From Gunmen to Politicians: The Impact of Terrorism and Political Violence on Twentieth-Century Ireland

by
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ABSTRACT

Many terrorist groups, it would seem, cause great turmoil but no lasting impact. This might include radical student groups of the 1960s and terrorist organizations of the 1970s. Yet, we know that in some instances political violence, or revolution, does lead to great social change. Consider Cuba as an example. This might suggest that terrorists and revolutionaries face a zero-sum game: total failure or total victory. There is a middle ground, however. The PLO, as an example, has not achieved an independent Palestine, but who in the 1970s would have imagined a Palestinian Authority led by Yasir Arafat. This case study of the Irish Republican Army and its political wing, Sinn Fein, examines this middle ground in Ireland in the 1916-1948 time period.

INTRODUCTION

On the surface, it would appear that most terrorist groups flash violently onto the scene and then fade away, without a lasting impact. Whither the Symbionese Liberation Army, the Red Army Faction, and so forth? Yet, a very small number of such organizations, including the African National Congress, seemingly won their war and have brought about massive social change in their respective countries. There is also a middle ground. Some groups, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), for example, exist for decades and bring about significant change, but (as of yet) have not won their war. It is this middle ground that is examined here, in a case study of the effects of the paramilitary and political campaigns of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and its political arm, Sinn Fein in Ireland between 1916 and 1948.

On Easter Monday 1916, a small group of Irish rebels, calling themselves the Irish Republican Army, joined with an even smaller group, the Irish Citizen Army, and seized parts of central Dublin. Rebel leader Patrick Pearse stepped forth from Dublin's General Post Office and declared an Irish Republic. From the outset the rebels knew that they were doomed to failure. It is reported that James Connolly, leader of the Irish Citizen Army, commented that morning, "We

are going out to be slaughtered."[1] Within a week the British reduced parts of Dublin to rubble, rounded up the rebels, and smashed the Easter Rising. Several rebel leaders, including Pearse and Connolly, were executed. Others were sentenced to life in prison. Approximately 1,800 persons were deported to an internment camp in Wales. In the short term, the Easter Rising was a disaster.

In the long term, the Rising was the most important event of Ireland's twentieth century. Although a 32-county "Republic" was not achieved, Ireland was politically transformed. The Rising's failure set the stage for a guerrilla/terrorist campaign by the IRA from 1919-21, complemented by the revolutionary political activity of Sinn Fein. Outcomes of this Irish Republican activity include the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1920), which partitioned Ireland and the Anglo-Irish Treaty (1922), which confirmed partition but also led to self-government and a new constitution for the Irish Free State, in 1923. Further, political advances by former rebels, in the 1930s and 1940s, resulted in a more Republican constitution for Ireland in 1937 and Irish neutrality during the Second World War – political results unimaginable for Ireland in 1915. The failed rebellion of 1916 had a lasting and significant effect on the social and political structure of Ireland.

The Setting

Ireland's conflict with the English dates from the twelfth century and the Norman invasion. In the seventeenth century, after years of conflict, three unsuccessful Irish rebellions against the Crown left the majority of the Irish as disenfranchised Catholics who were subject to Protestant settlers from England and Scotland, and political control from England.[2] In the late eighteenth century, inspired by the American and French Revolutions, Republican ideology came to Ireland in the form of the United Irishmen movement. A rebellion in 1798, supported by France, failed but also led to significant change. An Irish parliament in Dublin, open only to Protestants, was disestablished and the Act of Union, effective 1 January 1801, created the United Kingdom of England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales.

Throughout the nineteenth century there were constitutional and military campaigns designed to break the Union. There were rebellious uprisings in 1848 and 1867, and bombings, shootings, and other activities through the 1870s and 1880s.[3] Politically, a major victory of Daniel O'Connell's repeal movement was to grant Catholics the right to sit in parliament in 1829. Later in the century, Land League agitation successfully brought the return of lands confiscated from the Irish peasantry in the seventeenth century.

When anti-landlord agitation in the 1870s and 1880s threatened to make Ireland ungovernable, Prime Minister William Gladstone introduced the first Home Rule Bill for Ireland, in 1886.[4] The bill was designed to create a separate Irish parliament in Dublin. While Liberal members of the Irish Protestant ascendancy supported Home Rule, many in the pro-Union Protestant community in

Ireland opposed it. This was especially so in Northeast Ireland, in the province of Ulster, where the majority of the people were Protestant descendants of seventeenth-century settlers. Northern Protestants feared they would be dominated by Catholics in a Home Rule parliament; their perspective was summarized in the phrase, "Home Rule Means Rome Rule." Consequently, in 1886, there were major sectarian riots in Belfast.[5]

Conservatives and Unionists combined to defeat the legislation and the liberal government. Gladstone resigned and in the subsequent election a Conservative and Liberal Unionist government was returned. A second Home Rule Bill in 1893 was also defeated. In 1912, a third Home Rule Bill was introduced. This bill gave Ireland a separate parliament with significant control over internal affairs, including (after amendments) control of the police.[6] Withheld from that parliament, however, were larger policy issues. As J. J. Lee comments, "Responsibility for relations with the Crown, defence and foreign policy, custom and excise, and land purchase, was reserved for Westminster."[7] This bill, in 1914, was passed, but with two provisos. The first was that it would not come into force until the end of what had become the First World War. The second was that parliament would consider a special amendment with respect to the nine counties of Ulster, where many Unionists were calling for exclusion of some if not all of the counties from the legislation. The Home Rule Bill passed in 1914 is the standard against which future gains, brought about by the political and military campaigns of Irish Republicans, are to be judged. Constitutional politicians in the Irish Parliamentary Party had achieved limited self-government, with the likelihood that some portion of Ulster would be excluded.

Changes Caused by the Easter Rising

The British response to the Rising was that "as penalty followed penalty a feeling of revulsion set in; the feeling that the [English] government was indulging in an orgy of revengeful bloodletting."[8] The "blood sacrifice" raised the consciousness of the Irish public, who initially did not support the Rising.

Prisoners taken in 1916 and then released re-organized the Irish Republican Army and the political party Sinn Fein. In 1917, Count Plunkett, father of executed 1916 leader Joseph Plunkett, was elected to Westminster in the North Roscommon by-election on a Sinn Fein ticket. He abstained from taking his seat and called for the creation of an independent Irish parliament. Abstentionism climaxed with the December 1918 general election when Sinn Fein took 73 of the 105 Irish seats at Westminster but declined to sit in the House. The Irish Party, representing constitutional Irish nationalists, took six seats, and the Unionist Party, representing Protestant and Loyalist North-East Ireland, took 26 seats. In January 1919, elected Sinn Fein representatives who were available (36 were in prison at the time of the election) met as a constituent assembly, the Dail Eireann, and formed the government of the Irish Republic. Eamonn de

Valera, a mathematics professor and the most senior of the 1916 survivors, was named president of the Republic.

On the day Dail Eireann met for the first time, a small band of IRA Volunteers ambushed a unit of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and began a guerrilla war for Irish independence. The IRA grew quickly and its capabilities rapidly expanded. During the 1920-22 period, it is estimated that there were as many as 15,000 IRA Volunteers, of which 3,000-5,000 were active at any one time.[9] To counter the IRA, the British hastily mustered troops, labeled Black and Tans because of their uniforms, to reinforce the RIC. The combined RIC/British forces are estimated at 40,000.[10]

During the Tan War campaigns of violence and counter-violence were waged by the British, RIC, and IRA. Events in November and December 1920 are cases in point. Michael Collins, IRA Director of Intelligence and leader of the reorganized IRB, was particularly ruthless. On Sunday morning, 21 November, IRA men under his direction broke into homes and hotel rooms in Dublin and executed 11 suspected British spies. Some were shot in front of their wives. That afternoon, also in Dublin, the Black and Tans got their revenge by firing indiscriminately into a crowd at a football match, killing 12 and wounding 60. Later in the month, 18 Auxiliaries were killed by the IRA at Kilmichael in County Cork. Then, on 11 December, another Auxiliary was killed and 11 wounded in Cork City. That night, Black and Tan and Auxiliary personnel looted and then set Cork City on fire, burning out much of the city centre.[11] Tom Barry was leader of the IRA in West Cork, and it was his guerrillas who were responsible for the IRA success at Kilmichael. Barry was as ruthless, and effective, as Collins. Under his direction informers and spies were executed, and when the British burned out the homes of IRA sympathizers, his policy was to burn out two pro-British homes for every one pro-Republican home destroyed.[12] Lee states that in 1920-21, the IRA killed 525 crown forces and injured another 1,000.[13] A relative sense of the efficacy of the IRA is found in the casualty figures for 1920. That year, the IRA killed 176 police officers and 54 soldiers, and suffered 43 casualties.[14] With regard to popular support the IRA more than held its own in several areas, especially in the south and west. In the north, however, although it was active the IRA faced the British, RIC, and its Protestant rival, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), and was less successful.[15]

In response to the political unrest throughout Ireland, Westminster passed the *Government of Ireland Act (1920)*, which partitioned Ireland. Two Home Rule parliaments were created, one in Belfast for the six northeastern counties and one in Dublin for the rest of the country. Unionists immediately formed a government for Northern Ireland, with Sir James Craig as prime minister. The two governments had "powers of local self-government," while control of defence, foreign policy, and finance remained with Westminster. Also, Westminster reserved the right to intervene in Ireland affairs, insisting that "the

supreme authority of the parliament of the United Kingdom shall remain unaffected and undiminished over all persons, matters and things in Ireland, and every part thereof."[16] Lee adds that, "The Act contained more concessions than any previous Tory administration had offered, but the Conservatives could not yet bring themselves to concede the essence of self-government."[17]

The Irish rebels ignored the *Government of Ireland Act* and continued their military and political campaigns. Unable to defeat the IRA, the British agreed to a general truce on 11 July 1921. In William Gamson's terms, the IRA and Sinn Fein had won "acceptance" by its antagonists as valid spokespersons for legitimate interests. They also, in Gamson's words, won "new advantages."[18] Plenipotentiaries of the revolutionary government, including key figures like Arthur Griffith and Mick Collins, negotiated a treaty that was signed on 6 December 1921, and then ratified in Dail Eireann, on 7 January 1922. The treaty was controversial, and was rejected by many Republicans who objected to several key provisions that sustained a British role in Irish affairs. These included an oath of allegiance to the British monarch; the fact the British maintained control of some Irish ports; the imposition of a governor general; and the confirmation of partition, as legislated by the *Government of Ireland Act (1920).* The final vote in the Dail was 64-57.

What is relevant here is a comparison of the 1921 treaty with Home Rule in 1914 and the *Government of Ireland Act (1920).* The treaty led to the creation of the Irish Free State, which comprised 26 of the 32 Irish counties. A primary advantage gained by the Free State was that it became a self-governing Dominion of the British Empire, like Canada and Australia. Further, British forces were withdrawn from the Free State, which also obtained the right to raise and maintain its armed forces. Finally, while there was an oath of allegiance, it was not straightforwardly to the King but first to the Irish constitution.[19] In the words of British historian R.F. Foster, "What the treaty provided was complete independence in domestic affairs, including full fiscal autonomy (which cabinet members had wanted built into the Government of Ireland Act in 1920, but which Lloyd George had then opposed)."[20] Edward Carson, who led the charge against Home Rule and turned down being first prime minister for Northern Ireland, commented bitterly in the House of Lords on the Articles of Treaty with, "You know you passed them because you were beaten. You know you passed them because Sinn Fein with the army in Ireland has beaten you."[21]

It would appear that while the Republicans had not gotten their Republic, they had attained much more than what was offered in 1914 with Home Rule, and more than what was offered in 1920 with the *Government of Ireland Act*. Michael Collins, for example, is quoted as saying, "Think – what I have got for Ireland? Something which she has wanted these past seven hundred years."[22] Seán Cronin, IRA Chief of Staff in the 1950s, states in *Irish Nationalism: A History of Its Roots and Ideology*, "The IRA fought the guerrilla war of 1919-21

and was the midwife of the nation-state. By destroying the British administration in nationalist Ireland the IRA in thirty months accomplished what the Parliamentary Party had failed to do in almost fifty years: it forced a settlement of the Irish question."[23]

Post-Treaty Ireland

Republicans split over the treaty. Eamonn de Valera, who opposed the treaty, resigned as president of the Irish Republic. Arthur Griffith, the founder of Sinn Fein, supported the treaty and helped form a pro-treaty ministry that included Mick Collins, another signatory, as president of the Provisional government of the Irish Free State. However, collectively, the anti-treatyites refused to recognize the authority of the new government. In Dublin, anti-treaty IRA forces established their headquarters in the Four Courts, the country's legal center. The Free State government demanded they surrender; they refused and civil war broke out. The IRA was disorganized from the start and the Free State forces, backed by the British, drove the IRA from Dublin and pursued them into the countryside. In August, Arthur Griffith died of a heart attack and Mick Collins was killed in an ambush in Cork. Liam Cosgrave, another 1916 veteran, succeeded Collins as president. Those supporting the Free State were better organized and, with the support of the British, they won the civil war. In 1923, IRA chief of staff, Frank Aiken, met with Eamonn de Valera, still president of Sinn Fein, and ended the war. De Valera issued a famous statement to the "Soldiers of the Republic, Legion of the Rearguard" and declared that "[the] Republic can no longer be defended successfully by your arms. . . ."[24] Aiken issued a cease fire order to soldiers still in the field.

Politically, the civil war created bitter political divisions. Sinn Fein remained the primary opposition party, but they refused to participate in the Free State parliament. For them, the Second Dail Eireann remained the true government of the Republic and Free Staters were traitors who had sold out the Republic for political power in a truncated, unfree, Irish state. Abstention from Westminster had lead to the creation of Dail Eireann. Abstention from Leinster House, site of the Dublin government, left Liam Cosgrave and the pro-treatyites, all former revolutionaries, in unchallenged control of the Irish Free State until 1932.

In 1926, at the Sinn Fein *Ard-Fheis* (Convention), Eamon de Valera asked the delegates to drop the abstentionist policy with respect to both Leinster House and Stormont. His request was denied. De Valera resigned as president of Sinn Fein and formed a new political party, Fianna Fail. Fianna Fail and Sinn Fein contested seats in the June 1927 Free State general election. Under the direction of the charismatic de Valera, Fianna Fail virtually wiped out Sinn Fein as the Republican alternative in the election, but they did not win enough seats to form a government. Instead, William Cosgrave and his pro-treaty *Cumann na*

nGaedheal party remained in power until the next election. In the meantime, de Valera entered Leinster House.

In 1927, a rogue IRA unit shot dead Kevin O'Higgins, the Free State minister for justice during the civil war and subsequently the state's vice-president. William Cosgrave responded by introducing severe anti-Republican legislation, and there was no opposition party to stop it. In a dramatic move, de Valera led his followers to Leinster House, signed the oath of allegiance, and entered parliament. The decision haunts his place in history. Taking his seat did not prevent more repressive legislation and purists believed he had compromised his principles. In opposition, Fianna Fail continued its Republican rhetoric and kept an uneasy peace with those suspicious of de Valera's motives. Going into the 1932 Free State general election, de Valera was an untested alternative to the anti-Republicanism of Cosgrave. The IRA actively supported Fianna Fail, and the party won enough seats to form a coalition government with Labour. For the next 16 years Fianna Fail was in power, either in coalition or on its own.

Post-1932 Political Gains in Ireland

Fianna Fail in power was, in all but name, a Republican government. IRA prisoners were released, the IRA was de-proscribed, legislation removing the oath of allegiance was introduced, and the governor general was replaced with a de Valera loyalist. Fianna Fail also refused to pay land annuities to the British resulting from the *Government of Ireland Act (1920)* and the treaty. Because no government can tolerate an armed organization that challenges its authority, the relationship between the IRA and Fianna Fail was soon strained, and by 1936, the IRA was again a proscribed organization. Those who remained in Sinn Fein and the IRA viewed de Valera as the ultimate traitor and sell-out. What is important here, however, are de Valera's successes in government.

Eamonn de Valera minimized the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty. He directed the development of a new constitution that, in 1937, was ratified by the Free State electorate. Article 2 stated, "the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and the territorial seas," and Article 3 claimed for Dublin parliament the right to exercise jurisdiction over the entire island, (pending the reintegration of the national territory." Most important, in 1938 and as *Taoiseach* (prime minister) under the Irish constitution, he engineered the return of control of Irish ports not released with the 1921 Treaty. This helped Ireland stay neutral in the Second World War, in spite of pressure from the British and United States. This was perhaps his greatest political achievement.[25] Whether or not Irish neutrality was justified is not the issue here. What is important is that an Irish government was independent enough of Britain that it formally opted out of a war that, clearly, threatened the very foundation of that country.

Implications

At first glance, the Easter Rebellion of 1916 was a complete failure. Dublin was reduced to ruins, the rebel leaders were executed, and their followers were sent to prison. Yet, the rebellion put into play a series of events that led to the complete transformation in Ireland. Just prior to the rebellion, it appeared that Ireland would receive some form of Home Rule, with the northeast corner of the country excepted. By 1923, there was an Irish Free State with much more political power than would have been available under Home Rule. By 1948, Ireland was a republic in all but name. The Free State government in 1948 did not control the northeast corner of the island, but it did throughout the rest of the country. And most important, the people who achieved this political change were former gunmen.

In studying the negatives and positives of political violence and terrorism, it is perhaps best to take a long-term view of the phenomena. What on the surface may appear to be little change in fact may prove to be substantial. Further, it is significant that in Ireland former gunmen became major political figures. Contemporary history has become littered with such people, but it was the Irish campaign that set the precedent in the twentieth century.

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Endnotes

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