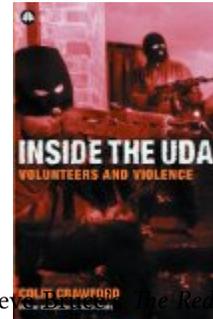


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Colin Crawford. *Inside the UDA: Volunteers and Violence*. London: Pluto, 2003. xix + 225 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7453-2107-3.

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In the early 1970s violent paramilitary organizations emerged from working-class, Protestant communities in the industrial cities and towns as well as the conservative rural areas of the north of Ireland. In the course of three decades of conflict, these organizations were responsible for killing almost a thousand people, the vast majority of them innocent civilians. In the latter years of the conflict, loyalist paramilitaries were killing more people than the Irish Republican Army (IRA). In the current international climate, when the positing of “western,” “democratic,” and “conservative” against the categories of “terror” and “brutality” is so deeply embedded in public debate, the randomness and often extreme brutality of Ulster loyalist paramilitary violence is a vital reminder that there is no necessary contradiction between these frequently opposed categories. The story of Ulster loyalist paramilitary violence also illustrates the extent to which the line between terror and counter-insurgency is blurred.

Loyalist paramilitaries have not enjoyed the degree of sympathetic attention in academia or the media that Irish republican paramilitaries have enjoyed, a fact of which they are acutely aware. This book is part of a self-conscious attempt on the part of the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) to rectify that deficit, to give the UDA’s version of events to a wider public. There have been many journalistic accounts of the main loyalist paramilitary organizations but there is also a small but strong academic literature. Richard Jenkins’s *Lads, Citizens, and Ordinary Kids* (1983), Sarah Nelson’s *Ulster’s Uncertain Defenders* (1984), Desmond Bell’s *Acts of Union* (1990) and James McAuley’s *The Politics of Identity: A Loyalist Community in Belfast* (1994), have helped to build up a substantial and sophisticated literature on the politics of the Protestant communities from which the paramilitaries

draw support and recruits, while Steve Bruce’s *Hand* (1992) and *At the Edge of the Union* (1994) discuss the politics of the paramilitary organizations. *Inside the UDA* contributes much useful empirical material to the debates on loyalism, but the analysis fails to engage to any great degree with existing work on loyalism or on political violence. The themes the author addresses tell us more about the issues that are important to the UDA than they do about the dynamics of paramilitary mobilization.

Originating in conversations between the author and senior UDA leader John White on the need for a book that would act as a kind of history of the organization, *Inside the UDA* is an account of the largest, if not the most coherent, of loyalist paramilitary organizations. The UDA emerged in 1971 as an alliance of local “defense associations” in Protestant working-class areas of Belfast and other parts of Northern Ireland. The UDA remained legal until 1992 and UDA members were not barred from membership of the security forces in Northern Ireland until then, despite the fact that the UDA was clearly involved in paramilitary violence. The author, Colin Crawford, began to build relationships with loyalist paramilitaries as a probation officer in the Long Kesh internment camp outside Belfast, at the height of the conflict in the mid-1970s. The author is now lecturer in Applied Social Studies at the University of Ulster; he became involved in the peace process in the 1990s as a representative for loyalist prisoners.

The great strength of Colin Crawford’s book is his degree of access to key loyalist paramilitaries, the trust he established, and the amount of candor with which his interviewees spoke; a candor, however, that is strictly and carefully limited. The book is based on extensive inter-

views with a wide range of UDA members and provides a unique insight into the ways in which active paramilitaries viewed their involvement in both targeted assassination and random killings. Recurring themes include the central aim of “terrorising” Catholic civilians, in order to increase Catholic pressure on the IRA to end its campaign, and the argument that UDA killings in latter years were much more targeted and played a crucial role in forcing the IRA to call a ceasefire.

One of the most important themes of the book is the loyalist view that they were doing what the security forces wanted to do, but could not, because they were hampered by red tape. As one former loyalist paramilitary put it: “I joined the security forces.... But I found out after seven years in the security forces that it just wasn’t working.... [O]ur hands were tied at every turn.... [I]f the cuffs had been taken off the security forces earlier there would have been no need for me and people like me to become involved in the paramilitaries” (p. 132). Loyalists took heart from the collusion offered by some members of the security forces, interpreting this as evidence that they were in effect acting as auxiliaries to the state.

The security forces in Northern Ireland often have pursued loyalist paramilitaries vigorously, particularly in recent years. Nonetheless, loyalist definitions of themselves as unofficial auxiliaries to the state’s counter-insurgency efforts have been met with strong answering echoes from significant sections of the security forces. This is illustrated most clearly by the evidence that has emerged in recent years about the role of British army agent and UDA member Brian Nelson, responsible for UDA targeting for much of the 1980s. Security force intelligence was regularly provided to Nelson by his handlers in the British military’s “Force Research Unit” (FRU) to allow him to identify targets for the UDA. The FRU often steered UDA operations away from Catholic civilians and towards suspected IRA members. The UDA appears to interpret the Nelson case as evidence that the UDA was, in effect, acting as an auxiliary to the efforts of the security services, paradoxically aligning them with the Irish republican analysis of the relationship between the state and loyalist paramilitaries. The author explains the UDA’s shift to more selective targeting by arguing that “the leadership [of the UDA] realised that they could not work with potentially sympathetic sections of the security services until their killing became more targeted, focused and selective” (p. 33), and that “elements within the British security services during the mid-1980s and

1990s did have an interest in the increasing military professionalisation of the UDA/UFF” (p. 44). The loyalist belief that their activities were of some use to the state in its counter-insurgency efforts is not without foundation.

The categories and characterizations developed in the vast academic and popular literature on the dynamics of terrorism, on the motivations of terrorists, on terrorism as a self-conscious ideology of evil which is the opposite to popular will and democracy, sit uneasily with the accounts of former loyalist paramilitaries in Crawford’s book. In the accounts here, “terrorism” is less the product of sinister manipulation and determined fanaticism than of the kind of networks of neighborhood and friendship as well as local identity and loyalty which in other circumstances elicit enthusiastic approval for their contribution to the building of social capital. In the context of a wider social upheaval, these intimate local networks decisively shaped the development of political violence. Ulster loyalists are often characterized as incoherent in their identity because of the tension between loyalty to Britain on the one hand and to Northern Ireland on the other. Several of the accounts in this book emphasize the fact that the prime focus of loyalty for many of those who became involved was neither Britain nor Northern Ireland, but a local peer group and the neighborhood in which they grew were raised. In a description echoed by a number of other accounts in the book, one member describes how he first joined the UDA:

“The boys I knew were in sort of a gang (the Ulster Boot Boys). We would get together on a Saturday and go into Belfast and hang around the town.... We knew that the UDA held their meetings on a Sunday night, Sunday teatime, in the area. About 12 of us went and offered our services.... The entire membership of the Ulster Boot Boys in the area went and joined the UDA. I think there were 73 of us who all joined together” (pp. 81-82).

Inside the UDA suffers from weaknesses inherent to the project. The book emerged from the desire of the UDA to write a kind of official history of the movement and to get across the views of ordinary members. This ensured that the author enjoyed unprecedented access, but it also means that interviewees are often allowed to present very questionable characterizations of events without challenge. Despite such weaknesses, the book provides us with first hand accounts that occasionally shine a blinding light on the darkest corners of paramilitary mobilization and violence.

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