The IRA Regrets...

The shooting of two Australians by the IRA in Holland at the end of May was a sharp reminder that there are still parts of Europe where neither peace nor democracy can be taken for granted. In fact the bewildering changes that have taken place in Eastern Europe should serve the useful purpose of focussing attention on the sore points of the West, of which Northern Ireland remains the most obvious example.

As the province prepares for the commemoration of the 300th anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne on July 12th, it is all too easy to see the conflict in Northern Ireland as immune from outside influence, stuck in its own time-frame and with unchanging political cleavages beneath the ebb and flow of the violence. The reactions to Roermond reinforced this static view of the situation. Mrs Thatcher stated bluntly (and inaccurately) that "the IRA are now indiscriminately killing men, women and children". The London Daily Star described them as "vermin". From the other side came the equally predictable and chillingly cynical response that the two Australians were the unfortunate casualties of a colonial war between the IRA and British troops.

It is an illusion, however, that the dreadful stalemate, punctuated by outbursts of abuse and grotesque self-righteousness on all sides, is necessarily permanent. Beneath the veneer of "stability" (which at the moment means around 100 deaths every year), forces can be detected at work which could cut the ground from under the feet of all the extremist players in Northern Ireland - Republican, Unionist and British alike.

The conflict has typically been portrayed as either a struggle against colonialism (by Republicans), part of an international campaign against terrorism (Unionists and successive British governments) or an incomprehensible religious battle among the "mad Irish" (by a large section of the British population). Now, however, and particularly in the light of Eastern Europe, such formulations, always inadequate, are in danger of being rendered completely redundant by several different factors.

One is democracy. The present troubles in Northern Ireland were sparked off by the Civil Rights marches of 1968, which themselves were partly inspired by student demonstrations in the United States and Western Europe and by the Prague Spring. Much of the blatant discrimination against Catholics which the marchers decried has been eliminated in the last 20 years, thanks to the removal of the Unionist Party from power. Now new events in Prague and elsewhere are showing up the progress which still needs to be made if Northern Ireland is to be a part of the new democratic Europe.

The fact that Northern Ireland is part of the United Kingdom, which is a democracy', does not mean that its people are governed democratically, even by Britain's flawed standards. Both Catholics and Protestants in the province are coming to realise that they will shortly be among the least adequately represented people in Europe. They elect 17 MPs to the Westminster parliament, none of whom belong to mainland political parties, and who therefore have little input into fundamental national issues such as the economy. Nor do they have a direct influence on legislation specifically concerned with Northern Ireland, legislation which is not even subject to the normal parliamentary committee procedure.

Since the institution of direct rule from Westminster in 1972, there has been no provincial assembly with any real power, while local government has been forced to surrender just about every function more important than garbage collection. This shameful lack of genuine representation is at last beginning to exercise some minds in new directions. Some Unionists, equally as disenfranchised as the Catholics, are beginning to consider independence for Northern Ireland as a serious alternative to their beloved union with Britain.

While this in itself is hardly a promising option for the Catholic minority, it is at least evidence of the gradual disintegration of old ways of thinking about the problem. There are also moves in the British Labour party to persuade it to organise and stand candidates in the province, as the Tories have recently started to do. Labour, however, is reluctant to compromise its long-term goal of a united Ireland in exchange for meaningful representation in the here and now, and is unwilling to stand against the nationalist Social Democratic and Labour Party because of the first-past-the-post electoral system. Thus the growing support within the party for proportional representation (and other constitutional changes) could prove to be another unexpected factor in the Northern Ireland equation.

At the same time, the accelerating integration of Western Europe will have a significant impact on both Northern Ireland and the Republic. Despite the romanticisation of the Republican cause by many on the Left, the 'actually existing' Republic remains one of the most reactionary countries in Europe, its government still shackled to the Catholic Church in a way long since left behind even by Italy and Spain. In 1986 its people voted four to one against the limited legalisation of divorce. Anti-abortion dogma is written into the constitution; all contraceptives require a doctor's prescription.

Such conservative positions can only be ameliorated by the moves towards a 'Social Charter' for Europe, and the adoption of laws conforming to minimum European standards. Ireland, whose woeful economy relies heavily on EEC farming subsidies, cannot afford not to change, however reluctantly. Social bigotry flourishes...
among Northern Ireland's Protestant ideologies too - homosexuality was only recently legalised in the province - and the secularisation of the laws of both the UK and Ireland under European influence will be a far more powerful factor in uniting Irish people across religious divides than any political or military campaigns.

The effects of these external influences will be long-term and gradual. Yet they represent the possibility of changing the terms of the debate on Ireland from the tired arguments about the political status of the North towards long-neglected questions of civil rights and social justice for people in both parts of the island.

Given these circumstances it's interesting to reflect on the levels of support for the most intransigent 'political' positions, represented by the IRA and the British government. Sinn Fein's vote has dropped below 10% in the North and to derisory levels in the Republic, making their claim to somehow represent 'the people' of Ireland entirely fraudulent.

On the other hand, opinion polls in Britain show regular majorities in favour of withdrawal from Northern Ireland. These two facts taken together, as well as the disillusions among Unionists with their marginalised position seem to suggest that the time is right for all parties concerned to reassess their ossified positions.

In practice, this means the Irish Republic renouncing its claim to the territory of Northern Ireland and examining its own blighted political culture; Unionists recognising the genuine fears and aspirations of Northern Catholics; and Britain according people in Northern Ireland the same democratic rights as everyone else in the UK.

No matter where the lines are drawn on the map, Northern Irish Catholics and Protestant have to co-exist in the future. If they are to do so peacefully, the debate needs to be about concrete issues such as desegregating schools and ways to make local democracy work rather than 'political solutions' and 'defeating terrorism'. Although appalling events like Roermond would seem to preclude any optimism about an early end to the cycle of violence, the faint signs in the background are that Irish politics may be about to be dragged kicking and screaming into the 20th century.

Mike Ticher.

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Romanian Holiday

Four short months after the dictatorship's fall, Romania's voters legitimised its successor with an overwhelming majority.

The ruling Front for National Salvation's (FNS) lopsided victory on May 20 is a severe blow for the democracy movement here. Out of step with a national consciousness permeated by the logic of the old regime, the activists must now rethink their long-term strategy. Extremist tendencies within their ranks, however, jeopardise the movement's potential as a progressive force in the country's fragile civil society.

The democracy movement is a continuation of the revolution hijacked by the former old guard as President Nicolae Ceaucescu attempted to flee the country. At first only a couple of hundred students remained in the streets to protest at the Front's spurious seizure of power. The numbers soon swelled when the FNS moved from a provisional coalition of dissidents and intellectuals to a party dominated by former apparatchiks, the old state mechanisms still being behind it.

By early May, daily demonstrations packed Bucharest's University Square. Hunger strikers and encamped activists occupied the central intersection, draping the area with anti-Front banners and artwork. Around their sunburned necks hung placards with the label FNS president Ion Iliescu has assigned them - Golan, or hooligan.

The Golans' chief objective, to ban former Securitate (Ceaucescu's secret police) and nomenclature from the election, was a constructive attempt to make a clean break with the past.

In the activists' first attempt at grassroots organising and coalition building, the 'revolution's flag bearers rallied around the Timisoara Proclamation, a petition demanding the purge of the old apparatus, civil rights and reconciliation with the national minorities. The opposition amassed several million signatures and the support of hundreds of political and cultural organisations for the document.

Yet the movement, concentrated in Bucharest and Timisoara, has been unable to reach the rural population or establish broad solidarity with the working class. "Twenty million people woke up on December 24 with lilacs as a Christmas present", noted one demonstrator. For those who never took to the streets, the marginally improved food and energy supplies appeared the tangible result of the Front's takeover. In the countryside, concepts of democracy and political opposition are as uninformed as before the revolution. The 'bad father'
Ceaucescu was simply replaced by the 'good father' Iliescu.

But the Front's years are numbered, as Romania orients itself to a political culture more in tune with its past than reform communism. The fledgling democracy movement could offer one alternative. At the same time, the new emphasis on nationalist-religious values points in another direction, one with wide potential appeal here. The ideology has deep roots in Romania. It found its clearest expression in the movement's inter-war period which culminated in the fascist regime of the 'forties.

Among the democratic movement's troubling features, no positive program is under discussion to replace the despised communists. "Down with the Front! Down with the Securitate! Down with communism!" the chants and speeches repeat over and over. Other themes, such as the environment, the economy or social problems are conspicuously absent from debate.

The one-track campaign has prevented a constructive social dialogue from opening new space within the public forum. Intellectuals and student leaders, for example, have yet to meet. The preoccupation with 'anti' themes has bred a hate psychology that could easily find less deserving victims once the Front's day has come.

Though still beneath the surface, the political vacuum within the movement has been insidiously filled by conservative values suppressed - as well as manipulated - during the stalinist era. Behind the democratic facade, the demonstrators' animosity toward the government is no less fuelled by the Front's comparatively mild nationalist rhetoric and secularism.

The religious outburst followed the revolution in reaction to the amoral politics of the dictatorship, "It's fashionable now to be religious," said one student, echoing the newfound faith throughout the opposition. While the converts distance themselves from the Orthodox Church hierarchy that collaborated with the fascist and communist governments alike, they embrace the implicitly anti-modern, authoritarian ethic of the church philosophy.

The nationalist impulse surfaced in full force after the Tirgu Mures events in April when ethnic Hungarians and Romanians clashed, leaving three people dead. The violence unleashed a storm of nationalism and anti-Hungarian sentiment, encouraged by the distorted coverage of every major newspaper. The blind patriotism is the same that Ceaucescu so skilfully nurtured - only now it has room for concrete expression.

The 'Hungary complex' is most acute in the more ethnically homogeneous regions of Moldavia and Wallachia (capital Bucharest), that lack the experience of multi-ethnic co-existence. The vast majority of activists there are convinced that Transylvanian Hungarians have separatist designs backed by the Hungarian government. The distrust has perpetuated a Romanian chauvinism directed against the minority and hostility toward their demands for cultural rights.

The nationalist fervour has also drawn the movement closer to extremist political groups. Most of the protesters support the centre-right National Liberal Party. Simultaneously, roughly half the Bucharest students express sympathy with the neofascist organisation Vatra Romaneasca. This Transylvanian-based organisation poses as a Romanian cultural society, while espousing a crude xenophobic nationalism aimed at the ethnic Hungarians.

The movement's emphasis is somewhat different in Timisoara, the country's western-most city, in which the democratic resistance first found its voice. Timisoara and the surrounding Banat region boast a relatively harmonious, multi-cultural society of Romanians, Hungarians, Serbs and Germans. Through its propinquity to the West, democratic and mercantilist traditions give it an identity distinct from the eastern regions.

In the three-week occupation of Opera Square before the election, workers and professionals outnumbered students. An atmosphere of togetherness was evident as people gathered every evening to discuss and debate issues. A variety of citizens' groups are active, addressing different social problems through community initiatives. The Greater Romania sentiment is absent, at least from demonstrations.

The nationwide movement must follow Timisoara's example, as it has in the past, if it is to formulate a progressive vision for the future. The democratic opposition, however, confronts its course with no anti-capitalist, anti-stalinist left; nationalism on the rise; and an assortment of opportunistic parties seemingly bent on ousting the Front.

Chances seem remote for the broad social dialogue between government and opposition, among the nationalities and within the movement itself, that could build upon the existing structures of civil society.

The Front and its democratically sanctioned security apparatus could well crack down on the activists and propel them further along a reactionary, perhaps violent, path. The spirit of Timisoara has defied all odds before - its enlightenment is critical again to safeguard the revolution's legacy.

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Turning Turtle

Egalitarian, peace-loving and a delightful shade of dark green, the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles live deep in the bowels of New York - the sewers, actually - where they perfect their martial arts skills under their master, Splinter, a rat.

Like all teenagers, they're hooked on pizza, talk in sub-rap/surf speak and kid each other round with wise-cracks and put-downs. Unlike most teenagers, they're 'heroes in a half-shell', fighting all sorts of baddies with their Ninja arts and disappearing to all kinds of planets and space places to battle their foes: Rocksteady, Bebop, The Shredder and others.

The Turtles are a 'nineties marketing marvel, in fact. Their comic books (there's an adult version, still drawn by original creators Eastman and Laird, and a more light-hearted kids' version) and their cartoon series (currently showing on the Seven Network here) made them huge and desirable for kids both in the USA and many other parts of the world: the United Kingdom, Canada, Hong Kong, Malaysia and some places I can't even pronounce - according to Mark Freedman, the man who signed the licensing deal to promote the Turtles in Playmates Toys, who make the plastic action Turtle toys, are talking $US150 million in Turtle sales. The Nintendo game has generated $250 million since it was launched. Turtlefood (cereal, cookies, burgers, pizza, pork rinds, yoghurt), Turtlegames, Turtlebooks, Turtleposters, Turtlerecords, Turtle T-shirts, Turtlevideos ... you name it, it comes in Turtle.

And now the movie which is going to bring the whole kaboodle to a peak. Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles comes complete with the catchphrase "this is not a cartoon, dude!" and leaves in its trail a bunch of problems. The Turtles have been criticised for violent tendencies - the cartoon show is reported to have 34 acts of violence every hour, (though of course each episode only runs for half an hour). The film was criticised for having a similar ratio of violent acts, though its $US25 million opening weekend would suggest that few parents - in the USA, at least, care very much about such warnings. At any rate, the aim of the live-action Turtles film was to appeal to kids and adults, rather than be a purely cute/sie production. It treads a fine line, and it will tread on a few consciences as well. Though no blood is spilt and there is, in fact, only one actual death (a semi-accidental one, at that!) parents might be alarmed by a gruesome glint in their children's eyes as they anticipate the next Turtle clobberin' in TMNT.

For what it's worth, the Turtles aren't quite as gruesome as they're painted. Indeed, one retailer explains the success of the action toys as being the inherent humour in the whole concept - apart from anything else, their thoroughly ridiculous name.

The "Mutant" in the title also seems to cause a lot of trouble for some parents and critics, even though the Turtles' mutancy is presented as completely positive (it gave them human characteristics). A recent newspaper cartoon in the Sydney Telegraph Green Guide showed one "Violent Mutated Tortoise"
blasting another into oblivion; the cartoon was there to illustrate an article on the uselessness of children’s television in the afternoons. Richard Neville, writing in the Sydney Morning Herald, in his new guise as guardian of public morals, managed a withering comment on the Turtles’ cruel and wicked battle gear currently on the market.

Of course, if the Turtles were true ‘full-on’ Mutants wearing their entrails on the outside and displaying four Freddy Kruegeresque heads ready to be blasted into blood by knives and guns, this would hardly limit their appeal to the kiddies. But as it happens, the Turtles set a fine example, as TV examples go.

Associate Professor Grant Noble from the psychology department of the University of New England, NSW, recently prepared a report on the “likely impact” of the toys from the TMNT series for the toys’ Australian licensees. Noble denies immediately that the toys are ‘victim toys’ and adds that while some of the Turtles’ enemies are rather ugly, no one in the series is suffering, damaged or mutilated.

Noble concedes that children will play with the Ninja toys in an aggressive manner - “however I would not expect these toys to invoke any more aggression in the play of children aged between six to thirteen than from many other toys currently available”. At any rate, the good characters in TMNT are very ‘good’. “The group does not go out looking for wrongs to right,” he says. “Rather the evil plans of The Shredder tend to impinge on the turtles’ lives so they are almost forced to move into action to preserve the status quo.”

Noble is also enthusiastic about the “overall tone” of the TV show, claiming it to be “tongue-in-cheek”. “For example,” he says, “at the end of one episode one turtle comments to the camera, “it may not be realistic but it is a happy ending.”

Of course, Grant Noble was doing a report for the merchandisers, and his comments have to be taken in that context. But from my own casual viewing of the program I would have to say I agree with him. I don’t enjoy watching children’s action cartoons myself and even a relatively high-calibre, imaginative concept like the Ninja Turtles is a bit of a bore for this 25-year-old. But violence in Ninja Turtledom is minimal, and death is completely absent. In fact, the overall tone of the show is more Utopian than anything else.

The film is a lot more fun, and the live-action Turtles are pretty impressive, too. Their facial expressions are the work of Jim Henson’s Creature Shop, and Ninja Turtles was the last major project Henson worked on before his death earlier this year. The film makes a few concessions to an older audience, just in case you thought you were going to be allowed not to think for an hour and a half - one reference (to The Grapes of Wrath) went right over my head. As per Noble’s judgment on the cartoon show, the Turtles are utterly victimised by a gang of thieves called The Foot before they actually take any action at all - their leader, Splinter, is kidnapped and their friend April O’Neill’s home is ruined before the Turtles manage any sort of out-and-out retribution. In fact, one wonders why they’re so slow to do anything.

Casey Jones, a (human) vigilante and Turtle ally, finds he has a heart, and wins over a large percentage of The Foot with an emotive argument rather than a whack with his hockey stick. Splinter the rat talks young Danny Pennington reasonably out of his anti-social thieving ways. Beautiful.

Australian children are Turtle crazy, there’s no denying it. But anyone who wants to condemn them outright should just look back at the state of Batman in last year’s blockbuster movie. Emotionally troubled, psychologically scarred, a lonely millionaire with a ruthless streak...now, that guy had problems!

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