powersharing forcefully, and a United Ireland categorically. If one side is not ready to make compromises, there is only a little room for settlement. In the Irish context it meant that Unionist/Loyalist resistance could thwart any compromise. The equation which sealed the fate of the Sunningdale Agreement was simple: while almost any change was a gain for the Catholics, even the smallest compromise gesture was a loss for the Protestants in comparison with their former power monopoly. The role of the violence of the IRA was that it raised the cost of this practical and symbolic leadership role to the Protestant elite, forcing it to consider if it was more beneficial to have an agreement and share power. Passive resistance could not achieve this, since the Unionist elite was not disturbed by the lack of democratic legitimization of Stormont.

In my view the dissertation has proved that even thirty years of war and the economic degradation of the province was not enough to pressurize the Unionists to make a meaningful compromise: for that a strong coalition of forces was needed. In this coalition, as part of the pan-nationalist strategy, we can find Dublin, the Northern constitutional nationalism, the Republicans and the Irish Americans. In a sense, the Blair government was also part of the coalition, as unlike the Conservatives, they had no emotional/political links to the Unionists. It is clear from the results of the research that without the political courage of Tony Blair and London's firmness, it would have been impossible to break the resistance of the Protestant community.

The Belfast Agreement is the result of the process initiated by Gerry Adams, but it is neither the victory of Irish Republicanism, nor of Unionism. It is a compromise between them, which is closest to the programme of John Hume's constitutional Irish nationalism. This is the programme of the equality of the Irish community within Northern Ireland, even if the Republicans openly aim to build the United Ireland of the future on it. The fact, that the road is theoretically open for that, is an important symbolic victory in itself for the Irish.

The dissertation has also proved, that the Irish strategy (both the constitutional and the „physical force” type) used the internationalisation of the conflict well to advance its aims. By far the most important role was played by the United States, but the role of the Vatican and Libya was also important. The European context was significant, but it would be a mistake to overestimate it. The European integration could not answer the conflict in itself, but from the Irish viewpoint, it played an important and positive role.