

Politicians struggled to curb sectarian killings

Dr Eamon Phoenix, political historian and lecturer at Stranmillis University College, Belfast, delves into the newly released files



in 1971 to the European Court of Human Rights.

In the same month Sammy Smyth, a UDA spokesman, was shot dead in north Belfast.

Also in March the British government began the phasing out of special category status for paramilitary prisoners. From March 1 any prisoner convicted of scheduled offences was to be treated as an ordinary criminal.

The IRA responded with a campaign of assassination against prison officers and in September Kieran Nugent became the first IRA prisoner to refuse to wear prison clothes. The blanket protest which was to lead to the 1980-81 hunger strikes had begun.

In May Kenneth Newman became chief constable of the RUC and began to push the new policy of police primacy or 'Ulsterisation' which thrust the RUC and UDR to the security forefront. Violence continued to escalate. Four RUC men died in IRA attacks on May 15 and loyalists carried out a spate of sectarian assassinations. On May 18 two Protestant brothers were killed by the IRA.

On July 21 1976 the IRA's assassination of the new British ambassador to Ireland, Christopher Ewart-Biggs, at Sandycroft, Co Dublin, sent shockwaves through the British and Irish political establishments.

A young female secretary also died and the head of the Northern Ireland Office at Stormont, Brian Cubbin, was badly wounded.

But the summer was still young. On August 10 one of the most poignant tragedies of the Troubles occurred in west Belfast when the three Maguire children (including a six-month-old baby) were killed by an IRA getaway car whose driver had been shot dead moments earlier by British troops.

This tragedy was to trigger the spontaneous emergence of the Women's

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Peace Movement that summer and autumn, led by the children's aunt, Mairead Corrigan, and Mrs Betty Williams, a housewife from the area.

Peace rallies made the headlines in August and September, resulting in the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize



■ **SHOOTING:** The IRA shot 10 Protestant workmen dead at Kingsmills in Co Armagh. The attack was one of many sectarian murders in 1976

to the two leaders in October 1976.

However, the movement, though well-meaning, had no coherent strategy and violence continued to escalate.

In August SDLP leader Gerry Fitt was forced to defend his Antrim Road home at gunpoint in face of a hostile mob. It was a further step in his alienation from his nationalist electorate in west Belfast.

In September the tough-talking former Yorkshire miner Roy Mason replaced Mr Rees as secretary of state. The SDLP was right to be alarmed at prime minister Jim Callaghan's remark that he had "sent a thief to catch a thief" – a veiled reference to Mr Mason's capacity for hard-line security measures.

In October the former Sinn Féin vice-president Maire Drumm was shot dead by loyalists in a Belfast hospital.

As violence again escalated in November the Provisional IRA established a new northern command, signalling grassroots disillusionment with the 1975 IRA ceasefire.

On December 1 the Fair Employment Act, outlawing discrimination on religious and political grounds, became law. In the same month Dr Patrick Hillery became president of Ireland.

The economic situation continued to deteriorate during the year with 10 per cent of the workforce jobless.

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soldiers and 38 RUC officers and UDR members. It was the worst death toll since 1972.

THIS year the Public Record Office in Belfast releases previously confidential files for 1976.

Of the 607 files examined 32 have been closed on grounds of sensitivity with an additional 27 subject to partial closure. In most cases the reason for closure was to protect personal information on individuals in accordance with data protection principles.

This year in addition to those files released under the 30-year rule the record office has opened a large series of secret files from the old Stormont Ministry of Home Affairs for the first time.

These deal with political, public order and security issues in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s.

Key files include those relating to the 50th anniversary of the 1916 Easter Rising in 1966, Sinn Féin and the Republican Clubs in the 1960s and key events in the Civil Rights campaign of the 1960s including the Derry march of October 5 1968 and the Burntollet ambush of January 1969.

Several files relate to the career of DUP leader Ian Paisley including one, dated 1969, entitled 'Ulster Protestant Action'. All of these files had been held back by the authorities during earlier releases of state papers on grounds of sensitivity.

Proscription of UVF highlighted

THE decision of the British government to proscribe the Ulster Volunteer Force in 1975 is highlighted in the confidential files.

The action followed a wave of UVF bombings and shootings on October 2 1975 in which 12 people died.

The next day the then secretary of state, Merlyn Rees, held a meeting with the British general officer commanding, RUC chief constable Sir Jamie Flanagan and senior officials in Stormont Castle. The meeting considered the previous day's violence, for which the UVF was thought to be largely responsible.

After much discussion Mr Rees decided on proscription. It was accepted that the direct security advantages would be slight since convictions for membership were virtually impossible without a confession.

However, Mr Rees felt that the continued legal existence of the UVF was sufficiently offensive to the public to warrant proscription. Moreover, a ban would inhibit fundraising and the holding of meetings.

After the general officer commanding and chief constable considered how to act against UVF members, it was agreed that the organisation should be proscribed from midnight on October 3 1975.

Mr Rees then signed the order.