Breaking Down the State
Jasper, James, Duyvendak, Jan Willem

Published by Amsterdam University Press

Jasper, James and Jan Willem Duyvendak.
Breaking Down the State: Protestors Engaged.
Amsterdam University Press, 2015.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/66492.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66492
This chapter examines an extreme case of protest: the armed struggle of Irish nationalists between 1912 and 1921, and the efforts on the part of sections of the British state to defeat the rebellion by the use of armed force. It examines the different cognitive frames and strategies of the various police and military organizations of the British state (Royal Irish Constabulary, Dublin Metropolitan Police, the “Black and Tans” and Auxiliaries, and the British Army, together with the intelligence services) as they confronted armed insurgency in Ireland. States, as Jasper (2015) and Goldstone (2004) have argued, should not be treated as unitary actors. This is immediately apparent in the case of the British state in Ireland, where even the sectors where one might expect considerable policy coherence – in the coercive organizations and in the Cabinet – displayed a high level of organizational incoherence and difficulty in coordinating strategy. This was one factor, perhaps a crucial one, in the failure of British counterinsurgency in Ireland.

The Anglo-Irish coercive players were far from homogeneous, and approached the struggle with distinct worldviews, frames, or mental maps to guide them in their search for appropriate policies. These maps were not simply cognitive, but also deeply emotional and value-symbolic, mobilizing affective solidarities. Since the interests and organizational cultures of the various players were distinct – and often at odds with each other – the tensions between them must be understood if we are to understand how “the state” developed its response to insurgency. We can arrive at a more accurate analysis of state response by abandoning any notion that we are dealing with a unified actor, much less a unified and coherent rational actor.

The conflict in Ireland was multi-dimensional: it was not simply a struggle for national independence against a recalcitrant empire. It was also a sectarian struggle between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland. There was thus a triangular conflict between the largely Catholic southern Irish nationalists, the Protestant Ulster loyalists, and the British government, itself deeply divided over what policy to adopt. Ulster acted as a “spoiler,” preventing the introduction of Home Rule in 1914, and
preventing the creation of a united and independent Ireland. Much of the
historiography of the period focuses on southern (and largely Catholic)
nationalism and the conflict with the coercive organizations of the
British state. Ulster saw its share of violence, though this took a differ-
ent form, that of sectarian conflict between Protestants and Catholics.
The importance of Ulster, however, lay not in direct conflict but in its
role of spoiler, precluding any easy accommodation of Irish nationalist
aspirations. The very existence of Ulster was a factor in the calculations
of all players. Ulster – with the specter of a large and uncontrollable
Protestant militia and the potential of a sectarian, civil war throughout
Ireland – was the dog that didn’t bark.

This chapter highlights three key dynamics: (1) each party to the con-
ict – the British government, the Southern nationalists, and the Ulster
loyalists – was a congeries of organizations, movements, and powerful
individuals. There was little organizational coherence, and principal-agent
problems abounded, as leaders proved unable to control their rank-and-file
or their allies. (2) Not only were the actors not unitary, they were not entirely
“rational,” either: the frames they used to understand events were inaccurate
schemata, and/or there was muddled thinking. (3) All actors in this conflict
shaped their strategies, at least in part, in response to their understandings
(accurate or otherwise) of what their adversaries (and potential allies) were
doing. The repertoires of contention and the strategies and tactics adopted
shifted rapidly in a series of moves and countermoves. Much social action
and outcomes is contingent, for all sorts of reasons. In this case, a major
source of contingency stemmed from the fact that actors were not, in any
simple sense, “rational,” and frequently misunderstood the motives and
intentions of other players. In what follows I will demonstrate how these
three issues – fragmentary actors, the absence of clearly rational strategies,
and strategic interaction – together offer a set of analytic tools with which
to understand this conflict. I follow a narrative organization, highlighting
the analytic issues as I proceed.

Background

The struggle for Irish independence has a long history. This chapter focuses
only on the armed conflict between 1912 and 1921 and its immediate ante-
cedents. Following the Act of Union, Ireland became, in 1801, an integral
part of the United Kingdom with its own MPs sitting in Westminster.
For the next century, Ireland would remain the poorest, most rural part
of a multinational polity. Violent agrarian conflict was endemic, and a culture of organized resistance developed that pitted poor and insecure tenant farmers against large landowners, often of English extraction. The formal exclusion of Catholics from political power, from the professions, and from the universities – a result of earlier British dynastic and religious struggles – added a religious, and national dimension to the agrarian protest. By the late nineteenth century, these grievances had been largely resolved and Ireland was experiencing sustained economic growth, but a pernicious legacy of bitter feelings toward England and the English remained.

Policing was carried out by two separate bodies. In the capital, the Dublin Metropolitan Police was modeled after the Metropolitan Police of London. An unarmed body of constables and detectives, it was oriented toward routine crime prevention and detection. A small special branch kept track of political subversives. In the rest of Ireland, an armed constabulary, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC), much along the lines of the Italian Carabinieri or the French Gendarmerie, was equipped with rifles and was organized as a national, rather than a local force. Constables were housed in police barracks, usually in groups of eight to ten men, and could be assigned anywhere in the country. That said, the paramilitary aspects of the RIC at this time should not be exaggerated.

The end of the nineteenth century saw a flowering of cultural nationalism (the Gaelic revival) in Ireland, and it was this – and not agrarian discontent or confessional exclusion – that fed the nationalist movement that now emerged. There was a deliberate and self-conscious effort to “recover” a sense of Irishness. Classes in Gaelic were held, and Irish sports, including hurling, were popularized.

These efforts politicized many spheres of daily life. The result was that “Irishness was to be redefined and, with it, the shape of the Irish nation” (Townshend, 2005: 8). Like most European nationalisms of this time, the new Irish cultural nationalism emphasized the unity of the “people” with the soil in a romantic, nostalgic, and organicist image of the virtues of the simple rural life contrasted with the cosmopolitanism of high urbanism.

The Gaelic revival melded with an implicit (and sometimes explicit) assertion that Ireland was a nation defined by its adherence to Catholicism. This was partly in response to a sense that the oppressors were English Protestants, and that one of the distinctive features, therefore, of Irish nationhood was a widespread Catholic piety. This new definition of “Irishness” in terms of Catholicism and Gaelic culture was to prove an insuperable obstacle to the creation of an Ireland that was both united and free of British
rule. The fact that 29 percent of the population of Ireland were Protestants, and that most of these were concentrated in the province of Ulster (thereby giving them great political clout) posed a central difficulty for this line of thought. Nationalists could have a united Ireland or a Catholic Ireland, but not both.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Irish nationalists could draw on two distinct traditions of protest, with radically divergent strategies. On the one hand there was the Fenian tradition of conspiracy, terrorism, and insurrection. On the other hand there was a largely successful effort to use Irish representation in Parliament to advance the cause of independence by pressing for “Home Rule” legislation.

Opening Moves: Home Rule and Ulster Opposition

In 1912 the Gladstone ministry introduced the Third Home Rule Bill, which, unlike the preceding attempts, was not vetoed by the House of Lords. It was intended to come into effect in 1914. Irish independence appeared to be about to be advanced peacefully, and Ireland would be left to run its internal affairs.

Trouble began when the vast majority of Ulster Protestants simply refused to accept Home Rule. Half a million signed the Solemn League and Covenant in September 1912, the very title redolent with Protestant symbolism. In January 1913, an armed militia, the Ulster Volunteer Force, was formed and grew quickly to about 100,000 members. The Catholic nationalists in the south responded by creating their own militia, the Irish Volunteers. Both sides began to import weapons. In April 1914 the UVF ran nearly 50,000 rifles and three million rounds of ammunition into Ulster. The Liberal government dithered over what to do. British efforts to stem the flow of arms were ineffectual.

In August 1914, there were over a quarter of a million men enrolled in citizen militias in Ireland. A substantial minority of them were armed with modern weapons, and more of these were on their way. Ireland had entered a confused and volatile state that was not yet civil war, but no longer peace. (Townshend, 2005: 28)

Thus the conflict in Ireland, at its core a struggle over national identity and national independence, was transformed into a sectarian or confessional division. Mainstream Irish nationalism had identified itself as Gaelic and Catholic, and was thus in no position to transcend the sectarian divide by
offering a vision of Irishness that delinked national identity and religious affiliation. Ulster Protestants elected to maintain their Protestant identity by reaffirming their ties with Britain, destroying the possibility of a peaceful, constitutional solution to Irish aspirations for independence. In the words of historian Charles Townshend, “‘Ulster’ had opted out of Home Rule, and had threatened armed rebellion to do so. It was this armed threat that transformed and militarized the language of Irish politics as the Home Rule crisis unfolded” (Townshend, 2005: 30).

The British Cabinet contemplated enforcing Home Rule over Ulster opposition. This was politically risky: the Liberal Party was split internally over the Home Rule issue, and some Conservative political leaders were openly advocating armed resistance to Home Rule. What tipped the scale was the determined resistance of sections of the British officer corps, many of whom identified with Protestant loyalism. A major crisis in civil-military relations ensued. The commander of the Curragh base, Sir Henry Paget, was ordered by the War Office to begin preparations to put down the Protestant resistance. Fifty-seven of the seventy officers in the camp made it known that they were unwilling to take part in any action against the Protestant community of Northern Ireland. A series of meetings between army officers and the Cabinet led to the issue being brushed under the carpet (Beckett, 1986). British civil-military relations had deteriorated to the point where the civilian political leaders could no longer count on the military to carry out their wishes.

Unsure of the reliability of its own military forces, and in any case reluctant to repress its loyalist supporters, the British government backed down and the Ulster Protestants were allowed to continue to arm themselves. Here was an instance of a radical flank setting policy.

Before the Ulster crisis could find a political settlement, the First World War erupted. The Home Rule bill received royal assent in September 1914, but its implementation was suspended until the end of the war, forcing Irish nationalists into a variant of what Jasper terms the “naughty or nice dilemma” (Jasper, 2006: 106-107). The Parliamentarians, led by John Redmond, sought to use the war as an opportunity to demonstrate their loyalty to the Crown, hoping thereby to reap the reward of Home Rule once the conflict was over. Thousands of Irishmen flocked to the colors. Other nationalists, drawing on the old Fenian tradition, hewed to the slogan that “England’s difficulty is Ireland’s opportunity.” As the war dragged on, and as its costs rose, the Fenian choice was to prove the winning formula.

The outbreak of war did, for a while, lead to an uneasy quiet in Ireland. Initially it increased pro-British sentiment as many Irishmen volunteered to
serve in the British Army. However, by 1916 the tradition of conspiracy and urban insurrection had been resuscitated. On Easter Monday, 1916, between 1,200 and 1,600 armed troops of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the militia of the organized labor movement, the Citizens’ Army, took over the center of Dublin, to the surprise and curiosity of the local population. A republic was proclaimed.

Easter 1916: Catholic Martyrdom

A conspiratorial group within the Irish Republican Army, the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), had planned an uprising throughout Ireland for Easter Sunday, 1916. Preparations were made in as much secrecy as possible. The cover for assembling bodies of armed men was to be a field exercise of the Irish Volunteers. As word of what was planned leaked out, divisions within the IRB rose to the surface. The moderate elements within the IRB sought to cancel the insurrection. This resulted in a postponement from the Sunday to the Monday and much confusion about what actually was to take place. In the event, the insurrection went ahead on the Monday. A Republic was proclaimed, and the insurgents settled down to await an uprising in the rest of Ireland and promised German assistance. Neither was forthcoming.

The British Army swiftly brought in reinforcements, sealing off the center of Dublin. They then moved onto the attack and, in several days of intense street fighting, forced the surviving rebels to surrender. The insurrectionaries had underestimated the earnestness and strength of the British response, and overestimated the level of support from the general population in Dublin and from rebels elsewhere in Ireland.

In its revolutionary technique, the uprising was a revival of a nineteenth-century European tradition of street fighting. In its symbolism, the movement was dominated by the Catholic Martyrdom of its leaders, most notably Patrick Pearse. This was new, part of the Gaelic revival.

In terms of an instrumental assault aimed at the seizure of state power, the rising was an unqualified failure. However, it set off a train of events that eventually led to a successful insurgency against British rule. The Rising, as it came to be known, drew on romantic notions of nationalist struggle and on Catholic notions of sacrifice and martyrdom. It inspired a generation of nationalist radicals, legitimizing the use of mass violence, branding the British state more firmly than ever as an imperialist oppressor.

The leaders of the Rising, such as Patrick Pearse, were strong believers in the potency of symbolic politics. Dramatic acts had the power to
galvanize public opinion. Charles Townshend notes that “[a]s he moved into middle age, his ‘imagery showed an almost pathological lust for violence’” (Townshend, 2005: 23). The redemptive violence of revolution was married to a Catholic pursuit of martyrdom. Such men “saw time as their enemy, not their ally... This would be their only chance to fulfill the IRB’s dream of revolution – an opportunity elevated into a spiritual necessity by Pearse and others, who believed that Ireland’s soul could be saved only by an act of Christ-like sacrifice” (Hart, 2005: 78-79).

As the various players monitored the actions and strategies of the others, there was much room for misperception. In the case of the Easter Rising, the British authorities in Ireland, both civil and military, were caught unprepared. British intelligence in Ireland during the First World War was focused entirely on the threat of German spies, German subversion, and the possibility of a German invasion of Ireland. As a result, although tipped off about IRB plans for an uprising on Easter Sunday, British authorities in Dublin made no preparations to deal with it.

Sixteen of the leaders of the Rising were shot by firing squad. The public response caught the British authorities off guard: in the midst of a great war the execution of a handful of armed rebels seemed eminently justifiable. The Irish public, however, was outraged, and these men were seen as martyrs for the cause of Irish independence.

Another mistake was made in the battle to define the nature of the conflict. In the aftermath of the Rising, more than 3,000 suspects would pass through army custody. Most prisoners were sent to a vacant camp for German prisoners of war in Frongoch, North Wales. Here they were mostly left to themselves in the sort of regime that prisoners of war would experience. The more politically active among the prisoners organized the inmates and began a campaign of resistance to the British camp authorities. The less political prisoners were inducted into the nationalist cause, and Frongoch became the university of the revolution. A new generation of leaders and activists came to the fore: more pragmatic than the Easter martyrs, but equally willing – in their own way – to utilize martyrdom for their purposes. This would enable a shift in strategy from open insurrectional confrontation to guerrilla warfare. “Sinn Fein got the benefit of the Rising, whereas the Irish Volunteers and the IRB – the Rising’s vehicles – had been decapitated and dismembered by casualties and executions” (Hart, 2005: 136).

Meanwhile, the Great War continued. In Britain the government had initially relied on a volunteer army. By 1916 it came reluctantly to the decision to introduce conscription, but exempted Ireland in order not to create more problems for itself. Following the German offensive of March 1918, the
British government sought to impose more thoroughgoing conscription in England, Wales, and Scotland. The price it paid to do this was to remove the exemption Ireland had hitherto enjoyed. Irish nationalists vowed to resist any effort to implement conscription in Ireland. In fact, the British government had no serious intention of doing so, and quickly backed down in the face of mass protest (Gregory, 2002). However, considerable damage had been done. The leading nationalist organization, Sinn Féin, capitalized on the anxieties generated by the threat of conscription to rapidly expand its membership (Hart, 2005: 171-172).

The result was a rapid re-alignment of the Irish party system. The first post-war elections, in 1918, were the death knell of the old Parliamentary Party. They were swept aside by the new radical nationalists of Sinn Féin. It was time for a new strategy.

Sinn Féin Strategy

Sinn Féin's broad strategy was to problematize the obedience given to, and acquiescence in, British rule. This could be achieved in a variety of ways. Campaigns of non-cooperation and boycotts were envisaged. Ostracism and intimidation of “collaborators” with British rule would play a part. If armed conflict were to occur, it would not take the form of a sudden urban uprising led by a secret organization, along the lines of Easter 1916, but would be guerrilla warfare.

Elections would no longer be utilized to produce a bloc in the British Parliament which could negotiate for better treatment for Ireland, but would instead serve as a referendum to demonstrate popular support for Sinn Féin. They would legitimate an assertion of sovereignty. In January 1919 an Irish parliament (Dáil Éireann) was called into being and a republic was declared (again.)

A central part of any revolutionary struggle, indeed in Charles Tilly’s view the very definition of a revolutionary situation, is the effort to establish a counterstate of some kind that can directly compete with the “official” state for legitimacy and allegiance (Tilly, 1978). Remarkably, the British government seemed quite obtuse about this danger. They allowed the creation of Irish parliamentary institutions and they would shortly permit the administration of justice to collapse in rural and village Ireland.

On 21 January [1919], Dail Eireann, made up of those Sinn Fein MPs not in jail, met for the first time, in the Dublin Mansion House. A Declaration of Independence was issued, and a government was formed to carry out
Sinn Fein's election pledges. While the occasion was public and watched by policemen, it was ignored by the British government as just so much hot air. This republic was indeed imaginary – as was its ability to govern – but those concerned were very serious about making it a reality. (Hart, 2005: 187)

IRA Strategy

The Irish Republican Army, secretly dominated by the IRB, was the armed wing of Sinn Féin. The IRA was to implement the military component of the strategy of making Ireland ungovernable.

The first sustained IRA campaign was against the police. The Royal Irish Constabulary was a national police force, widely scattered in the towns and villages of Ireland. Unmarried officers – the majority of the force – were housed in small “barracks,” usually row houses indistinguishable from any other. The first step was to ostracize and harass police officers. This was followed by attacks on poorly defended barracks with the aim of seizing weapons and increasing pressure on the RIC to abandon rural and small town Ireland. Attacks grew in size and frequency in the second half of 1919, and then rapidly escalated. It became perilous to maintain a continuous police presence in the countryside. Police barracks, usually physically vulnerable or only hastily fortified, came under attack and were often abandoned. The IRA burned evacuated barracks: this sent a clear symbolic message to the local population. In practical terms, police presence in many parts of rural Ireland became episodic and ineffectual. The British court system was paralyzed by the unwillingness of juries to convict or of witnesses to testify against the IRA. RIC morale plummeted and resignations soared. Many constables came to a modus vivendi with their nationalist opponents, opting for passivity in order to survive through this time of troubles and live to enjoy their pensions. The Dublin Metropolitan Police, whose detective force was hit hard by IRA assassins, lapsed into political passivity. By intimidating and killing the police, and by preventing the operation of the Crown courts, the administration of justice in the countryside and small towns was stopped. It was replaced by the establishment of a shadow state with its own Dáil Courts and Sinn Féin police.

In their moral framing Sinn Féin and the IRA reached back to the themes of martyrdom which had been so prominent in 1916, but now subordinated them to a more disciplined political organization. A new tactic was introduced: arrested militants now went on hunger strike (a tactic copied directly from the British suffragettes), and large crowds gathered outside jails to protest and lament. This placed the British authorities on the horns of an
unattractive dilemma: allowing the hunger strikers to die would paint the state as cruel and barbaric; releasing them would be a show of weakness. Funerals for IRA martyrs were incorporated into these prolonged mass rituals of solidarity and defiance.

Imprisonment was part of a larger set of symbolic and emotional rituals that bolstered rebel resolve.

Prison was one of the vital transformative experiences that made clerks and farmers’ sons into new men: soldiers and martyrs. The revolution had to be imagined before it could be enacted, and the revolutionaries had to imagine themselves into history to give themselves the power to change it. To stand in the dock and defy the Crown, to be cast into prison for being a patriot – these were clichéd but immensely powerful roles, endlessly rehearsed in nationalist songs, histories and literature. By re-enacting them you could become your heroes. What seemed immature or naïve to observers at the time, or to skeptical historians since, could have the force of a religious conversion to the people who were living it... Playing the role of the defiant rebel was far more than mere theatricality. It was a source of power and energy and solidarity – part of the basic chemistry of revolution. (Hart, 2005: 168)

The Cabinet wavered. Its initial response was to release the hunger strikers. This did nothing to quiet nationalist protest; and so the Cabinet shifted to a hard line. In October 1920, alarmed that his release might lead to a mutiny of police and army, the Cabinet allowed a Cork Sinn Féin leader, Terence MacSwiney, to die. The Cabinet’s decision worked: the IRA stopped using the tactic of hunger strikes.

The British Response

The British Army responded by demanding the implementation of martial law and summary military courts which would operate with different rules of evidence. This was resisted by the politicians, who held the view that defeating the insurgents was “a police matter.” But the RIC were in disarray and the army – with vastly expanded imperial commitments after the First World War and facing massive industrial unrest in Britain – had few men to spare for Ireland. This shortfall in manpower was met by efforts to augment the Irish police. In March 1920 the British recruited recently demobilized veterans of the First World War, into two new formations: the notorious Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries. (The Black and Tans were formed from
ex-soldiers; the Auxiliary Division, from ex-officers.) These men, who treated all Irish as alien enemies, rapidly acquired a well-deserved reputation for indiscriminate violence. It marked a new strategy on the part of one section of the British state: a “police war” of counterterror and reprisal.

The Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries were virtually independent of both the police and the army.

[W]hat they were actually to do, no-one said. Here, then, was a force of immense potential, brought into action with the minimum of planning... [I]t was left to work out its own salvation in conditions where experience of the Great War was of limited relevance... It lacked the military discipline essential to an armed force under constant stress... Some became first-class fighting (if not police) units, but many succumbed to drunkenness and gained a reputation as perpetrators of the most calculated and destructive reprisals. (Townshend, 1978: 111-112)

The creation of the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries opened up a chasm among British strategists. On the one hand, “it became clear that [the commanding officer of the police, General Henry Tudor (with Lloyd George’s backing) was happy to condone, or at least turn a blind eye to, police reprisals against presumed Sinn Feiners” (Jeffery, 2006: 265); but the senior army generals were not. They were alarmed by the indiscipline of the paramilitary. Chief of the Imperial General Staff, Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, disliked the idea of an ad hoc force of ex-soldiers reinforcing the RIC. As historian Keith Jeffrey notes, Wilson’s

... apprehensions about this “panic measure of raising 8000 scallywags” were remarkably prescient... “I can't imagine what sort the men will be, no-one will know anybody, no discipline, no esprit de corps, no cohesion, no training, no musketry, no mess, no NOTHING. I don't like the idea... Then to make measures worse [General Officer Commanding in Ireland] Macready proposes to draft these mobs over to Ireland at once and split them up into lots of 25 to 50 men over the country so there would be no hope of forming and disciplining this crowd of unknown men. It is truly a desperate & hopeless expedient bound to fail.” (Jeffery, 2006: 263)

Wilson was no conciliator: he merely wanted army control over operations. He “wanted lists of known Sinn Féiners in each district of Ireland to be posted on the church doors all over the country; and, whenever a policeman is murdered, pick five by lot and shoot them!” (Jeffery, 2006: 266).
General Neville Macready was aware of the problem, “but for him the honour of the army outweighed everything else, including the success of the Government’s policy and the survival of the Government itself” (Townshend, 1978: 112). It was a case of placing organizational interests over national ones. Behind this was a reluctance to focus on the central issue:

There was … a traditional ignorance of Irish affairs… By and large the Cabinet adhered to the “murder gang” theory … and based on it a dual policy of “crushing murder” while reconciling the “moderates.” But no real attempt was made to assess the strength and outlook, or even to prove the existence, of this moderate group on which the whole policy hinged. (Townshend, 1978: 203)

With the possible exception of Macready, the top generals were politically insensitive when it came to Ireland. Importantly, Henry Wilson was an Ulsterman passionately attached to the idea of Unionism, hardly the best qualifications for someone whose task was to oversee the withdrawal of Ireland from centuries of British tutelage. As for Macready, he was, in Asquith’s words, a man of “cool head” and “good judgment,” and Lloyd George was evidently attracted by his liberal sympathies, which set him apart from the general tendency of the British officer corps. The problem was that Macready did not want the job. He professed to “loathe” Ireland “and its people with a depth deeper than the sea and more violent than that which I feel against the Boche.” (Jeffery, 2006: 260-261)

Guerrilla War and Counterinsurgency

The British military, with few exceptions, notably failed to understand their adversary. First, by constantly referring to the IRA as a “murder gang,” they suggested that it was a small, desperate minority, whereas it clearly enjoyed the active or passive support of the vast majority of the population. Little thought was given (except perhaps by Macready and some other senior generals) to the notion that a broad political solution was required, or that the elimination of existing armed bands would simply result in their replacement as new recruits stepped forward to take the place of those killed or imprisoned.

By defining the problem as one of eliminating a small hard core of active militants, the military fell back on their comfortable view that they were fighting another regular army, and that the principal task was to identify,
track down, and eliminate (by arrest or by killing) small but well-defined armed bands. This was a mistaken view. The IRA bore more resemblance to a social movement than it did to a conventional army. The IRA developed as a series of locally and regionally based organizations, loosely held together by commitment to a common cause. Communications between IRA headquarters in Dublin and the regional brigades were cumbersome at best, and there was no automatic discipline and following of orders.

[IRA commander] Michael Collins did not plan, start, direct or control the war. No one did – no one person or headquarters that is. Most Volunteer units outside Dublin had been formed locally, elected their own leaders, funded, armed, motivated and trained themselves, planned and mounted their own operations, and succeeded or failed, with very little input from headquarters beyond demands for dues and reports... Each brigade operated in its own territory almost exclusively, requiring little coordination with neighbours... They fought their wars all on their own. (Hart, 2005: 242)

The diffuse and grassroots nature of the insurgency meant that British Army efforts to dismantle the IRA organization were unlikely to succeed. Exacerbating the bizarre diagnosis of a “murder gang” was the widespread, almost unconscious, contempt and underestimation in which the Irish were held by the British.

Reprisals, Unofficial and Then Official

During the opening days of the armed struggle, both the British Army and the IRA acted with restraint. Army officers and soldiers walking the streets of Irish cities were left to go about their business unharmed, and even attacks on Crown forces by the IRA were generally targeted at those officers who were a particular thorn in the side of the IRA. For their part, the army generally refrained from actions that would punish large sections of the population.

There were, however, limits to this mutual tolerance. The cultural norms that facilitated restraint eroded as tempers frayed and new repressive forces were recruited. Early in the guerrilla struggle, when British officers or soldiers were killed, troops would break out of barracks and go on a rampage, uncontrolled by their officers. Driven by the desire for revenge, they committed reprisals either against those they believed guilty, or more generally against the civilian population of the area. Houses were burnt,
individuals murdered, and a climate of mayhem generated. With the arrival of the Black and Tans, these unofficial reprisals now became policy for the police. This alarmed both Macready and Wilson. They were concerned that army discipline might break down. Bowing before what they saw as the inevitable, and placing organizational goals above national ones, they accepted that they could not control their troops. Instead, in December 1920, they authorized “official reprisals,” whereby the local population would be punished for aiding and abetting the insurgents.

The top army leadership was, on the whole, unhappy with a policy of indiscriminate reprisals.

[T]hose generals in Ireland who had thought deeply on the use of military force as a means to political settlement had never shared the Cabinet’s apparent faith in its efficacy. Even apart from the style of violence employed by the police, which aroused their intense dislike, they believed that military rule in Ireland would only inflame age-old hatreds and impede the arrival of a lasting peace. (Townshend, 1978: 199)

Flying Squads, Active Service Units, and the Great Hunt

As the campaign of reprisals developed, the army persevered with its strategy of locating and eliminating the IRA as a military formation. While this was unlikely to produce a meaningful political outcome, house-to-house searches and tip-offs from informants did yield valuable intelligence, which in turn produced better targeted searches. IRA activists responded by going “on the run,” moving constantly from place to place and staying wherever they could find shelter. Gradually, these men coalesced into “flying squads” and “Active Service Units.” Their principal activity continued to be one of ambushes of British patrols, particularly in rural areas, and the assassination of police and army personnel.

Yet, even faced with an adversary that it had now forced into more or less permanent armed bands, the army tactics used to locate them produced meager results. During May and June 1921, as noted in the British Army’s official history, Record of the Rebellion in Ireland, “it was decided to try the effect of ‘drives’ on a large scale over a large area, using the cavalry for the purpose. Every male civilian was to be interrogated, and all who could be identified as members of the I.R.A. were to be detained, and houses were to be searched for arms” (British Army, n.d.: 43).

Several large drives were undertaken. They failed to locate any significant number of rebels. According to the army’s official history,
The reasons that the visible success was not greater were in the first place that the identification of individuals was very difficult because the police, who had to be relied upon for this, were, in many cases, comparatively new to their areas, and, in any case, were men who would be compelled to continue living in the district after the troops had left. Secondly, a larger number of troops per square mile and a longer time spent in each area would have been necessary in order to discover hidden arms. Lastly, such operations could only be really effective when it was permissible to detain and intern every young man arrested unless he could produce satisfactory evidence of his loyalty. There is no doubt that a large majority of the men released through failure to identify them were in fact connected with the I.R.A. (British Army, n.d.: 44)

The final conclusion that all young men should be arrested unless they could prove that they were loyal supporters of the British administration in Ireland simply amounted to a charge of “guilty unless proven innocent” and an implicit recognition that the majority of the population were not active supporters of the British administration. The army now contemplated a war against the entire population to save it from itself – or from the supposed handful of extremists who had terrorized and misled the bulk of the population into following them.

The War Turns Nasty

The war was always a highly personal one. IRA units were recruited on the basis of kinship networks, and had strong ties to local communities. The principal method of attack was the individual assassination of a policeman, an informer, or someone who was suspected of opposition. Many more people were killed in this way than in roadside ambushes or armed confrontations with the security services.

In his analysis of who killed whom in Cork county, Peter Hart concludes that

ultimately, individual identities were irrelevant in the face of politically imposed labels and the ever-widening division between “us” and “them.” Violence was not directed at people so much as categories (…) This little cycle of killings reveals the runaway tit-for-tat logic of the guerrilla war in Cork, driven by fear and the overwhelming need to respond (…) All of the victims were unarmed and helpless when shot and all were killed or kidnapped near home (…) Murder was more common than battle. This
dirty war was waged largely by small bands of gunmen, young, tough, and barely under the control of their superiors. The “active squads” on both sides did what they liked, undeterred by orders or discipline further up the organization. Although the IRA, the RIC, and the army numbered in the hundreds and thousands in Cork, most of the killing was done by a few hard men... It was these men who forced the pace and, in a sense, the revolution came down to a confrontation between these groups, even if its victims were often innocents or outsiders. It was an intimate war, played out within homes and neighbourhoods, often between people who knew one another. (Hart, 1998: 18)

The War Ends

Throughout the period of armed conflict, the Lloyd George administration sent out, or listened to, a variety of peace feelers. However, so long as it seemed that the state might bring order to Ireland by suppressing the IRA – and David Lloyd George’s military advisers were usually optimistic on this score – no meeting of minds between the Irish revolutionaries and the government was likely. Moreover, there were always those in key positions in British politics who insisted that there could be no negotiations with rebels and murderers. For their part, Sinn Féin moderates needed to be careful not to be outflanked by the hard-liners in the IRA. (Indeed, this tension was to come to a head in the Civil War of 1922-1923.) Peace talks were politically risky, and all sides approached them with great hesitation and trepidation.

As the conflict dragged on, as tactical innovation by one actor led to counterinnovation by another, all sides increasingly faced a scenario of escalating violence, with no end in sight. By 1921, the senior leadership of the British Army had come around to the view that a massive reinforcement of the forces in Ireland was both necessary and (through a reduction in troop levels elsewhere in the empire) possible. They wanted a new and more draconian strategy: martial law extended to the entirety of the island, trade with Britain and the rest of the world cut off, and the population forced into submission. For Sinn Féin, it was unclear whether this was a bluff on the part of the army, or whether – if it was not a bluff – the civilian leadership would acquiesce to the new strategy. They could not be sure, and, with a sense of stalemate in the guerrilla war, turned their attention to the negotiations in Downing Street. Talks between the government in London and the IRA/Sinn Féin leadership were started (with parallel discussions between London and Belfast), and a truce was declared in July 1921.
The talks produced a compromise settlement: the terms of Ireland's new constitutional status were much broader than the Home Rule that had been on offer in 1914, but less than the full independence of an Irish Republic that had become the nationalist demand. Ireland was to be partitioned into two entities, and an oath of allegiance to the British Crown was required. An Irish Free State would come into existence in December 1922. Not surprisingly, the IRA split over whether or not to accept the terms of the London negotiations. A brief, but bloody, civil war (1922-23) ensued, the moderates prevailed, and the Irish Free State gradually evolved into the independent republic of the southern part of a divided island. In Ulster there were waves of sectarian rioting, with the police (the Royal Ulster Constabulary) openly siding with the Protestant unionists against the Catholics (Parkinson, 2004). A militantly Protestant state was created in Ulster which was reluctantly accepted by the southern Nationalists, who were in no position to do much about it.

Analytic Reprise

Interaction of (Three Sets of) Strategies

The three sides in this conflict constantly monitored each other and attempted to guess at their adversary's next move. All players responded to changing circumstances and to changes in strategy on the part of their adversaries and allies. There were systematic slippages, as one player failed to accurately grasp the intentions of another player, with predictable biases that exacerbated the conflict.

Some strategies clearly developed as direct responses to actions of other players; other strategies emerged from different sources. The British decision to release hunger strikers was a direct response to the protests generated around that tactic; and the perception that giving in to the hunger strikers simply increased the ranks of Sinn Féin by demonstrating British weakness then led to a reversal of British strategy and a “get tough” policy with regard to hunger strikers. This worked; and the nationalists dropped this tactic from their repertoire. The adoption of “official reprisals” and the tit-for-tat escalation of the war of assassination were mutually reinforcing spirals. Other strategies – such as the urban insurrection in Dublin on Easter Monday, 1916, and the targeting of the RIC in 1919 – were not responses to actions taken by the other side, but instead drew on shifting
understandings, frames, and repertoires that are best explained as largely endogenous developments in strategic thinking.

Because of the disaggregated nature of the various players, including the coercive organizations of the British state in Ireland, they sometimes pursued internally incompatible strategies. When this happened, as with the introduction of the Black and Tans into the conflict, senior leaders, both civilian and military, regularly demanded a re-thinking of strategy to produce a clear and co-ordinated response on the part of the various repressive organizations. Because of political disagreements within the Cabinet, and the limitations of the frames used by British politicians, such strategic clarity was seldom forthcoming.

British Framing: The Murder Gang and the Police; Rebellion and the Military

The British had a strong preference for defining the Irish situation as “one for the police” and of using the police wherever possible. Ireland was, after all, part of the United Kingdom, and the kind of harsh counterinsurgency measures which might be employed overseas were unacceptable there (Muenger, 1991). When emergency formations such as the Black and Tans were raised, it is noticeable that they were formally attached to the RIC rather than to the army. Because of these cultural preferences, key players in the British state misjudged the impact of their measures on Irish opinion.

Its most fateful assumption was that public opinion would find the use of policemen, even though they were armed ex-soldiers, preferable to that of the military in the suppression of disorder. This was due in part to a failure to accept that the R.I.C.’s police capability had broken down and could not be restored by pouring in ill-disciplined recruits; and in part to a natural antipathy to military rule. (Townshend, 1978: 137)

In June 1921 Lloyd George was to tell the Cabinet that “the Irish job (…) was a policeman’s job,” and that if it became “a military job only” it would fail. But (…) the Government never defined the conflict, and the issue was obscured by attempts to distinguish between war and insurrection, summed up in Lloyd George’s phrase, “You do not declare war against rebels.” The Government was unwilling even to admit that a rebellion existed which had to be countered by military methods. The roles of the Army and the Police were never properly understood (…) There was no specific decision, but an acquiescence in the drift of events. (Townshend, 1978: 40)
The British state was placed in a dilemma by the identification of Sinn Fein with I.R.A. terrorism and violence. The increases in attacks on the Crown Forces, and the breakdown of constitutionalism and justice, compelled even the Liberals to accept the inevitability of a forcible response. For them the restoration of law and order was not just a convenient slogan behind which to temporize, but a moral priority. (Townshend, 1978: 201)

A second consequence was closely linked to this: the British failure to appreciate that once Ireland was embarked on the road to independence, the process would be rapid. Other cases of withdrawal from occupations suggest that once the process begins, popular mobilization in the occupied territory increases, the legitimacy of the occupation declines, and the withdrawal must be hastened. British withdrawal – in some form or other – was not only inevitable, it was urgent.

A further consequence was the failure to grasp the nettle of Ulster. When home rule for Ireland was announced, the Ulster Protestants mobilized to defeat the measure. They acted as spoilers, setting in motion the chain of events that would lead to armed conflict in Ireland. The British state was unable to produce a quick and decisive response, either with regard to Ulster or with regard to other aspects of the Irish crisis.

The dithering over whether the army would obey orders to suppress the Ulster militias (the Curragh incident) was merely the icing on the cake of a larger failure of political will. Of course, it can be argued that the British government faced objective, structural constraints. It faced a divided Ireland, part of which was a paranoid and sectarian Ulster; and it had to deal with an army heavily Anglo-Irish in sympathy and unwilling to think of itself as an obedient servant of the constitutionally elected civilian authorities. (This, in turn, owed something to the incomplete democratization of the British political system and the remaining importance of the monarchy and aristocracy in the civil-military chain of command.)

Of course the British government was also distracted by the titanic struggle of waging a total war and then by the complexities of peacemaking and of administering vast new additions to the empire in the Middle East. Moreover, the specter of Bolshevism and the reality of troubled industrial relations and massive strikes in Britain served further to distract British decision makers from effective intervention in Ireland. It is hardly surprising that there was little policy coherence with regard to the insurgency in Ireland.
Frames, Folk Sociology, Cultural Assumptions

Throughout English society there was a widely diffused condescension toward the Irish which could at times become an attitude of contempt and prejudice. Examples abound. Lord Garnet Wolseley thought the Irish incomprehensible: “A strange, illogical, and inaccurate race, with the most amiable qualities, garnished with the dirt and squalor which they seem to love almost as dearly as their religion” (Muenger, 1991: 144). As Townshend argues, “The British ... had responded to the latent hostility of the Irish with a benign contempt... [There was a] common British view of the Irish as a quaint, childlike race, often incompetent, and easily terrorized or led by extremists into violent behavior” (Townshend, 1978: 200).

The result, on the part of the British, of these deep-seated attitudes to the Irish was a “tendency to lay down the law rather than to consult, to coerce public opinion rather than seek its consent” (Townshend, 1978: 201). After noting that “the Irish are not easy to understand” (British Army, n.d.: 30), the army’s official history went on to argue that the Irish had come to have little respect for law and order.

Perhaps the circumstance which has most influenced the character of the Irish is the fact that for many centuries... [T]hey have had little share in their own Government. There was, therefore, a general lack of respect for government (which was looked on as foreign) and consequently for the law. This has lasted for seven centuries and had bred in the Irish character a lack of discipline and an intolerance of restraint... There is not only no respect for the law; there is no common standard of public morality... Judged by English standards the Irish are a difficult and unsatisfactory people. Their civilization is different and in many ways lower than that of the English. They are entirely lacking in the Englishman's distinct respect for the truth... Many were of a degenerate type and their methods of waging war were in most cases barbarous, influenced by hatred and devoid of courage... There were undoubtedly many among the IRA who were moral degenerates, brutal and cruel to a degree, and there is an underlying cruelty in the nature of many Irishmen. (British Army, n.d.: 31-32)

British intelligence analysts and top military commanders nearly universally saw the IRA activists as coming from the lower orders of Irish society. The army’s official history asserts that the leadership of the IRA were “largely the riff-raff of the country, men without means or education” (British Army, n.d.: 53). Not only Irish, but lower class as well.
This assessment derived largely from an assessment of the nature of modern democracy. Britain was still in a situation of transition from aristocratic and gentry politics to mass electoral politics. Army officers were largely drawn from the middle and upper classes of British society. They viewed the expansion of the electorate and the rise of the labor movement with some alarm, and felt that the traditional “governing classes” ought to run politics. It is not surprising, therefore, that they viewed the IRA activists as coming from a social stratum that was unfitted to govern.

For the nationalists, the central framing device was that of a united people. Because this had been defined largely in cultural terms and in opposition to Protestant England, it took on a sectarian quality: Ireland was a Catholic nation. Class conflict was deliberately subordinated to the struggle for national liberation. For Ulster Protestants, the central frame was an uneasy juxtaposition of loyalty to the British Crown and an almost paranoid fear of betrayal by the British government and persecution by the Catholic majority in Ireland. For them, Home Rule meant Rome Rule.

Such a framing on all sides necessarily meant partition; yet for nationalists who aspired to a united Ireland this was a bitter pill to swallow. Until the moment of decision, the contradiction could be suppressed by ignoring or underestimating the size and strength of unionist opposition in Ulster, with the result that no solution satisfactory to all Irish (not to mention the English) was to emerge.

The entire struggle was invested by all sides with great emotional and symbolic significance. This was apparent in the initial reluctance on the part of British state managers to negotiate with “rebels” and “murderers,” in the invocation of Catholic notions of martyrdom, first by Pearse and his fellow insurrectionaries in 1916 and later by Sinn Féin and the IRA, in the condemnation by both nationalists and the British state of “atrocities” committed by the other side, in the paranoid and hysterical sectarian fears of Protestant Ulster, in the refusal of the anti-Treaty die-hards of the IRA to swear any oath of loyalty to the British Crown or empire, and in many other ways. As D. G. Boyce has noted,

“Men do not in the long run fight for phrases, but for realities,” remarked Asquith complacently in 1920. He could not have been more mistaken. The readiness to take up arms in defence of emotional symbols is always regarded as a particularly Irish characteristic, but in 1921 and 1922 a British administration, firmly supported by British public opinion, was prepared to declare war in order to ensure that the symbol of the Crown was incorporated into an Irish constitution. (Boyce, 1972: 183)
The Context of Global Revolution and Anti-Bolshevism

The struggle for Irish Independence occurred within the framework of two larger contexts: the First World War, and arising out of that war, a global wave of revolution. By the time that widespread insurgency had developed in Ireland, concern with social unrest and Bolshevism was acute among British elites. There were frames within frames, the Irish problem being viewed in the larger imperial context. The immediate post-war years saw a wave of industrial unrest in Britain, and considerable numbers of soldiers (soldiers who might have been used in Ireland) were posted throughout Britain to serve as a force to suppress rebellion in the heartland. British elites were also panicked by the Bolshevik revolution and saw revolutionary threats everywhere. There was an early effort by the British authorities to find links – there were none – between the Bolsheviks and the Irish nationalists.

General Sir Henry Wilson was a conservative. As the war drew to an end, he was increasingly alarmed by the specter of Bolshevik-inspired social revolution. “Our real danger now,” he wrote in his diary on 10 November, ‘is not the Bosh but Bolshevism’” (Jeffery, 2006: 229). He thought that General Macready faced a global nationalist and communist challenge in Ireland. He wrote in his diary that Macready “is fighting New York & Cairo & Calcutta & Moscow who are only using Ireland as a tool & lever against England, & nothing but determined shooting on our part is of any use” (Jeffery, 2006: 263).

When it came to imperial possessions, Wilson’s “gut reaction to disorder or challenge was simply to ‘govern or get out’” (Jeffery, 2006: 239). Wilson identified four “storm centers”: Ireland, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and India. The task was to define the troop requirements to keep all four quiet (Jeffery, 2006: 244). Adding domestic industrial unrest to these tasks would overly stress an army that in the wake of demobilization contained few long-term cadres and was poorly trained and motivated. The theme of too many challenges and not enough troops was to echo repeatedly throughout the course of the Irish conflict.

The Disaggregated State: Organizational Goals and Perceptions Are Not the Same as State Goals and Perceptions

When Sir Henry Wilson, CIGS, adopted a policy of “official reprisals” in Ireland, his principal motive was to protect the integrity of the army. It is fairly common for military organization to focus on narrowly defined
organizational goals, to the detriment of the pursuit of the larger goals of state policy. There are obvious reasons for this kind of organizational parochialism, and it is not surprising that a central concern of state managers is to transcend the petty concerns of bureaucratic politics. That they often fail is equally unsurprising.

Not only were there vast differences in diagnosis and strategy between the police and the military, but the introduction of two largely uncontrolled paramilitary organizations, the Black and Tans and the Auxiliaries, triggered a spiral of indiscriminate violence that undermined such efforts at pacification as had been undertaken.

The central fact of British policy with regard to Ireland was that there simply was no coherent policy. The British government oscillated between concessions and coercion. Moreover, the British government employed various coercive organizations (British Army, RIC, Black and Tans, Auxiliaries) which adopted contradictory approaches to the problem and never properly co-ordinated their strategies.

This shifting and ambivalent approach generated the worst of both worlds for the British government, antagonizing large sections of the Irish population without effectively cowing them into submission. Importantly, the British government was greatly constrained by its tradition of rule of law and respect for civil liberties, even in wartime. Harsh repression, or even the imposition of a state of emergency, entailed huge political costs for the government in Britain. In the end, a rising tide of protest in Britain, together with a concern not to overly antagonize the American and Dominion governments, meant that the political costs of counterinsurgency in Ireland were simply more than the Lloyd George administration was willing to bear.

References


