

# The Weaver Street bombing in Belfast 1922: violence, politics and memory

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**ABSTRACT.** *On 13 February 1922, an unidentified person threw a bomb into Weaver Street, which was full of Catholic children at play, killing four children and two women. The bombing became a locus of political controversy between the British government, the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State and the government of Northern Ireland, and became the archetypal story of innocent Catholic lives taken by the intercommunal conflict in the six counties which became Northern Ireland in 1920–22. This article seeks to contribute to the understanding of the role of this intercommunal conflict in Irish and British politics, using the Weaver Street bombing as a case study. This article analyses nationalist representation of the conflict as an orchestrated campaign against Catholics, ‘a pogrom’; unionist representation of the conflict as loyalist self-defence against the I.R.A.; and the British government’s effort to publicly maintain neutrality in the conflict.*

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The bombing of Weaver Street in Belfast on 13 February 1922 was one of the most violent incidents of the wider conflict in Belfast and the six counties that became Northern Ireland in 1920–22. It claimed the lives of four Catholic children and two adults, and left at least sixteen others wounded. The bombing took place amid the complex conflict in the emerging Northern Ireland which involved Irish nationalist and loyalist paramilitaries, the British army and Northern Ireland’s security forces. The conflict claimed 498 lives in two years, and left 23,000 homeless and 10,000 expelled from work.<sup>1</sup> A much higher proportion of civilians were injured in this conflict than in the rest of Ireland during the Irish Revolution. To compare, the average percentage of civilian victims in Ireland overall was only 39 per cent<sup>2</sup> in 1917–21. Meanwhile, in County Antrim, including Belfast city, civilians made up 85 per cent of victims.<sup>3</sup> The centenary of the Weaver Street bombing in 2022 revived public attention regarding it, which produced historical blogs and publications in the press,<sup>4</sup> including an article

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<sup>1</sup> Alan F. Parkinson, *Belfast’s unholy war: the Troubles of the 1920s* (Dublin, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Eunan O’Halpin and Daithí Ó Corráin, *The dead of the Irish Revolution* (New Haven and London, 2020), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 548.

<sup>4</sup> Cormac Moore, ‘The Weaver Street massacre: the worst atrocity since “Herod slew the innocents”’, *Irish News*, 20 Mar. 2022; idem, ‘Why don’t we remember the Weaver Street massacre in Belfast?’, *Irish Times*, 13 Feb. 2023; Patrick Mulroe, ‘Clones, Weaver Street and the forgotten violence of 1922’, *Stories from a Border Kitchen*, (<https://>

by Dr Karl O’Hanlon, great nephew of Eliza O’Hanlon, who was killed by the bomb.<sup>5</sup>

However, little is known still about the place of the intercommunal conflict in Belfast in the politics of Ireland and Great Britain at the time it occurred. As it was played out, Irish nationalists claimed that it was a Catholic ‘pogrom’ by the Protestant majority, orchestrated by the Ulster Unionist leadership and the new government of Northern Ireland. Recent historiography has not found evidence of a specifically state-organised campaign against Catholics; it has also been established that Protestants were targeted too.<sup>6</sup>

However, to date no critical studies of representations of the conflict in Irish and British politics have been undertaken. It is implausible that Irish nationalists were not aware of Protestants killed and injured in the conflict of 1920–22. Still, they represented the conflict as an anti-Catholic ‘pogrom’. No comprehensive studies have examined what Irish nationalists meant by ‘pogrom’ in relation to this violence. Meanwhile, the unionist representation of loyalist action as self-defence due to anxiety and fear of a perceived or actual threat of Irish republican violence has seemingly been treated as self-explanatory.<sup>7</sup> Given that recent scholarship on political violence considers emotions, such as fears and anxiety, as only one cause of violence among many others,<sup>8</sup> unionist representations of violence in Belfast can also be critically examined. Finally, very little has been explored about how the British government perceived the intercommunal conflict, although until the transfer of powers to Northern Ireland in early 1922 the British government was responsible for its law and order, and theoretically remained so afterwards.

This article seeks to contribute to understanding the politics surrounding the conflict in Belfast and the emerging Northern Ireland by interrogating the political representations of the Weaver Street bombing, which became a locus of political controversy in 1922. The bombing shocked Belfast and the whole of Ireland and Great Britain as its victims were almost exclusively Catholic children. Weaver Street and its vicinity was a small, predominantly Catholic area in North Belfast, which would later be almost completely depopulated following an armed loyalist paramilitary attack in May 1922 (thirty-nine out of forty families moved out),

theborderkitchen.blog/clones-weaver-street/) (20 Mar. 2023); John Ó Néill, ‘Weaver Street, Tuam and Bessborough as ‘non-sites of memory’, The Treason Felony Blog (<https://treasonfelony.wordpress.com/2022/01/27/weaver-street-tuam-and-bessborough-as-non-sites-of-memory/>) (20 Mar. 2023). See also John Ó Neill, ‘The Weaver Street bombing and not dealing with the past’, The Treason Felony Blog (<https://treasonfelony.wordpress.com/2016/02/04/the-weaver-street-bombing-and-not-dealing-with-the-past/>) (20 Mar. 2023).

<sup>5</sup> Karl O’Hanlon, ‘Remembering my great-aunt Eliza, killed in Weaver Street bombing 100 years ago today’, *Irish Times*, 13 Feb. 2022.

<sup>6</sup> See Niall Cunningham ‘“The doctrine of vicarious punishment”: space, religion and the Belfast Troubles of 1920–22’ in *Journal of Historical Geography*, xl (2013), pp 52–66; Brendan O’Leary, *A treatise on Northern Ireland: volume 2. Control: the second Protestant ascendancy and the Irish state* (Oxford, 2019); Robert Lynch, ‘People’s protectors? The Irish Republican Army and the “Belfast Pogrom”, 1920–1922’ in *Journal of British Studies*, xlvii (Apr. 2008), pp 375–91.

<sup>7</sup> See Jim McDermott, *Northern divisions: the old IRA and the Belfast pogroms, 1920–22* (Belfast, 2001); A. C. Hepburn, *Catholic Belfast and nationalist Ireland in the era of Joe Devlin, 1871–1934* (Oxford, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin A. Valentino, ‘Why we kill: the political science of political violence against civilians’ in *Annual Review of Political Science*, xvii (2014), pp 89–103.

which was rare even by the standards of Belfast.<sup>9</sup> On the evening of 13 February 1922, a bomb was thrown into the street when children were playing there. At least twenty-two were wounded and six died of their wounds.<sup>10</sup> Fr John Hassan, curate of St Mary's Catholic church in Belfast,<sup>11</sup> in his major contemporary nationalist account, wrote that it was 'a more horrible outrage than any that had hitherto disgraced this savage city'.<sup>12</sup> The bombing was discussed in Westminster and in correspondence between the government of Northern Ireland and the British government as well as the British government and the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State. Warring representations of the attack were put forward by Ulster unionist, nationalist and British politicians while popular responses to it were reflected in governmental correspondence, in parliamentary debates and in the contemporary press. This article examines how the debates surrounding the event and its investigation were inextricably connected with ongoing high politics.

It is notable that the Weaver Street bombing has sometimes been remembered as having taken the lives of six Catholic children,<sup>13</sup> although in fact four children and two adults were killed. The probable reason for this discrepancy is that the figure of six children was recorded in the major contemporary source of nationalist propaganda on violence in Belfast during 1920–1922, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom*, by G. B. Kenna, an alias for Fr Hassan, which was commissioned by the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State. Additionally, the Provisional Government's memos, which framed the Free State's propaganda about the violence in Belfast in 1922, mention that six children were killed.<sup>14</sup> The bombing of Weaver Street profoundly shook the public both in Ireland and in Great Britain. Its timing and the wider political situation meant that in nationalist propaganda it came to epitomise Catholic victimisation in the intercommunal violence in Belfast and Northern Ireland overall.

## I

No longer existing on the map of Belfast since the 1960s,<sup>15</sup> Weaver Street used to be a narrow street of terraced houses in North Belfast off York Street and York Road, which was a mixture of businesses, warehouses and workers' housing.<sup>16</sup> It was inhabited by working-class Catholics, who were employed at mills and

<sup>9</sup> Declan Martin, 'Migration within the six counties of Northern Ireland from 1911 to 1937 with special reference to the city of Belfast' (Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, Belfast, 1977), p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Kieran Glennon, *From pogrom to civil war: Tom Glennon and the Belfast I.R.A.* (Cork, 2001), p. 102.

<sup>11</sup> G. B. Kenna, *Facts and figures of the Belfast Pogrom* (Dublin, 1922), p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> Kenna, *Facts and figures*, p. 104.

<sup>13</sup> For example, see Glennon, *From pogrom to civil war*, p. 102; Cunningham, 'The doctrine of vicarious punishment', p. 58; Jonathan Bardon, *A history of Ulster* (Belfast, 2001), p. 487.

<sup>14</sup> Memo for 13 Feb. 1922 (N.A.I., NEBB 1/1/6, Summary of atrocities in Ulster 1922, January–April); Belfast summary, 6 Nov. 1922 (N.A.I., TAOIS/S1451).

<sup>15</sup> O'Hanlon, 'Remembering my great-aunt Eliza'.

<sup>16</sup> Martin, 'Migration within the Six Counties of Northern Ireland from 1911 to 1937', p. 90.

factories in Belfast's Docklands.<sup>17</sup> By the early 1920s, Weaver Street was part of a largely Catholic-populated enclave in the predominantly Protestant North Derby Street area. Areas with a relative Catholic majority off York Street and York Road, like Weaver Street and the vicinity, were 'sandwiched' between bigger areas where Protestants were a majority.<sup>18</sup> One end of Weaver Street was connected to a predominantly Catholic Milewater Street and on its other end crossed into North Derby Street, inhabited mostly by Protestants.

On the evening of 13 February 1922 between 8pm and 9pm, an unidentified person threw a grenade into Weaver Street from the corner of North Derby Street.<sup>19</sup> Grenades, which were commonly referred to as bombs, were only introduced to the urban setting in the aftermath of the First World War, where they had been used in trench warfare.<sup>20</sup> The splinters and shrapnel from the grenade injured at least twenty two people, mostly children. Six people died of their wounds, which made the Weaver Street bombing the first of the three single incidents with the highest number of casualties in the conflict in the emerging Northern Ireland.<sup>21</sup> Six people were killed in each of two other incidents which followed in 1922: the murder of the male members of the McMahon family in Belfast and the Altanaveigh massacre in County Armagh in 1922. The fact that most of the victims of Weaver Street bombing were children also makes it stand out among other killings during that year.

On the evening of 13 February, Weaver Street was peaceful. Approximately thirty children were out in the street.<sup>22</sup> They were playing skipping-rope, swinging on ropes tied to lamp posts, singing on the doorsteps of their homes and playing marbles and other games, while their parents were also out watching them.<sup>23</sup> Between 8pm and 9pm, the games were interrupted by two Special constables of the Ulster Special Constabulary (U.S.C.), a newly established auxiliary police force recruited exclusively among Protestant communities, who chased the children from the Milewater Street corner where they were skipping. The Specials sent them to the middle of Weaver Street, as witnessed by Catherine MacNeill, mother of Rose Anne MacNeill who died after the bombing.<sup>24</sup> According to her, the Specials intervened ten minutes before the bombing (during her cross-examination she said that this was not the first time constables had put the children away from that corner, and there was some discussion during the inquest as to whether this was a unremarkable instance of the police looking out for children's safety or a more suspicious action). Shortly afterwards, five minutes before the bombing, three policemen were seen coming from Shore Road to North Derby Street and speaking

<sup>17</sup> *Irish News*, 22 May 1922.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp 90, 98.

<sup>19</sup> The events of the bombing are reconstructed based on the press coverage in the aftermath of the bombing and coverage of the Belfast City Coroner's inquest into the deaths of four children. See *Irish Times*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Irish News*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Northern Whig*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Belfast News-Letter*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Irish News*, 4 Mar. 1922.

<sup>20</sup> Timothy K. Wilson, *Killing strangers. How political violence became modern* (Oxford, 2020), p. 137.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy K. Wilson, *Frontiers of violence: conflict and identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia, 1918–1922* (Oxford, 2010), p. 167.

<sup>22</sup> Belfast summary, 6 Nov. 1922 (N.A.I., TAOIS/S1451).

<sup>23</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Irish News*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>24</sup> *Irish News*, 4 Mar. 1922.

with two civilians on North Derby Street.<sup>25</sup> The policemen left and the two civilians were seen walking up and down towards Jennymount Mill on North Derby Street and passing Weaver Street corner. One of the civilians threw the bomb into Weaver Street and a revolver was fired into the street after that. This account of the bombing was presented during the inquest at the Belfast City Coroner's Court into the deaths of four children in Weaver Street in March 1922. The witnesses were Agnes O'Neill, Mrs MacCaffrey, Ellen Rafferty, John Pimley, the father of the wounded Annie Pimley,<sup>26</sup> and Patrick Kennedy, one of the brothers of Catherine Kennedy who had died of her wounds.<sup>27</sup> Constable Boyd testified that the revolver fire after the bombing was meant to cover the retreat of the bombers.<sup>28</sup> It also prevented the parents from reaching their wounded children. In a slightly different version of events presented in November 1922 before the Belfast Claims Court, a civilian witness testified that there were three civilians involved, not two as mentioned during the coroner's inquest. The witness claimed to have seen one of them take out the bomb out of his pocket, draw out the pin and throw the bomb into Weaver Street.<sup>29</sup>

The bomb was thrown from the corner of North Derby Street into Weaver Street and it exploded right among the children, injuring them with splinters and shrapnel. As Lord Chief Justice Denis S. Henry pointed out at the first session of the Belfast City Commission on 15 February, the victims were 'little children of poorer class, who are driven by the very necessities of existence to go into the streets for their play'.<sup>30</sup> Four girls died of their wounds within two days of the bombing (age is given in brackets). Ellen Johnston (11) died on the night of the bombing and her father, George, was subsequently awarded £50 in compensation for her death.<sup>31</sup> Catherine Kennedy (15), a millworker,<sup>32</sup> died upon arrival at the Mater Hospital on the night of the bombing.<sup>33</sup> Her brother Barney (10) also sustained injuries, but survived. Rose Anne MacNeill (13) and Eliza O'Hanlon, baptised as Mary Elizabeth<sup>34</sup> (11), died the following morning after the bombing.<sup>35</sup> Eliza's two siblings, Martha (13) and John (16), were wounded as well. Two adults later succumbed to their wounds: Margaret Smyth (53) died on 23 March,<sup>36</sup> and Mary Owen (40) died on 7 April 1922.<sup>37</sup>

Other children and adults were wounded non-fatally: Mary Kerr (6), W. J. Dempsey (13), William Connolly (13), Patrick Maguire (14), Kate O'Neill

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> 'John Pimley', Census of Ireland return for 48 Jennymount, Duncairn Ward, Antrim, 1911, N.A.I., available at ([www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Antrim/Duncairn\\_Ward/Jennymount/132689/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Antrim/Duncairn_Ward/Jennymount/132689/)) (20 Mar. 2023).

<sup>27</sup> 'Patrick Kennedy', Census of Ireland return for 10 North Derby, Duncairn Ward, Antrim, 1911, N.A.I., available at ([www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Antrim/Duncairn\\_Ward/North\\_Derby/132357/](http://www.census.nationalarchives.ie/pages/1911/Antrim/Duncairn_Ward/North_Derby/132357/)) (20. Mar. 2023).

<sup>28</sup> *Irish News*, 4 Mar. 1922.

<sup>29</sup> Belfast summary, 6 Nov. 1922 (N.A.I., TAOIS/S1451).

<sup>30</sup> *Irish Independent*, 16 Feb. 1922.

<sup>31</sup> Moore, 'Why don't we remember the Weaver Street massacre in Belfast?'

<sup>32</sup> *Irish News*, 4 Mar. 1922.

<sup>33</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Feb. 1922

<sup>34</sup> O'Hanlon, 'Remembering my great-aunt Eliza'.

<sup>35</sup> *Irish News*, 4 Mar. 1922.

<sup>36</sup> *Northern Whig*, 24 Mar. 1922.

<sup>37</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 8 Apr. 1922.

(14), Annie Pimley (16), Robert McBirney (16), George O'Connor (16), Mary Clinton (18) and Grace Kelly (21). Josephine Conway (12), also a millworker like Catherine Kennedy,<sup>38</sup> spent thirteen weeks in a hospital and was awarded £25 in compensation.<sup>39</sup> Other wounded children also won compensation claims: John McCluskey (12) got £30 and Susan Lavery (14) got £40.<sup>40</sup>

On 3 March 1922, the deaths of Catherine Kennedy, Eliza O'Hanlon, Ellen Johnston and Rose Anne MacNeill were subject to an inquest at Belfast City Coroner's Court.<sup>41</sup> Eliza, Ellen and Catherine had earlier been buried at Milltown Cemetery.<sup>42</sup> It was confirmed that the children died of haemorrhage caused by bomb splinters and shrapnel.<sup>43</sup> Constable Boyd and Sergeant J. Beattie said that the explosion was heard in the barracks and they came to Weaver Street after hearing the children cry. The investigation of the bombing turned out to be very politically sensitive as it sent shockwaves across both islands, and Northern Ireland's police and Special Constabulary were implicated in it.

District Inspector Lynn denied the claims of the witness that three policemen had been seen conversing with the bombers. According to him, the police were in the barracks that evening.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Mrs Agnes O'Neill's testimony against the police was initially rejected by the police on the night of the bombing and on 18 February. Mr Bernard Campbell, barrister for the next-of-kin of the deceased, claimed that no effort had been made to trace the constables allegedly seen by the witnesses and that he had had to intervene to oblige the police to accept the witness statements about these constables. The coroner, Dr James Graham, and the jury agreed that there was prima facie evidence of collusion with the U.S.C. and recommended a special inquiry subject to the approval of the minister of home affairs of Northern Ireland, Sir Richard Dawson Bates. However, there is no surviving information on whether further investigation of the bombing was allowed.

## II

The Weaver Street bombing took place amid a dramatic surge in violence in Belfast that had begun in mid-January.<sup>45</sup> Violence in early 1922 was extensively covered in both the nationalist and unionist press, unlike, for example, the shipyard expulsions of 1920, which went completely unreported by the unionist leaning *Belfast News-Letter*.<sup>46</sup> However, the timeline and origins of this violence were politically contested. News reports in unionist newspapers denounced the Weaver Street bombing as a 'dastardly' or 'cowardly' outrage.<sup>47</sup> The *Belfast Telegraph*

<sup>38</sup> Belfast summary, 6 Nov. 1922 (N.A.I., TAOIS/S1451).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Moore, 'Why don't we remember the Weaver Street massacre in Belfast?'

<sup>41</sup> Belfast City Coroner's Record of Inquests, 3 Mar. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., BELF/6/1/2/14).

<sup>42</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 17 Feb. 1922.

<sup>43</sup> For the newspaper reports of the inquiry, see *Belfast Telegraph*, 3 Mar. 1922; *Freeman's Journal*, 3 Mar. 1922; *Belfast News-Letter*, 4 Mar. 1922; *Irish News*, 4 Mar. 1922; *Northern Whig*, 4 Mar. 1922.

<sup>44</sup> *Irish News*, 4 Mar. 1922.

<sup>45</sup> Parkinson, *Belfast's unholy war*, p. 211.

<sup>46</sup> Connal Parr, 'Expelled from yard and tribe: the "Rotten Prods" of 1920 and their political legacies' in *Studi irlandesi. A Journal of Irish Studies*, xi (2021), pp 303–04.

<sup>47</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Belfast News Letter*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Northern Whig*, 14 Feb. 1922.

deplored it: ‘This was an abominable deed, and it is a pity the perpetrators have escaped.’<sup>48</sup> However, the unionist press reported the bombing along with other numerous incidents in Belfast, blaming ‘murder gangs’ and ‘desperados’ without distinguishing between the victims or perpetrators’ religion, although they mentioned ‘Sinn Fein’ if the I.R.A. was suspected. They attributed the outbreak of violence in Belfast to retaliation for the kidnapping of forty-two prominent unionists in Tyrone and Fermanagh by the I.R.A. on 7–8 February, and a gun battle between the I.R.A. and the U.S.C. in Clones on 11 February.<sup>49</sup> Notably, this explanation of the cause of the Weaver Street bombing and other violence in Belfast at the time has been adopted in the historiography of the period.<sup>50</sup>

The ongoing loyalist violence was presented in the unionist press as legitimate self-defence against the I.R.A. As Tim Wilson describes, the unionist view of loyalist violence was that it was a ‘highly regrettable (but ultimately understandable) response to intolerable provocation’.<sup>51</sup> The *Belfast Telegraph* emphasised that ‘feeling still runs high in the city and throughout the North of Ireland generally in consequence of the Sinn Fein invasion in Tyrone and Fermanagh and the shooting of Special Constabulary at Clones’.<sup>52</sup> In a way, this was a claim to loyalist victimhood that suggested loyalists were forced to act in the face of the violence of the I.R.A. The trope of Ulster’s self-defence was acutely relevant since the British Government refused to launch a military rescue operation to release unionist hostages and opted to negotiate their release with the Free State Provisional Government instead, even though additional military and naval support was granted to the government of Northern Ireland.<sup>53</sup>

While the unionist press exonerated loyalist violence on the grounds of self-defence, it also called for it to be kept in check with appeals for self-restraint by the loyalist public in the face of perceived provocation by the I.R.A. The northern cabinet’s statement to the public on 17 February, under pressure from the British Government to get the security situation back under control, expressed ‘their deep appreciation of the great restraint and self-command shown by the Loyalists of the Six Counties under the strain of outrages lately committed’ and urged them to continue the ‘praiseworthy conduct, as nothing can better contribute towards its efforts to restore peace’.<sup>54</sup> A similar call to maintain good discipline and abstain from ‘irresponsible action of any kind’<sup>55</sup> along with reassurances about regular communication with the government of Northern Ireland was published by William Henry Holmes Lyons, the grand master of the Orange Lodge of Ireland and chairman of the Orange, Black and Loyalist Defence Association

<sup>48</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>49</sup> For more details on the kidnappings and the Clones incident, see Robert Lynch, *The Northern I.R.A. and the early years of partition 1920–1922* (Dublin, 2006), pp 115–16; Michael Farrell, *Arming the Protestants: the formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary and the Royal Ulster Constabulary 1920–27* (London and Sydney, 1983), pp 92–3.

<sup>50</sup> McDermott, *Northern divisions*, p. 167; Lynch, *The Northern I.R.A. and the early years of partition 1920–1922*, p. 116; Michael Farrell, *Arming the Protestants*, p. 93; Glennon, *From pogrom to civil war*, p. 102.

<sup>51</sup> Timothy K. Wilson, ‘The most terrible assassination that has yet stained the name of Belfast’: the McMahon murders in context’ in *I.H.S.*, xxxvii, no. 145 (May 2010), p. 85.

<sup>52</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>53</sup> Lynch, *The Northern I.R.A. and the early years of partition 1920–1922*, p. 115.

<sup>54</sup> *Northern Whig*, 17 Feb. 1922.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

of Ireland, a loyalist paramilitary organisation which supplied recruits to the U.S.C.<sup>56</sup>

The Weaver Street bombing was seen as an embarrassing result of such excessive loyalist violence. The *Belfast News-Letter* lamented that ‘unfortunately, the provocation against which we warned all peaceable people has apparently been seized upon by certain evil-disposed individuals, who perpetrated the horrible bomb outrage in Weaver Street last night’.<sup>57</sup> James Cooper, an Ulster Unionist member of the House of Commons of Northern Ireland for Fermanagh and Tyrone, called for self-restraint against firing on ‘anyone who was innocent’ at a demonstration in Omagh on 17 February.<sup>58</sup> He supported his plea using the example of the Weaver Street bombing: ‘let them have no incidents like those they had in Belfast the other day, when someone threw a bomb in among a lot of harmless little children, several of whom were killed. That was not a credit to Ulster; it was not credit to any Unionist.’ Someone in the audience said, ‘We did not do that’, to which he replied that he did not know who did it; however, the bomb was thrown into ‘Sinn Fein territory’ and he did not want any of them to fire on innocents.<sup>59</sup>

While northern Catholics were not blamed for the bombing publicly, behind closed doors the unionist leadership were already denying loyalist responsibility for the bombing. Edward Carson wrote in his diary that there was no evidence that the bomb was thrown on purpose to harm the children.<sup>60</sup> Frederick Crawford, a prominent Ulster Unionist and businessman, who had been involved in the Larne gun-running, claimed in his letter to James Craig, the prime minister of Northern Ireland, that his sources proved that the explosion was accidentally caused by ‘Sinn Feiners’ themselves.<sup>61</sup> His version of the events held that the ‘Sinn Feiners’ were moving their weapon stores in Weaver Street, a bomb fell on the ground and the pin fell out, wounding the children who were watching. He also claimed that loyalists would not be able to get within 500 yards of Weaver Street and, hence, could not have perpetrated the bombing. His version denies the very geography of Belfast, according to which a Catholic Weaver Street bordered with a Protestant North Derby Street. In his response to Crawford, Wilfred Spender, secretary to the cabinet, concurred with this version of the events.<sup>62</sup> Interestingly, the response of the unionists to the next major atrocity against Catholics in Belfast, the murder of five male members of the McMahon family and one of their employees on 24 March 1922, was to disown it in a similar vein.<sup>63</sup>

### III

For nationalists, the Weaver Street bombing was one of the many attacks on Catholics in Belfast that happened with the silent or even direct support of the

<sup>56</sup> David Fitzpatrick ‘The Orange Order and the border’ in *I.H.S.*, xxxiii, no. 129 (May 2002), p. 55.

<sup>57</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>58</sup> *Northern Whig*, 18 Feb. 1922.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 18 Feb. 1922.

<sup>60</sup> Personal Diaries of Sir Edward Carson, 18 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC665/2/Reel 8/D/1633/2/26), quoted in Cunningham, ‘Doctrine of vicarious punishment’, p. 58.

<sup>61</sup> Crawford to Craig, 20 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., Crawford papers, D1700/5/6/6).

<sup>62</sup> Spender to Crawford, 21 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., Crawford papers, D1700/5/6/8).

<sup>63</sup> Wilson, “‘The most terrible assassination’”, p. 86.



northern government. It was labelled by the nationalist press as ‘the worst outrage of the previous two years’.<sup>64</sup> The *Irish News* wrote: ‘The bomb-thrower in Weaver Street ... will probably get a medal if half-a-dozen babies die from the ghastly wounds inflicted by his hand.’<sup>65</sup> The bombing and the conflict in Belfast were afforded considerable coverage in the Irish regional press across the emerging Irish Free State,<sup>66</sup> even though by 1922 the Irish regional press was preoccupied by local matters.<sup>67</sup> The nationalist press across Ireland, both in Northern Ireland and in the Irish Free State, argued that the ongoing violence was not caused by the border crisis, as the unionist press suggested, but was part of an orchestrated campaign against the Catholics in the north, although only the *Irish Independent* and a few regional newspapers<sup>68</sup> specifically mentioned the term ‘pogrom’ against Catholics while reporting Weaver Street. The term had first been used to describe Belfast riots against Catholics in 1912 and was brought back to describe the violence against Catholics during rioting in Derry in June 1920.<sup>69</sup> The framing of the Weaver Street bombing as part of a ‘pogrom’ reflects that for nationalists the bombing was only part of what they saw as a two-year long assault on the Catholic minority.

The nationalist newspapers were adamant that Catholics were killed in Belfast prior to the incidents on the border, starting from 6 February when a Catholic barman Thomas Gray was shot in the city.<sup>70</sup> The *Irish News*, the organ of the Irish Parliamentary Party and published in Belfast, was the most articulate about the perception of an orchestrated campaign against Catholics. It argued that violence in Belfast was ‘regulated with almost mathematical precision from quarters broadly known as “Unionist”’ and called for Sir James Craig to distance himself from it.<sup>71</sup> In an article by a special correspondent, the *Freeman’s Journal* argued that the organisation behind the campaign of violence against Catholics was evident as ‘for the three weeks the attacks on Catholics ceased as if by magic, and on 6 February started again like a prairie fire’.<sup>72</sup> Nationalist newspaper reports sometimes indicated the religion of the victims, in particular of Catholics, although in many instances they also reported victims without mentioning their background. They generally blamed ‘Orange murder gangs’ or ‘the Orange’ for the violence.

The key nationalist argument was that violence against northern Catholics was sectarian and not political, as the northern government and unionist press were presenting it. Joseph Devlin, of the Irish Parliamentary Party, M.P. for West Belfast at Westminster, was outspoken in parliament in London about an ongoing campaign of violence against Catholics in Belfast. Speaking in the House of Commons on 16 February he said ‘for over 18 months the people I represent in this House have been

<sup>64</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, 15 Feb. 1922.

<sup>65</sup> *Irish News*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>66</sup> For example, *Western People*, 18 Feb. 1922; *Longford Leader*, 18 Feb. 1922; *Cork County Eagle and Munster Advertiser*, 18 Feb. 1922; *Nenagh News*, 18 Feb. 1922; *Drogheda Argus and Leinster Journal*, 18 Feb. 1922; *Kerry People*, 18 Feb. 1922.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Wehrly, ‘Journalism and the local newspaper industry in Sligo, 1899–1922’ in Ian Kenneally and James T. O’Donnell (eds), *The Irish regional press, 1892–2018: revival, revolution and republic* (Dublin, 2018), pp 25–6.

<sup>68</sup> For example, *Southern Star*, 18 Feb. 1922; *Derry Journal*, 25 Feb. 1922.

<sup>69</sup> Wilson, “‘The most terrible assassination’”, p. 89.

<sup>70</sup> *Irish News*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Irish Independent*, 15 Feb. 1922.

<sup>71</sup> *Irish News*, 14, 16 Feb. 1922.

<sup>72</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, 17 Feb. 1922.

treated as outlaws. They have been hunted; they have been persecuted; they have been murdered; they have been attacked by assassins, some of them uniformed and the liveried servants of this very Government.<sup>73</sup> The Weaver Street bombing for him was one of many crimes committed against Catholics in the course of this campaign. According to him, the violence in Belfast was ‘merely a repetition of what has been going on in that city for the last half century’.<sup>74</sup>

The same line of reasoning was adopted by the Catholic hierarchy and, in particular, Bishop MacRory, bishop of Connor and Down. An outspoken critic of the British government for its lack of action to defend northern Catholics from violence in Belfast,<sup>75</sup> he sent a telegram to Prime Minister David Lloyd George on 14 February, calling for British troops to be deployed in Belfast and stating that there was ‘no adequate protection here for Catholics’.<sup>76</sup> He would become a co-founder of the Belfast Catholic Protection Committee later in April 1922,<sup>77</sup> which would actively voice the concerns of Catholics in Northern Ireland.<sup>78</sup> Protesting against what they saw as a unionist campaign of misinformation about Catholics in the north, the committee strongly denounced the way loyalist self-defence against ‘Sinn Fein’ was used to justify violence against all Catholics. Later in May, the committee published a letter in the nationalist press asking whether ‘the children of Weaver Street be regarded as Sinn Feiners [...] Can the profession of even ‘Sinn Fein’ views justify the horrors inflicted on Catholic women and children in Belfast?’<sup>79</sup> Responding in June to an article by Rev. Arthur C. Hill, ministering in Glasgow, in which he denounced crimes committed against Protestants in Belfast,<sup>80</sup> the committee stressed his omission of crimes against Catholic innocents in Belfast, including the Weaver Street bombing.<sup>81</sup> Having been widely denounced in the press in its immediate aftermath, the Weaver Street bombing became a locus of controversy in the Westminster parliament, involving both Irish governments and the British government.

#### IV

The news about the Weaver Street bombing reached Westminster the morning after the attack. On 14 February 1922, Winston Churchill, the British state secretary for the colonies, was compelled to speak at the House of Commons about violence in Belfast and other ongoing issues in Ireland, such as the kidnappings of loyalist

<sup>73</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 1364 (17 Feb. 1922).

<sup>74</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 1367 (17 Feb. 1922).

<sup>75</sup> Mary Harris, ‘The Catholic Church, minority rights, and founding of the Northern Irish state’ in Dermot Keogh and Michael H. Haltzel (eds), *Northern Ireland and the politics of reconciliation* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 66.

<sup>76</sup> *Irish Independent*, 15 Feb. 1922.

<sup>77</sup> Harris, ‘The Catholic Church, minority rights, and founding of the Northern Irish state’, p. 71.

<sup>78</sup> Margaret O’Callaghan, ‘Language and religion: the quest for identity in the Irish Free State 1922–32’ (M.A. thesis, University College, Dublin, 1981), p. 36.

<sup>79</sup> Quoted in Patrick J. Gannon, ‘In the catacombs of Belfast’ in *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, xi, no. 42 (June, 1922), p. 294.

<sup>80</sup> *Glasgow Herald*, 3 June 1922.

<sup>81</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, 6 June 1922; *Irish Independent*, 8 June 1922; *Cork Examiner*, 8 June 1922.

hostages by the I.R.A. He did so upon a private request by a member of parliament or a peer, whose name is not known as per the parliamentary procedure. His office sent a telegram to Wilfrid Spender, secretary to the government of Northern Ireland, asking him to provide ‘as soon as possible such particulars as you have regarding last nights bombing in Belfast and in particular to which side the children afflicted belong’,<sup>82</sup>

Sir James Craig, the prime minister of Northern Ireland, provided an extensive response presenting a particular view of the ongoing violence in Belfast, including the bombing. He began by stating that ‘the greatest tension has existed in Belfast since the kidnapping of loyalists and the murderous attack on the police at Clones station on Saturday last’,<sup>83</sup> a passage which was echoed almost verbatim in the same day’s *Belfast Telegraph*’ editorial. He enumerated attacks that had occurred in Belfast since 12 February, which he viewed as the starting point of the outbreak. He deplored the outrages, ‘especially the latter dastardly deed, involving the lives of children’, and reassured Churchill that the situation was being dealt with by the Northern Ireland authorities and the British military. Churchill presented Craig’s telegram in the House of Commons that day<sup>84</sup> and the lord chancellor presented it in the House of Lords during a discussion on arms in Ireland.<sup>85</sup> The London correspondent of the *Northern Whig* would write the following day that ‘The House [of Commons] listened in concerned silence, members being evidently much moved by the story thus unfolded’.<sup>86</sup>

Craig represented the Weaver Street bombing as an accident caused by indiscriminate bomb warfare in the area. He wrote: ‘regrettable incidents occurred that day; including the indiscriminate throwing of bombs over a wall into Weaver Street, a Sinn Fein area, which resulted in the death of two children and the wounding of fourteen others’.<sup>87</sup> It is impossible to ascertain Craig’s source of information about the bombing, but his representation was at odds with publicly available information that morning. While some newspapers reported three<sup>88</sup> or four<sup>89</sup> bombs thrown into Weaver Street, major Belfast newspapers reported only one bomb thrown and they specifically painted Weaver Street as an idyllic playground subjected to a sudden bomb attack. Craig’s denial that children could have been targeted on purpose is significant. It is important that at the time of the Weaver Street bombing Craig’s government was negotiating a grant from the crown to fund the U.S.C. for 1922–23<sup>90</sup> and that the Treasury was wary about approving it.<sup>91</sup> Admitting that the bombing was a result of a failure of his government’s security forces may have been a step too far.

The fact that U.S.C. constables were implicated in later witness statements on the bombing would have been even more embarrassing. It is notable that Craig described Weaver Street as a ‘Sinn Fein area’ rather than indicating that the children were Catholics despite this information having been requested by the Colonial

<sup>82</sup> Hemming to Spender, 14 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>83</sup> Craig to Churchill, 14 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>84</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 806–807 (14 Feb. 1922).

<sup>85</sup> *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, cl, 134–135 (14 Feb. 1922).

<sup>86</sup> *Northern Whig*, 15 Feb. 1922.

<sup>87</sup> Craig to Churchill, 14 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>88</sup> *Irish Times*, 14 Feb. 1922; *Londonderry Sentinel*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>89</sup> *Daily Mail*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>90</sup> Farrell, *Arming the Protestants*, p. 87.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

Office. Back in August 1921 his government insisted that violence in Belfast was not sectarian riot, but a political conflict between the Northern State and I.R.A. gunmen imported from the Free State and backed by Sinn Féin.<sup>92</sup> Nevertheless, it is also possible that Craig was genuinely denying that the bombing targeted children on purpose. In his private telegram to Churchill later that week he reiterated his version about indiscriminate warfare. He wrote that the bomb was either thrown 'over a building into a particular area without knowing that children were there in the vicinity' or the bomb which exploded in Weaver Street 'was intended for use in another area'.<sup>93</sup> In any event, a version of the Weaver Street bombing as an unfortunate accident in a disloyal 'Sinn Fein area' was in line with the unionist narrative about the overall culpability of 'Sinn Fein' and the I.R.A. for the ongoing violence, but it also served his Government's line of reasoning about the threat from the I.R.A which required funding of the security forces by the British government.

## V

Churchill's presentation of Craig's telegram in Westminster drew a strong response from nationalist quarters. The *Irish News* argued that an existing campaign of 'hunting' Catholics in Belfast was now exculpated by the northern government.<sup>94</sup> The *Freeman's Journal* published a piece, 'Truth about Belfast. Genesis of the pogroms that have disgraced the city', which resembled the rhetoric of the *Irish News*.<sup>95</sup> Their special correspondent wrote that Craig used the wording 'Sinn Fein area ... as if to indicate that the act was that of a Sinn Feiner. It means that Catholics or Sinn Feiners throw bombs among their own people.'<sup>96</sup> During the debate on the Irish Free State Bill on 17 February, Joseph Devlin attacked Craig for presenting the bombing as 'Sinn Fein bombing their own'. According to Devlin, a statement that the bomb 'was thrown in a Sinn Fein district' suggested that.<sup>97</sup>

A meeting of the executive of Belfast Sinn Féin with other members of the nationalist community passed a resolution to the president of Dáil Éireann protesting on behalf 'of the religious and political minority in Belfast, forming 100,000 of the citizens' against Craig's misrepresentation of violence in the city as caused by the border kidnappings and Clones, thereby supposedly justifying the murder of Catholics in Belfast which, according to them, had started in any case in the previous week.<sup>98</sup>

Michael Collins, the chairman of the Provisional Government of the Irish Free State, sent a telegram to Churchill in response to Craig's representation. It was a copy of a telegram by the Sinn Féin Cumann in Belfast which had been originally sent to Arthur Griffith, the president of Dáil Éireann. The cumann passed a resolution to draw Griffith's attention to a number of attacks on Catholics in Belfast, which included a 'bomb thrown among children at play' on 13

<sup>92</sup> Patrick Buckland, *The factory of grievances: devolved government in Northern Ireland, 1921–39* (Dublin, 1979), p. 186.

<sup>93</sup> Craig to Churchill, 18 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>94</sup> *Irish News*, 15 Feb. 1922.

<sup>95</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 17 Feb. 1922.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 1369 (17 Feb. 1922).

<sup>98</sup> *Northern Whig*, 17 Feb. 1922.

February.<sup>99</sup> The telegram stated that [Catherine] Kennedy and [Ellen] Johnston were instantly killed, three others had since died in hospital and seventeen further victims were maimed. It summarised that ‘this is six county Government’ and that they would never recognise such a government. On 15 February, Churchill was speaking in the House of Commons on the matters of violence in Belfast again. He read out the part of the telegram Collins had forwarded to him, which enumerated Catholic victims in Belfast, leaving out the scathing denunciation of the northern government.<sup>100</sup> He also read Craig’s second telegram, which provided up-to-date figures on casualties in Belfast and reiterated the urgency of releasing loyalist hostages. There was a strong backlash against Collins’s telegram in unionist quarters, denouncing it as intervention into Northern Ireland’s affairs.<sup>101</sup> The *Belfast Telegraph* commented that Collins ‘carefully omitted reference to every Protestant who had been shot, while Sir James Craig’s telegram was a fair summary covering both sides’.<sup>102</sup>

Collins sent another telegram on violence in Belfast on 16 February asking Churchill to read it in the Commons,<sup>103</sup> but he also passed it on to the press for publication.<sup>104</sup> He addressed a number of ongoing issues: suspension of the evacuation of British troops from Ireland; kidnapping of loyalist hostages by the I.R.A.; and ongoing violence in Belfast and elsewhere in Northern Ireland. Writing about violence in Belfast, he pointed out that that military protection to Catholics was granted only after Bishop MacRory’s appeal to the British prime minister, Lloyd George. He denounced the *Daily Mail’s* coverage of the Weaver Street bombing as it was written in its news report that ‘the bomb “fell” among children’ without indication that ‘the bomb was thrown deliberately among the children by some person purporting to uphold the side which Sir James Craig upholds’.<sup>105</sup> Collins’s rhetoric was in line with the nationalist argument that there was a campaign of misinformation in the unionist and British press concerning violence against Catholics in Belfast.

Collins also described the resort to arms by nationalists in Belfast as self-defence against the northern government and its supporters: ‘It is unavoidable that Nationalists that form a minority in Belfast should take steps to defend themselves and their families against attacks by the followers of Sir James Craig when the British authorities take no effective steps for their protection’. While Collins was in contact with the Catholic hierarchy in the north<sup>106</sup> and aimed to be a voice for the Catholic community in the face of partition, he was also responsible for much of the violence conducted by the northern I.R.A. in Belfast and on the border at the time. By painting Catholics as taking up arms against ‘the followers of Sir James Craig’ he reinforced the unionist perception that all northern Catholics were complicit in the I.R.A. violence and also distracted attention from his own role in I.R.A. northern actions. As discussed earlier, a lack of protection by the British government for the Catholic minority had already been invoked by the

<sup>99</sup> Griffith to Collins, received by the Irish Office on 15 Feb. 1922, (T.N.A., C.O. 906/20).

<sup>100</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 1008–1009 (14 Feb. 1922).

<sup>101</sup> *Northern Whig*, 16 Feb. 1922; *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 Feb. 1922.

<sup>102</sup> *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 Feb. 1922.

<sup>103</sup> Collins to Churchill, 16 Feb. 1922 (T.N.A., C.O. 906/20).

<sup>104</sup> *Irish News*, 17 Feb. 1922; *Belfast News Letter*, 17 Feb. 1922.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> Harris, ‘The Catholic Church, minority rights, and founding of the Northern Irish state’, p. 69; Eamonn Phoenix, *Northern nationalism: nationalist politics, partition and the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland 1890–1940* (Belfast, 2004), pp 177–8.

Catholic hierarchy. But it was also used by Dáil Éireann propaganda to justify I.R.A. violence. In 1921 the *Irish Bulletin*, the propaganda outlet of Dáil Éireann's Publicity Department, reprinted in the press in Ireland and Great Britain, wrote that: 'when repeated appeals by the Catholic minority for protection by the British forces failed to produce any response, the I.R.A. had been asked to give assistance to the restoration of order.'<sup>107</sup> Given that Michael Collins himself was most likely behind the kidnappings of loyalist hostages earlier in February,<sup>108</sup> his telegram demonstrates a lack of consideration for Belfast Catholics by the Provisional Government in the face of the I.R.A. campaign in the north.

## VI

The publication of Collins's telegram led to the British government unwillingly putting aside its policy of neutrality towards the conflict in Belfast. A grave security situation in Northern Ireland was serving potentially to destabilise the Treaty, which was passing through the House of Commons at the time in the shape of the Irish Free State Bill. Churchill was urging Craig to cooperate with Collins to calm down the violence as 'otherwise it is not possible for us to keep Parliament duly apprised'<sup>109</sup> and urged the heads of both Irish governments to have 'some form of parley'<sup>110</sup> while speaking in the House of Commons. Additionally, a badly-handled outbreak of violence in Belfast was embarrassing both for the government of Northern Ireland and the British government, as security powers had already been transferred to Northern Ireland, and the U.S.C., funded by the British crown and recruited almost exclusively from Protestants, was being extensively used to deal with the ongoing violence.<sup>111</sup> For these reasons, Churchill was very careful to attempt to maintain the appearance of British neutrality on violence in Belfast. When speaking during the Irish Free State Bill hearings, he described the violence as 'furious and inhuman passions that are alive amongst certain sections of the population, Catholic and Protestant'.<sup>112</sup>

The unionist press especially resented his appearance of neutrality.<sup>113</sup> The *Belfast News-Letter's* London correspondent wrote on 16 February: 'What aroused the indignation of Ulster members, however, was the trend of his commentary — the deliberate attempt to give the House the impression that the Northern Unionists were no less responsible for existing trouble than Sinn Féin.'<sup>114</sup> His government's coalition in the Westminster parliament was already shaky on the matter of the settlement on Ireland.<sup>115</sup> While expressing in the House of Commons every confidence in the northern government's 'strenuous efforts to do all they can to

<sup>107</sup> Keiko Inoue, 'Propaganda of Dáil Éireann: from Truce to Treaty' in *Éire-Ireland*, xxxii, no. 2–3 (summer/autumn 1997), p. 168.

<sup>108</sup> Lynch, *The Northern I.R.A. and the early years of partition 1920–1922*, p. 117.

<sup>109</sup> Churchill to Craig, 18 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>110</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 1268–1269 (14 Feb. 1922).

<sup>111</sup> Buckland, *The factory of grievances*, p. 181.

<sup>112</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 1268–1269 (14 Feb. 1922).

<sup>113</sup> *Northern Whig*, 16 Feb. 1922; *Belfast Telegraph*, 16 Feb. 1922.

<sup>114</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 16 Feb. 1922.

<sup>115</sup> Ronan Fanning, *Fatal path: British government and Irish revolution 1910–1922* (London, 2013), p. 321.

prevent reprisals in any form and loss of life and destruction of property'<sup>116</sup> privately Churchill repeatedly pointed out Craig's failure to prevent the violence and reminded Craig 'the Imperial Government are as you know bearing very heavy charges to maintain forces for your security'.<sup>117</sup>

Against the backdrop of his efforts to bring Collins and Craig to negotiate, Churchill acknowledged the Weaver Street bombing as an appalling act of violence. In response to Collins's published telegram Churchill wired him: 'There is a universal feeling of horror here at the bomb-throwing among children in Belfast. Am sending a further telegram to Craig on the subject. He has already denounced it as a dastardly outrage, but, in my opinion, it is the worst thing that has happened in Ireland for the last three years.'<sup>118</sup> This telegram was reprinted in the 'Facts and figures of the Belfast Pogrom', although it was erroneously described as a statement in the House of Commons.<sup>119</sup> The same day Churchill wired Craig to convey a similarly strong message: 'A profound feeling has been aroused in the mind of leading people here by the bomb among the children. This deed has no equal for savagery in recent Irish History. It is the record and the limit I thank God I was able to read your scathing denunciation of it in good time. What would have been said if twenty Protestant children had been similarly shattered in Southern Ireland?'<sup>120</sup>

It is critical for understanding both telegrams that Churchill wrote them in the expectation of privacy. Neither telegram was meant for the general public. Contrary to Churchill's policy of neutrality and expectations of privacy, Michael Collins passed on his denunciation of the Weaver Street bombing to the press, to be published the following day with his own reply: 'Glad to know Sir James Craig and all others denounced the outrage. He and the leaders of the North-East Parliament can prevent action of this kind if only they adopt a sufficiently stern attitude.'<sup>121</sup> The following morning Churchill wrote to Michael Collins to stress that he had not been writing for publication and asked in a restrained manner for Collins not to publish their correspondence unless it was explicitly agreed beforehand.<sup>122</sup>

As expected, publication of Churchill's telegram to Michael Collins fanned Ulster unionists' resentment. Edward Carson wrote in his diary on 18 February 1922 that it was 'wicked of' Churchill to say that the Weaver Street bombing was the worst incident in Ireland in the last three years. He wrote that even if it was 'a wicked, outrageous crime, it is only one, among how many on the other side?'<sup>123</sup> On 20 February 1922, Crawford would write to Craig that the news about Weaver Street hit the unionist cause in England very badly.<sup>124</sup> In his telegram to Churchill on 18 February Craig insisted that he 'must not continually emphasise the unfortunate killing of the children'.<sup>125</sup> He wrote: 'without palliating this

<sup>116</sup> *Hansard 5 (Commons)*, cl, 1010–1011 (15 Feb. 1922).

<sup>117</sup> Churchill to Craig, 18 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>118</sup> *Westminster Gazette*, 18 Feb. 1922.

<sup>119</sup> Kenna, *Facts and figures*, p. 104.

<sup>120</sup> Churchill to Craig, 17 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>121</sup> *Westminster Gazette*, 18 Feb. 1922.

<sup>122</sup> Anderson to Cope, from Churchill for Collins, 18 Feb. 1922 (T.N.A., C.O. 906/20).

<sup>123</sup> Personal diaries of Sir Edward Carson, 18 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., MIC665/2/Reel 8/D/1633/2/26), quoted in Cunningham, 'Doctrine of vicarious punishment', p. 58.

<sup>124</sup> Crawford to Craig, 20 Feb. 1922. (P.R.O.N.I., Crawford papers, D1700/5/6/6).

<sup>125</sup> Craig to Churchill, 18 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

dastardly outrage I could unfortunately quote other instances where loyalist women were deliberately done to death in the presence of their children'.<sup>126</sup>

## VII

The bombing of Weaver Street was an exceptional incident in the conflict in Northern Ireland. Not only because children were deliberately targeted, but also given its high number of casualties. It is striking that contrary to its exceptional nature, it became synonymous with how innocent Catholic lives were being taken in the violent conflict in Belfast. It was further invoked in public speeches in 1922 to condemn violence against Catholics in Northern Ireland.<sup>127</sup> During the Irish Free State Bill debates in the House of Lords on 21 March 1922, Stanley Owen Buckmaster, 1st Viscount Buckmaster, referred to the bombing as 'a bomb thrown into a Catholic school' as a symbol of the wrongs inflicted on the Catholic community in Northern Ireland, which were denied by Ulster Unionists in Westminster.<sup>128</sup> One of the explanations as to why an exception came to be used as an exemplar of the Catholic experience has to do with the powerful nature of the perception of children's victimisation in a violent conflict in this period. Although the majority of the wounded children were at least ten-years-old and two of the girls who were killed worked as millworkers, some commentators described them as 'babies',<sup>129</sup> 'little children',<sup>130</sup> and infants 'slain by Herod',<sup>131</sup> thus emphasising their defencelessness. The responses to the wartime violence against children during the First World War suggest that children were seen as an embodiment of innocence, home, future and everything most protected.<sup>132</sup>

However, the most immediate reason why the Weaver Street bombing became the epitome of innocent Catholic victimisation was its use in the fierce propaganda war which unfolded in late spring and summer 1922 against the backdrop of the intensifying violence in Belfast, a campaign against the northern government by the pro-Treaty and anti-Treaty I.R.A., the failure of the second Craig-Collins pact, and the Tallents inquiry (initiated by the British Government) into the failure of that pact.<sup>133</sup> The Free State Provisional Government's voice on the conflict in the north changed, along with its policy towards the North. In February, while Collins was still hoping to get the British government to pressure Craig into negotiations over the Treaty's boundary clause, the Provisional Government was not explicitly accusing the northern government of an orchestrated campaign against Catholics. Instead, it used the press and direct contact with Winston Churchill to bring attacks against Catholics to the attention of the British government. Weaver Street was

<sup>126</sup> Craig to Churchill, 18 Feb. 1922 (P.R.O.N.I., CAB/11/1).

<sup>127</sup> *Irish Times*, 1, 24 Mar. 1922.

<sup>128</sup> *Hansard 5 (Lords)*, cc, 694 (21 Mar. 1922).

<sup>129</sup> *Irish News*, 14 Feb. 1922.

<sup>130</sup> Speech by Joseph Cooper, *Northern Whig*, 18 Feb. 1922.

<sup>131</sup> Speech by Fr Patrick J. Gannon, *Freeman's Journal*, 14 Oct. 1922.

<sup>132</sup> Manon Pignot, 'Children' in Jay Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge history of the First World War* (Cambridge, 2014), vol. III, p. 31.

<sup>133</sup> See Buckland, *The factory of grievances*, p. 203; Robert Lynch, *The partition of Ireland 1918–19* (Cambridge, 2019), p. 153; Michael Hopkinson 'The Craig-Collins pacts of 1922: two attempted reforms of the Northern Ireland government' in *I.H.S.*, xxvii, no. 106 (Nov. 1990), pp 145–58.



among the first cases used to this end. On 11 March the Provisional Government sent a memorandum to Churchill accusing the police in Belfast of killing a number of Catholics in 1921.<sup>134</sup>

On 25 February the Publicity Department of Dáil Éireann circulated witness statements on the Weaver Street bombing in the nationalist press.<sup>135</sup> The U.S.C. officers were reported to have shooed children from the Milewater Street into Weaver Street ten minutes before the bombing. Also, uniformed people were reportedly seen talking to civilians at the junction of North Derby Street and Weaver Street before the incident. The same witness testimony would be presented during the coroner's inquest into the bombing in March, but a definitive link between the bomber and the U.S.C., as well as the question of whether the U.S.C. deliberately gathered children at one end of the street, would never be established. At the time the Provisional Government's propaganda only circulated these as witness statements, not facts.

By the summer, the Provisional Government's version of the occurrences surrounding the bombing was transformed. After the failure of Craig-Collins pact, and on the back of the Tallents inquiry into its failure, the Provisional Government openly joined in the Catholic hierarchy's claims that there was an orchestrated campaign by the northern government against Catholics. The Publicity Department of Dáil Éireann launched the 'Weekly Irish Bulletin of Belfast Atrocities', accusing Craig's government of an orchestrated pogrom against Catholics in the North. Reports in the Bulletin enumerated crimes committed against Catholics in Belfast and Northern Ireland and were circulated in the nationalist press.<sup>136</sup> The Provisional Government's propaganda now used earlier witness testimony in the case of the bombing as hard facts in favour of their argument that the northern government was complicit in crimes against northern Catholics. Writing about Weaver Street, the Bulletin claimed that policemen on duty 'shepherded' children towards one end of Weaver Street, after talking to two strangers, where the children would be bombed by those strangers.<sup>137</sup> In another issue, it accused 'Specials' and 'Orange bombers' of acting together.<sup>138</sup>

Fr Patrick J. Gannon, a Jesuit priest based in Cavan, who actively published on political and social issues in Ireland, reproduced this version of events in his article on the situation in Belfast in June.<sup>139</sup> It is notable, however, that allegations about the U.S.C. did not make it into another piece of propaganda sponsored by the Provisional Government in cooperation with the Catholic hierarchy. 'Facts and figures of the Belfast Pogrom' by Fr John Hassan, was commissioned by Bishop MacRory in April 1922 upon Michael Collins's request,<sup>140</sup> but only states that the bomb was thrown at children at play by 'Orange bombers'.<sup>141</sup> Nationalist sources maintained that it was due to unionist propaganda that in a number of

<sup>134</sup> Paul Bew, *Churchill and Ireland* (Oxford, 2016), p. 118.

<sup>135</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 24 Feb. 1922; *Irish News*, 25 Feb. 1922; *Irish Independent*, 25 Feb. 1922.

<sup>136</sup> *Freeman's Journal*, 6 June 1922; *Evening Echo*, 6 June 1922; *Cork Examiner*, 6 June 1922; *Fermanagh Herald*, 17 June 1922.

<sup>137</sup> *Weekly Irish Bulletin of Belfast Atrocities*, 5 June 1922 (N.L.I., LO 1728).

<sup>138</sup> *Weekly Irish Bulletin of Belfast Atrocities*, 26 June 1922 (N.L.I., LO 1728).

<sup>139</sup> Gannon, 'In the catacombs of Belfast', p. 283.

<sup>140</sup> Kieran Glennon, 'Facts and fallacies of the Belfast pogrom' in *History Ireland*, xxviii, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2020), p. 28.

<sup>141</sup> Kenna, *Facts and figures*, p. 104.

European continental newspapers, including some Catholic papers in Rome, the Weaver Street bombing was represented as ‘Sinn Feiners’ bombing Protestant children.<sup>142</sup> In October 1922, while speaking at an Annual Catholic Truth Conference against the backdrop of the unfolding Irish Civil War, Fr Gannon compared the Weaver Street bombing to the slaying of innocents by Herod.<sup>143</sup> Even after the conflict in Belfast subsided, the memory of the bombing lingered on.

## VIII

On 13 February, the Weaver Street families were shaken by the first of the three most deadly incidents of the whole conflict in 1920–22. Only two other incidents of the conflict matched the death toll of the Weaver Street bombing: the McMahon murders in March and the Altanaveigh massacre in June 1922. In the months after the bombing, the community of Weaver Street was heavily afflicted by a second episode of paramilitary violence. An estimated 171 Catholic families from the York Street and York Road area were forcibly evicted between February and June 1922,<sup>144</sup> including thirty-nine tenants from Weaver Street.<sup>145</sup> The residents of Weaver Street fled after a large group of loyalist paramilitaries fired rifles and revolvers into their homes on the evening of 20 May 1922, killing Thomas MacShane of Jennymount Street and wounding John Donnelly of Milewater Street.<sup>146</sup> In the absence of the destroyed 1926 census, it is difficult to trace where individual families went afterwards, but most of those forcibly evicted from the areas where Catholics were a minority later settled in areas of Belfast where Catholics were a majority.<sup>147</sup>

The impact of the First World War can be traced in the Weaver Street bombing. Bombs were introduced to the cities after soldiers used them in trench warfare during the war. Also, the bombing was a result of rampant paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, which was also prominent in Europe in the aftermath of the war. The bombing appears to have been perpetrated by loyalist paramilitaries, with the alleged involvement of Northern Ireland’s security forces. The jury of the coroner’s inquest recommended a further inquiry due to possible collusion of perpetrators with the police forces. However, no further inquiry was reported.

The Weaver Street bombing profoundly shook the public and politicians both in Ireland and Britain. Its most striking feature was that the victims were mostly children at play. This strong response exposed the unspoken conventions about the limits of accepted violence in the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland,<sup>148</sup> which arguably prevented further transgression of these limits as no comparable attacks on children followed. Violence against children was unacceptable, as they were seen the embodiment of innocence. It is remarkable that this unique incident became in the nationalist propaganda of later 1922 an archetypal example of Catholic victimhood in Northern Ireland.

<sup>142</sup> *Weekly Irish Bulletin of Belfast Atrocities*, 5, 26 June 1922 (N.L.I., LO 1728); G. B. Kenna, *Facts and figures*, p. 104; Patrick J. Gannon, ‘In catacombs of Belfast’, p. 283.

<sup>143</sup> *Freeman’s Journal*, 14 Oct. 1922.

<sup>144</sup> Martin, ‘Migration within the six counties of Northern Ireland’, pp 160, 162.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>146</sup> *Irish News*, 22 May 1922.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>148</sup> Wilson, *Frontiers of violence*, p. 171.

The political controversy around the Weaver Street bombing revealed bigger narratives about violence in Northern Ireland in 1920–22. Craig represented Weaver Street as an unfortunate casualty of intercommunal warfare in a disloyal ‘Sinn Fein’ area that was caused ultimately by the I.R.A. threat. For the unionists, the bombing was a deplorable, but understandable, outcome of the recent abduction campaign by the I.R.A. While Craig and Carson denied that loyalists might have committed such an atrocity, some sections of unionism called on loyalists to restrain their violence to prevent similar incidents.

Meanwhile, the British government aimed to maintain a visible neutrality, and in February 1922 it was determined to proceed with the Irish Free State Bill and leave the Irish governments to deal with their problems, although it was still interested in maintaining a stable security situation in Belfast to avoid such embarrassing crimes as Weaver Street. The publication of Churchill’s telegram, with its empathetic denunciation of the bombing, revealed to the public what was only meant for Collins’s eyes, contravening the desirable neutral image of the British government.

The rhetoric that the bombing was part of a pogrom featured in all nationalist press across Ireland but was most articulately raised by Joseph Devlin and the northern Catholic church hierarchy. In February, the Provisional Government circulated witness statements on the Weaver Street bombing in the press which implicated the northern security forces, but they openly laid out the accusation of the pogrom only from June 1922, after the efforts to negotiate the boundary issue failed. Unionist claims of victimhood were more subtle, implying that unionists were forced by the I.R.A. to defend themselves and that regrettable incidents like Weaver Street could have been avoided if it had not been for the violence by the I.R.A. These overarching representations of violence in Northern Ireland were shaped by the underlying attitudes and beliefs which drove the violence. Their further analysis can help historians in building a more comprehensive understanding of the conflict in Northern Ireland in 1920–22.<sup>149</sup>

<sup>149</sup> This article is partially based on my master’s thesis in Irish Studies at Queen’s University, Belfast (2019/20). I am grateful to Professor Margaret O’Callaghan, Professor Peter Gray, Professor Heather Jones, John Dorney and anonymous peer reviewers for their very insightful comments, which helped shape this article. I am also deeply indebted to Dr Clodagh Tait, joint editor of *Irish Historical Studies*, for her very helpful comments on the article and for supporting me in the process of finalising the manuscript against the backdrop of my displacement arising from Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.