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Out of this savagery and obscenity emerged a finality: no more killing

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By Martina Devlin
 Saturday August 16 2008

OMAGH was the bomb that shocked and awed us. It was the bomb that finally forced us to confront our violent heritage and say: no more killing.

After 30 years of the Troubles we had grown blase on this island about sudden, bloody death -- so many pointless deaths. Deaths we allowed ourselves to forget, once the initial outrage wore off. But

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Omagh proved that some atrocities still retained the power to stun us.

A line was crossed there, and it's odd it should have been at Omagh and not at [Enniskillen](#) or Greysteel or [Warrenpoint](#), or any of the other place names synonymous with carnage.

Perhaps it was because we had tentatively started believing in peace back in 1998, with the [Good Friday Agreement](#) just signed and the world smiling its approval at us for finally settling our differences. People's hopes were up and their guards were down.

There had been false dawns before, but surely not this time. Somehow everyone believed (because we desperately wanted to believe) that this time peace would hold. Hope and history seemed finally ready to rhyme.

And then came Omagh: mayhem on an unprecedented scale. An event which swept through the town like an Old Testament plague, arbitrary in its choice of who to smite and who to spare.

Within minutes on a busy Saturday afternoon, one of the sunniest that year, the main street of an ordinary country town was reconfigured into a lunar landscape.

Twenty-nine dead, hundreds injured. And even for many who survived the devastation, life would never be the same.

Yet something positive did emerge from the rubble in Omagh. You had only to tune in to yesterday's memorial service to witness it: a steely determination to cling to peace.

The Omagh bomb should have shattered the peace accord -- but it didn't. It should have led to another outbreak of tribal hostilities -- but it didn't.

It should have sparked a cycle of grievance and recrimination -- but it didn't. It should have led to a breakdown of trust -- but it didn't.

Could it be, instead, the bomb to end bombs? That was always too much to hope for, too much to expect from one act of savagery.

But it did generate revulsion to an exceptional degree. The universal response was shock waves of visceral abhorrence -- not a platitude in sight.

Of all the attacks to scar [Ulster](#) during those three bloodstained decades, that car bomb in Omagh sparked the most intense reaction at home and abroad.

It killed babies. It killed unborn babies. It killed grandparents and schoolboys and schoolgirls and a Sunday school teacher. But it gave birth to something, too.

A flame of co-operation and cross-community support was ignited in Omagh in those early hours of dismay and disbelief, and the town has not lost them through the years. Evil had its day there, but it was not allowed to go unchallenged -- it was not allowed to gain momentum.

I've always thought of those events in Omagh as a keystone of the peace process. The foundations had been dug already, but what happened on August 15, 1998, served to underpin them.

The politicians who worked together on the accord were devastated by this setback. I remember the grim expression on [Bertie Ahern's](#) face when he visited afterwards. He couldn't hide his sadness -- his shoulders were slumped beneath the weight of it.

[Tony Blair](#) was almost in tears as he paced the town's Market Street, while [President Clinton](#) reached out towards a sea of hands and seemed to need consolation as much as he offered it.

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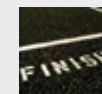
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Those political leaders were united in a determination not to visit another bomb-ravaged town, not to face another bereaved relative. Omagh's legacy became a solemn duty undertaken by them to make sure the peace process took root.

Watching coverage of the remembrance ceremony, when the Heart of Glass was unveiled on the site where the bomb detonated, I kept seeing another scene superimposed there.

I saw amateur video footage screened 10 years ago showing blood-spattered survivors gasping in the immediate aftermath. The air around them was smoky, lending everything an unreal tone.

Some stood dazed, uncomprehending; others wore their fingers to stumps scrabbling through rubble for their companions. And what made this disaster so horrific was that it was man-made.

"There is a time for war and a time for peace," recited one of yesterday's speakers, quoting from the Book of Ecclesiastes.

The time for war must be past -- Omagh taught us that.

It is a lesson we cannot afford to forget.

- *Martina Devlin*

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