

THE SIEGE OF 64 GREAT STRAND STREET

The siege of Connolly House took on a new phase when some of the attackers climbed on to the roofs of neighbouring houses and, as if this were a signal, the crowd renewed the assault.

The door had been secured by the defenders with forms and blocks of timber nailed to the floor and the crowd on discovering this turned their attention to a factory next door. A gate leading into this building was broken down and mattresses and bedding material set on fire. The fire gave off a thick, black smoke which crept into the besieged house. Those on the ground floor retreated upstairs. A skylight was broken and some of them climbed on to the roof.

John Harris, a confraternity member and former marine who had served with the British expeditionary force against the Bolsheviks, led an attacking party of 14 in an assault on the rear of the house. The defenders were now in retreat and as Harris's group approached they saw some of them scrambling across the rooftops. The assault party entered the building without resistance and began examining papers and books that were strewn about. Harris was leafing through a minute book he had picked off the floor when he was struck on the head with a brick. Streaming blood he was taken to Jervis Street Hospital, clutching the ledger. Later that night, his head bandaged, he took the book, which contained information on the activities of the R.W.G. in Guinness's Jacob's and the Inchicore Works, to Fr. Ring, a curate in the Pro-Cathedral who looked at his bandaged head and said, "It'll be a star in your crown in Heaven". Harris had a scar on his forehead for the rest of his life. (21)

As the house filled with smoke and the mob began to occupy it, the defenders were making their escape across the rooftops. The fire brigade tried to rescue two women who were in difficulties on the slates but they were prevented by the crowd who slashed their water hoses. Fourteen of the defenders, including Sean Murray, who

by Pat Feeley

injured his ankle, escaped across the glass roof of Squire's joinery department and took refuge in the St. John's Ambulance Brigade building. George Squire, a building contractor later estimated damages to his premises at between £400 and £500. (22)

O'Reilly and Gilmore were among the last to leave. Gilmore fired warning shots at men coming across the roofs to give the others a chance to get away.

The gardai entered the building after a number of shots had been fired in rapid succession and Guard Thomas O'Callaghan grappled with a man in a tweed overcoat, whom he later identified as Gilmore, and felt a gun in his pocket. Gilmore escaped downstairs and when he was again approached by the guards, drew a gun and threatened to shoot them. They asked if he had permission to carry a gun and he said he had from the only people 'authorised to grant permission, the I.R.A.'. When they ordered him to surrender it, he said he would not without the permission of the O.C. of the South Dublin Brigade. Later he surrendered and when he was in the tender told them where there were two guns, under the counter. They found two loaded revolvers, a Webley and a Colt 45, automatic.

When the crowd captured the house, they wrenched out light fittings, broke open drawers and presses, scattering the contents about the floor, and smashed up the furniture and the fireplace. They threw furniture, books, pamphlets, bicycles and red flags through the broken windows into the street. The red flags were held aloft and burned. The pamphlets, which included "The Irish Case for Communism" by Sean Murray, "Marx, Engels, Lenin on the Irish Revolution" by Ralph Fox, and others of similar content, were torn up and burned on the street which was made into a paper. The mob, after setting fire to

the building, soaked the top floor in petrol and set it on fire.

The scene became disorderly after this and ambulance men carrying the injured away were stopped and questioned. At this stage the guards began to take action and fifteen of the demonstrators were arrested.



Sean Murray.

The men sheltering in the St. John's Ambulance Brigade headquarters refused to leave until the streets were cleared. The police were hostile when they arrived but agreed to take them to the Bridewell for their own protection.

About thirty of those on the street were treated for head injuries in Jervis Street hospital. Most of the guards were said to have received minor injuries and Superintendent O'Connell, who was in charge of about 60 police, was hit twice, by a brick and a stone.



It was now all over. The building was wrecked, the communists had fled and the guards were making arrests. The crowd decided it was time to go home.

Interviewed by a newspaper reporter, Joe Troy said he had been in the house since Tuesday afternoon and had nothing to eat for two days except bread and tea. He regretted that the attack had taken place. (23)

Another defender said he and twelve others had been in the house since Monday and had been unable to get in food. A woman sent out to buy some had been set upon by the crowd. He said he could not understand the reasons for the attack as their movement was concerned only with economic questions and was not anti-religious.

A report on the following day described the scene in Great Strand Street. The house looked as if had been wrecked by an explosion with windows broken and window frames smashed. While inside, doors were hanging from the hinges, shelves were pulled off the walls, and broken furniture and crockery littered the floor. Damage was estimated at about £600.

A large force of guards was in the vicinity under an Inspector and young men with heads, arms and legs in surgical bandages came to survey their work of the night before. People in the surrounding lanes and streets were said to be in fear and trembling that there would be a recurrence of the violence.

It was rumoured that a further attack was being planned on the following night on the Workers' College in Eccles Street. This time the authorities made sure that the events of the previous night were not repeated. Mrs. Despard was a national figure, eccentric or otherwise, in Britain where she had a lot of powerful political connections. The wrecking of her house could have had diplomatic repercussions. Her brother was Field Marshal Sir John French, hero of the Boer War, onetime chief of the Imperial General Staff, Commander of the British Expeditionary Forces at Ypres and Viceroy of Ireland.

Accordingly, early in the evening both ends of the street were cordoned off by a force of about seventy Gardai. Only those with business were allowed in. About 9.30 a crowd began to form in Temple Street but the guards ordered them off the street and they withdrew. The only violence of the night occurred when a crowd of about 300 marched up Dorset Street and tried to enter Eccles Place. Stones were thrown. A guard was hit and a passing tram car had a window broken. The guards made two charges with drawn batons and dispersed the stone throwers, who retreated down North Great Georges Street where they

demonstrated outside the Unemployed Workers' headquarters. Then, followed by the police, they proceeded on to Marlborough Street, jeering and hissing on their way past Unity Hall, and dispersed under the shadow of the Pro-Cathedral. Guards remained on duty at Madam Despard's house throughout the night.

In Great Strand Street about 100 police were on guard around the burnt-out building and motor lorries and motor cycles stood by. Curious crowds gathered but there was no trouble. About 9.45 a group of young people passed down Capel Street shouting and one of them threw a stone at Connolly House. Other than this the night passed quietly. (24)

The following week, **An Phoblacht** condemned the incidents and the 'frenzied mob', and blamed the A.C.A., who had issued a circular claiming that the communists had engineered the dismissal of O'Duffy, for the 'organised element in the riot'.

This was an attempt by the republicans to make political capital out of what happened at the expense of Cumman na nGaedheal. They were closer to the truth when they said that the crowd was made up mostly of hymn singing religious fanatics who believed if they 'lynched a communist' they were doing God's work, and that the guards had made no real effort to protect lives and property.

Addressing a meeting in Cathal Brugha Street, some days later, Maud Gonne McBride, referred to the 'disgraceful scenes' in the city. A voice in the crowd shouted that those involved were Catholics. She continued saying she was ashamed that Mrs. Sheehy-Skeffington should be publicly abused and that the home of Mrs. Despard should be attacked. Again the voice repeated, "It was Catholics". To which this time she replied, "They were hooligans". (25)

The attacks were also condemned by Nora Connolly-O'Brien and Fr. Michael O'Flanagan, president of Sinn Fein.

In an editorial the **Irish Workers' Voice** accused Fianna Fail of stirring up popular feeling against the R.W.G. and compared it to the police attacks on the unemployed in Belfast in October of the previous year. The analysis was wrong. The attacks were not government but religious inspired, and while Fianna Fail shed no tears publicly or privately for what happened, neither did they instigate it. Also they were undoubtedly carefully distancing themselves from the red smear with which Cumman na nGaedheal was trying to paint them.

The **Standard**, which normally carried weekly articles on the evils and dangers of communism, gave no coverage to the incidents. Neither did it condemn the violence carried out in

the name of religion. The **Irish Catholic** carried an account of the attack which it said took place during a communist meeting. The paper saw the event as a demonstration of the people's opposition to communism.

However, St. Patrick's Anti-Communist League, a religious association set up amongst the working class to fight communism, disassociated themselves from the attacks and said they had no sympathy with those who disturbed the peace of the city.

The Noel Lemass Cumann of Fianna Fail condemned the violence and said that the cause of Catholicity would not be furthered by street violence.

On Thursday a number of people appeared in the district court on charges in connection with the incidents. Charlie Gilmore was charged with possession of a Colt automatic and six rounds of ammunition and of threatening to shoot Garda O'Callaghan.

Gilmore refused to reply to the charge, rejected bail and read a newspaper during the proceedings. A number of guards gave evidence against him. They described how he threatened to shoot O'Callaghan, refused to surrender and stood at a door with a gun in his hand letting firemen in. Garda Murray said Gilmore claimed he had permission from the I.R.A. to carry a gun. He was remanded in custody for a week. (26)

Patrick J. Griffin of Richmond Road was charged with the alleged possession of a book and bookcase. Superintendent O'Connell said the book belonged to Connolly House and contained a list of names. Griffin said he had found the book on the floor when he entered the building and he picked it up intending to give it to police to whom he thought it might be of interest. The case was dismissed. Griffin came from a quiet middle class family who were upset at his being involved with such a mob.

The probation act was applied to James Caffrey (17) accused of taking a deal shutter from outside the house.

Four men were charged with being members of a riotous and disorderly mob: John Lynsky, a civil servant of 67, Moyne Road, Rathmine, William Carey, 9 Bracken's Cottages, Waterford Street, William Kavanagh of Corporation Buildings and Michael Meehan, a labourer of Lower Gloucester Place.

Supt. R. O'Connell said he saw Lynsky (who wore a pioneer pin in court) lighting papers, and piling furniture on a fire, in the middle of the street. Mr. Herman Good, solicitor, said his client was not involved in politics and only happened to come upon the scene of the disturbances.

William Kavanagh was arrested approaching Connolly House with a board. Kavanagh said he had spent the night at the pictures and after the pic-

tures went to a chip shop. He left the shop and went to Great Strand Street. He had only taken the board as a souvenir. Inspector Flanagan who gave evidence said he had not seen him throwing stones.

Supt. O'Connell said Michael Meehan had been involved in stone throwing and was arrested in possession of a tea urn, the property of Connolly House. Meehan denied throwing stones and said he had picked up the urn on the street. All were remanded for a week on bail.

Gilmore's statement that he had permission from the I.R.A. to carry arms in defence of Connolly House was refuted by the I.R.A. leadership, anxious not to be identified in any way with communism. A statement issued by the Adjutant General said he had no such orders to be in Great Strand Street. This in turn was contradicted by Harry Gilmore who said that as his brother's commanding officer, he had given him permission to carry a gun as a result of his own experiences in Dame Street. He said he understood one of the objects of the I.R.A. to be the protection of the civil and religious freedom of all citizens. This applied to those in Connolly House whose lives were being threatened by a mob inflamed by the same feelings which led to the attack on himself. (27)

The I.R.A. leaders replied to this in a further statement but refused to be drawn on their selective championing of causes. The Adjutant General said he had nothing further to say publicly but that Gilmore's letter and the 'allegations' (whatever these were)

that he had made were subjects for disciplinary action. (28)

On Sunday April 9 Harry Gilmore was court-martialed but was acquitted on all the charges brought against him. He refused to sign a prepared letter exonerating the I.R.A. of dealings with the communists.

Those on remand appeared before the district court on April 6th. Gilmore was again charged with possession of a Colt automatic and ammunition with intent to endanger life and with threatening to shoot a guard. He was sent for trial to the Circuit Criminal Court.

John Lynsky and William Kavanagh, charged with being part of a riotous and disorderly mob, were each bound to the peace for 12 months and Michael Meehan, charged with the same offence, was sentenced to fourteen days in jail. (29)

Gilmore's case came before the Circuit Criminal Court on Monday May 1st. A large number of republicans and socialists were in the public gallery.

In evidence Guard Thomas O'Callaghan said he entered the building after hearing shots and encountered the defendant whom he discovered was armed. Gilmore, who acted in his own defence, questioned the guards on their role during the riot and implied that they made no real attempt to control the mob or protect the building and those inside. He said he was a republican and believed he had saved lives by his presence in Connolly House. The jury returned a verdict of not guilty. The judge praised the guards for their bravery in a dangerous situa-

tion and said he would make no comment on the jury's verdict. (30)

The verdict could be read in a number of ways, as ambivalence towards the I.R.A. or as an acknowledgement of their new found respectability under Fianna Fail. (George and Charlie Gilmore were prominent amongst the political prisoners released by Frank Aiken after the party assumed power). Also there was the traditional fear amongst jurors of convicting republicans, the fear of reprisals.

In an atmosphere of triumphalist Catholicism an anti-communist march organised by St. Patrick's anti-Communist League took place in Dublin on the Sunday after the burning of Connolly House. Led by a pipers' band and with a large flag inscribed "God Bless Our Pope", a thousand people set out from O'Connell Street via Parnell Street to Marlborough Street. Many of the crowd wore yellow and white armlets, the Papal colours. They chanted slogans, sang hymns and carried bannerettes with inscriptions like "Pray for Ireland", and "Keep the Faith your Forefathers Died for".

They were accompanied by a large force of guards who cordoned off Cathal Brugha Street where a meeting was being addressed by Maud Gonne. Mr. P. Glennon, president of the anti-Communist League, addressing the meeting said that while they did not condone violence they would not tolerate communist speakers and blasphemy on the streets. (31)

The intellectual argument supporting the rights of private property was made by Fr. Fergal McGrath, the



Madame Despard and Maud Gonne McBride (carrying placard) at a demonstration.



Madam Despard addressing an anti- fascist rally.

distinguished Jesuit, in a sermon at the beginning of April. Communism, he said, was essentially anti-religious and wished to impose an omnipotent state in place of the omnipotent God. The church did not defend the present capitalist system but it would support a balanced system in which private property was not abused, as in the present capitalist system, nor rejected, as under communism, but 'honoured as the strongest safeguard of human liberty'. (32)

Westmeath County Council passed a resolution congratulating the people of Dublin for setting an example of how to rid the country of communist agitators and called on the government to deport all 'soviet agents' and all those who had gone on delegations to Russia. The County Council Chairman Thomas Maguire dissented saying that he would not support such a resolution until he knew the full facts of all that had happened in Great Strand Street. He knew how easy it was to brand people communists; he himself had been called one. (33)

Peadar O'Donnell's support for Jim Ralton on public platforms at the Rotunda and in Drumsna and Charlie Gilmore's armed defence of Connolly House made the I.R.A. leaders more determined to clearly and unequivocally distance the movement from communism and communists. Also in a letter to the papers at this time, the respected republican nationalist, Mary MacSwiney, warned republicans that the people would reject them if they

continued to align themselves with the communists.

An Phoblacht, which had a wide circulation at the time, said in an editorial in June that the I.R.A. was not communist, contrary to what was being said by the press, politicians, and clergy. It went on to say that there was in fact an order forbidding volunteers to be members of the Communist Party, or any other political organisation, and that there never had been any connection between the I.R.A. and the communists. They were opposed to the present economic and social system but also to atheistic communism and had plans for a new social order that was not antagonistic to religion. (34)

At the Wolfe Tone commemorations at Bodinstown, Maurice Toomey, Chief of Staff of the I.R.A., hammered home the same message. The republican army was not communist nor in alliance with communists. Its aim was to put the country's resources at the disposal of all the people and to bring about social justice. Toomey's speech was delivered to more than 5,000 members of the I.R.A., including left wingers like Peadar O'Donnell, George Gilmore and Frank Ryan.

In a belated comment on the disturbances in Strand Street **The Standard** said that although the riots were 'reprehensible' they were 'instructive'. They showed that the communists did not control the 'nationalist revolutionary elements' whom they had hoped to recruit in the campaign for a Workers' Republic. They had failed to get their support during the

disturbances. (35)

After a month or two the attacks tended to be forgotten in the normal way. However, they undoubtedly had shown how weak and lacking in support the communists were and helped to drive the wedge deeper between them and the I.R.A. It was a demonstration of popular anger, which left no one in any doubt as to the hostility of the majority of the citizens of Dublin towards communism, and a violent affirmation of loyalty to the church and its teachings. The crowd, after all, were only acting on warnings and encouragement they had received from the pulpits and the Catholic papers.

The communists should have learned from it that theirs was very much a minority viewpoint and was strongly opposed by the majority of people. That this violent hostility was based on religious hysteria and on the most extraordinary anti-communist propaganda stories is another insight into the thinking and educational level of the people at the time.

SOURCES

- (1) The Standard, 4/2/1933.
- (2) Ibid. 4/3/1933.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) The Irish Times, 28/2/1933.
- (5) Ibid. 20/2/1933.
- (6) Ibid. 1/3/1933.
- (7) Ibid. 6/3/1933.
- (8) The Catholic Herald, 25/3/1933.
- (9) The Irish Press, 25/3/1933.
- (10) An Phoblacht, 8/4/1933.
- (11) Ibid. 29/4/1933.
- (12) Interview, James Dillon, Dublin, 1976.
- (13) The Irish Independent, 27/3/1933.
- (14) An Phoblacht, 29/4/1933.
- (15) The Irish Times, 30/3/1933.
- (16) The Irish Independent, 29/3/1933.
- (17) Interview, Peadar O'Curry, Dublin, 1976.
- (18) Interview, Charlie Gilmore, Dublin, 1976.
- (19) The Irish Times, 23/3/1933.
- (20) The Irish Independent, 30/3/1933.
- (21) Interview, John Harris, Dublin, 1976.
- (22) The Dublin Evening Mail, 30/3/1933.
- (23) The Irish Press, 30/3/1933.
- (24) Ibid.
- (25) An Phoblacht, 8/4/1933.
- (26) The Irish Times, 31/3/1933.
- (27) An Phoblacht, 8/4/1933.
- (28) Ibid.
- (29) The Irish Press, 7/4/1933.
- (30) The Irish Times, 2/5/1933.
- (31) The Standard, 8/4/1933.
- (32) The Irish Times, 3/4/1933.
- (33) Ibid. 8/4/1933.
- (34) An Phoblacht, 17/6/1933.
- (35) The Standard, 20/5/1933.