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“‘We have seen these sort of people at work lately all over the globe’ (the Unionist Member of Parliament for Londonderry): Northern Ireland and 1968”

The Northern-Irish Troubles is seen as having its origins in the ancient quarrel between Protestants and Catholics. Northern Ireland is regarded as being out of place and out of time in the post-war world: “a Protestant state for a Protestant people.”

Reading the primary sources, however, suggests another reading of the recent past. Northern Ireland was not outside the mainstream in a Europe where a counter-insurgency war was being fought in one of its great cities, where former Nazis held high office, and laws from the fascist-era were used against protesters. The Second World War, post-war reconstruction, the Cold War, the affluent society, and the global revolt of 1968 all impacted upon Northern Ireland. The last of these transformed the struggling campaign for civil rights into a mass movement and sparked the Troubles. Northern Ireland’s ‘68ers were hoping for a repeat of Paris in May when they provoked police in Derry into attacking civil-rights marchers. They believed that by unmasking the authoritarianism that lurked beneath the Government’s liberal rhetoric they could inspire a socialist revolution. The violence that the ‘68ers unleashed did indeed succeed in polarizing society, but it was along sectarian lines rather than class lines. Sixty-eight is perhaps the most tragic example of how the global and the local have come together to make Northern Ireland’s history; the Troubles is perhaps the most tragic outcome of ‘68 and suggests its legacy is as much one of civil strife as civil liberties.