We tend to think that violent conflicts can only end with one side coming out a clear winner. However, in Northern Ireland, the 30 years of armed conflict has ended but the country is still in political flux. There is no clear winner or loser. There is no decisive defeat of one side or the other.

So many people were at one time willing to kill and die for their beliefs. Many have been imprisoned due to their beliefs or actions related to those beliefs. What becomes of that passion? And how does one justify the past in light of the present? Especially in the case of Northern Ireland when it is still in a state of transition.

While the organizations made their changes rather publicly, the individual decisions to put down the weapons happened on a much more private, personal level. It was the “ordinary foot soldier” who had to privately come to terms with what was publicly being put forth. These soldiers had to privately make their personal decision to put down the weapons, or not; to endorse the peace process, or not; and to deal with all the consequences that go along with those decisions.

George Mitchell commented on the complexities of the Northern Irish conflict and the difficulties faced trying to come to a peaceful compromise. “Centuries of conflict have generated hatreds that make it virtually impossible for the two communities to trust each other. Each disbelieves the other. Each assumes the worst about the other. If there is ever to be a durable peace and genuine reconciliation, what is really needed is the decommissioning of mind-sets in Northern Ireland. That means that trust and confidence must be built, over time, by actions in all parts of society.” (Mitchell 1999, 37)

There were 3,524 lives claimed by “The Troubles” in Northern Ireland between July 1969 and December 2001. (Sutton 2002). It is believed 2,056 of those killings were carried out by
Republicans while 1,020 were carried out by Loyalists. According to the CAIN website, “Paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland do not publish annual accounts, therefore information on membership and the size of arsenals is speculative. Estimates of the strength of paramilitary groups do sometimes appear in the media. These are usually based on a few main sources: The Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the British Army, and British Intelligence agencies (MI5 and MI6).” CAIN estimates that the Irish Republican Army (IRA) membership in the 1970s could have been as high as 1,500. However, at the time of the 1994 cease fire, estimated membership was around 500. For the Loyalists paramilitaries, the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) had about 30,000 members in the 1970s. According to the website, “Its current strength is probably several hundred with a few dozen being 'active' in the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) a covername used by the UDA.” The Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) is estimated at having a membership of several hundred.

For many involved in the conflict, their political beliefs have not changed. At one point, they believed that violence was justified and would advance their cause. As Shirlow and McEvoy state in their book, _Beyond the Wire_, “Historically, both Loyalists and Republicans viewed violence as the logical response to the denial of their respective rights.” (2008, 9-10) However, many now believe that violence is no longer worth continuing and that there are more effective ways to create change. In most cases, this doesn’t mean they have changed their core beliefs; they still have Republican or Loyalist values.

I first visited Northern Ireland in 1986 to visit a pen pal. I was young and naïve and had no concept of the conflict. I was unprepared to see the army patrolling the streets and the vehicle check points. Over the years, I returned to Northern Ireland as often as I could, sometimes tying it in with my journalism studies at the University of Maryland. I eventually came to work as a freelance journalist in Northern Ireland in 1994 for about 6 months. I interviewed politicians, religious leaders, peace activists, former paramilitaries and active paramilitaries.

At the end of August, 1994, the IRA announced a ceasefire. Although I greeted the ceasefire with cautious optimism, I wondered if these men I had spoken with, who had been willing to be imprisoned, kill and die for their beliefs, would be able to put the violence aside in favor of politics without their demands being met. That ceasefire lasted 17 months.
The current agreement and ceasefire seem to be holding. The Good Friday Agreement is now 10 years old. The IRA declared an end to armed struggle in July of 2005. I became very interested in why this current peace was continuing. Many people believe that part of the delicate success here is that the former combatants have been involved in the peacemaking process.

A positive aspect of the demobilization and reintegration of former combatants in Northern Ireland is that the ex combatants themselves have been very involved in their own reintegration process. Ex prisoner support groups were significant in offering support, training and involvement in the communities. (Rolston, 2007). According to Rolston, “In short, what ex-prisoners needed was not reintegration narrowly defined, but a robust programme of reconstruction and a recognition of the skills and political wisdom they had to take a lead role in that reconstruction.” (2007, 276)

Ex prisoner support groups were significant in offering support, training and involvement in the communities. (Shirlow, 2008) Also, many former prisoners excelled in the political arena. David Ervine, former Ulster Volunteer Force member turned Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) politician and party leader, was elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly and served until his death in January 2007. Martin McGuinness, former Irish Republican Army member currently holds the position of Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland. Some other post conflict issues are still unfolding in Northern Ireland, such as the whether or not former combatants should be allowed to serve on the police force, if there ought to be a truth commission and if there should be an amnesty.

It is important in any post conflict research to try to understand the people who were actually involved in the conflict, the circumstances that caused them to become involved and the conditions that ended that conflict. And as Senator Mitchell pointed out in his book, Making Peace, “Prisoners play an important role in the politics of Northern Ireland. They are seen by some in their communities as heroes who fought to defend a way of life and an oppressed people.”(1999, 131)

Even though these former political prisoners have a unique position in Northern Ireland, the problems they face are well documented. The process of reintegration or reentry is difficult. Many former political prisoners had difficulties with family and friend relationships, issues

In 1999, Jeremy Travis, who was the director of the National Institute of Justice in Washington, DC, was approached by the then Attorney General Janet Reno. She asked him what was being done for people being released from prison. His answer was that he didn’t know. He then set out to answer her question and eventually wrote a book titled, But They All Come Back: The Challenges of Prison Reentry. According to Jeremy Travis, the former director of the National Institute of Justice in Washington, DC, “…we have forgotten the iron law of imprisonment: they all come back. Except for those few individuals who die in custody, every person we send to prison returns to live with us.” (2005, XVII) He claims that it is essential to have networks set up to help with reentry, to give the former prison support and the ability to rebuild his or her life. In Northern Ireland, it is estimated that there are about 25,000 politically motivated former prisoners. (Shirlow 2008, 4)

For my project, I am looking at the stories that former prisoner ex combatants tell about their transition from a soldier or volunteer to a civilian. Although I am only at the beginning stages of my research, I will be conducting in depth life story interviews with 15 Republicans and 15 Loyalists. An important part of this study is the fact that it will look both Republicans and Loyalists. Martin Cowley, a former Belfast Reuters reporter who covered the “Troubles” of Northern Ireland for decades stated that an understanding of one side can only be gained by learning about the other side. It must be understood how one side acted to understand why the other side reacted. (Cowley 2007) Looking at both Republicans and Loyalists will allow for similarities and differences in attitudes, coping techniques, paramilitary organizational support, and influences to be identified between the two groups. It will also allow for strengths and weaknesses in the community and governmental support to be identified. I want to give the former combatants the opportunities to tell their stories in their own words. I’m not interested in whether or not they are telling me the truth, but rather how they construct their stories to make their pasts livable in the present. In the narrative, people reconstruct their lives in stories which give coherence, purpose and significance to their lives. According to Jackson, ‘in making and telling stories we rework reality in order to make it bearable.’ (2006, 16)
The participants can tell whatever they feel is relevant. The major events may seem obvious, but it may be the smaller things that are more important to them because people are influenced by everyday events as well as monumental events. It is very important to give the former combatants the opportunity to tell their stories as they want to tell them. People are influenced by everyday events as well as monumental events and this must be taken into account. They are also influenced by society, their neighborhoods, the schools and the institutions they have to deal with in everyday life. (Miller 2000, 2)

One of my participants told me that he had enjoyed doing the interview and that I didn’t come across as a ‘typical academic’ with certain boxes to tick. He liked the fact that he was just able to tell his story. In telling their narrative, people reconstruct their lives in stories which give coherence, purpose and significance to their lives. They also often look into the future for what they hope for themselves. This influences how they tell their life story. (McAdams and Pals 2006)

Members of paramilitary groups must have interpreted the struggle in the context of their own personal meanings. There were events which shaped their decisions. The narrative approach will allow the participants to tell their own stories in their own words. It will also allow for explanations and expounding of events, feelings, and reactions in a way that is only possible with the life story approach. This method will allow me to look at why people made the choices they made and how that influences who they have become. It will allow for a fuller picture of the participants, looking at important events throughout their lifetime, how they interpret those events and their expectations for the future.

Maruna, who carried out research into reintegration of “ordinary decent” former prisoners (as opposed to political prisoners), states that stories are a good way to understand what is going on with a certain section of society. “…self-narratives are explicitly contextual. Stories are cultural artifacts. One of the best ways to understand a particular subculture or group at a particular point in time is to analyze the stories that members of that group are telling.” (2002, 39)

Mike Tomlinson and I worked with Coiste na nlarchimi, a former prisoner support group, to organize a conference for former combatants. On December 3, 2007, the conference, ‘Whither Now After the War: Future directions for former pro- and anti-state activist’ took
place at Queen’s University, Belfast. We had a panel of Republican former combatants and Loyalists former combatants. There were several jokes among the panelists about how a few years ago they would have been trying to kill each other. But now they are coming together to help advance the peace process. One Loyalist stood up and said, “I don’t consider the Republicans my enemies, they are just misguided Ulstermen!”

One point that was brought up at the conference was that the former combatants are aging and their stories may be lost if they, or someone else, does not record them. It was acknowledged that former combatants have made positive contributions to the post conflict society and that may not be recognized if not properly documented.

There are three aspects of the former combatant’s stories I want to look at in this paper. First, I want to look at their stories of joining the different organizations, next the prison experience, and finally stories of the decision to turn away from violence. The participants all said that joining an organization just sort of happened. We tend to assume there is some dramatic moment or even that causes them to join. But they all talked about it just being a natural progression due to family connections or a slow growing frustration with what they saw as a lack of response by the authorities.

A former Official IRA member said that he joined at the age of 16, because it was what was expected of him. His father, his uncles and his cousins were involved in the Republican movement. For him, joining was almost just a rite of passage. He didn’t expect that the IRA would win the war, but not joining would be failing in his duty to the family and the community. He said he didn’t consider himself a soldier because soldiers are separate from the community. Rather he considered himself a volunteer and protector of the community.

A former UVF member joined because Protestants were being put out of their homes and he thought that the police and UDA weren’t doing enough about it. However, he was already ‘unofficially’ a member. His uncle was very involved with the Loyalists and would frequently give his young nephew small jobs to do for him, such as putting a gun in his football gear bag and transporting the weapon from one place to another. So he already knew all the right people and was trusted and the transition to a full member was seamless.
Another former UVF member decided he needed to do something when it was no longer safe for him to go into certain areas. He said, basically, it was damaging his social life. He was very interested in music, girls and drinking. He said he first realized things were changing when he was walking his Catholic girlfriend home and she told him he couldn’t walk her all the way home, they would have to part at a corner because she was concerned for his safety going into a Catholic area. He told her he hadn’t done anything to anyone. He couldn’t understand why he would be in danger. But the “no go” areas began to increase. So he tried to join the police thinking that way he could protect his neighborhood. However, there was a height restriction at the time and he was too short so he was rejected. He joined the UVF instead. This is a particular finding that I want to explore more. How many young men joined the illegitimate groups because they were turned down from joining the legitimate ones?

All participants acknowledge that there was a sense of power and self importance involved. They wanted to be seen as the tough men, get that feeling of belonging and status.

A former Official IRA member talked about the excitement of firing a weapon. When he fired on a British tank and it stopped, he felt like he’d stopped the British Empire. He talked about how, as a young man, firing a weapon and being engaged in dangerous combat was exciting. It made him feel alive. As he put it, there was no other feeling like it. However, he also acknowledged that some men, even the best fighters, would get sick to their stomach before going out on a maneuver.

One of the former UVF men said he joined because he wanted to be in the club. He said he was a bit like a sheep. He so badly wanted to impress the group that when he went out for his first ‘kill’ he was afraid that he might let the lads down and not complete his task. That was how important being in the group was to him.

He did feel at the time that he was protecting his community. So when he was finally arrested and charged with 8 murders, he was a bit surprised when the police who arrested him didn’t have kind words for him for helping to protect the area. Instead they called him a murdering bastard.

Prison seemed to play an important role to all the former prisoners. They all said it was a positive experience for them. One of the most interesting things about the prison experience to me is that it bonded former combatants, whether Republican or Loyalists.
One former Loyalist said, in his words, that he had a “wonderful time” in prison. He said it was much harder on his family and friends. He got the sentence, but they did the time. He made great friends, studied and earned a degree, developed a sense of camaraderie and became a Christian in prison. Prison gave him the time and space to think and he discovered that violence wasn’t the way to go.

A former Republican said that prison gave them time to think and study and organize. He was in a Republican wing and they did military drills but none of them really knew how to march. They got a guy who had been a boy scout teach them.

A former Loyalist credits prison with saving his life. He was charged with a murder he said he did not commit but acknowledges that if he had not been arrested he would have killed someone or else been killed himself. His prison experience was a bit different from others. He had been convicted of killing a UDA man. As a UVF man, it was not safe for him to be kept in the H-Block compounds so he requested to go to the Crumlin Road prison. This meant he was locked up alone for many hours so in many ways, where the combatants in the H-Blocks were reinforcing their bond with their organization, he was left on his own to question his allegiance. While in prison, he became a book worm and also became a Christian. He said his personal war against Catholicism ended.

His religious conversion appeared to be a way to make up for what he had done, a way to construct a story so that his life would make sense. In Dillon’s book, God and the Gun, he draws on experience from John Bach who was a Church of Ireland prison chaplain and criminologist. “What is never in dispute is that a prison cell is an unusual if not a dangerous place to experience a religious conversion: solitariness and self-pity may combine to create an atmosphere in which a highly emotional message can have real, albeit superficial, appeal. Many prison conversions have lasted only a short time. John Bach says that cell conversion, and promotion of the experience, should be treated with caution.” (1997, 83)

However, this conversion has held true. When the Loyalist was released from prison after 14 years, he met and fell in love with a Catholic woman. He decided that if he really had made this change in his life, this was the grand test. He also decided God had a sense of humor. He married the Catholic woman.
A former Official IRA member said his transition away from violence was very slow. He said the awareness seeped into him. While he was in prison, the leadership began to say that they needed to a change in tactics. They told the volunteers that although they would continue defensive action, they would not take part in offensive action because they needed to prepare for the big war that was coming. He said it didn’t take long to realize they were headed for a total ceasefire and a change from violence to politics to fight for their beliefs. The Officials called a ceasefire in the 1970s. According to the former Official IRA member I talked to, he thought the leadership had gone about this in the right way. The leadership was based in Dublin, away from the fighting and they could see the bigger picture. The volunteers were too emotional and couldn't see beyond their next operation, bombing or shooting. They couldn't think about what would happen in 6 months time.

He said his commitment to violence ended when he could no longer find arguments in support of it and he realized that compromise was the only way forward. He also realizes that some people will always see him as a traitor for that. When asked how difficult the transition was from combatant to civilian, he said “easy as that!” snapping his fingers. He said it was honestly a relief.

A story from the early days of fighting had always haunted him. He said he recalls a time when the IRA were shooting at the security forces and he and his friends were laughing about it. There was an old woman there and she said ‘you’ll not be laughing when they’re shooting you in your beds.’ And he said ‘ah, but we’re gonna win this time.’ And she said, ‘win what son?’

At the time he was just thinking that she was a silly old woman, but her words stuck with him. And now looking back, he says she was right. “Win what? And if you’re gonna be shot in your bed to win something, what are you gonna win? That’s something that stood in my mind.”

Although he says he is not ashamed of what he has done, he wishes that sometimes he could just be a ‘nobody’. To so many people he will always be the person he was, they will not see him as the person he is now. He said, “I was never JUST an Official IRA man.”
Mitchell claims it is the feedback from society, the way people perceive others see them, which helps to form identities. “How other people treat us, and their expectations of us, feeds back into our sense of self. In this way personal identity is very much produced from our experiences of the social and political world.” (2006, 12) So in some ways, he can never lay to rest his former life because the people around him continue to see him in that role.

He claims that the Officials were the first Republicans to begin talking to the Loyalists. And that this communication helped with the peace process. He said that the problems former Republicans and former Loyalists prisoners have are very similar. And the reason that former Republicans and former Loyalists work together for peace building now is because of their families, their children and grandchildren. They understand that if there is a disaffected minority, the “Troubles” could start up again and it would be their children and grandchildren fighting and suffering. So, from that perspective, he says the peace building activities are purely selfish.

Another Republican said that the movement began to lose legitimacy for him when he realized that the armed struggle was not advancing the cause and in fact was hurting it. He thought that there was no possibility of success with the violence and that there were other options, but the leadership was refusing them. He felt that they situation had become a ‘catch 22.’ Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was refusing to give in to the ‘terrorists’ and the IRA were not changing tactics. The legitimacy of the operations was gone in his eyes; he could no longer take part.

He also said he thinks Sinn Fein are the true dissidents. Although most people think of the dissidents in Northern Ireland as being those trying to disrupt the peace process, he says that Sinn Fein are the dissidents because they are going against the values of the Republican movement by engaging in the British system. So, they are really the ones who have broken away from the movement. And his fear is that if Sinn Fein continues to ignore the original demands of the movement, violence could erupt again. However, he did not suggest an alternative course of action for Sinn Fein to advance the peace process without engaging in the Assembly.

One of the former Loyalists was on the blanket protest while in prison. At the time there were only 8 Loyalists on the blanket. He said they did not participate in the dirty protest, so they
used the toilet and showered, but refused to wear the prison uniform, so they had only a
blanket to wrap around themselves.

Because the Republicans refused to bathe, they would be forcibly washed if they had a court
appearance. He remembers one such event. The Loyalist remembers the sounds of the
Republican being dragged down the hall, the sounds of him being plunged into what they all
knew was scalding hot water, and the derogatory remarks the guards made as they forcibly
washed the Republican. The Loyalists remembers feeling disgust and thinking at that point, if
he’d had a gun, he would have shot the guard. There was that moment of realization that he
was feeling protective over the one who had been his enemy. The one who was representing
the State was the one he turned his anger toward. He said suddenly he found himself liking
and having empathy with the people who were supposed to be his enemies. And this is where
his road to non-violence began.

I had, at one point, been told by an academic not to gain access to one community from the
other community. He said that if a Republican gave contact information for a Loyalist, the
Loyalist would be suspicious, and other Loyalists would be suspicious. However, the
participants I have dealt with have been eager to offer contacts from the other communities. I
asked about the possibility of suspicion and was told that the two communities might not
have the same political beliefs but they have been working together in former prisoner
groups, community groups and peace groups for awhile and, for academic research, there
would be no such issue. And as Jamieson and Grounds discovered in their research, many
former prisoners feel most comfortable with other former prisoners, regardless of what
organization they belonged to. It was the unique prison experience which bonded them.
(2002, 54)

There are several points I will continue to develop as I go through my research. One
difference that was pointed out to me during the research is that Republicans claim that
members will never take personal responsibility but will say “we did” an action, giving
collective responsibility to the group, while Loyalists will take individual responsibility.
How does that play out in the way they tell their stories? Will there be a marked difference
due to the personal responsibility of the Loyalists?
Also the Republicans claim they have a long tradition of not recognizing the State and rebellion being supported within their community while the Loyalists tradition is one of “law and order”. This may contribute to why in some situations, returning Republicans received a better reception from their communities than some returning Loyalists. Many in the Unionist areas felt that the State forces were the legitimate forces and should have been left to do their jobs and that the Loyalists broke away from the idea of legitimate means. As stated above, it will be interesting to examine if many Loyalist former combatants first tried to join the State forces before joining one of the paramilitary organizations.

One of the Republicans tried to illustrate the “healthy lack of respect for the law” that exists in the Nationalist communities. He told of a devout Catholic widow who lived in the Republic of Ireland. She had no means of support so she began making and illegally selling an alcohol known as “poteen.” The community knew she did this but no one seemed to care. Somehow the authorities found out and she was taken to court. The Republican said as a young man he was amazed to see her swear to tell the truth and sit there and boldly lie, saying that she didn’t even know what “poteen” was. The community continued to back her. They saw it as she was doing what she needed to do to survive and the laws should be ignored.

Another issue that continues to come up in interviews is the idea that the Loyalists were pawns. The Republicans think the Loyalists were used to create an image of a Republican against Loyalist conflict, rather than a Republican against the British State. The UVF man who was convicted of killing a UDA man says that he thinks the authorities set him and his friends up to take the fall for something they did not do to create tension between the two Loyalist groups. In many cases, the former prisoners must deal with a feeling of betrayal from those they felt they were protecting or working for. “There has been constant criticism from within Loyalist paramilitary circles that it was their political leadership that manipulated or directed them into engaging in violent activities in the first place. Those politicians generated the situation, then washed their hands of them, condemning the paramilitaries for interpreting their calls too literally.” (McAuley 1997, 166)

I also want to explore the continuing role social class plays in the lives of the former combatants. In 1993, I had a former combatant tell me that it was people like him who should be helping to make decisions toward the peace process because they had the most to lose. According to him, it was people from working class who were fighting and dying, it was their
neighborhoods being destroyed by the violence, and it was their families suffering. He felt that the politicians were too upper class and were relatively untouched by the violence and the issues surrounding the conflict, such as inadequate housing, lack of jobs, and discrimination.

It seems to me that many of the former combatants wear their working class backgrounds as a badge of honor. At a recent seminar, a Loyalist former combatant fretted that the Loyalists might be left behind by the politicians where the Republican politicians were staying true to their socialist and working class roots. (Seminar May 6, 2008) While at the ‘Whither Now’ conference, Dawn Purvis, Leader of the Progressive Unionist Party, commented on how she has been called ‘Red Dawn’ in the Assembly because of her somewhat socialist views on affordable housing. At that same conference there were some derogatory comments made about Republican politicians owning multiple dwellings, questioning how you can be a Republican and own ten houses.

I was completely taken aback by a question a former prisoner ex combatant asked me at the end of an interview. He asked, “So you are from Washington, DC. Are you middle class then?”

I want to continue to explore that even in the darkest stories, the wonderful humor of Northern Ireland comes out. The Northern Irish sense of humor is unique and often very dark and sarcastic. Humor seems to have been woven into the society as a way of dealing with the tensions that existed. Humor is a way to connect with another person. And people in Northern Ireland seem to judge each other by whether or not they are “good craic” - fun, entertaining, worth hanging around. Most studies about Northern Ireland fail to mention that humor. (Buckley and Kenney 1995, 139).

This research will highlight the use of humor in the participants’ stories. Humor appears to be a way that identity is solidified and tested and a very real way to deal with difficulties of life. Laughter seems to be a medicine that can sometimes make the unbearable bearable. (Dewey 2004, 159)

A former Loyalist tells a story, setting the scene in prison, of the worlds hardest, most feared, deadliest terrorists, sitting around together playing bingo. He also tells a story of picking up a
Republican from prison for a day release. They were going to go shopping in Belfast. As they were driving through a very Loyalist area, the Loyalist turned to the Republican and said, ‘last time I was driving down this road with a Catholic, he was in the boot!’

Humor was used by all the participants throughout the interviews. After the tape recorder was shut off, the former OIRA member relayed a long string of comical stories that happened while he and his comrades were on missions. He also talked about the very serious side, how very strong, hard men would keep running to the bathroom or would be sick before a mission. But he acknowledged that it was the humorous things that kept them going as a unit. The juxtaposition of the very grim with the very silly was rather staggering. This will be explored further with this study.

In conclusion, I would argue that when talking about how conflicts end, at least in the case of Northern Ireland, we cannot ignore the contributions of former prisoner ex combatants. The fact that they are so involved in community building and dialog with each other gives credibility to the peace process. (Shirlow and McEvoy 2008, 10)

Looking at the life stories of former prisoner ex combatants will help to give an insight into why they became involved in the first place and why they are desisting from violence now. As Maruna points out in his book, Making Good, self-narratives are an important way of understanding a certain section of the society. “Stories are cultural artifacts. One of the best ways to understand a particular subculture or group at a particular point in time is to analyze the stories that members of that group are telling.” (2002, 39)

Although there is much more research still be done, the life stories may help to give an insight into what, if anything, could cause the violence to erupt again. All of the participants commented that it was their desire for the peace to hold but that they had concerns. They worry about one group or another being left disaffected. They worry about the political parties losing sight of the original issues which caused the conflict, such as proper housing, discrimination, availability of jobs and sectarianism. These life stories may give an insight into how to best engage with the communities to ensure lasting peace.
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