

The IRA

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Ireland has an indigenous tradition of political violence. This ran at a low level in the nineteenth century, from agrarian 'outrages' of an essentially socio-economic nature, through the serious sectarian riots that periodically shook Belfast and Londonderry (1857, 1864, 1872, 1886, 1898), to the highly politicised, often symbolic, militarism of secret revolutionary organisations such as the Fenians. The state responded with frequent use of 'Acts of Coercion' and the development of an armed Royal Irish Constabulary that owed more to European gendarmerie than the stereotypical British 'Bobby on the Beat'. Ireland was in a kind of half-way house, as Charles Townshend explains: "British rule in Ireland so often found itself paralysed because it could neither operate on English principles (because it did not have sufficient public cooperation) nor abandon English principles and govern by the direct application of force. It had to preserve the show and rhetoric of civilisation."^[1]

In the 40 years or so before the Great War there was a discernible militarisation of European life as mass citizen armies defined a new public ethos of nationalism and service. The United Kingdom, with its strong tradition of voluntarism, was resistant to this, but by the Edwardian Age, with prevalent notions of national efficiency, the Naval Race with Germany and perhaps simple osmosis, a certain militarism was apparent here too. At one end, there was Baden Powell's Boy Scout Movement, at another was the Ulster Volunteer Force and the Irish Volunteers (or Oglaiigh na hÉireann, from about 1919 known popularly as the Irish Republican Army, IRA). Ireland, thus, was not *sui generis*.

The crisis of the Third Home Rule Bill, 1912-14, reintroduced the gun into respectable politics. With the intention of preventing Home Rule for all of Ireland, Ulster Unionists (covering nine counties) established the UVF and a provisional government ready to take over the administration of the province rather than accept rule from Dublin. The Irish Volunteers was established in 1914 as a mass movement to defend Home Rule. A faction refused to support the war and a further sub-faction was embroiled in the republican Rising of Easter 1916.

Establishment of the State of Eire, 1922

Sinn Féin swept nationalist Ireland in the General Election of 1918 and proceeded to establish a parallel parliament (Dáil Éireann) and the rudiments of a state. This was surprisingly effective in practice and very quickly acquired sufficient authority to challenge Crown authority. As it was driven underground, the Volunteers began to assert itself as the Army of the Republic (it adopted the title 'Irish Republican Army' from the meeting of the first Dáil on 21 January 1919 to indicate its

allegiance to the newly established, if unrecognised state). A guerrilla War of Independence was developing apace by 1920. Republican purists, committed to the goal of a united Irish people, nevertheless found itself embroiled in sectarian feuding in the six counties of Northern Ireland.

Britain bided its time and, with the 1920 Government of Ireland Act, ensured that the 'Ulster problem' would be settled by fait accompli: the six counties were given their own Unionist dominated Home Rule state. By the time of the Treaty negotiations between Irish Republicans and the British Government (1921), Northern Ireland was an established structure that few thought could readily be dismantled.

Britain had been brought to the negotiating table, but the subsequent Treaty fell short of a united Irish republic. Disillusioned, the bulk of the IRA opposed the Treaty. The Free State Army in the South and the Northern Ireland Government had the IRA crushed by 1932, but it retained the aura of incorruptible warriors cheated of fairly won victory.

IRA activity 1935-62

In Northern Ireland, the IRA were seen not just as republican revolutionaries, but also as champions of the Catholic nationalist minority. It was in the latter mode that the IRA was most commonly, if still sporadically, active. On 23 June 1935, for example, in the aftermath of an Orange parade, rioting broke out which lasted on and off for three weeks. The IRA emerged as community defenders and, indeed, provocateurs. One Republican recalled:

... the old sectarian trouble started again. It had ended we thought in 1922 [sic], with nothing like it recurring in twelve years. But the scent of it in the ravings of the Ulster Protestant League was around, and in June 1935 it broke. Everyone [in the Belfast IRA] was mobilised and assigned to certain houses. ... The trouble started first with an Orange procession in Orange Street, but it quickly spread. Dickie Dunne was in Lancaster Street looking down upon York Street. He had a .303 rifle, a great rarity in Belfast, but he could not get a shot. Finally an Orange cat walked out, so he shot that. Immediately a fat woman ran over, picked up the cat, shouting imprecations back at the Fenians. So he let fly a shot at her and that sent her scurrying. 1935 was the first time we used Thompson guns in Belfast. They made such a racket they sent the police scurrying.[2]

The IRA launched an abortive **bombing campaign in Britain from 1939 to 1941**, but attempts to link effectively with German intelligence, luckily for its future reputation, were scuppered. A more substantial 'Border Campaign' (1956-62) failed to ignite Catholic revolt in Northern Ireland. Faced

with an impasse, the IRA's leadership turned to political agitation preparatory to a revolution in which force would be deployed.

Armed Protest and Violence 1968-72

The escalation of violence from 1968 reactivated the militants. The Provisional IRA split from the 'Official' leadership in December that year. The Provisionals (or 'Provos'), with their greatest strength in the North, rejected the Officials' strategy of prioritising peaceful 'political' agitation in a period of crisis. Both wings benefited from a perceived need for armed defence in Catholic working class ghettos, and the increasingly forceful attempts to disarm these areas by the British Army. The traditional Republican analysis appeared to many to be valid again.

In retrospect, Reginald Maudling, Home Secretary responsible for Northern Ireland from 1970 to 1972, clearly recognised that the IRA, though a relatively small organisation, relied upon considerable sympathy from much of the Catholic minority. They had, he said, "the support of a large community which offers them protection and secrecy".^[3]

Bill Craig, presumably enjoying privileged lines of information from the security forces, estimated that Official and Provisional IRA strength in both the Upper and Lower Falls, in April 1971, was 1,500. Of these, 900 in Upper Falls were Provos and 600 in the Lower Falls were Officials. When 'territorials' (i.e. defence vigilantes), female auxiliaries and youth volunteers were factored in, the numbers swelled to some 3,000.

There was widespread fear that a well armed Protestant population was biding its time to repeat the August 1969 'pogrom'. Northern Ireland, by United Kingdom standards, was awash with arms: in April 1971 there were 73,193 [firearms certificates](#) in Northern Ireland, for 102,112 weapons, which meant that one man in seven over the age of 20 had a gun.

There's no doubting the continued Loyalist pressure on Catholic communities. A report for the Community Relations Commission, for example, estimated that 15,000 families had moved their homes due to intimidation in the Greater Belfast area during the period between August 1969 and February 1973. Major Raymond Layard of the 4/7th Dragoon Guards revealed in November 1972 that his British Army unit had kept a log of intimidation activities which revealed that in south-east Belfast planned attacks on Catholic homes were being carried out by gangs, and that "even Protestants who have tried to stick by their neighbours have been attacked".

From early 1972, there was a swell in individual sectarian assassinations against Catholic civilians by Loyalist paramilitaries. Only in December 1972 was a special ‘murder squad’ of the RUC designated to investigate the sectarian killings. The Ulster Defence Association (UDA) were behind many of these murders, though it did not generally take responsibility until it evolved a specialised ‘nom de guerre’ that could be disavowed, the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), first deployed in June 1973. In early 1973, British troops on the ground – feeling that they had the IRA on the run – were more worried by the threat posed by the UDA.[\[4\]](#)

So a certain amount of sympathy for the IRA derived from lack of faith in the Army’s ability to protect Catholics from Loyalist attack.

Clashes with the British Army

In these circumstances, the IRA were welcomed as a kind of last line of defence in an on-going state of siege in Catholic areas. When the Army moved into working class areas to seize arms, it is little surprise that they were fiercely resisted. Quickly enough, anti-British traditions were given substance and the Army was identified with repression.

From the ‘no go’ areas, the IRA were able to calibrate [collisions with the British Army](#) that facilitated their strategic objective of casting them as the enemy. “The Provisionals had planned well,” argued Desmond Hammill, “Their policy of alienating the Catholics from the Army by forcing soldiers to react vigorously in Catholic areas was succeeding.”[\[5\]](#)

The Official IRA stayed aloof from the Provisional bombing campaign, condemning it as de facto sectarian, though physical pressure from the Provos stymied their attempts to organise grass-roots opposition in areas such as the Ardoyne in Belfast. The Officials enjoyed the reputation of being “shrewder and sharper” than the Provos (as Tommy Herron of the UDA said as late as May 1973), but their tactical militarism and increasingly arcane Marxist theory in fact rendered them increasingly abstract from the volatility of gut Republican politics.

The Provisional IRA only gradually ratcheted up their campaign, and it was initially rooted in arson and riot, pursuits that were looked upon as little more than asocial not only by the ranks of Nationalist hooligans, but by the wider Catholic community. This made it easier for the IRA to ratchet up operations slowly so that they tested popular toleration of attacks upon the enemy, but did not radically outstrip them. Home-made and scabbled together munitions often defined tactics, rather than any greater sense of strategy. Said one IRA commander of nail bombs in 1970, “You can say it’s our weapon of the moment”.[\[6\]](#)

Bloody Sunday

The months following Bloody Sunday were the highpoint of the IRA campaign and the support it was able to generate. At a press conference in Paris on 24 April 1972, introducing Francis McGuigan, an escapee from [Long Kesh](#) prison camp earlier in the year, the Provisionals claimed that there were no less than 1,000 IRA volunteers in Belfast, mainly Provisionals.

The Provisionals were struggling to establish a political strategy to match their success in displacing law and order with warfare. It was important to de-legitimise the Northern Ireland state, in their opinion a massive gerrymander creating an artificial Unionist majority in one part of an integral Irish nation. Thus they targeted the Stormont Parliament and Government for destruction first. But something else would have to take the place of, or at least compete with, the six county entity as an actually existing basis for self-determination. Of course, the island of Ireland was preferred, but the Republic's Government was determined not to allow this to happen. On 21 October 1971, Paddy Kennedy, a Stormont MP close to the Provos, had been ejected from the Dáil in Dublin when he attempted to exercise his right, as an 'Irish citizen', to address the 'national' assembly. A moderate Nationalist 'Assembly of the North', convened some 100 delegates at Dungiven Castle on 27 October 1971, but this was designed to exclude Republicans and indeed held the border inviolate, inviting no representatives from even those northern Ulster counties on the other side of the border. This rendered it virtually irrelevant in any constructive sense, but certainly succeeded in stymieing any attempt to establish a serious political rival to the Northern Ireland statelet. The Provisional Republican movement's own nine-county 'Dail Uladh' parliament, intended as preparatory to a federal unification of Ireland, was still-born.

The Provos, nevertheless, had cause to feel that events were moving their way. That elements of the British political elite were moving towards embracing an all-Ireland solution was undoubted. Harold Wilson, in particular, seemed to imply that even the abandonment of the Union was on the cards. For example, in November 1971, he proposed in Westminster a 15 year period of transition to Irish unification during which time the Republic would become a member of the British Commonwealth. The southern Government could be no less radical and in December 1971 Jack Lynch told the London press that "serious negotiations must begin on the basis of finding agreed Irish unity and a harmonious relationship between Britain and a united Ireland".

IRA Ceasefire 1972

On 29 May, the Official IRA ordered an immediate cessation of hostilities. Though not complete (as late as May 1973 it claimed responsibility for the death of seven British soldiers and many injured

during “recent retaliatory action” in Northern Ireland), the ceasefire was taken seriously by the British, and Official IRA internees were rapidly released.

The [introduction of Direct Rule](#) seemed to be the point when the Provisional IRA might rationally and to its political advantage call off its armed campaign. On 19 June 1972, de facto political status was granted to convicted terrorist prisoners, ending a hunger-strike by Republican prisoners that had begun over 30 days previously. With the conditions now set, the Provos announced a suspension of offensive operations from midnight, Monday 26 June, provided that a public reciprocal response was forthcoming from the Armed Forces of the British Crown. William Whitelaw, referring to the ceasefire proposal at Westminster, said “As the purpose of her Majesty’s forces in Northern Ireland is to keep the peace, if offensive operations by the IRA in Northern Ireland cease on Monday night, her Majesty’s forces will obviously reciprocate”. Seamus Twomey, for the IRA, described the situation not as a ceasefire, but rather a ‘bilateral truce’.

IRA talks with William Whitelaw

Secret talks between the IRA and Whitelaw were held on 7 July. The IRA’s demands were (1) the British Government’s public recognition of the right of Irish people as a whole to decide the future of Ireland (2) a declaration of intent to withdraw all British forces from Irish soil by 1975 and an immediate withdrawal from certain areas (3) an amnesty for all political prisoners in British and Irish jails, for all internees and detainees, and wanted men on the run. The Secretary of State, William Whitelaw, described these demands as “impossible”.[\[7\]](#) It is most likely that the IRA saw its opening demands as only an opening gambit to begin a more nuanced process:

The movement had fought a campaign over three years which had now achieved recognition of the Provisionals as a political force, with legitimate demands that the British Government recognised. The key understanding we had with Whitelaw ... was that we would have a place at a conference on the future of Ireland. In the nearer future, we believed, internment would end, and British forces would withdraw from Catholic areas.[\[8\]](#)

After the meeting on 7 July, indeed, the IRA believed that “a place at a conference on the future of Ireland had already been agreed”.[\[9\]](#)

As it was, the truce broke down on 9 July. The spark was an attempt by Nationalists to seize houses vacated by Protestants for re-housing Catholic families in Horn Drive, Suffolk, adjoining Lenadoon Avenue. The UDA assembled to prevent this, and when they were backed up by the British Army, the

Commander of the Belfast Brigade, Provisional IRA, Seamus Twomey, told the Army commander that he considered that the British Army had broken the truce. A fire fight broke out between the Army and the IRA. Some hours later, the IRA formally ended the truce.

William Whitelaw, in a speech to Paddington Conservative Association, made clear that the dalliance with the IRA was at an end. The British Government, he said, was committed to a political reconciliation of the communities “whether the extremists on either side like it or not”; if the IRA returned to its campaign with ferocity, “we will retaliate with the same ferocity”. The IRA had played an important role in bringing down Stormont, but it did not have the capacity to constructively influence the shape of any alternative.

[1] Charles Townshend, *Political Violence in Ireland - Government and Resistance Since 1848* (OUP, 1984), p. 96.

[2] Harry White as related to Uinseann MacEoin, *Harry* (Argenta: Dublin, 1985), p 44.

[3] Reginald Maudling, *Memoirs* (Sidgewick and Jackson, 1978), p 184.

[4] ‘Letter From a British Army Officer on Duty in Belfast (Early 1973)’, Charles Carlton, *Bigotry and Blood: Documents on the Ulster Troubles* (Nelson-Hall: Chicago, 1977), pp. 128 – 9.

[5] Desmond Hammill in *Pig in the Middle: The Army in Northern Ireland 1969 – 1984* (Metheun, 1985), p. 32.

[6] Simon Winchester, In *Holy Terror: Reporting the Ulster Troubles* (Faber and Faber, 1974) pp 106 – 8.

[7] William Whitelaw, *The Whitelaw Memoirs* (Aurum, London, 1989), p100.

[8] Maria Maguire, *To Take Arms: A Year in the Provisional IRA* (Macmillan, 1973), p 126.

[9] Maria Maguire, *To Take Arms: A Year in the Provisional IRA* (Macmillan, 1973), p 132.

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