

Victims and Survivors

Focus on Northern Ireland

Required Reading

David Bloomfield *et al.*, eds. *Reconciliation After Violent Conflict*, pp. 54-66.

Highly Recommended Reading

Marie Smyth, 'Putting the Past in its Place: Issues of Victimhood and Reconciliation in Northern Ireland's Peace Process', in Nigel Biggar (ed.), *Burying the Past: Making Peace and Doing Justice after Civil Conflict*. Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2001, pp. 125-53.

Further Reading

Bloomfield, Kenneth. *We Will Remember Them: Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner*. Belfast: HMSO, 29 April 1998. Available in PDF at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/issues/victims/docs/bloomfield98.pdf>

Community Dialogue. *Dealing with the Past: From Victimhood to Survival?* Belfast: Community Dialogue, 6 January 2005. Available in PDF from <http://www.communitydialogue.org/>

Hamber, Brandon and Robin Wilson. *Recognition and Reckoning: The Way Ahead on Victims Issues*. Democratic Dialogue Report 15. Belfast: Democratic Dialogue, April 2003. Available in PDF from http://www.brandonhamber.com/pubs_reports.htm

Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery: From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. London: Pandora, rev. edn 2001 [1992].

McKittrick, David, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton (eds.), *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles*. London and Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1999.

Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, *Human Rights and Victims of Violence*. Belfast: NIHRC, July 2003. Available in PDF from <http://www.nihrc.org/dms/data/NIHRC/attachments/dd/files/22/victimsofviolence.pdf>

Victims Unit, OFMDFM, *Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve: Delivering practical help and services to victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland*. OFMDFM: Belfast, 2002. Available in PDF form from <http://www.victimsn.gov.uk>

WAVE, *Injured ... on that Day*. Belfast: WAVE, 2009.

Additional AV Resource

'Healing the Wounds of War' Programme 1: Remembering To Forget (3 January 2002). Ways of remembering that can bring closure on the past.

'Healing the Wounds of War' Programme 6: Burying The Dead (7 February 2002). How people have begun to bury their terrors as well as their dead after state terror in Central America.

Further AV Resource

BBC Radio Ulster Legacy Series. Throughout 1999 at 8:58 am the Legacy Series documented the experiences of people affected by the Troubles. For two minutes each day ordinary people told how the events of the last three decades in Northern Ireland affected their lives. For a few sample extracts see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/history/legacy/index.shtml>

Electronic Resources on Victims in Northern Ireland

Commission for Victims and Survivors <http://www.cvsni.org> or <http://www.mygroupni.com/victimcommission/>

FAIR (Families Acting for Innocent Relatives) <http://www.victims.org.uk/>

INCORE: 'Remembering' victims and survivors at <http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk/victims>

Northern Ireland Office, <http://www.nio.gov.uk/victims>

Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The Victims Unit <http://www.victimsnri.gov.uk>

Relatives for Justice <http://www.relativesforjustice.com>

Victim Support http://www.victimsupport.org.uk/vs_ni/vs_ni_home.html

Possible Films

Bloody Sunday. (2002). 107 mins. Directed by Paul Greengrass. A dramatization based on the Civil Rights Parade led by Ivan Cooper in Derry on Sunday 30 January 1972, and the killing of 13 civilians by British paratroopers. Produced by ITV.

Cal. (1984). 102 mins. Directed Pat O'Connor. Drama based on the short novel by Bernard MacLaverty. Tells the story of a young IRA volunteer involved as a driver in the killing of an RUC officer, and the story of the officer's widow Marcella.

Fifty Dead Men Walking. 117 mins. Directed by Kari Skogland. A dramatization of the life of Martin McGartland, a youth from west Belfast who was recruited to spy on the IRA in the late 1980s.

Hunger (2008). 90 mins. Directed by Steve McQueen. Written by Enda Walsh and Steve McQueen. A dramatization of the six weeks leading up to the death of Bobby Sands during the 1981 hunger strike at the Maze.

In the Name of the Father. (1993). 133 mins. Director Jim Sheridan. A dramatization based on the wrongful prosecution and imprisonment of the 'Guildford Four' who were arrested for a pub bombing in 1974. It focuses on the efforts of Gerry Conlon, and his father Giuseppe who was arrested with him, to clear his name.

Omagh. (2004) 115 mins. Directed by Pete Travis. A dramatization of the impact that the Real IRA bomb in Omagh had on the relatives of the 29 people killed in 1998. The film was made by RTE and Channel 4 and first screened in June 2004.

Some Mother's Son. (1997) 112 mins. Directed by Terry George. A dramatization based on the 1981 hunger strikes, the film follows the efforts of two mothers to save their sons' lives.

Sunday. (2002) 90 mins. Directed by Charles McDougall. Written by Jimmy McGovern. A dramatization of the events of 'Bloody Sunday' in a slightly longer time frame than the better known *Bloody Sunday* by Greengrass, covering preceding events and continuing to the flawed Widgery Inquiry. Produced by Channel 4 (released on DVD in 2007).

Titanic Town. (1998). 98 mins. Directed by Roger Michell. Based on the novel by Mary Costello. A Belfast housewife in Andersonstown faces opposition when she launches a campaign in 1972 to stop daytime shootings.

Introduction

[Slide 2] As with much of the terminology in conflict or post-conflict situations the terms ‘victim’ and ‘victimhood’ are highly contested and can be used to mean different things. The IDEA Handbook points to distinctions between individual and collective victims, and also to differences between direct and indirect victims. There are also differences created by gender, by age (children and adults), and by generation (first and second). A number of other distinctions and clarifications can also be drawn. Drawing conceptual and analytic distinctions can clarify some of the issues at stake. However, some might ask how important academic clarification of terms really is, and whether it is missing something more important. In light of such questions, it is important to remember that conceptual and analytic work is unlikely to have little immediate bearing on the substantive issues that victims face. Nonetheless if it is done well it can make it much easier to address those issues in a positive way.

[Slide 3] Perhaps the most significant principle to remember when thinking about victims and their needs, their rights, and their responsibilities, is that they are not a single group—each victim/survivor is an individual with individual concerns and an individual coping mechanism. Even members of the same family can react in very different ways to the loss of a family member. However, as a general rule most victims/survivors in a conflict usually want some form of appropriate acknowledgement of their loss. For example, survivors of the Armenian genocide continue to press Turkey for acknowledgment of what happened. The reluctance in Turkey to have an open discussion on this remains a very difficult issue, and the refusal to acknowledge what happened is seen as adding to the injustice.

Survivors/Victims

[Slide 4] For some the term ‘victim’ can suggest passivity and disempowerment. In situations of domestic abuse it is common to see the term ‘survivor’ as more empowering and preferable to the term ‘victim’. Both ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ can be used to indicate that someone has suffered a wrong, but they suggest a different attitude in how the person sees themselves in relation to that wrong. The term ‘victim’ is often seen as focussed on the past and the wrong that was committed; whereas the term ‘survivor’ speaks more of the present or future, and the fact that the wrong has been survived.

[Slide 5] However, in armed conflicts the terms ‘victims’ and ‘survivors’ are not necessarily interchangeable. Despite the advantages of survivor language in many cases of conflict, in wide-scale armed conflict situations there is often no avoiding the term ‘victims’, especially for fatalities of the conflict. For example, in a genocide the term ‘victims’ is likely to refer to those who died and ‘survivors’ refers to those who lived. Alternatively, in a conflict like Northern Ireland, the term ‘victims’ usually refers both to those who are killed and also to the (surviving) immediate family members of those who are killed. More recently the tendency for victims to be seen primarily in terms of deaths and whether there is adequate acknowledgment of people who have been injured has also received more attention.

[Slide 6] Whether the statistics should include as ‘victims’ those who were actively involved in armed groups during the conflict is a subject of strong disagreement in Northern Ireland. Some would include civilian and security services fatalities but not paramilitary groups, others would argue for an inclusive definition of ‘victims’ that includes all fatalities resulting from the conflict. Often these differences are linked to concerns over a perceived ‘hierarchy of victims’ (see below).

Typology of Victims

[Slide 7] Acts of physical and psychological violence in a conflict have an impact beyond the immediate individual victim. They also impact on other individuals and onto collective victims.

To understand the ‘outgoing ripple’ from any act of violence it is helpful to distinguish at least three types of individual who may be a victim.

Primary victims—individuals who suffer the immediate impact of a harmful act, through death, injury or other immediate consequence

Secondary victims—those who are closely linked to primary victims and who suffer as a result of the death, injury or suffering of the primary victims. For example, close family members who are affected directly by a death or injury within the family, and/or indirectly by changes in personal or family lifestyle prompted by the death or injury.

Tertiary victims—those who are at some distance from the primary victims but are still individually impacted by it and/or by responses made to it.

[Slide 8] In many cases it is also important to think in terms of collective victimhood as well, and individual tertiary victims mark something of an overlap region for thinking of collective victims alongside individual victims:

Group or Community as victim—the group/community or part of a society that vicariously identifies with primary victims so that violence suffered by an individual has a much wider impact on that part of society. This is especially significant in sectarian/ethnic conflicts because in these conflicts a sense of collective identity is an important part of the conflict. The difference between this group and the tertiary victims may not be clear cut but it may be helpful to think of the tertiary groups as those who know the victim as an individual, whereas the group or community is more likely to think of the victim as a representative but not know the victim personally.

Whole Society as victim—the social cost to the whole society from conflict and the cultures of violence, silence and mistrust that conflict can generate.

Putting the typology together in this way, and including the sometimes controversial category of ‘whole society as victim’ should not be seen as suggesting that everyone’s suffering is equal, or that everyone has suffered in the same way. On the contrary, it is to suggest that whilst in one sense everyone may have suffered, it is not the case that everyone has suffered in the same way or equally. Clarifying ways for seeing how everyone may be said to have suffered or not, and is equal or not, is an important prior step for assessing the debate over the hierarchy of victimhood.

A Hierarchy of Victimhood?

[Slide 9] In Northern Ireland the term ‘victim’ is more common than the term ‘survivor’ in references to the conflict. In part this is because ‘victim’ has been linked to death rather than injury. In addition it also probably reflects a political context where claims to victimhood can be politically empowering at least in the short term. Those who have suffered most can draw political benefits from this claim. One of the problems with this is that there can be a negative overemphasis on victimhood. The politics of victimhood can lead to a competitive bidding for victim status, in which the suffering of others is minimised whilst one’s own suffering is amplified. At its most extreme, this competitive bidding can lead to a very negative identity around victimhood. For example, some commentators have referred to a MOPE syndrome (Most

Oppressed People Ever Syndrome) where the emphasis is very heavily on the suffering rather than survival and/or resistance.

An imbalanced sense of victimhood can be used to excuse counter violence.

[Slide 10] The hierarchy of victimhood is often closely linked to hierarchical perceptions around responsibility/innocence, with some victims claiming complete innocence and placing all the blame on other parties. Whilst it is important to recognise that both individual suffering and individual responsibility will vary significantly between individuals, nonetheless in many conflicts the gap between guilt and innocence is usually less clear-cut at a collective level. In such circumstances, any attempt to draw up a hierarchy of most victimised or innocent victims is likely to be highly contested.

Addressing 'Victims Issues' in Northern Ireland

[Slide 11] There are a wide-range of 'Victims Groups' active in Northern Ireland working with individuals and groups affected by the conflict, some of which are cross-community and others are more single-identity.¹ Prior to the 1998 Belfast Agreement very little was done to address the needs of victims in Northern Ireland. Kenneth Bloomfield's report *We Will Remember Them: Report of the Northern Ireland Victims Commissioner* was the first serious official step in this direction.

[Slide 12] In 2000 a Victims Unit was set up by the devolved Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. The Victims Unit (<http://www.victimsnri.gov.uk>) has produced various documents and strategies. This includes a working definition of Victims in the context of Northern Ireland as:

*The surviving physically and psychologically injured of violent, conflict related incidents and those close relatives or partners who care for them, along with those close relatives or partners who mourn their dead.*²

¹ Amongst the most widely-known are WAVE, Relatives for Justice and FAIR.

² Victims Unit, OFMDFM, *Reshape, Rebuild, Achieve: Delivering practical help and services to victims of the conflict in Northern Ireland* (OFMDFM: Belfast, 2002) p. 1.

In light of the discussion on survivors and victims above it is noteworthy that this definition might actually be a definition of survivors rather than victims, and it seems to exclude those killed by the conflict.

[Slide 13] The appointment of the four Victims' Commissioners in Northern Ireland (Brendan McAllister,

Bertha McDougall, Michael Nesbitt and Patricia MacBride) has been far from straightforward and in many ways reflects the ongoing divisions within society around such a sensitive issue.

[Slide 14] The *Lost Lives* project was a rather different way to document the primary victims of the conflict, though it has provoked mixed reactions.³ Some families have disputed information in the book.

[Slide 15] *Question:*

- What do you understand by the words 'victim' and 'survivor' and in what contexts is one more appropriate than the other?

³ David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton (eds.), *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died as a Result of the Northern Ireland Troubles*. London and Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1999.