

Twenty-four.

By the third week of January, large areas of Britain were, to a greater or lesser degree, in the hands of the insurgents. But this possession was as chaotic as the organisation of each the liberated areas, where a dozen parties fought for power and influence.

With American warships lurking off the coast of Galway and an American diplomatic mission on urgent business in Dublin, the north of Ireland had been largely abandoned by the forces of the Protectorate. Since then the counties to the immediate north of the border had descended into sectarian violence and territorialism of a savage and well-established kind.

On the southern edge of the province, two counties had declared schism and asked to be united with the nation to the south. The government of the nation in question was said to be considering the request - which was an urgent one - and in the meantime had sent its military forces in their entirety to Monaghan and Donegal.

In Belfast, the west and the north of the city were armed camps threatening imminent destruction of each other. Firearms, ammunition and explosives were being shipped into Portavogie from suppliers thought to be operating on the coast of Ayrshire. Soviet gunships sank three fishing vessels engaged in this trade in the course of one night: and then retired to deep-water anchorages in the firth of Clyde, the firth of Lorne and the sound of Mull.

In Scotland, meanwhile, vast areas had fallen to the insurgents. Almost all of Argyll had been taken by an impromptu army of camp escapees, though an airfield at the southern end of Kintyre was still controlled by Soviet marines who had landed directly from seaward. The counties along the coast of the Moray

firth were in the control of heavily-armed farming elements, though there were still redoubts of Militia, again on the coast and again supplied and succoured from the sea.

The landward areas of Aberdeenshire had fallen in their entirety, and all their towns; though up in the Cairngorms and in the valleys around Balmoral there were still Militia outposts. To the south, units of Fraternal special-forces, Paramilitaries and Militia were roaming the Forest of Atholl, just over the border with Perthshire - but in general that county was in the hands of insurgents too, though there had been fierce fighting at Perth's river bridges before the town itself was captured.

Dundee, meantime, had fallen very quickly to the workers of its jute mills and jam plants. They had quickly declared a city-republic, had taken control of the local publishing industry, and had hoisted a gigantic red flag over the headquarters of its most pre-eminent newspaper printing business.

In Fife, perhaps on account of the violence with which Pitmungo had been suppressed, there had been very considerable savagery in the streets of Glenrothes and Dunfermline before the proclamation of a Free State and an all-county workers' republic (with the exception of St. Andrews).

In Edinburgh and the Lothians, however, the position was less clear-cut. Within hours of the general strikes and rioting, large areas in the south of the city had called on the Militia to protect private property and the law in general. As a result, the writ of the city's popular council did not run to every boundary of the capital. A number of householders on the upper floors of some of the better apartments in the New Town had been suspected of signalling by mirror, or some other means unknown, to one or more of the Soviet

warships out in the firth of Forth. Covert - and sometimes perfectly open - support for the Militia and other Protectorate forces was also widespread in most of the other wealthier parts of the city.

In the west of Scotland, however, throughout Glasgow and its environs and down through Lanarkshire, the insurgents were in complete control. Their influence also ran far to the south-east, stretching in a cone towards Moffat, and then to the west and south-west towards Greenock and Ayr.

The Militia still controlled the Scottish south west, and also Cumberland. But from Newcastle to the Humber the insurgents were firmly in command, and also across England from east to west. Wales was in the hands of popular councils and their guard forces, as was much of Devon and Cornwall. Farmers had taken command of Norfolk and Suffolk from the Wash to the Blackwater, and on the south coast insurgents had taken - and briefly held - a swathe of coast from Portland Bill to Chichester. After two days of bitter fighting, however, they lost most of it to units of marines which had been landed under cover of darkness at a dozen points on the mainland from the Protectorate's huge combined-forces base on the Isle of Wight.

In the south-east, the Militia never lost control, although in a number of towns around the Thames estuary there had been rioting and unbridled demonstrations of public anger. But these had been crushed with some ferocity - for the safety of the Protectorate was deemed to depend on the shipping routes running into London Docks through the dangerous banks and treacherous shallows of the estuary.

From these tumultuous events, however, the religious sects with which the country teemed stood for the most part aloof. At the

great general assemblies held in most cities in the immediate wake of the seizure of power, a lone Daniel or Fifth Monarchist had made his voice heard; but in general their interests lay elsewhere. As a result, some thousands of rural locations were claimed by the sects as their own.

In Wiltshire, hundreds of New Adventists established a centre at Silbury Hill, and were said daily to be awaiting a miraculous sign, while others congregated at ancient Gunwallowe on the Cornish coast. A mob of New Ranters stormed the cathedral in Salisbury and attempted to destroy what they called pagan idols. The church authorities accused them of herecy, called on some Soviet marines from Southampton to dislodge them - and then demanded that they be turned-over to the diocesan authorities for fair and proper trial according to the long-established norms of canon law.

A Ranter settlement had been established on St. Michael's Mount - to which, the Ranters insisted, the young Jesus had once paid a visit - in Cornwall. An encampment of Daniels and Quakers had established itself at every one of the tors across Dartmoor, and had begun to interrupt - sometimes, even, break up - legitimate and fully-licensed church services in the surrounding towns. Some of these ruffians, even, had denounced the Thirty Nine Articles. Here again, the ecclesiastical authorities called on the services of the Militia and Yeomanry to protect the proper forms of established doctrine and practice.

Anabaptists took control of the hills in Dorset, and established a colony at Lavington on the north Yorkshire moors, while in Buckinghamshire there were pitched battles between moderate Levellers and their more extreme brethren. The New Forest - despite its deadly proximity to the armed-camp of Southampton -

teemed with outlaws, camp escapees and Diggers. At Hordle, near Lymington, a commune of Shakers had established themselves and proclaimed their immortality, and were awaiting at any moment the return of Mary Ann Girling. Encampments of even stranger sects, meanwhile, were said to be scattered throught the Mendip Hills, with their headquarters at the ancient Iron-Age fort of Maesbury Castle.

And in the north-east an armed and especially heretical band of Fifth Monarchists had taken possession by force of Lindisfarne Castle on the coast of Northumberland. Here they were said to practise community of women, divinely-inspired, along with demonic alchemy and holy prophecy. They went naked at all times and the bearded men had begun to grow their hair long, while members of the community were said daily to be testing the immortality of their souls; and miracles were taking place on a regular basis. A sequence of stars had been seen in the night sky which was judged of the greatest significance, while a carved-stone post in the castle yard had been clearly seen to spout blood at sunset, had quoted Scripture at midnight: and by the following dawn had begun to call in question the tripartite nature of God.

Scotland, however, was largely free of what the Archbishop of Canterbury was now calling 'these pestilential nests of syphilitic heresy': From the beginning, the religious authorities in Scotland had hunted down and destroyed without mercy any man, woman or child, whether of full or feeble mind, who had dared to challenge the God-given primacy of session, presbytery, synod and general assembly. Initially, this had led to some dreadful, and regrettable, errors of judgement. At Portobello, for instance, near Edinburgh, two lasses who had fallen pregnant without the blessing of marriage (and who were unable to establish any clear evidence of divine

intervention) were dragged naked to a church trial at dawn, and then tied by their hair to posts on the beach that they might there honourably drown the vicious evil of their sins.

In Ayrshire, three elderly ministers, claiming Knox as their authority, were stoned to death for suggesting that bishops in the kirk 'could be lived with'. When a unit of Militia attempted to intervene and save the ministers' lives, they too were stoned by a hysterical crowd of women. In the countryside outside Aberdeen, there was even a brief renaissance of witchcraft. In one modest farmtoun, an aged crone was accused of having spelled the cattle, and induced them to give water in place of milk. She had in addition been heard to speak in tongues and had also endeavoured to raise by secret incantation the justly dead. A fire had been laid and lit in a steading-yard, and a stout stake driven, before wiser counsels from synod intervened, and took the crone away for further examination.

Meanwhile, that third week of January was witness to something of an interregnum - so to speak - in the tumultuous events shaking the land.

Despite the rebellion in the camps, the rioting, the general strikes and the armed seizure of power in many districts, life was in certain respects largely untouched. The respectable newspapers were still printed and distributed, though circulation was badly affected by the shortage of trains to carry them to all the corners of the realm. But the BBC continued to broadcast responsible news and culturally-significant entertainment in a way that corresponded fully with its charter obligations, as defined by the Protectorate's appointees to the Board of Management. The cheese-ration, having disappeared altogether the previous autumn, returned at the rate of

one ounce per week for every person properly entitled to it. The fresh-meat ration, which had effectively disappeared in many districts, was suddenly reinstated, to sixpence per week, with sixpence worth of corned-beef in addition for industrial workers and nursing mothers. Eggs, however, on account of the American blockade, remained strictly a black-market pleasure.

In London, the worst fogs for thirty years had been reported in the autumn; now the city was deep in snow, which had brought havoc to such transport services as were still reliably in operation. A number of theatres was still open in the West End, but audiences were down on account of the weather, and the effect of cowardly pipe-bomb attacks attributed to religious anarchists. And of course the criminal and civil courts, and their diligent servants, went about their work in accordance with the law, old or new. In Manchester, there was even a hanging, the first of a woman for 12 years. The woman in question had been found guilty of murder: a number of newspapers saw fit to comment on the critical place of the law as the essential and enduring cement of all civil society. Some newspapers went further, indeed, and drew a cautious comparison with the likely fate of those who continued to challenge the state. And with one mighty and unanimous voice the newspapers called for the return of responsible leadership to the working-class movement, which had clearly fallen under the influence of demagogues, extremists and dangerous English Jacobins.

These newspapers also made bold to call for an extension of the interregnum - as some actually called it. And at first, it did seem as if this pause in the trouble might well be extended.

But after a day and a night, the news rolled in the land that a monster procession through London was in prospect: and that those

fit to so do should begin at once to converge on the British capital. There was excited talk of Blanketeers and Chartists and Peterloo, and a thousand regional heroes from the near and distant past: and overnight, or so it seemed, increasingly immense crowds did indeed begin to converge on London.

By the 20th of January, the political situation was critical. American battle-fleets were on exercises - said to be entirely routine in nature - off the coasts of Ireland and western France. American radio services from Dublin - unaccountably they were no longer being jammed - announced that short-range bombers had moved to military airbases at Shannon for training purposes, and that long-range nuclear-armed bombers were on standby on the eastern coast of the United States. There was rioting in some of the overseas camps, not least among the 100,000 especially dangerous Britons detained at residential centres in the occupied Baltic statelets. Some thousands of these had already been loaded into sealed trains, and carried off to unknown destinations further east.

And now the state began to tremble before the advance, tumultuous, unpredictable and leaderless, of the mighty common mob: for by now it had good reason to tremble. Overnight an army hundreds of thousands strong began to converge irresistably on London: in surly battalions with banners and fiery torches, and often with their own Popular Guards to keep them company.

By the morning of the 21st, at least half-a-million armed workers were massed around the great city, awaiting some sort of instruction from the local leaderships that had urged them there. In the heart of government, there was desperate debate - and terror. High Protectorate officials and heavily-compromised collaborators from the native governing classes were already fleeing the city, and

rushing for the ports of the south eastern coast. The gold bullion below the Bank of England was already loaded for delivery by a convoy of armed trucks to two fast ships waiting at the docks. In the ranks of the military leadership there was panic too; for in the course of two days, a situation that might have been manageable was now entirely out of hand. Frozen with indecision, they decided to wait: and with that decision promptly handed the initiative to the insurgents on their doorstep. They did not have long to wait for those insurgents to seize that initiative.

Late in the afternoon of the 21st, shortly after dark, the BBC broke into a programme of military music to announce that at five o'clock precisely there would be 'an important announcement pertaining to the situation of unrest in which the country now finds itself'. Five o'clock came and went, without any interruption to the music; but at twenty past the hour, without warning, the music died. After some moments of tense silence, a harsh and expressionless voice - hitherto unknown to the audience - began to speak. This is what it said.

'The leading organs of the Protectorate, recognising the unrest now prevailing throughout the country, have agreed to broadcast the following announcement to the peoples of Britain. The union of the popular councils which have seized power, and which continue to hold power, in a number of principal industrial and agricultural centres, has renewed its call for a monster procession through the streets of London tomorrow afternoon. The union of these popular councils has also called for a National Convention of such councils, to convene tomorrow evening in plenary session at a location in the city to be announced later. The terms of the union of popular councils' call for a procession are as follows.

‘The union of popular councils of the working peoples of Britain calls on all those able to do so to move at once into the centre of the city. The union of popular councils calls on the working people of London and the surrounding counties to rise and take command of their localities by whatever means necessary. Popular Guards are ordered to move to defensive positions at once, and take control of all principal transport routes and junctions around London. The agenda for the National Convention is as follows. Free association of workers with free collective bargaining in the workplace will be allowed. Free elections to parliament will take place at an early date, with a free plurality of parties to contest them. All forces from the occupying power are to be confined to their bases, until demobilisation or return overseas. The Militia is to come under the immediate control of the National Convention, prior to its abolition. The personnel of the security forces and religious police are to hand themselves over to the Popular Guards at once. All prisoners held at overseas locations are to be returned at once. The requisition of the farming surplus will halt, and the socialisation of agriculture will be reversed within six weeks. Child labour will be phased-out in all industrial enterprises. The penalty of death will be abolished for all political, religious and industrial offences at once. All press and broadcasting censorship will stop by the weekend. Long live the National Convention!’

The grim voice read on:

‘In the cause of assisting the restoration of the social order, the leading organs of the Protectorate met today, and agreed to give consideration in a constructive spirit to these foregoing demands, and to broadcast them, in accordance with the wishes of the union of popular councils. The leading organs of the Protectorate have

also agreed to meet the leadership of the forthcoming National Convention in a spirit of amity and goodwill, as soon as that leadership has had time to fully formulate its requirements. As an immediate concession to popular feeling, and as a token of their goodwill, the leading organs of the Protectorate have this afternoon ordered all units of Militia, Paramilitary, Regular, Special, Yeomanry, Auxiliary and Fraternal forces to leave the districts of London and the surrounding counties by midnight at the latest tonight'.

The harsh, expressionless voice stopped speaking abruptly. There was a sustained silence of perhaps half a minute: an outrage, anyway, in continuity terms; and then the military music began again, at precisely the point at which it had stopped some minutes earlier.

This announcement was listened to in stunned silence by huge audiences: and very shortly afterwards, its import was known to millions more. In the great encampments around London the effect was instantaneous and electric; quite simply, the people began to move in mighty throngs into the outskirts of the capital.

By midnight, scores of trains had made their way to the city's principal stations, without any sign of obstruction or opposition. The districts of King's Cross and Euston were colonised at once by heavily-armed Popular Guard detachments from Scotland and Yorkshire. Liverpool Street station had fallen by one in the morning to organised bands of dock labourers, who had also taken possession of the London School of Economics, and who had established armed checkpoints in the Strand.

The Stalingrad station was seized by insurgents from the south and the west. By that time, large parts of the Home Counties had fallen into the possession of mobs - in some cases - and

disciplined bands of insurgents on the other. There was heavy fighting in Chatham and Maidstone. There was looting and rioting in many parts of London. At the city's traditional gaols, the prison warders disappeared at two in the morning, and the criminal inmates poured into the streets, intent on taking advantage of such opportunity as the situation might present to them.

By three in the morning there was heavy fighting at Tilbury, centred on a convoy of armoured trucks believed to be carrying bullion from the Bank of England's vaults. Criminal gangs broke into the Royal Mint, and returned fire when they came under attack from a unit of Popular Guards. By four, another dozen trains - mainly composed of coal and cattle trucks - had arrived in the city: and by five, armed units of Popular Guards were taking possession of key locations throughout the capital. By six, most of the west of the city appeared entirely empty of Militia forces - and, indeed, of any sign whatsoever of government forces. An hour later, the east of the city was also in insurgent hands. And when dawn began to break at eight, it appeared as if the Protectorate had surrendered large parts of the capital without a fight.

Shortly afterwards, a gigantic procession was under way from Copenhagen Fields to Westminster and on to Kennington. At least six other gigantic crowds were making their way through other parts of the city. There were excited reports of similar huge congregations at other centres in the north: a quarter of a million people were rallying at Kersal Moor near Manchester, and there was a huge meeting under way at Birmingham's Bull Ring. There was heavy rioting in the Potteries, and ferocious fighting in Glasgow on the orders of the Clyde central withdrawal of labour committee, as a result of a renegade unit of Militia having fired into the funeral

procession of a shipyard leader killed in their custody three days earlier. On Merseyside there were monster processions converging on the St George's Hall district, under the command of the regional joint strike committee.

In London itself, there was renewed violence through the eastern side of the city, at the bidding of the River Thames shop steward's movement, centred on the South West India Dock. Soon, violence had consumed districts across the city, notably in Canning Town, Barking, East and West Ham, Bow and Bromley, Poplar, Stepney, Bermondsey, Southwark, Chiswick and Tilbury.

A thousand handbills and illegal newspapers circulated, and agitators appeared to command every corner with their cries. Many of the papers enclosed special supplements dedicated to the arts of building barricades and street fighting: while their editorial matter was exclusively dedicated to the great matters in hand; down with the Defence of the Realm Act - under which political detainees could be held abroad; abolish the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act - which allowed secret trial, in absentia, by military tribunal and expropriation of property at the will of the state; smash the Combination and Corresponding Acts - which forbade a national union of local associations and the administration of illegal oaths; down with the hated Master and Servant laws - which sought to regulate the nature of contract between employer and employee; and down with the hyenas of the Protectorate!

Long live the Grand Remonstrance of the National Convention! Long live the Grand National Holiday! The nation would soon enjoy once more its Universal Bread - or Universal Blood!

There were also repeated demands for the repeal of the New Game Laws, under which huge areas of the north and west of Scotland, and northern England, had been emptied of people and turned into gigantic hunting preserves for the senior leadership of the Protectorate: with ferocious penalties for game-poaching within them.

At lunchtime bells begin to ring out over the city from every quarter, as churches were stormed by those radical Daniels and other sectaries who had survived the blizzard of repression to which they had been subject. At St. Paul's there was some considerable violence as its established guardians attempted to protect the site from the invaders. Two canons were lynched on the steps, and the Daniels began at once to sack the interior of the cathedral. Soon, the choir-stalls were feeding a huge bonfire on the steps. There were similar attacks on ecclesiastical buildings across London: though most were uncontested, as the Anglican authorities, in response to a suggestion of the Protectorate's Council of Religious Affairs, had withdrawn almost all its licensed clergy the previous evening.

For a time, there was fierce hand-to-hand fighting between insurgents and some Paramilitary units through the empty buildings of the London School of Economics, and in the vicinity of the central law courts. Here, some young miners from the slum pits of southern Wales were confronted by an angry young barrister called Roberts, who urged them to return to their place of work and leave government to those who best understood the law. The lads - they had been drinking heavily all night - dismembered the young woman, dragged her naked torso to the embankment, and hurled it

into the Thames-side mud with strident and hate-filled cries of vengeance.

But incidents such as these - if perfectly understandable - were infrequent. Large parts of the city, indeed, were en fete - for the public houses had opened their doors, or been forced to open their doors, and there was extensive looting of those hundreds of restaurants and hotels reserved for the servants and guests of the Protectorate. Exultant and victorious crowds surged through Piccadilly and Leicester and Trafalgar squares while mobs looted the rich emporia of Regent Street, which for a year past had been reserved for the exclusive use of senior officers of the Protectorate.

By dusk, when it had begun to snow again, Popular Guards had secured all of the royal palaces, erected gigantic banners above them, and taken into custody the skeleton staffs of caretakers that they had found there. Other units were taking possession of the principal centres of political administration in the city: notably the Home Office and the parliamentary compound where the members of the Protectorate Parliament normally resided under a heavy guard of Militia and protective screen of anti-aircraft guns.

But there was no resistance at any of the ministries, for these were found to be abandoned, their records looted and burned in a way which indicated extreme urgency on the part of the government arsonists. At the parliamentary compound, certainly, there was some considerable violence; but it was short-lived. A heavily-armed unit of Militia had been cut-off and isolated on account of the speed of the Protectorate's withdrawal from the city, and had determined to protect their compound to the last man. This they did, and very savage hand-to-hand fighting - mainly with Popular Guard units from Scotland, Yorkshire and Merseyside - ensued. At one point, Militia

troopers on the roof attempted to bring their anti-aircraft weapons to bear on the struggle below, but in this useless attempt they were thwarted by insurgents who had already reached the roof. In any case it was something of an empty victory: for there were no members of the parliament to be found in the buildings, or anywhere else in the city.

Downing Street and the Foreign Office were empty too; and great crowds made their way from the south of the river by the Stalingrad bridge towards the palace of Westminster. Other mighty crowds converged on the palace from Whitehall: and by that evening, thousands of delegates from across the country had taken full possession of the building, and declared their National Convention - amid scenes of chaotic enthusiasm - to be now in full and open session.

Sometime around midnight, there was a further proclamation announced on the BBC, in the name of the Protectorate's leading organs, which were now in permanent session aboard a naval vessel off Chatham. The Protectorate had chosen to demit office, and transfer its authority and resources to such government as the National Convention might in due course appoint. There would be a further and final statement on the political situation from the Protectorate within the next twenty four hours. At that, the wireless went dead. In the chamber, hundreds of delegates roared their approval and waved red flags. Clearly, it was the beginning of the end for the Protectorate.

The Convention immediately went about its great work, and declared that - in the name of the people - it now represented the full and only authority of state. Time and again, throughout the night

and by stupendous acclamation, the framework of Protectorate tyranny was dismantled beyond return.

By breakfast time the New Game Laws had been repealed. Miners had won the right to appoint their own checkweighmen - for the mining authorities of the Protectorate had been notorious for under-paying the weight of the coal hewn and heaved to the weighing stations. An urgent debate had raged on the blasphemy laws. Security of employment and free collective bargaining of wage-rates had been declared for the permanent, preferable and casual dockers of the nation's commercial ports. The authority of extra-judicial summary courts had been abolished. The age-limit for full-time employment was raised to twelve and then fourteen and finally sixteen (except in shops and offices, where it remained at fourteen). The socialisation of agriculture was overturned; and in manufacturing industry, the nine-hour day was declared universal.

Soon, wilder demands began to be heard from some of the religious and political radicals both within the chamber, and in the corridors and streets outside. A New Commonwealth should be declared, and the land readied for a New Jerusalem. Factory labour should be abolished at once! Organised religion should be outlawed, its nests torn down and its malign rooks scattered to the west wind! Money and class and property should forever be banned from the land and a Republic of the Just declared forthwith!

In this millenarian chaos did the National Convention greet its first full day of governing authority.

By now, it was snowing heavily again. The Convention paused in its labours. There was, after all, no need for haste, for there was no threat to its existence. The Protectorate had gone - and would announce that fact shortly. But by the evening, there was

still no broadcast statement from the naval vessel off Chatham. This silence was at first puzzling and later un-settling. Some speculation even began, in worried tones, as to what the silence might yet signify.

And then, as the Convention re-assembled that evening, the Protectorate struck back: and it struck back with a bloody vengeance.