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An eye-witness report from Derry by Seamus Brady 19th August, 1969 (Tuesday)

27,000 persons - more than half the population of Derry - are living in a state of siege behind barricades in the Creggan, Lecky Road, and Bogside districts of the City. This is the area that in the past week has come to be known by those who live inside it as "Free Derry".

These are the people who for three days in the past week - on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, the 12, 13 and 14th of August, 1969, - defended this area against attacks by armed Royal Ulster Constabulary using armoured cars and tear-gas.

What happened in Derry during those three days and since is one of the most remarkable episodes in man's fight for fundamental rights and freedom. It was a rebellion by unarmed civilians led by a civilian committee.

It was a rebellion in which no political group has been involved.

The Derry Citizens' Defence Association consists of around 12 persons, most of them middle-aged men who are in business in the city. They include shop-keepers, professional men, artisans, salesmen, shop managers, and a number of unemployed men. One of the committee is a Presbyterian. Two of them are ex-British servicemen. One of the latter is an Englishman married to a Derry girl.

They have deliberately avoided involvement with political groups with in the city. Despite the claims made by the Six-County Government, the I.R.A. has no hand or part in the rebellion that has taken place in Derry City.

Arms have not been used at any stage by the defenders, though they have access to a small store of arms they have refused to use them. The only occasion on which arms were used was when 200 R.U.C. riot-squad police followed by 200 Paisleyites wearing steel helmets and armed with wooden steel-pointed staves, made an attack on Wednesday night up Great James' Street towards the Catholic Cathedral of Saint Eugene. Shots were then fired from behind the police and at least two of the defenders were wounded.

The defenders in Derry relied on petrol-bombs made largely from milk bottles and strips of cloth with petrol which was freely supplied by garages inside the area and brown sugar used to make the bomb "stick". When they ran short of brown sugar they used Daz, Omo and other detergent powders which was supplied free from shops and supermarkets within the area. The only other weapons were paving stones taken up from the street corners and broken into small pieces for throwing at police. At the moment inside the barricades each street corner has its pile of stones ready for further attack

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The Defence Association produce their own daily news bulletin on a duplicator. They issue passes for access through their barricades, signed by members of the committee of the Association.

During the battle they set up, and are still maintaining, two casualty clearing posts manned by five doctors and have two ambulances supplied by the Knights of Malta operating inside the area. In addition a number of gas treatment centres were set up.

The adaptability of these people is astonishing. Within an hour of the first attack by C.S. (riot-gas), instructions had been run off on the duplicator and set up in the area on "what to do if you are gassed". Today the citizens have in readiness 1,00 gasmasks made from rubber goggles which were bought in seaside resorts during the last week in parts of Donegal and brought over the Border quietly. These are rubber goggles that people would wear swimming. The mask is completed by strips of cloth with ribbons to tie around the face, these being doused with lemon juice or vinegar and water. In the instructions issued throughout the area during the gas attacks the notices say: "C.S. can kill in enclosed space. Therefore keep the flats closed against gas canisters".

The defence of Derry against police attacks as it appeared on television and other media gives a wrong picture of what went on behind the barricades. A group of teenagers manned the 100-foot high flats in the Rossville street area and prevented police advancing by hurling petrol bombs on top of them as they tried to force their way up the street. But thousands of middle-aged men and women, and children from the age of seven, and upwards were engaged making petrol bombs out of barrels of petrol set up at different points throughout the area.

Walking through the area today, one notices more middle-aged women with bandaged hands from burns than men.

The defence committee summoned the men to battle by knocking on every door in the area and asking any men inside to report to certain points.

The daily bulletin issued during the battle is an indication of the responsibility with which the citizens conducted the whole rebellion. Copies of the bulletin are put in herewith. They refer in part under the heading "Responsibility - we are not an army. We are ordinary people. We are not trained to react like robots as a soldier is. It is therefore even more important that we should discipline ourselves. There should be no looting. This is a just struggle and a just cause and looting debases the spirit of the cause and the people. It causes antagonism among our people because we begin to think of private gain instead of the common struggle. On the practical side it takes people away from the fighting.

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"For the same reason there should be no joy-riding in private cars. They are very badly needed for vital transportation of materials, people and the wounded".

One of the extraordinary results of the rebellion in Derry is the tremendous communal spirit that has developed among the people inside the barricaded area.

The Defence Association have organised their own police force mainly from youths who fought behind the barricades and from the roof of the flats. There are about 100 of these. They man the barricades from 8 p.m. until 8.a.m. each night.

The Association issues passes written out on its own noteheading ( a copy of a pass is put in herewith).

The public houses in the area have been required to close at the usual licensing hours. Looting was put down firmly. On the night of Thursday, August 14th, when the British troops moved into the area and police withdrew, the Defence Association immediately put out pickets throughout its area to maintain law and order.

I witnessed one case in which about 10 youths who had broken open a barrel of wine, were drunk and were taunting a British force of five men at a barbed wire barricade. They were speedily rounded up and removed from the scene by some of the young defenders.

In another case a man went berserk with a loaded rifle inside the area and was threatening to shoot British troops. He was disarmed and given an hypodermic injection by one of the doctors inside the area to calm him down.

The virtual leader of the Association in Derry is Mr. Patrick Laurence Doherty a foreman joiner who works for a local Protestant firm. He has emerged as a spokesman for the citizens. He conducts all negotiations with the British military, along with Sean Keenan, the Association chairman.

The committee meets almost continuously in Mr. Doherty's house at 10 Westland Street, Bogside. I have attended meetings of the committee up to 3,4 and even 5, o'clock some mornings.

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Mr. Doherty takes the view that the battle for Derry is now ended and as he says himself "The rest is up to the diplomats".

Patrick Doherty is not a politician. True, he is Republican in outlook, but he is not a member of any political party and he is certainly not a member of the I.R.A. He is a married man with a large family and considered to be one of the best men at his job in Derry area. He originally was employed as a foreman on building sites by the local Northern Ireland Hospitals' Authority but he was brought back at increased money by the local contractor because of his worth.

Doherty told me: "The last thing we now need in Derry are armed attacks from across the Border or attacks on the British Embassy in Dublin, or groups of volunteers moving across the Border in an irresponsible way.

"The people in Derry have shown that they have been able to do what the Czechs could not do, and what the Hungarians could not do against the Russians. We fought with our bare hands and without arms and we won".

The only need in Derry today is for the Irish Red Cross to conduct an investigation into families who are being hard hit because their men folk are unable for fear of arrest by R.U.C. to go outside the barricaded area to work, or the Labour Exchange (which is outside the barricades) to draw the dole.

I know that the Defence Association has already advanced some money which it has collected to needy families who are hit in this way.

The outlook inside the barricaded area of Derry is simply that they have opted out of the Stormont Government's area.

I put in here a document which was issued and duplicated by the Defence Association after a meeting which took place at the R.U.C. military headquarters in Derry at Victoria Barracks between Mr. Doherty and Michael Canavan of the Derry Citizens' Defence Association and Colonel Todd of the British Military Authority. This meeting took place on August 16. At that meeting, Patrick Doherty laid down the Defence Association's short term demands as follows:-

1. Provision of protective military patrols on the fringes of our area.

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This was asked for because of fears that the B.-Specials who would break into the barricaded areas from the rear where there were no British military patrols at the time. Colonel Todd agreed to this request and British military patrols are now spread thinly right around the barricaded area but outside the barricades and behind their own barricades of barbed wire.

Short term demand No. 2. Removal of B.-Specials from the whole of Derry commission area.

I understand that B.-Specials have since been withdrawn from the roads leading from the barricaded area to the Border and that these are now patrolled nightly, after the British Customs withdraw by mobile pickets of British troops.

Short term demand No. 3. Release of all persons arrested in the past week for other than criminal offences. This request was transmitted to the General Officer Commanding British troops in Northern Ireland but has not been acceded to so far.

Short term demand No. 4. RUC or military personnel to enter the Bogside or Creggan areas.

This request is being acceded to and is being strictly observed by the British military and the R.U.C.

In their long-term or main demands the Defence Committee asks for :-  
1 Abolition of Stormont. 2. Disbandment of B.-Specials throughout the Province.  
3. An assurance that no retrospective punitive action be taken in connection with recent disturbances.

The statement ends "We remain at war with Stormont until these demands are met. We are prepared to accept impartial military rule for the time being."

When I talked to members of the Committee they explained this last demand to me. By "impartial military control" they mean joint military patrols of Irish and British troops. By the phrase "for the time being" they mean that they no longer want to remain under the Stormont Government and wish to come under the jurisdiction of the Irish Government from Dublin.

When a number of Irish Labour Party T.D.'s visited the area on the evening of Saturday, August 16th (they included Dr. Browne, Cruise O'Brien, Keating and Cluskey) I was present when they met the Committee after traipsing with pressmen through the Bogside. The meeting with the Committee took place in Doherty's house. They were told that while they were welcome and that anything they could do to educate and enlighten the British Government would be welcome, at the same time it was added "this Committee is taking its orders from our Government in Dublin".

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How did this whole business start in Derry? It is important to get at the root reasons as to why this citizens' revolt took place.

One must go back to Saturday, October 5, when the civil rights movement organised a parade through Derry and across the Craigavon Bridge to the Waterside. This was banned by William Craig, the then Minister of Home Affairs. Very few Derry people took part in this parade. Members of the Defence Association to whom I spoke put the number of Derry people involved at less than 200. Most of the civil rights supporters came from outside Derry.

But that same afternoon Derry City football team were playing at home and some 5,000 men were attending the game at Brandywell. When they were leaving the ground word came that the R.U.C. were "cracking the skulls of the students on the Bridge". The men naturally moved towards that direction to see what was happening, but there was certainly no concerted movement to assist the civil rights demonstrators. The ordinary citizen in Derry is not interested in civil rights. The only civil rights that the average Catholic in Derry wants is self-determination and an end to the Stormont regime.

The fact is that the men behind this rebellion in Derry are mostly middle-aged men who are reasonable well off, in good jobs, with their families reared; many are buying their homes and have no reason to fight for jobs or houses.

But on the particular Saturday afternoon when the men coming from the match reached the Diamond they found police and civil righters already there. Police lost their nerve. The riot squad was ordered up and the first of the now famous baton charges down Butcher Street and under the Derry Walls into the Catholic quarter took place. But for the first time in Derry's history, the police were chased out of the Bogside and back into Butcher Street by young men throwing stones which were readily available on the building sites all over Bogside.

The so-called riot squad are ordinary R.U.C. men who have done riot drill in refresher courses given at the training headquarters in Enniskillen. They are usually drafted into an area where trouble is expected.

One shop-keeper in Butcher Street described that evening scene to me when the riot police were seen for the first time in Derry. He was standing in his shop doorway when a group of about 40 police appeared with steel helmets, shields and batons. They charged down the street at a group of stone throwers, beating on the shields with their batons and screeching at the top of their voices to work up their courage. Two minutes later they came running back in retreat with the stone-throwers chasing them.

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This was a climatic moment in the history of Derry over the last 50 years. For never before had the ordinary citizens seen the R.U.C. retreating from anyone.

From that day the battle between the Catholic people of Bogside and Creggan - and the R.U.C. - has gone on continuously. What finally outraged the ordinary citizens of Derry was the savage attack by the riot squad police into the Bogside last January when they broke into houses and beat up people indiscriminately.

A police officer was sent in to conduct an investigation. No result of it has ever been announced. Affidavits and other evidence were compiled for the Cameron Commission - but it has not yet produced any report.

The people of Catholic Derry finally came to the conclusion that Stormont was not prepared to do anything about its police. To the 50 years of discrimination in housing and jobs, the denial of the franchise in Derry where there has not been a Catholic mayor since 1921, they now had thrust upon them and continuing hazard that their young men were being hauled in willy-nilly by the police and beaten up. And there was no redress against this that they could find.

I have come across evidence which I can produce in the next few days by affidavit that over the past nine months the R.U.C. have behaved towards the Catholic citizens with unbridled savagery.

Young men were pulled in, beaten up, their teeth knocked out in cases, put in cells for an hour and then released on the promise that they would "go straight home". The father of one youth who had been thus beaten told me that when he went to see a solicitor and a policeman who is a friend of his, he was advised by both to stay away from Victoria police barracks "they would pull him in, beat him up in similar fashion and then say they had never seen him before.

Chichester-Clarke says that the Apprentice Boys' march in Derry on August 12 was "a peaceful affair". There is no doubt that great care was taken to ensure that the marchers behaved with dignity. Each club travelled in by bus and was under orders to behave. But the trouble was that the procession took place through mixed Catholic areas and at one point it passed by the foot of William Street, a notorious trouble spot over the past year in Derry and the entrance to the Catholic quarter of the Bogside.

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To the Catholics this was purely an exercise to indicate to all and sundry that the Orangemen could parade as they liked and that the Orange minority in Derry could assert its domination at any time.

Therefore, on the Sunday before the 12th of August - that is Sunday August 10 - a meeting was held of all political groups and organisations on the Catholic side. It was from this meeting that the decision emerged to entrust full control of the Catholic areas of Bogside, Lecky Road and Creggan to the Citizens' Defence Association. On the 12th of August, while the procession was passing through the city, preparations were going on inside the Bogside area to defend it against further attack by the police which was feared that evening.

The Apprentices Boys' march past the foot of William Street was pure provocation. Chichester-Clarke must have been aware of this. His brother Robin, A Unionist M.P. at Westminster, was present as an observer, and Craig the former Home Affairs Minister marched in the procession. In full view of Catholic teenagers held behind steel barriers and a police cordon at the foot of William Street, Orange women did a dervishes' dance along the procession route and hurled abuse at the "Fenians". When stones began to fly, the riot police were called out to charge up William Street and into the Bogside. Here the first petrol bombs were thrown and the battle was on.

One incident indicates the responsibility with which the people acted during the three days of fighting. On the Wednesday evening, August 13, about 7.0'clock the Defence Committee ordered a diversionary attack on the police station at Creggan Road. This was intended to relieve pressure at Rossville Street.

The police station at Creggan is inside the barricaded area. Two lorry loads of police, and one lorry load of B-Specials, got through to the relief of the barrack. But the entire force was driven inside the barrack and the crowd, by this time numbering 400, pressed a fierce attack of petrol bombs. Elderly women and children carried bombs to the young men who had climbed roofs overlooking the barrack. The 30 odd police men and Specials inside would have been burned alive had not John Hume, the M.P. for Foyle, persuaded the attackers to hold off while he held truce talks with the police. As a result, the police agreed to stay inside the barrack and the attack was broken off.

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The police are still inside the barrack. A British military patrol is on daily duty from 4.p.m. right through the night around the barrack by arrangement with the Defence Committee. This has been done to prevent attacks on the police.

It should be pointed out that John Hume has taken no part in the fighting and indeed has counselled against violence.

The position of Miss Bernadette Devlin, the M.P. for Mid-Ulster, should also be understood. She arrived in Derry just as the battle was beginning and she is followed around the area by the inevitable covey of photographers. But she has not authority whatsoever inside the area and indeed if the women inside the barricades had their way she would be put out. But the younger people pay tribute to the fact that she did fight alongside them and for that reason she is allowed to carry on conducting her press interviews and talking as if she were leading the fight.

The Defence Committee have taken this very sensible attitude that they are prepared to use politicians such as John Hume or Edward MacAteer or Miss Devlin and to allow them to make statements on behalf of the citizens provided they say the right thing.

They are using every available means, therefore, to maintain themselves inside the barricades.

I think the highest tribute should be paid - and should be understood outside Derry - to the various political organisations. For example the small but vociferous Labour Party group led by Eamon McCann. They have very little political support among Catholics in Derry, are regarded as Marxist, and certainly show some indication of accepting infiltrators from London. But they have resolutely subordinated their whole approach to the Defence Committee during these days. In fact the Labour group has provided the duplicator on which statements from the Committee and the daily news bulletin is run off.

The Daily Express report by their political correspondent to the effect that trouble-makers who were responsible for anti-Vietnam riots in London and for the attacks on the London School of Economics were among those inside the Bogside is completely without foundation. It is true that a number of students (about 20 in all) - Germans, French and others - did show up and joined in the fight. Two of them who since went outside the barricades were arrested by police and have been sentenced to terms of imprisonment.

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The statement by the Taoiseach, broadcast over television and radio on the evening of Wednesday August 13th, has had a tremendous effect among the people inside the barricaded area. I was told that grown men broke down in tears in the street as they listened. I spoke to another man, a relative of mine who was at home having a meal on relief from barricade duty when he heard the broadcast. He rushed into the street shouting the news which everybody already knew. "The Irish Army is with us".

From that moment the defenders of Derry identified themselves with the Irish Government and they are prepared to take advice and leadership from that Government.

The people of Bogside and Creggan and the Lecky road areas will no longer accept R.U.C. of any religion in their area. They are particularly antagonistic to Catholics in the R.U.C.

It is important, therefore, to understand that the rebellion which took place in Derry was not due to the call for civil rights. Neither was it motivated by any political philosophy. It was simply that the ordinary families in Derry had suffered so long from the brutalities of the R.U.C. that they decided they were no longer going to allow the R.U.C. into their area. This is why they armed themselves with stones from paving slabs and with petrol bombs.

Their situation is completely different from that in Belfast, Dungannon Coalisland, Armagh or elsewhere in the Six-Counties, where the Catholics are not in a majority.

The suggestion by Chicester-Clarke that there was a concerted uprising by Republicans in the Six-Counties is without foundation. The facts are that on the Tuesday night, August 12th, when the police attacks were at their height in Derry as fresh reinforcements of R.U.C. were moving in, 'phone calls went out from the defenders in Derry to Strabane, Newry and other areas where there are Catholic majorities to attempt to draw off the police by staging demonstrations. Such demonstrations did take place in Newry, Strabane and other places. But they were purely peaceful demonstrations. At Strabane for example more than 500 people blocked the main road to Derry with the result that lorry loads of B-Specials who were being moved on Derry at the time were unable to get through on the Tuesday night.

It is important to realise that life inside the barricades is going much as normal. The milkman comes on his rounds each day. The bread vans are moving throughout the area after being allowed inside the barricades. The gasman calls to collect from the meters. In the evening young men walk with their girls.

11.

But over it all is an air of uncertainty. Today the Defence Committee has begun to register all the citizens within the area. In other words they want to compile a register of the population of Free Derry.

They have excellent relations with the British troops. In fact one of the secrets they are keeping to themselves is the fact that a corporal in charge of the British troops at Butcher Gate was born in Creggan.

It is important to understand what actually happened in relation to the withdrawal of R.U.C. and B-Specials forces. On the afternoon of Thursday, August 14th, shortly after the B-Special constabulary - 8,500 men - has been mobilised throughout the Six-Counties, a force of between 100 and 200 B-Specials without arms but armed with helmets, shields and batons was moved up through William Street into the Rossville Street area to reinforce the R.U.C. who at this stage after three days of fighting were finished. The petrol bomb attacks continued from the roof of the flats. The B-Specials took up position behind the R.U.C. in Rossville Street. Then, 45 minutes later, the first jeeps of British troops rounded the corner at William Street into Rossville Street.

The Defence Association immediately sent a spokesman forward to the barricades and he spoke through a loud hailer to the British commander. He asked that police should withdraw. The police moved out of the area.

There was a tense moment on the Walls at Butcher Gate overlooking the Bogside area where the police for a moment refused to withdraw. Hundreds of Catholics in the Bogside watched this drama on the walls. The officer commanding the British troops ordered the district inspector in charge of the R.U.C. to take his men off the Walls which overlooked the Catholic area. The district inspector said "We will withdraw but we will return if you require our presence". Then the R.U.C. moved away and the Catholics in the Bogside cheered. Since then four British troops have maintained watch on the Walls.

There are plans in Derry I understand to blow up the Walker monument. Gelignite is ready but the only deterrent is the fact that there is still one Catholic family remaining the the little row of houses below the monument and outside the Walls known as Nailor's Row. I was told that when that family is evacuated they will blow up the monument.

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Extra troops were moving into Derry on Monday August 18th. They are setting up sandbag replacements on the Craigavan Bridge. This to me is an indication that they fear outside intervention and the possible mining of the bridge which would cut off communication between the Six-Counties and the whole area of Free Derry.

It should be noted that movement from the Border areas at Bridgend, or on the road from Letterkenny or even on the unapproved roads into the Creggan and Bogside areas is unimpeded by daytime. There are on the approved roads only the normal British customs checks at frontier posts. But from 6 p.m. on, when the British custom posts close, there are British military patrols on the roads in jeeps. And in some areas there are still road blocks maintained by B-Specials. But it would be a simple matter to move supplies of any kind in daylight over the ordinary roads or by the unapproved roads leading from Grianan into the Creggan area.

Patrick Doherty is now on the telephone at his home. Telephone number is Derry 4838. The telephone has been installed by the simple process of running wires from a house nearby and attaching a hand set. He advises me that he will be getting a new number shortly. This is being done for security reasons.

There are Catholic sympathisers inside the telephone exchange which is outside the barricade area.

One of the simplest ways of getting through to Derry without going through the local exchange is to ring the operator at Bridgend in Donegal, since she has an automatic connection with all numbers in the Derry area.

End.