

# Northern Irish Mural Traditions: Opposing Views of History

Heather Sitkie

By simply looking at the walls when one walks along the streets of such towns as Derry or Belfast, there is a lot that can be inferred of Northern Irish History. Although these walls were set up as political barriers meant to keep peace, the murals painted upon them are used as territorial markers and political propaganda for either side of conflict decades old known as The Troubles. The murals painted upon these walls are representations of the political and social instability within Irish society. There is much that can be discovered about Northern Irish history looking at murals that were painted before, during, and after the conflict of the Troubles. These murals reflect different cultural community's views of their history internally while also aiming externally to express themselves and have their stories shared. This resulted though, in a clash of representations and divided tradition. These murals take into account two different sides to one long-existing struggle; they reveal two different depictions of Northern Irish history. The words and pictures painted on these walls were as essential to the cause as weapons were to the fight. Due to this conflict, there have always been two different depictions of Northern Irish history.

Northern Ireland has long been a region with deeply rooted social divides. These social divides are a result of religious wars that are centuries old. The Catholic and Protestant traditions have repeatedly been clashed since the seventeenth century.<sup>1</sup> Protestant

---

*Heather Sitkie is from Woodstock, Illinois. A sophomore majoring in history with teaching licensure, she wrote "Northern Irish Mural Traditions: Opposing Views of History" for Dr. Michael Shirley's Historical Research and Writing course in the fall semester of 2013.*

<sup>1</sup> Gregory Goalwin, "The Art of War: Instability, Insecurity, and Ideological Imagery in Northern Ireland's Political Murals, 1979-1998." *International Journal Of Politics, Culture & Society* 26, no. 3 (September 2013): 190, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

settlers came into Northern Ireland from Scotland and Britain, slowly overpowering the Irish Catholic inhabitants. From these religious roots, the more modern expressions of conflict would become political. This turn to political issues largely formed with the partition of Northern Ireland in 1921,<sup>2</sup> which was concentrated on the question of Northern Ireland's political status. Unionist organizations desired to maintain the region as a part of the United Kingdom, whereas nationalists were attempting to reunite Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. The overall result of this clash was the Troubles.<sup>3</sup> Although the Troubles are officially considered to be over, the conflict unofficially remains prevalent in Northern Ireland today.

### **The History of The Troubles**

The fight between opposing political ideologies resulted in much instability among the people of Northern Ireland. The instability was especially prevalent in politics and the government's legitimacy was being questioned. Parliamentary organizations began to emerge rapidly. The Irish Republican Army, Irish National Liberation Army, the Ulster Defense Association, and the Ulster Volunteer Force were all organizations that stepped into the spotlight among the turbulence of the conflict. These organizations felt the government was unable to provide the people of Northern Ireland safety and claimed to represent their respective cultural communities, while providing them protection and security. However, there was a struggle of instability within each of those communities themselves. Each organization and cultural group struggled to define its collective ideological aims and create one identity. This struggle started to emerge on the walls in the form of murals, a practice that reached its peak between 1981 and 1998.<sup>4</sup> The organizations on both sides of the conflict turned to murals as

---

<sup>2</sup> The partition of Ireland occurred when the British granted Independence to 26 counties of Ireland in 1921; the remaining 6 counties located in north east Ulster remained under British rule.

<sup>3</sup> An armed conflict between Loyalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland that lasted from 1968 to 1998.

<sup>4</sup> Goalwin, "The Art of War," 190.

a way of legitimatizing their ideological claims as a use of propaganda to gain support for their cause (see figure 1). Both the Republicans and Loyalists used these large, and seemingly inescapable, murals all over the walls to not only take a stance on the situation at hand, but also to encourage the neutral parties and communities to align with their organization.

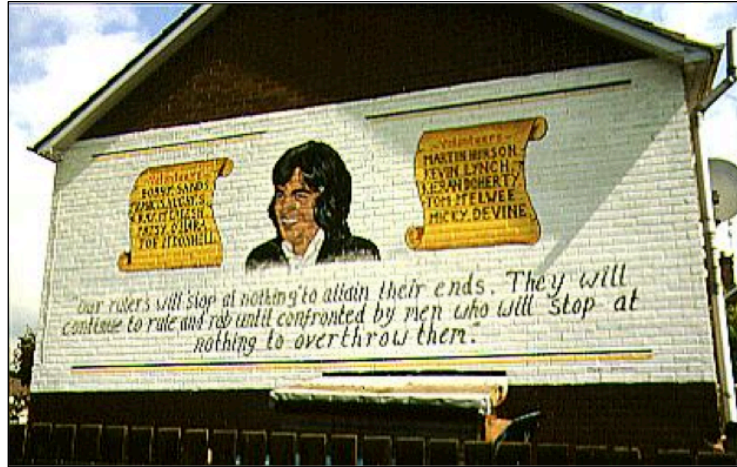


Figure 1: Hunger Strike Mural, Lenadoon Avenue, Belfast, 1998. Source: CAIN

### The History of Mural Paintings in Northern Ireland

The use of art as an expressional tool for social movements has long been in practice. Art can be used in many different varieties and mediums to express goals and ideologies. For example, in the United States, the Civil Rights Movement used music, organizations such as the Black Panthers used theatrical drama, and the Women's Movement utilized poetry.<sup>5</sup> The artwork of these social movements allowed activists to depict their image of the world they find themselves in.

The use of this expressional form of art is especially prominent in the social movements that involved a large emphasis on culture and cultural politics. In Northern Ireland, the political conflict arose from two deeply rooted cultural communities. The

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 192.

dispersing of artistic and powerful cultural symbols allowed the social movements of the Loyalists and Republicans in Northern Ireland to spread their causes and form larger cultural groups for support.

In July of 1908, Protestants began painting murals each year as a part of an annual celebration of victory in the Battle of the Boyne<sup>6</sup> in 1690.<sup>7</sup> At this time, the Protestant people used the murals as a declaration of their British identity (see figure 2). These mural images also were used as a means to reinforce residential segregation and create “boundaries” of places where Protestants resided into “Protestant areas.” Comparably, there were places that were also defined as “Catholic areas.” Today, the chief characteristics that are known to define the modern mural paintings are parliamentary images and symbols. Irish history is painted on these walls, and it has always come from two different perspectives because of the Catholic and Protestant cultural split.

---

<sup>6</sup> The Twelfth is an Ulster Protestant celebration held annually on the 12<sup>th</sup> of July; the origins of the celebration come from the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Ulster, celebrating the Glorious Revolution (1688) and victory of Protestant king William over Catholic king James II at the Battle of the Boyne (1690). The Battle of Boyne was fought in 1690 between the Catholic King James and the Protestant King William across the River Boyne; The battle, won by William, was a turning point in James’s unsuccessful attempt to regain the crown and ultimately helped ensure the continuation of Protestant ascendancy in Ireland.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Forker and Jonathan McCormick. “Walls of history: the use of mythomoteurs in Northern Ireland murals.” *Irish Studies Review* 17, no. 4 (November 2009): 428, Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

Nationalist (Republican) murals developed into propaganda tools as a way of countering the influence of Loyalist, or Unionist, political dominance.<sup>8</sup> The Loyalist murals have recurring images that show masked men with guns as hero-like figures that are devoted to a just and right cause that is not only religiously legitimate, but politically legitimate as well (see figure 3).



Figure 3: UVF volunteers in action with automatic weapons. Ohio Street, Belfast, 1985. Source: CAIN

The murals on both sides are designed to “justify” killing the other side’s people, whether they are combatants or not. The images also highlight the sufferings of people, regardless of what side of the conflict they are on. The analysis of these murals can be used as a means of exploring the conflict of the Troubles by way of gaining a deeper understanding of each group’s ideology.

The symbolic content depicted within the murals greatly strengthened the division within the society of Northern Ireland. The murals “crafted opposing narratives using cultural and national myths that told the history of Northern Ireland in a way that

---

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 424.

supported their sides own ideologies.”<sup>9</sup> The images that both organizations chose to use in their murals were carefully selected to convey the idea that they were fighting for a version of Northern Irish history that was not only right, but innocent. Mural painting was used by both sides of the conflict, despite the differences in Loyalist and Republican histories.

Though they differ in many ways, Loyalist and Republican mural traditions were used as a means by which to create and express the identity of the two sides of the conflict. The Loyalist’s

*Figure 4: The  
Petrol Bomber-  
Bogside, Derry,  
1994.  
Source: CAIN*



use of murals as propaganda took an emphasis on the hegemony Britain had over Northern Ireland. It was a further development of the political ideologies of the unionist movement. The Republican murals often expressed a cultural resistance within the idea of Irish Nationalism. Each singular movement wanted to portray their own one-sided version of Northern Ireland’s history that would support their own political ideologies and goals. Both Republicans and

---

<sup>9</sup> Goalwin, "The Art of War," 192.

Loyalists alike presented their ideas as being the only reasonable way to explain the continuing Northern Irish struggles.<sup>11</sup>

### **Loyalist Mural Traditions**

The majority of Loyalist's murals are largely found in Protestant East Belfast and Protestant streets and areas in Londonderry.<sup>12</sup> The Loyalist murals sought to connect the unionist community of Northern Ireland within itself, as well as with the United Kingdom. Typically, Loyalist mural imagery could fall into three categories according to the historian Gregory Goalwin: depictions of historical events, portraits of armed paramilitary soldiers, and symbolic expressions such as flags or coats of arms to depict identity.<sup>13</sup> The depiction of significant historical events was common practice for the Loyalists; as previously mentioned this was a result of an annual tradition beginning in 1908. Progressively, the murals became more and more explicit and threatening, developing into images that were closer to propaganda than simple depictions. This came about especially in the 1970's and 1980's (see figure 4). By the 1990s, murals represented more of a symbolic identity (see figure 5).

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 212.

<sup>12</sup> The names of the city, county, and district of Derry or Londonderry in Northern Ireland are the subject of conflict between Irish nationalists and unionists; Generally, nationalists favor using the name Derry, and unionists using Londonderry (Legally, the city and county are called "Londonderry", while the local government district is called "Derry").

<sup>13</sup> Goalwin, "The Art of War," 199.

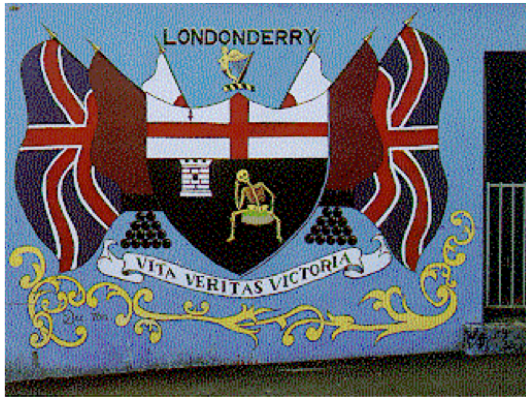


Figure 5:  
Flags. Bond's  
Street, Derry,  
1981.  
Source: CAIN

The early Loyalist images depicted in the murals sought to legitimize the British hegemony and political status. This was done through significant historical events that supported Protestant ascendancy. The most popular historical Loyalist image portrayed is of "King Billy."<sup>14</sup> King Billy's victory at the Battle of Boyne is considered the defining movement that legitimizes Protestant ascendancy and cultural dominance.<sup>15</sup> King Billy's continuing appearance in the murals is reinforced by the muralist's paintings of the Twelfth of July celebrations. King Billy is almost always portrayed on a white horse, wearing a spotless uniform with a look of valor (see figure 6). King Billy was depicted as a Protestant hero who defeated Catholic forces and freed Londonderry from Catholic siege. King Billy's portraits and the entire Twelfth of July Celebration are symbols of Unionist victory and dominance. Loyalist's muralists used this message to remind Unionists of their dominant culture while portraying a constant reminder of Nationalist oppression.

---

<sup>14</sup> William III (He is informally known in Northern Ireland and Scotland as "King Billy") reigned over England and Ireland from 1689-1702.

<sup>15</sup> Goalwin, "The Art of War," 200.





Figure 6: King Billy. Kilcooley, Bangor, County Down, 1997. Source: CAIN

The more violent murals, that started to appear in the 1970's, portrayed armed men that were either firing their weapon or standing by in a permanently watchful pose (see figure 7). There was a constant threat of violence from Republican organizations.



Figure 7: Military. Snugville Street, Belfast, 1984. Source: CAIN

The murals emanated the powerful message that their soldiers were willing and ready to protect Unionists from any harm. The images of the soldiers protecting Unionist territories connected both Loyalist organizations and Unionist communities. These murals portrayed a sense of protection, but also reminded the community members to remain strong and loyal in times of distress as well as advertising for military and organizational support. These murals were also meant to serve the purpose of sending a warning to Republican organizations, which is why they were specifically designed to be threatening and violent in nature (see figure 8). The images were portrayals of Loyalists who were going to fight until the battle for their cause was won. These soldiers were also painted in place on the walls as a means of marking territory in an extremely threatening manner. The explicit message was that anyone who crossed the boundary would face radical punishment from the Loyalist military. By placing their soldiers in communities, Loyalist organizations could claim to represent that cultural group and give the community protection in exchange for the community's support.

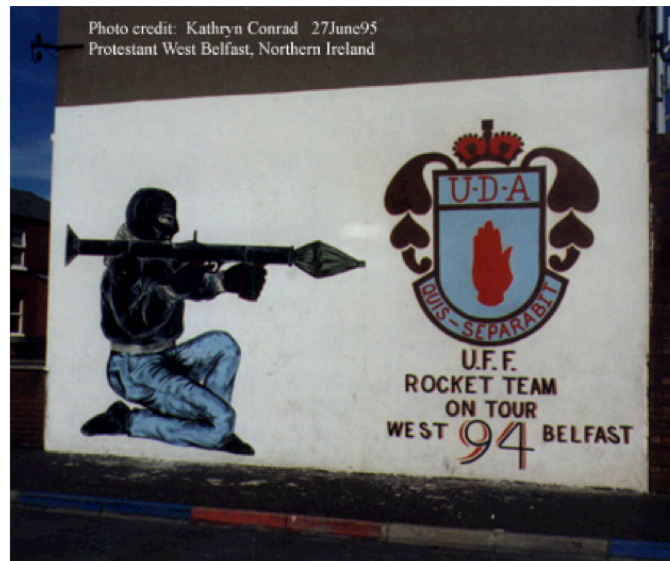


Figure 8: Parlimentary Mural. Shankill Road, Protestant West Belfast, 1995.  
Source: Kathryn Conrad

The last Loyalist theme that came to appear in murals of the 1990's was the use of flags, coats of arms, or slogans, anything that displayed a symbolic portrayal of the Loyalist ideology (see figure 9). The display of these symbols was especially powerful at this time due to the passing of the Flags and Emblems (Display) Act.<sup>16</sup> Prominent images that were displayed by Loyalists were the Union Flag, the Red Hand of Ulster (see figure 9), and portrayals of the British crown.<sup>17</sup> The Loyalists felt the passing of the Flags and Emblems (Display) Act was a means of oppressing their culture. The Unionist murals using such symbols sought to strengthen Loyalist and Unionist organizations. The use of these symbols, despite laws against it, is another form of Loyalist's representation of dominance in culture and their desire to maintain loyalty to Great Britain.



Figure 9: Red Hand of Ulster. East Way, Rathcoole, Newtownabbey, near Belfast, 1993. Source: CAIN

## Republican Mural Traditions

---

<sup>16</sup> The Flags and Emblems (Display) Act was an Act of the Parliament of Northern Ireland, passed in 1954; The Act gave the Royal Ulster Constabulary a duty to remove any flag or emblem from public or private property that was considered to be likely to cause a breach of the peace.

<sup>17</sup> Goalwin, "The Art of War," 203.

Much like the Loyalist murals, Republican muralists also drew upon themes and powerful images to create a Republican identity. Republican Murals were located mostly in the Catholic Falls Road, Ardoyne, and Upper Springfield areas of Belfast, and the Bogside, Foyle Road, and Creggan Areas of Londonderry.<sup>18</sup> Loyalist mural tradition had been established as a way in which to conserve the existing state of affairs, while Republican murals expressed revolutionary images in support of the Unionist movement to take control of the government and create social change. The challenge, however, Republicans faced was that their organizations were illegal and could not be accepted or recognized openly by any police or government force such as the British military. The Loyalists were able to enjoy that acceptance and recognition, the Republicans had to fight to legitimize their cause. Republican muralists wanted to underline the mistreatment Northern Irish people faced at the hands of British authorities and Loyalist groups. This gave the Republicans the social justification they needed; the Republican organizations were claiming to be protecting the people of Northern Ireland and their civil rights (see figure 10).



*Figure 10: Britain oppressing Ireland. Rossville Street, Derry, 1981. Source: CAIN*

Republican murals too call upon historical events to represent their cause. Unlike the Loyalists though, Republicans focused more on

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

their current struggle both locally and worldwide. Gregory Goalwin states that similarly to the Loyalists, Republicans draw upon five different themes in their murals: martyrs to the Republican cause (mainly the hunger strike), memorials of innocent victims, support of worldwide civil rights acts, symbolic expressions of identity, and representations of the armed struggle. Republican murals, unlike the Loyalist murals, did not develop in themes over time. All five themes have appeared from the beginning.



Figure 21: Bobby Sands. Sevastopol Street & Falls Road, Belfast, 1990.

Source: CAIN

In 1981 there was an explosion of mural painting from the Republican side of the conflict. The trigger of this new Republican interest in murals was a hunger strike undertaken by Republican prisoners demanding to be treated as politically motivated detainees as opposed to just common criminals.<sup>19</sup> This strike resulted in ten dead. The most famous of these hunger strikers was a man named Bobby Sands, who also happened to be a member of British Parliament. Next to King Billy, Bobby Sands is one of the most painted mural figures (see figure 11). His portraits are often

---

<sup>19</sup> Bill Rolston, "The Brothers on the Walls": International solidarity and Irish Political Murals." *Journal Of Black Studies* 39, no. 3 (January 2009):, 456 Academic Search Complete, EBSCOhost.

accompanied by his own quotes. Sands was seen as a man who was willing to endure any pain or cruelty in order to stand for his beliefs. This is why Sands was portrayed in murals as the ultimate expression of what Republicans stood for; he was their symbol.

Similar images of other hunger strike victims are portrayed in murals as well. The hunger strikers are often portrayed naked, emaciated, and bearded to give them a Christ-like appearance.<sup>20</sup> Both sides of the Troubles claim to represent two different religions and take claim of these religious identities as their culture and underlying differences among Northern Irish people. However,



Figure 12: *Hunger Strikers. Belfast, 1981. Source: The Plough And The Stars*

historian Gregory Goalwin, in his analysis of the murals, has noted very few religious symbols within the murals themselves. When religious symbols are shown, they are such symbols as the Bible, the rosary, Angels, and people in prayer. The main focus of both Loyalist and Republican murals are on the political issues at hand. The end of the hunger strike in 1981 resulted in the death of ten Republicans. Those ten became the symbol of strength for the Republican movement. It is common that these strikers are shown rising up and breaking out of Long Kesh prison, where they were

---

<sup>20</sup> Goalwin, "The Art of War," 206.

detained during the hunger strike. This is a symbol of the Republicans' enduring strength despite the repression of Loyalists and the British (see figure 12).



Figure 13: Cú Chulainn. Lenadoon Avenue, Belfast, 1996. Source: CAIN

People who gave their life for the movement were critical to the Republican community. Much like the mural portraits of overseeing Loyalist volunteer soldiers, these Republican figures were painted to remind the Republican community to find strength in their oppression, to continue to stand for their beliefs in the face of conflict, and of what the "enemy" has done to their friends and family. Among other featured mural martyrs are Cú Chulainn, whose heroic death came with a failed rebellion in Dublin that is known as the Easter Rising and other Easter Rising leaders such as Patrick Pearse and James Connolly (see figure 13). Depictions of these past heroes helped provide legitimacy while also providing a connection from the current struggles of the movement to past Irish revolutionaries. This helps to create a historical narrative that places the Republican's current movement among a long history of Irish Nationalism and resistance to British control. By using propaganda that connects past heroes to those the Republicans were currently glorifying, a collective identity arose. Much like the Loyalist portrayal of historic events, Republican martyrs invented a

narrative tradition that asserted their roots in Northern Irish history.



Figure 14: Memorial Mural. Catholic West Belfast, 2000. Source: Kathryn Conrad

The murals that depict non-politically motivated deaths are similar to those of the aforementioned martyrs. Memorial murals for those who lost their lives to the conflict stemmed from the murals of Bobby Sands and the other martyrs of the hunger strikes. Many Republican murals, unlike Loyalist murals, focused on the human cost of the Troubles. The Republican movement used this as a means of expressing their strength and desire to fight for their cause, no matter the cost. They wanted to portray their unbroken resistance (see figure 14).<sup>21</sup> It is common for Republican murals in Belfast and Londonderry to have a list of the names of those who died in the hunger strike as well as political leaders who have died. Much like Republican martyr murals, memorial murals also list the names of those that fell during armed conflict with British troops and Loyalist paramilitary organizations. Many of these names are those who were volunteer members of the PIRA (see figure 15).<sup>22</sup> Other names and even painted faces belong to people, including

---

<sup>21</sup> Goalwin, "The Art of War," 207.

<sup>22</sup> The Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) is an Irish republican paramilitary organization whose aim is to remove Northern Ireland from the United Kingdom and bring about a socialist republic within a united Ireland by force of arms and political persuasion.



children, who died in plastic bullet attacks.<sup>23</sup> Phrases such as “who next?” (see figure 16) appeared because these victims were killed during British efforts to “maintain the peace” The use of these memorial murals for victims of the conflict were used to not only display remembrance, but also exhortation for those still fighting for the movement. These murals were means of playing the victim to gain support.



Figure 15: PIRA. Springhill Avenue, Belfast, 1987. Source: CAIN

---

<sup>23</sup> Plastic bullets were intended to be used as means of crowd control in certain situations as nonlethal weapons. However, when used in riot situations, and aimed at victim's heads the rounds can be lethal.

Republican mural traditions took another, more international plea for support. Murals of Republican international solidarity were used to connect to and draw the support of other



Figure 16: *Plastic Bullets*. Oakman Street, Belfast, 1994.  
Source: CAIN

people around the world involved in similar Civil Rights movements, Socialist movements, and Nationalist movements. The international solidarity from the Republicans of Northern Ireland is based primarily on recognition and opportunity.<sup>24</sup> The very first Irish Republicans at the end of the eighteenth century, the Society of United Irishmen, identified with the French Revolutionaries and their Enlightenment ideals. Irish Republicans saw themselves as a part of an international movement of Republicans that spread from England at the hands of Thomas Paine and rose up in France and America.<sup>25</sup> Historian Bill Rolston took a further look into

<sup>24</sup> Rolston, "The Brothers on the Walls," 449.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 450.

examining the Republican murals and their references to international themes. Rolston has noted three major international conflicts that the Northern Irish Republicans strongly connect to and portray often in their murals. Many of these include various Palestinian, South African, and African American heroes.

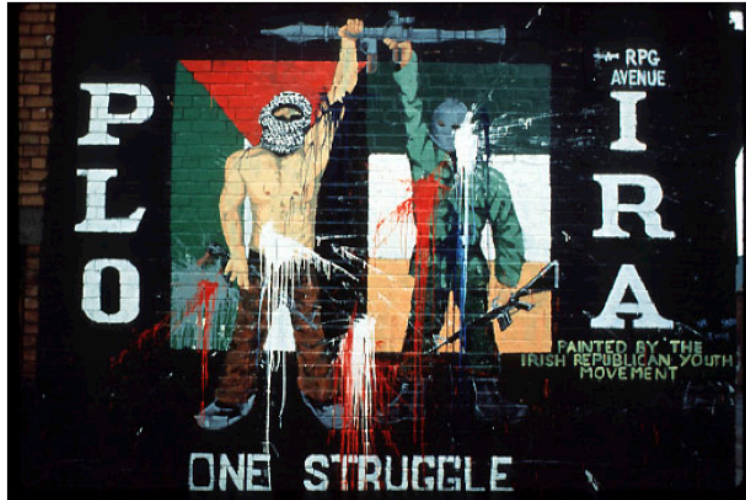


Figure 17: PLO & PIRA. Beechmount Avenue, Belfast, 1982.  
Source: Mark Humphry

In 1982 a mural was painted that showed a man of the PLO and the PIRA holding a Russian rocket propelled grenade launcher, a weapon both organizations used.<sup>26</sup> Underneath the slogan painted on read "one struggle" (see figure 17). Palestine was one of the first international subjects painted in Republican murals. The Irish have been in support of Palestine since Israel became established in 1948 and have dedicated many murals to them thereafter to show their solidarity.<sup>27</sup> In the mid 1990's, both South Africa and Northern Ireland were almost simultaneously taking their transitions from violent conflict to a state of peace. Northern Irish Republicans felt a

<sup>26</sup> The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is an organization created in 1964 with the purpose of creating an independent State of Palestine.

<sup>27</sup> Rolston, "The Brothers on the Walls," 461.

strong connection to the releasing of prisoners in South Africa and their pursuit of reconciliation in the country. The Republicans were facing nearly the same situation. The first South African mural appeared in 1986 (see figure 18).



*Figure 18: South African Solidarity. Falls Road, Belfast, 1988. Source: CAIN*

The republicans had a strong affinity to African Americans struggling in the United States. African American murals depict such figures as Fredrick Douglas, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X. Republicans, having felt oppression and suffrage at the hands of the Loyalists, identified heavily with the Civil Rights movement (see figure 19).

Flags, crests, slogans, and any other symbols that could represent national identity not only made an appearance in Loyalist mural tradition, but in Republican mural tradition as well. The Tricolour national flag of the Republic of Ireland is most notably visible in many murals (see figure 20). The symbol of the phoenix became associated with the Republican movement. The phoenix, known for its mythical ability to rise up and recreate life from its own ashes, is a popular image painted in Republican murals. The use of the phoenix was to signify the Republican's unbreakable commitment to their cause. Because they had less of a formal

organizational structure among them than the Loyalists, the images painted by Republicans depicted cultural identity and symbols. The representation, however, of the Irish Tricolour was especially risky due to the Flags and Emblems (Display) Act. The representation of these symbols were banned and punished severely. Depictions of crests, flags, shields, and other various representations of Republican cultural identity served a similar purpose to that of the symbols the Loyalist use in their murals. The Republicans used these in efforts of creating cultural unity to draw their community together.

The representation of the armed struggle itself is the last



Figure 19: *Civil Rights, Shankill, Belfast, 2008. Source: Drew Tewksbury*

theme that is recurring throughout Republican mural tradition, not unlike the Loyalist mural tradition. These murals can range anywhere from specific military conflicts to portrayals of the weapons that the PIRA used. Much like the Loyalists, extremely daunting and intimidating images of armed Republicans can be found in the murals. These painted soldiers are watchful of their territory and often heavily armed upon the walls of the borders, there to stand guard over their communities. Similar to the armed men painted on Loyalist walls, they were not only territorial

markers and warnings, but also a reminder to support the movement and the PIRA (see figure 21).



Figure 20: *The Phoenix*. Whiterock Road, Belfast, 1991. Source: Bill Rolston.

Both Republican and Loyalist murals differ in many important aspects, but they also show similar themes throughout time. One important conclusion to draw from the analysis of both traditions is that each side used murals to create and express self-identity. Each movement sought to invent their own version of Northern Irish history that legitimized their cause and separate political goals. Each group's use of mural imagery reflects their own reality in the very complex nature of conflict.<sup>28</sup> Even though both organizations share similar symbols and themes, there is no historically shared sense of community among the Northern Irish population.

---

<sup>28</sup> Forker and McCormick. "Walls of History," 456.



Figure 21: PIRA. Sevastopol Street, Belfast, 1989. Source: Bill Rolston

### Conclusion

Walls in Northern Ireland are set up as political barriers meant to preserve peace and separate two disagreeing sides. But over time, the walls have developed voices. They are the voices of conflict over two different political beliefs, two different struggles, and two different histories. There are competing depictions of Northern Irish history painted on these walls. Not only are the Loyalists and Republicans expressing their sides of history, but they are also externally expressing their cultures' respective stories. Even though peace was made official over twenty years ago, the conflict is still very real and prevalent today, as the Northern Irish keep it alive with fresh coats of paint rather than the spilling of blood.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Robin Kirk, "City of Walls." *American Scholar* 80, no 4 (September 2011): 2, *Professional Development Collection*, EBSCOhost.