

The University of Akron

IdeaExchange@UAkron

---

Williams Honors College, Honors Research  
Projects

The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors  
College

---

Spring 2023

## Bloody Sunday: Death & Press

Joseph Gaffney  
jag262@uakron.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors\\_research\\_projects](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects)



Part of the [Diplomatic History Commons](#), [European History Commons](#), [History of Religion Commons](#), [Political History Commons](#), and the [Social History Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

---

### Recommended Citation

Gaffney, Joseph, "Bloody Sunday: Death & Press" (2023). *Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects*. 1704.

[https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors\\_research\\_projects/1704](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/1704)

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Williams Honors College, Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact [mjon@uakron.edu](mailto:mjon@uakron.edu), [uapress@uakron.edu](mailto:uapress@uakron.edu).

**Bloody Sunday: Death & Press**

Joseph A. Gaffney

Honors Research Project - Executive Summary

April 25, 2022

## Introduction

The primary objective of this research project is to understand the immediate social and political ramifications of Bloody Sunday in Ireland and England through the spread of information via the written press. Using reception theory, popularized by cultural theorist Stuart Hall in his 1973 essay ‘Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse, as a backdrop to analyze primary newspapers covering the event, it can be determined what sort of audience subscribed to each paper, what the scope of negotiation and opposition was present, and what sort of encoding and decoding communication models were employed.<sup>1</sup> The press’s influence after the day of bloodshed directly reinvigorated the ongoing conflict, prolonging and intensifying the violence by simply spreading the news of the event and fighting to control the narrative. These newspapers achieved this by using partisan language, exaggeration, omission of relevant information, and other subtle literary techniques; the written press used its influence on its readers to emphasize specific acts of violence on Bloody Sunday to further their political and ideological alignments.

Press influence swayed Irish public opinion in favor of independence as the brutality and senseless death at Croke Park most likely overshadowed the IRA’s assassinations earlier that day. The scope of research covers the immediate media coverage of the event and includes the two weeks following. The newspapers range from a few issues to more than a dozen each, depending on the size of the paper and its respective coverage. The written analysis will aim to answer a series of historical research questions. How were both the IRA’s killings and the subsequent reprisal massacre portrayed in the press to the public of Ireland and England? How did these populations generally react to the IRA’s killings? How did they react to the reprisal

---

<sup>1</sup> Stuart Hall, “Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse,” *University of Birmingham*, 1973, 1-3.

massacre? To what degree did the press influence the public's opinion of the IRA or the British forces in Ireland? These questions aim to strike at the most critical aspects of this historical event: the day's severity to those it most affected and the political and social action it would set into motion.

The legacy of the Irish War of Independence, the subsequent Irish Civil War, and the resulting unstable political situation that directly led to the more modern sectarian violence of the Troubles have pushed events like Bloody Sunday into the background. While there is significant scholarship on the IRA's killing operation and the massacre at Croke Park, this is less so regarding the particular repercussions of the event and its portrayal to the general public. Dr. Anne Dolan's article, "Killing the Bloody Sunday: November 1920," and Michael Foley's book, *The Bloodied Field: The Croke Park Killings on Bloody Sunday*, arguably get the closest to discussing the repercussions of the violence committed on Bloody Sunday.<sup>2</sup> However, Dolan's work focuses more on the IRA's motivations to commit violent acts, using Bloody Sunday as the basis of analysis rather than the broader consequences of the event and how that violence was delivered to the general public.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, Foley's book examines the Croke Park Massacre from the perspective of Dublin locals and the Gaelic Athletic Association explicitly, providing excellent contextual evidence leading up to Bloody Sunday and the government inquiries that followed.<sup>4</sup>

Bloody Sunday undeniably affected the English and Irish populations' views of the ongoing conflict in Ireland. This project demonstrates how serious an event the English and Irish press portrayed Bloody Sunday. In addition, within the context of reception theory, these primary

---

<sup>2</sup> Anne Dolan, "Killing and Bloody Sunday, November 1920," *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 3 (2006): 789-810.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 789.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Foley, *The Croke Park Killings on Bloody Sunday* (Dublin: The O'Brien Press Ltd, 2020), 1-5.

news sources give a glimpse into the lives and emotions of the civilian population felt in response to the day's bloodshed and, by extension, demonstrate the power of the press.

Unfortunately, due to the scarcity of comprehensive audience surveys and feedback, the project is limited in its capacity to assess the whole communication in a manner such as Hall's study.

Thus, the project focuses on the information proprietors and their targeted demographics. Still, this project will expand on our understanding of the nature of the violent conflict in Ireland during its fight for independence and the social and political consequences of that violence.

### **Methodology**

To achieve the goals and answer the questions set for this project, I have primarily examined period newspapers to show the written press's influence simply by spreading information and its ability to equivocate narratives. I have procured these period newspapers by combing digital archives for reports on the incidents that occurred on November 21, 1920, and what followed in English and Irish newspapers. The newspapers I have used encapsulate multiple perspectives of the situation in Ireland, ranging from prestigious British newspapers, the *Manchester Guardian* and the *London Times*, to the loyalist *Irish Times*, the more moderate *Ulster Herald*, and, finally, the radical Irish nationalist newspapers, the *Tipperary Nationalist* and the *Freeman's Journal*. All of these newspapers have subscription-based digitized online databases. I have also utilized speeches, diaries, and parliamentary transcripts from critical leaders involved in the conflict, such as IRA leaders Michael Collins and Tom Barry and British government leaders David Lloyd George, Winston Churchill, and Henry Hugh Tudor, covering the IRA's kill operation throughout Dublin and the subsequent massacre at Croke Park to add further primary source context. I cite relevant scholarship to add further context to my work.

### **Aftermath**

Bloody Sunday's violence was sensationalized by newspapers and thus prolonged and intensified the ongoing conflict in Ireland by simply spreading news of the events and fighting to control the narrative. The written media used the violent events of November 21, 1920, to support larger political causes. Thus, narratives formed in the following press release would engage with prospective readers and reinforce the political and ideological positions of their cause. In the context of reception theory, the attempts made by the press, as proprietors of information, to spin the violence of Bloody Sunday to support something larger were made by encoding information that is then decoded by the audience, the receivers of information. After the day of bloodshed, the press's influence directly reinvigorated the ongoing conflict: violence broke out in the House of Commons, Parliament condemned Sinn Fein and intensified its prosecution of the party. One week later- the Kilmichael reprisal ambush. The violent exchange between Joseph Devlin and various other members of the House of Commons when the former attempted to raise the issue of the Croke Park massacre before the floor showed how vicious the conflict could become even at the highest levels of government. The Kilmichael ambush proves an intensification of bloodshed on the ground, for only a week later, the cycle of violence would continue and result in the Burning of Cork.

Both the loyalist and nationalist press fought to capitalize on the violence of Bloody Sunday. Using encoding techniques aimed at their dominant audiences, the newspapers presented above shaped the portrayal of outrage. British establishment and Irish unionist press emphasized the illegality of the IRA's killings of British intelligence officers while also trying to salvage the reputation of the British government's counter-insurgency operations based in Dublin Castle. Irish nationalist newspapers, meanwhile, stressed the severity of the Croke Park massacre while avoiding implicating the IRA's actions earlier in the day. The emphasis on the

severity of violence committed by Irish republicans while relegating the massacre committed by Crown forces was an attempt by the British loyalist press to organize the meaning and messaging of the British government's precarious situation in Ireland. By using various communication methods and encoded information aimed at its dominant, anti-Irish nationalist British audience, the loyalist press further delegitimized Sinn Fein and the IRA in the eyes of the British public.

Shifting the focus from the IRA's kill mission in Dublin earlier in the day to the Croke Park massacre, the Irish nationalist hoped to preserve the nationalist political movement by highlighting the severity of violence inflicted upon a civilian populace by an imperial foreign government. By using various communication methods and encoded information aimed at its dominant, anti-British imperialist Irish-Catholic audience, the nationalist press further demonized the British government in the eyes of the Irish public.

## **Legacy**

Due to the legacy of the Irish War of Independence, the subsequent Irish Civil War, and the resulting unstable political situation that directly led to the more modern sectarian violence of the Troubles, events like Bloody Sunday have been left in the background. More than a hundred years have passed since Bloody Sunday. Still, many Irish remembrance memorials, articles, and other media were made to commemorate the Croke Park Massacre's hundredth anniversary on November 21, 2020. In all that time, violence endured by the people of Ireland spread and intensified in one form or another, only being broken up by milestone peace arrangements. Fortunately, over all this time, events such as the aftermath of the Irish Civil War in 1923 and the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 ushered in periods of relative peace and stability for both the Republic and Northern Ireland. While sectarian violence has been abated, the legacy of conflict in Ireland is a firm cultural touchstone.

### **Bibliography**

Dolan, Anne. "Killing and Bloody Sunday, November 1920." *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 3

(2006): 789-810.

Foley, Michael. *The Bloodied Field: The Croke Park Killings on Bloody Sunday*. Dublin: The

O'Brien Press Ltd, 2020.

Hall, Stuart. "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse." *University of Birmingham*.

1973.