

Peacework: lessons we have failed to learn

By Isabel Hilton,
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So much of what we understand depends on who tells the story. The story, for instance, of the fall of communism in central and eastern Europe in 1989 was most often told as a victory for Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher's politics of confrontation, a victory of implacable opposition, superior technology and a readiness to confront the "evil empire" with all weapons at "our" disposal. The language used talked of getting tough, preparing for war, facing them down, us against them. Those who advanced another discourse were called naïve, fellow-travelling or "useful idiots".

Looking back, it is curious what traction this version gained, given that every journalist, every participant and every witness to the televised proceedings of the European revolutions of 1989 was perfectly clear in what he or she saw: that ordinary people, having lost their fear, took to the streets in huge numbers and faced down oppressive regimes in country after country.

But when the instant histories came to be written, how much weight was given to the long process of engagement, through the [Helsinki process](#) [3], that had made these movements possible: the meetings, the encounters, the friendships and the civic solidarities, often pursued on the western side by organisations that were themselves in opposition to the militaristic tone of their own governments, and which were marginalised at home even as they forged profoundly effective links abroad? 1989 was not the triumph of one militarism over another, but a victory of peace over war, of people who quietly and with determination exercised their [collective power](#) [4].

In Northern Ireland, too, where on 9 May 2007 the [power-sharing government](#) [5] at last began its business of governing - secure enough as an idea and an institution to be mocked in a satirical puppet-show on television - there is a missing dimension to the narrative of the transition from war to peaceful politics. One box universally ticked in the report card of Tony Blair's government as he waves his interminable [goodbyes](#) [5] is that of "bringing peace" to Northern Ireland. While Blair's commitment and enthusiasm to ending the thirty-year "troubles" in this contested land was manifest, there is also a case to be made that Ireland, with a lot of help from its friends, finally brought peace to itself.

It was a small group of [women in Northern Ireland](#) [6], who, in 1976, before Tony Blair was elected to parliament, stood up and said no to violence and insisted that there was another way. They worked doggedly, day in day out, to bring together men who could not abide to be in the

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She is writing following the conference of the [Nobel Women's Initiative](#) [1] (NWI) in Galway, Ireland, on 29-31 May 2007. The purpose of the NWI is "to address and work to prevent the root causes of violence by spotlighting and promoting the efforts of women's rights activists, researchers and organisations working to advance peace, justice and equality".

Read openDemocracy's [blog](#) [2] from the NWI conference and listen to the [podcast](#) [2]

same part of town, let alone the same room. They did this for years, from territory that lay well outside the evident power of the gun or the government, through moments of hope and disappointment, finally leveraging themselves to the negotiating table, insisting on a voice. Some of them won the Nobel peace prize [7], an honour they recognise is shared with the many who stood with them. "Peace-building", as one of them said, "is very hard work."

The first step

There is a terrible sameness about victims' stories. No matter how many different ways are there for people to go hungry or grieve, to be injured or killed, we know the outcome and grow tired. The pain of petty cruelty is almost easier to imagine: the grandmother who cannot attend her granddaughter's wedding because she lives the wrong side of an uncrossable line; the grandfather who will not attend the baptism of his grandchildren because it takes place in a church he refuses to enter; the mother who waited forty days for the body of her son, dead on his daily journey to medical school; a mother trying to give hope to a child whose family home has been bulldozed; a father humiliated in front of his child at a checkpoint he had to cross to earn a miserable daily wage.

Those who wish to rekindle our indignation send actors to stand on the film-set of other people's tragedies, in the hope that celebrity will shine a light on something we have wearied of looking at. Those who do not live conflict on a daily basis, who have the luxury of alternatives, grow hopeless or indignant by proxy. We allow wars that we know to be pointless to roll on, ashamed of the ineffectiveness of our own frustration.

Hope seems too complicated to engage us for long, and yet, it does depend who tells the story. In Ireland, for a few days [8], the story was told of people who had learned to speak across lines of hatred and discover a common humanity on the other side, who had learned to abandon dreams of victory tomorrow and to talk of life today, who were prepared to deal with the devil himself if there was a chance that it might work.

Some had begun when they had nothing more to lose in war, having already lost everything that was most precious. But for others the starting-point was the realisation that there was nothing worth winning that could be won by violence, whatever their governments told them. From there they understood that governments are our servants, not our masters and that there is no such thing as national security if it fails to bring security to every citizen. To understand that is to take the first step to redefining peace, and to begin the long, hard task of building it.

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[5] <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/>

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