

Britain: Conservative government considered "forcible resettlement" of Northern Ireland in 1972

By Steve James
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The annual release of British state papers more than 30 years old has revealed that the 1972 Conservative government considered a plan to forcibly resettle some half a million Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland.

1972 was the bloodiest year in Northern Ireland's 25-year civil war. In 1969, under the Labour government of Harold Wilson, Britain had dispatched some 10,000 troops into Northern Ireland to prop up the Protestant, pro-British regional government in Stormont House.

Since Ireland's partition in 1921, the Stormont government had upheld British rule in the North through granting marginal privileges to Protestant workers, savage discrimination to their Catholic counterparts and the maintenance of an atmosphere of continual emergency. Election gerrymandering and the notorious Special Powers Act gave the Protestant, pro-British Ulster Unionist Party unrivalled powers of repression against the North's minority Catholic population.

This deeply unstable society fell apart in the late 1960s, as increasing numbers of Catholics demanded equal rights. Civil rights marches were met with mass police violence from the pro-British Royal Ulster Constabulary and a Unionist militia, the "B Specials", whilst paramilitary gangs loyal to the UK launched pogroms in Catholic areas.

The Wilson government utilised the violence as a pretext for dispatching British troops, supposedly to protect the Catholic population. But its real role quickly became clear, as British troops conducted a brutal colonial war of occupation against the Catholic population.

On "Bloody Sunday", January 30, 1972, British troops shot 27 unarmed civil rights demonstrators in Derry, 14 of whom died. Within Ireland, the massacre provided a wave of recruits to the provisional IRA, a three-day siege of the British embassy in Dublin, panic in the Irish government of Jack Lynch, and led directly to the collapse of the Stormont government of Brian Faulkner.

In response the Conservative government of Edward Heath imposed direct rule from London in March 1972. By July, amidst daily gun fights, bombings, and with Catholic areas in Derry barricaded against British troops, the Heath government was considering ever more repressive measures to end resistance to its rule.

It is in this context that the top secret appendix, entitled "Redrawing the Border and Population Transfer", came to be drafted. The typed and hand-annotated report considered the means by which the "dissident Republican population" could be moved out of Northern Ireland. The plan envisaged transferring Catholic dominated areas, mainly Fermanagh and Tyrone, either into the Irish Republic or into some form of transitional status.

The drawback was that this scenario involved creating new Catholic enclaves in a reduced but still Protestant-dominated rump North—primarily in Belfast—and Protestant enclaves in the newly transferred areas. To overcome this, the report proposed expelling 200,000-300,000 Catholics and 200,000 Protestants from their homes—one third of Northern Ireland's population.

The appendix states categorically that such a plan could not be accomplished peacefully. "Many would no doubt take the view that they should not be the ones

to pay the price for peace in Northern Ireland:

Catholics demanding justice where they were, and refusing to become refugees to obtain it, and Protestants seeing the need to move as poor reward for their ‘loyalty’ to the Crown,” it states.

Other documents suggest that in addition to the 20 battalions already in Northern Ireland, another 27 would have been required to enforce the forcible transfer, whose movements “it would be impossible to conceal” and who would be required to be “completely ruthless in the use of force”. A state of emergency would also have to be imposed, it states.

That such a proposal was drawn up and considered underscores the reactionary character of British rule in Northern Ireland. The plan was rejected on practical grounds, rather than on any principled objection to the forced resettlement of half a million people. The anonymous authors of the plan were sceptical as to its eventual success, noting that it would require a “formidable barrier of control” between the new areas and both the Republic and the rump of Northern Ireland, at great expense.

The top secret appendix, moreover, provides an object lesson in imperialist double standards.

In 1999, the Blair government affected outrage over claims that the Yugoslav government of Slobodan Milosevic had drawn up a plan to ethnically cleanse Kosovo’s Albanian population. No evidence of this plan—the so-called “Operation Horseshoe”—has ever been presented. Nonetheless the British ruling class claimed that the very possibility of its existence was morally repugnant enough to justify NATO’s ensuing bombardment of Yugoslavia. Milosevic is now on trial before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in The Hague on charges of crimes against humanity.

In contrast, evidence that Britain considered ethnically cleansing Northern Ireland has passed with barely a comment. Newspapers noted the blueprint’s existence almost in passing, and there has been no demand by Prime Minister Tony Blair for Heath and his nameless advisers to be held to account.

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