

Bloody Sunday (*Irish: Domhnach na Fola*)

by Mike McCormack, Historian

100 year ago, Ireland fought a War of Independence in which Britain employed many undercover agents to infiltrate the forces of the newly proclaimed Irish Republic. Michael Collins, leading the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) and Intelligence Chief of the new Republican Army (IRA), decided to eliminate that threat. He felt that if he didn't, their organization would be in grave danger because the Brits were also assassinating leading Republicans. So, he created his own intelligence force and an active service unit known as The Squad (a.k.a.: the Twelve Apostles) to eliminate British Intelligence agents. By mid-1920, the British had an extensive network of spies, supported by Black and Tan and Auxiliary troops and 18 agents known as the 'Cairo Gang' which IRA Chief of Staff, Dick Mulcahy, called, "*a very dangerous and cleverly placed spy organization.*"

Collins collected their identities and addresses from sympathetic housemaids, patriotic bartenders noting careless talk by British forces in Irish pubs and his own agents placed within the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). On 20 November, he expanded his Squad with other trusted members of the IRA for a special operation. They were briefed on their targets and Collins insisted that all actions take place at 9AM and not a minute before in order to show that the new Republican Army was not an undisciplined rabble as the Brits believed, but a well-organized force. A list of enemy agents at different locations in Dublin was divided among the chosen patriots. Collins's originally planned to execute more than 50, but reduced it to 35 at the insistence of Cathal Brugha, Dail's Minister for Defense, since there was insufficient evidence against some of them. Early Sunday morning, 21 November 1920, the expanded Squad attended Mass and set out on their missions fanning out to various addresses in Dublin. Some of the targeted agents were not at home, but between 9am and 9:15am, 15 agents were executed or fatally wounded and 5 others were slightly wounded. The Crown's colonial masters were shocked that the patriots were capable of such a well-timed operation, so perfectly coordinated. During the rest of the day, several of the agents who had been missed in the morning's action, were seen at the ferry, suitcases in hand and headed for England.

One of the IRA who took part in the attacks, Seán Lemass, would later become Taoiseach (Prime Minister) of the Irish Republic in 1959. Collins justified the action by saying, "*My one intention was the destruction of the undesirables who continued to make miserable the lives of ordinary decent citizens. . . There is no crime in detecting the spy and the informer in wartime. They have destroyed without trial. I have paid them back in their own coin.*" Unfortunately, there were those among the RIC, especially Black and Tans and Auxiliary officers bent on revenge!

Later that day a football match between rivals, Dublin and Tipperary, was to be held at Croke Park. Collins advised them to cancel the match, fearing a reprisal, but GAA officials insisted on holding it since the proceeds were to help families of imprisoned Irish rebels. That afternoon, members of the RIC's Black and Tans and Auxies surrounded Croke Park where more than 5000 fans sat watching that match. Suddenly the gates of the field flew open and a British Lorry full of armed RIC Auxiliaries came rumbling onto the pitch. The game stopped and many rose to their feet; the Tans and Auxiliaries jumped from the lorry and for a full minute and a half opened fire on the crowd killing 14 and wounding 60. The Brits later claimed that they had been fired on first, but Michael Hogan, one of the players killed on the field, obviously had no weapon in his shorts and shirt nor did the man who bent beside him to whisper the Act of Contrition in his ear and who was also shot dead! The Hogan Stands at today's Croke Park are named for that player.

The RIC had orders to surround the ground, guard the exits and search every man. Their commander, Major Mills, later admitted his men were "*excited and out of hand*". What Mills envisioned as a detain-and-search operation became an act of mass murder by trigger-happy Black and Tans and Auxiliaries bent on avenging the morning's losses. Some fired into the fleeing crowd from the pitch while others outside fired at fans climbing over the wall to escape. RIC, at the other end of the park, seeing panicked people fleeing the grounds, opened fire with machine guns. Despite the accusation that they had been fired on first, the RIC suffered no casualties and when the grounds were later searched for arms, none were found. British Brigadier Frank Crozier, in command that day, resigned over what he believed was the official condoning of the unjustified actions of the Auxiliaries in Croke Park. One of his officers reported that, "*Black and Tans fired into the crowd without any provocation whatsoever*". Two military courts of inquiry were held, and found that "*the fire of the RIC was carried out without orders and exceeded the demands of the situation*". Major General Boyd, Dublin District Commander, added that, "*the firing on the crowd was carried out without orders, was indiscriminate and*

The first victims were two boys; Willy Robinson, age 11, shot as he sat in a tree that gave him a view over the stadium wall and Jerry O'Leary, age 10, shot as he sat on a wall at the southwest end of the field. They were shot before the Tans and Auxiliaries ever entered the park, suggesting that they were shot to preclude them shouting a warning to what the Tans and Auxies were about to do despite orders to the contrary; that defined the action as premeditated murder! Among the spectators who ran for their lives was the playwright Sean O'Casey, who would later lament the human cost of war.

The final blow came that night for two IRA men, Dick McKee and Peadar Clancy and an innocent civilian who had been arrested earlier and were being held at Dublin Castle. The three men were taken from their cells and brutally beaten to death by their captors who claimed they were trying to escape. In all, 30 people died in fifteen hours on that fateful day in Dublin.

Bloody Sunday was a pyrrhic victory for Collins as his operation severely crippled British intelligence in Ireland, causing many other agents and informers to flee and causing great consternation in the British administration whose vicious reprisals increased support for the IRA at home and abroad, making Bloody Sunday one of the most significant events to take place during the Irish War of Independence.