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NAVAL WAR COLLEGE
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The Anglo-Irish War, 1916-1921: A Study in Misunderstanding

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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Introduction

This paper focuses on why Britain, with overwhelming advantages in size and strength, was defeated by a small group of untrained, ill-equipped Irish nationalists whose membership probably never numbered more than 5,000.¹ The central point is Britain did not understand the nature of this war and why the Irish were fighting. This lack of understanding crippled decision-making and operations leading to their "... political and moral defeat."² I will illustrate this point by examining four characteristics: command and control; will of both sides; intelligence and propaganda.

Determining the actual outbreak of the Anglo-Irish War is an academic guess as there was no official declaration of war by both sides. The most accepted date is 21 Jan 1919 when Irish insurgents shot and killed 2 constables during the theft of explosives bound for the quarry at Soloheadbeg, Co. Tipperary.³ This watershed changed the conflict from one of 'civil resistance' to open violence. However, I will start with the 'Easter Rising of 1916': a cataclysmic event from the nationalist perspective and just another Irish rebellion in a minor theater for the British. What followed was a low-intensity conflict until a truce was observed at noon, 11 July 1921. The treaty signed in December 1921 led to the Free State of Ireland and the British Empire receding from a strategic position of "survival national interest".⁴

States with a tradition of success during high intensity conflicts (Britain had just been victorious in WWI) but fail when they seemingly have every advantage are worthy of exploration. This is crucial as the United States will undoubtedly be embarking on low-intensity conflicts in the future. Understanding the nature of the war and why the enemy is fighting will be central to winning these conflicts, and studies of the past give clues on how to proceed. To prove my point I will give some background, analyze the war, arrive at

conclusions and offer recommendations. Concerning the terms in this paper: ‘insurgent’ describes Irishmen actually fighting and ‘nationalist’ is a blanket term for Irishmen who supported or believed in the cause.

Background

British influence in Ireland began when Richard “Strongbow” de Clare landed near Waterford on 23 Aug 1170.⁵ I will not review all the events between then and the Anglo-Irish War, but a few phenomena and groups that form the foundation of the conflict must be discussed.

The British: First the Protestant Ascendancy; wealthy landowners, closely aligned with Britain and anti-Catholic, around which the politics of Ireland revolved⁶ until 1885 when the first elections were held with “a comparatively democratic franchise.”⁷ Irish born, they saw themselves as British and served the Crown – Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff during the war, was Irish. There were also a fair amount of people in Ireland who were not part of the Protestant Ascendancy but were aligned towards Britain; these loyalists were similar to those during the American Revolution. British government in Ireland was represented by the Lord Lieutenant, appointed by the Cabinet in London. Locally elected Ministers of Parliament (MP) had no direct control over the Lord Lieutenant nor his civil service bureaucrats.

There were three distinct British forces. The Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP); an unarmed force of little note with the exception of G Division, the intelligence gathering arm of the Crown within the city itself.⁸ The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) were armed paramilitary forces⁹ responsible for maintaining law and order outside Dublin through a series of outpost

called 'barracks'.^a They were so good they became the model for colonial police throughout the empire.¹⁰ Identified with Protestants¹¹ and entirely Irish (until late 1919),¹² they were well respected until the war.

The British Army "posted in Ireland had multiple functions, ranging from basic training to defence against invasion and suppression of civil 'disturbances'..."¹³ When called upon, their scheme of employment from some 80 barracks was "... operations in aid of the civil power";¹⁴ however this was always viewed as the tertiary function and relations between the Army and the RIC were habitually poor.

The Irish: From a nationalist perspective, British administrators and forces were in Ireland to keep the Ascendancy in power and suppress the Catholic majority. The exception to this was the northern province of Ulster, where four of the nine counties were overwhelmingly Protestant. While Ulster would not play directly in the Anglo-Irish War, its demographic make-up would always have to be accounted for in any negotiated settlement concerning Ireland.

Politics: In 1886 Charles Stewart Parnell, a popular Irish nationalist and leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) was able to get home rule legislation introduced into the House of Commons, where it lost by thirty votes.¹⁵ He was scandalized in 1889, lost power of his party in 1890 and died 06 Oct 1891 leaving Irish parliamentary politics without a strong leader for a decade.¹⁶ IPP leadership was eventually picked up by John Redmond, who by 1900 had consolidated enough power to be recognized as the leading Irish politician.

Sinn Fein, literally translated as "We Ourselves", was originated in 1905 by Arthur Griffith as an alternative to the IPP. They held that Home Rule be rejected and Irish MP's

^a "The fact that police stations were called barracks said little about their (usually puny) size and strength, but spoke eloquently of their function" Townshend, Britain's Civil Wars, p. 48

withdraw from the British parliament to set up a 'Council of 300' in Ireland.¹⁷ Prior to the Easter Rising they were no match for the IPP.

After the death of “ ... Parnell the romantic hero, young men retreated from the party politics of home rule and fashioned their dreams in other activities.”¹⁸ These other activities were an awakening of cultural nationalism known as the Gaelic Revival.

Gaelic Revival: The "Irish Renaissance" in literature and theater was led by the Irish Literary Society and the Abbey Theater with such notables as W.B. Yeats and J.M. Synge.¹⁹ This renaissance “...answered the need of the Irish intelligentsia for self-definition and provided a rationale for cultural Anglophobia.”²⁰ Two other movements were simultaneously gaining popularity, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) and the Gaelic League.

The GAA, founded in 1884, revived national games and “had done more good for Ireland in five years than all the talk for sixty.”²¹ It provided a focal point for nationalist minded people and enabled insurgents to move freely and assemble under the auspices of sporting events. The Gaelic League’s stated objective was to keep Irish alive where it was still spoken and later to restore Irish as the language of the country.²² Within 10 years there were 600 local branches, with Irish introduced to 1,300 schools and “... invigorating every department of Irish life, and adding to the intellectual, social and moral improvement of the people.”²³

These three movements enabled growing nationalistic sentiments by providing a common link between numerous and varied people, displaced English culture as the norm and “it would provide an appropriate inspirational language for revolutionaries”.²⁴

Militarism: The two decades prior to the war were characterized by militarism. The catalyst was the Boer War (1899-1902) which “...focused much moderate Irish opinion into an

anti-imperial mould”,²⁵ caused a boom in Gaelic League membership²⁶ and “radical(ized) ... Irish politics.”²⁷

In 1912 John Redmond initiated legislation to bring Home Rule to Ireland. This passed and was slated to come into effect in 1914.²⁸ The response in Ulster was the formation of the Ulster Volunteer Force, a private army of “218,000 (who) pledged themselves to use ‘all means’ necessary to defeat home rule”²⁹ and “...received support from a staggering range of politicians, staff officers and military personnel in Ireland.”³⁰

In direct response to this, nationalist militias were formed, the largest being the Irish Volunteers. Poorly armed, they numbered as high as 150,000 by June 1914 and 191,000 in September. In total there were over 250,000 nationalist militia units of various size and competency on the eve of WWI.³¹

There is one group which stands alone from all this, not because of their size but for their tenacity and belief in violence as a means of securing independence. The Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) was founded in 1858 as a “secret society dedicated to the establishment of an Independent Democratic Republic.”³² Organized around circles (cells), they received financial backing from Irish-Americans³³ and by 1916 had developed a mystical belief in a ‘blood sacrifice’ to awaken the people of Ireland to violently overthrow the British.³⁴ The radical leadership used such notions as the loss of life and martyrdom as “somehow congruent with Christ’s sacrifice”³⁵ and “imagine(ing) that a race of Gaelic heroes would emerge out of the bloodied gutters...”³⁶

^b The officers of 3rd Cavalry Brigade threatened to resign and dismissal if they were ordered to act against the Ulster Volunteer Force. This so-called Curragh Mutiny added fuel to the nationalist fire.

Into this cauldron of intense nationalism and militarism came the specter of “The First World War (which) should be seen as one of the most decisive events in modern Irish history. Politically speaking, it temporarily defused the Ulster situation (meaning the Ulster Volunteers); it put Home Rule on ice; it altered the conditions of military crisis in Ireland at a stroke; and it created the rationale for an IRB rebellion.”³⁷

Immediately Britain called for Irishmen to support her, and “Some 58,000 Irish servicemen were mobilized at once...”³⁸ There was a good turnout from Ulster, enough to form the 36th Ulster Division. John Redmond pledged the Irish Volunteers would support the war during a speech at Woodenbridge, Co. Wicklow, on 20 September 1914. This caused a split in the Irish Volunteers, with the vast majority following Redmond and adopting the name National Volunteers³⁹, however only about 31,500 joined the army.⁴⁰ Those 5,000 to 13,000 who choose not to follow Redmond retained the name Irish Volunteers, kept a large share of the weapons and formed around a cadre of the IRB.⁴¹ This group transformed itself into a highly efficient militia force that “... decided on an insurrection to take place before the ending of the war. The outcome was the Easter rebellion of 1916.”⁴²

Analysis

End States, Objectives and Centers of Gravity: Britain's desired end state was to keep Ireland as part of the United Kingdom. While there was debate on whether this should be dominion status such as Canada or devolution like present day Northern Ireland, the bottom line for British statesmen and military leaders was “... the loss of Ireland was seen as the first step in the break-up of the British Empire. It was generally held that without control of Irish waters, naval defence would be fatally weakened.”⁴³ This was opposed by Irish nationalists whose desire was to free Ireland from British rule. This had variations in the form it should take and

what means should be used; but all insurgents and nationalists would agree that severing direct rule from London was the single objective.

As a pre-condition for discussions on self-rule, British Prime Ministers Asquith and Lloyd George demanded law and order be restored. Thus, as insurgent and nationalistic actions started to disrupt British rule, the operational objective became restoring law and order so a reasoned debate could occur.⁴⁴ They believed the organization they opposed consisted of identifiable leaders directing actions. From this they deduced the insurgent's center of gravity was their leadership, whose capture or death would lead to a collapse of the rebellion and the restoration of order.

Irish insurgents and nationalists knew with the differential in men and equipment they could never physically eject the British. Thus, their operations were centered on destroying the credibility and morale of the British government and forces in Ireland through something they would call 'defensive warfare'.⁴⁵ The British center of gravity from the Irish perspective was their collective will to continue the fight.

Irish Society and the Easter Rising 1916: The purpose of the Rising was not to take control of the country, rather to create martyrs for further Risings and force the British to do as much damage as possible. There had been a societal shift away from Britain and an organization with the mindset to resort to violence to achieve their goals. While the rebels were defeated British "... cruelty and stupidity in the months that followed"⁴⁶ allowed the Rising to ultimately be successful.

The British, believing the Rising was just another in a succession of such occurrences, had missed the shift in Irish sentiments. Their reaction was initially to suppress it with as much fire power as possible, with little or no thought of collateral damage to "the centre of Dublin,

(which) lay in ruins.”⁴⁷ During the actual uprising there were some incidents of shootings by British troops of unarmed civilians, the most sensational being journalist and “well-known pacifist Francis Sheehy Skeffington ... by a makeshift firing squad...”⁴⁸ Even though this week-long battle involved two sides the British, representing law and order, took the lion share of the blame for the destruction and deaths.

By the end of the Rising there was a new Commander-in-Chief for Ireland, armed with martial law,⁴⁹ causing the ‘man on the street’ to wonder why collective punishment was being imposed when the rebels were all in custody. Under this the British proceeded to execute the leaders of the Rising (15 total), instantly creating martyrs of them and evoking a sense of bitterness over the executions “... even amongst those who had no sympathy whatever with the Sinn Feiners (nationalists), or with the rising.”⁵⁰

Last, the British arrested over 3,000 people in connection with the rising.⁵¹ A full 50 percent were released which did not lend credibility to the British cause. The other 1500 or so were interned^c “either in criminal prisons or at a special camp at Frongach in Wales.”⁵² While Frongach undoubtedly helped from the practical stand point of dealing with a large body of people, collecting a majority in one place gave these rebels a chance to deepen their bonds, reorganize, study the mistakes made, plot new strategies and allow a new leadership to come forward.⁵³ This group would form the core of fighters during the upcoming war.

Through the weight of American^d, Irish and British public opinion and in an attempt to placate the rise of nationalist feelings in Ireland, martial law was rescinded, the internees released and home for Christmas 1916. The British attempted to get things back to normal;

^c Internment is the common word used by both sides, mainly because they were not given any type of trial.

^d A good case in point here is the British Ambassador in Washington wrote that American opinion had been against the rebellion, however 19 days later, after the executions, he was reporting a “dangerous change”. This was at a time when Britain was urging America to enter World War I. Kee, The Green Flag, p. 581 & 595.

part of 'normal' was conscription to help the war effort in France. Unforeseen by British leadership, conscription crystallized Irish (and Catholic leadership) opinion around nationalism. These blunders played into Sinn Fein's hand and in the general election of December 1918 they were able to win 73 of 105 parliamentary seats.⁵⁴ With this mandate, they kept to their word and constituted the *Dail Eireann* (Irish Parliament): the embodiment of the 'Council of 300'.

So what does this mean when looking through our lens of understanding the nature of this war and the four operational characteristics. First, command and control in this period is unremarkable. Second, while there were no problems with British will, not understanding the shifts in Irish attitudes unintentionally sped up nationalist support⁵⁵ and created a propaganda boom for the nationalists. Last, the British knew a rising was to take place but "...discount(ed) intelligence warnings of imminent rebellion."⁵⁶ All in all, this is a perfect example of what might be called 'negative effects based operations'. Because the British had missed the change in attitude their reaction exacerbated the problem and they had started down the path of losing the war. They also showed their assumption on the Irish center of gravity was incorrect: the rebel leaders were killed, however new ones would step into their place.

Nationalist Actions: As MLR Smith points out, this was a limited war where "...the weaker party may not be able to achieve any tangible military objectives, such as securing a piece of territory."⁵⁷ From the Irish perspective they were operating under Clausewitz's dictum that if you cannot defeat the enemy on the field "... another military objective must be adapted that will serve the political purpose and symbolize it in peace negotiations."⁵⁸ The political purpose was to sap the British will to continue fighting and acquiesce to nationalist demands. In order to do this you need a "highly sophisticated understanding of the utility of the military instrument and a careful appreciation of adversarial power."⁵⁹ With the stage set we need to

look at how Irish objectives and perceived Centers of Gravity played out.

The Irish understood they could never physically eject the British forces from Ireland through offensive operations;⁶⁰ they also deduced positional warfare like the Easter Rising would also lead to disaster. With the unfeasibility of these two force-on-force options, they resorted to a two prong attack "...combining the new ideas of civil resistance – the undermining of the British administration – with the very old ideal of physical rebellion."⁶¹

Civil Resistance: Newly elected Sinn Fein MP's, a good number of whom were in jail, had set up the *Dail*^e. This gave the nationalists legitimacy: the people's elected officials were trying to do the work of government. From this body they declared a state of war existed between Ireland and Britain, ratified a constitution, started a national loan and even sent a delegation to Versailles.^{f62} Under the *Dail* the Irish Volunteers became an army and were renamed the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Sinn Fein sponsored civil courts, especially land courts "for land disputes were still undoubtedly the major issue in ordinary Irish life."⁶³ "Claims were arbitrated with a fairness 'bordering on Quixotism' ... and even loyalist landlords were ready to accept their judgements."⁶⁴ Irish Volunteers took on the role of local police, carrying out court sentences, patrolling fairs and races and controlling the distillation and sale of alcohol.⁶⁵ While the British were attempting to restore law and order Sinn Fein was actually enforcing the civil law through their own courts.^g

Criminal courts were stymied because the juries were made up of Irishmen, many with nationalist leanings. For instance on 07 Sep 1919, in the Fermoy attack, the IRA ambushed 18

^e The British were to declare this an illegal body, however the *Dail* moved underground and continued to operate.

^f Although they were ignored in the final settlement talks, this would have a larger impact with their own constituency than with the rest of the world, save the U.S.

soldiers seizing 13 rifles, killing one, wounding four and then escaping. “At the inquest on the dead soldier, the coroner’s jury held that the attack had been a regular act of war, and had been intended not to kill the soldiers but to seize their weapons. Therefore ... they refused to bring a verdict of murder.”⁶⁶ While we will get to the British reaction, it illustrates the strength of nationalist influence.

Starting in May 1920, non-violent attacks on communications were initiated with transportation labor boycotts on war material. Irish longshoremen refused to unload ships which had to be unloaded by troops and railway workers refused to transport war goods forcing the army to transport its own goods.⁶⁷ Similarly, the postal service was seriously disrupted and the British had to change from their traditional method of delivering messages via post to establishing their own courier system.^h While these were never more than an “...inconvenience it certainly absorbed time and effort which would otherwise have been spent in pursuit of the IRA. On another level, it broadened the (nationalist) campaign and heightened the atmosphere of alienation from British authority; it was a true example of civil resistance.”⁶⁸

A last point dealing directly with propaganda; a British report from the Southern part of the country which speaks volumes:

A determined effort is being made to spread extremist ideas by means of so-called newspapers, containing no current news, which circulate largely through-out the district ... Papers of this kind ... do an immense amount of harm against the semi-educated people who are their readers, and who notice the Government do not interfere with them or contradict their mis-statements.⁶⁹

Irishmen were turning to the well propagandized nationalist cause and the British had deployed nothing to slow it down; its momentum was building.

^g Apparently under British law, this is legal if all parties agree to the courts legitimacy . Townshend British Campaign in Ireland p.68.

^h This ranged from destroying mail to opening it to reveal the contents. For this crime my wife’s paternal grandfather was jailed and sentenced to death. Tony Foley Interview

Physical Rebellion: The IRA had a nominal command and control structure which resembled a typical army, however it functioned very loosely if at all above the tactical level. There was a flow of intelligence between Dublin and outlying districts, but directives and orders were very rare and often ignored.⁷⁰ The exception to this was in Dublin where Michael Collins directed the efforts.⁷¹

Upon their return from Frongach, the IRB dispersed and began to capitalize on growing nationalist feelings. First was a campaign of boycott and intimidation against the RIC. The boycott ostracized them from the community they were supposed to be policing and caused them to lose contact with their local sources of intelligence.⁷² Intimidation took the form of raids on barracks with a second and equally important function of obtaining arms and ammunitionⁱ. The scale of this caused great frustration and a decline in the RIC morale to the extent their leadership was seriously concerned about its collapse.⁷³

Harassment was key to Irish operations. This took the form of nightly pot-shots at barracks^j, the constant threat of attack on and off-duty and kidnapping (including a Brigadier General while out fishing) driving the British to distraction.⁷⁴ It got to the point where a soldier could expect to sleep only every third night,⁷⁵ the minimum group to be traveled in was 30-40⁷⁶ and any type of recreation was forbidden on order from Winston Churchill, Minister for War.⁷⁷

Assassinations, effectively used by the insurgents, took on two forms, what we might call targets of opportunity and counter-intelligence. The first category included any British forces whose pattern of behavior allowed them to be an easy target.⁷⁸ The second was against leadership and intelligence services, this included an attempt on the Lord Lieutenant. The IRA

ⁱ The IRA was never to satisfy its hunger for these supplies and those groups of insurgents who had not started extensive raids early on would have a much lower level of contact.

targeted the DMP G division, which out of ten men total had three killed, one wounded and two unsuccessfully attacked until they "... ceased to affect the situation."⁷⁹ Irishmen who were found informing on the insurgents were executed and their bodies labeled with placards spelling out their crimes.⁸⁰

Actual attacks were fairly rare. This was not for lack of trying, it just took the insurgents quite a while before they had the expertise and weaponry to actually attack installations and convoys.⁸¹ The primary goal for insurgents in the countryside was to stay alive to continue the fight⁸² so engagements tended to be rare unless the insurgents had a clear advantage, but the threat was constant, adding to British strain.

Intelligence obviously played a huge role; for in order for insurgents to be effective they must be hitting the right targets. This was done primarily through using Irish sources inside the British administration in Ireland⁸³ and nationalist sympathizers who would report British movements. As seen in the previous section, propaganda would be played to here for the more spectacular the attack, the more it would be publicized and the more British credibility would suffer.

Irish Conclusion: The nationalists shared a vision grown from the Gaelic Revival, British reactions to the Rising and time spent in Frongach. This caused their operations of civil resistance and physical rebellion to coalesce around the singular goal of proving Britain was not in charge, an early form of self-synchronization. They used very accurate intelligence to target the will of all parties involved for the most propaganda value using very little command and control.

British Reaction: Throughout the war the British were continuously reacting, rarely gaining the

^j My wife's great-uncle was involved in this. Detained and beaten he was smuggled out of the country and into the U.S. My wife's maternal grand father, a fisherman out of Dublin, was among those doing the smuggling.

initiative. The Gaelic Revival and the reaction to the Rising never sunk in with the political leadership, even though some of these same men – most notably Winston Churchill – would call on the same strength of national character to persevere through World War II. Without understanding why the Irish were fighting, they struggled with how to address the situation.

Compounding this, Britain was struggling with the aftermath of WWI.^k They never grasped why the nationalists would not want to sit down and negotiate some type of settlement and never gained consensus on strategic direction, complicating the task of the operational leadership. This is summed up by:

During (the war) it would appear that the Government never realized the true state of affairs in Ireland, at all events until it was too late. Consequently they never devised a suitable and clear policy, or made any attempt to convince the country of the need for putting one into force.⁸⁴

British Will: Something worth noting here was the lack of cultural sensitivity and outright bigotry, for “the common British view of the Irish as a quaint, childlike race, often incompetent, and easily terrorized or led by extremists into violent behavior.”⁸⁵ When your attitude going in to the situation is one of disdain, it follows that when ‘incompetents’ gain the upper hand there will be a great shock to your morale.

The Army had problems associated with trying to get back to a peace time footing. As we have seen, Ireland was as a place of training with domestic problems being a distant third, counter-insurgency was not part of the mindset. As the draw down continued Army leaders expressed concern over the numbers of troops available in Ireland⁸⁶ which was exacerbated by the transportation strikes.

Additionally there were two quality problems: a first-in, first-out policy of personnel

Interview with Tony Foley.

^k By the time of Soloheadbeg they had an Army of Occupation in Germany, concerns over the Bolsheviks, problems in the Middle East, concerns over Greece and Turkey going to war, an economy to get back in order and domestic labor unrest from which the Irish Command had to earmark ten battalions for immediate shipment back to England. MacFarlane, British Politics 1918-64. pp. 1-16

reduction which lowered the experience level in the Army;⁸⁷ and those experienced officers and NCOs they did have were skilled in years of trench warfare, not counter-insurgency. They “... did not help matters by (their) very slow response to the challenge of guerrilla warfare.”⁸⁸ This reluctant participant quickly tired of a fight they did not want to be in and, frustrated by Irish attacks, their will was quickly defeated. This is best illustrated by the Commander in Chief for Ireland remarking in April 1921: “Whatever we do we are sure to be wrong.”⁸⁹

The RIC, who bore the brunt of the attacks, was forced to transform from a paramilitary police to a combat force, however its internal structure and ethos was struggling to change. Poorly armed at the outset, they were undermanned and incapable of fending off the insurgents to the point where British ex-servicemen had to be brought in to augment their numbers⁹⁰: the notorious ‘Black and Tans’, and ‘Auxies’.¹ As less defensible outposts were shut down, their morale and effectiveness plummeted further eroding British credibility.⁹¹

Propaganda: While a discussion of tactics might seem out of place under propaganda, three British tactics – sweeps, martial law and reprisals – set them up for public backlash. Sweeps consisted of setting a perimeter and searching the enclosed area, however, British troops were never trained in search operations so they missed evidence, contraband and people.⁹² Those who were detained were often released as intelligence was so poor they could not identify wanted men. This ineptitude was displayed in front of onlookers who witnessed the keepers of law and order embarrass themselves, and their failures invariably showed up in the newspapers.⁹³

Martial law was bandied back and forth amongst British leadership throughout the

¹ The Black and Tans were called such because there dark green RIC shirts and Army pants. They were ex-British enlisted men, thoroughly despised by the Irish (to this day) and wholly unsuited for ‘police’ duty. The Auxiliary Division of the RIC (ADRIC or Auxies) were ex-British officers who were potentially a potent counter-insurgent

entire conflict. Finally implemented in eight counties, British gains were never realized as a lack of command unity (which will be addressed shortly) and the Irish perception of communal punishment gave the nationalists a wealth of new supporters.⁹⁴

The last and most infamous was the tactic of reprisal. After the coroner's jury refused to bring a verdict of murder after the Fermoy attack "... the troops broke out of barracks and wrecked shops owned by members of the jury."⁹⁵ Reprisals, from beating and internment to murder and arson would eventually become a stated policy of the Army in Ireland and the norm for the Black and Tans, and Auxies.⁹⁶ This "... response was brutal, and in many ways counter-productive...(and it) both spread and stiffened opposition in Ireland."⁹⁷ These tactical miscues affected operations not only because of their immediate failure but also had secondary effects of reducing British credibility, magnified by Irish propaganda.

Intelligence: With the boycotts and assassinations, the normal RIC intelligence gathering system was hampered, the DMP's G Division rendered inoperable and the British army could never catch up due again to assassinations and lack of manning.⁹⁸ Intelligence is a major factor in any war, especially an insurgency, but the British were never "... able to build the essential foundation for success in guerrilla warfare, a dependable intelligence service."⁹⁹

When viewed from the operational intelligence perspective where intentions and attitudes gain importance, British lack of understanding the character of the nationalists was horribly deficient. This did not allow them to properly address the situation and gather useful intelligence.

Command and control: "Above all, the need for unified command was ignored."¹⁰⁰ The British Army General in charge during the war was initially offered command of the both the

force however were never able to discipline themselves enough to be universally effective. The majority of the horrible reprisals were to be done by these two groups.

Army and RIC but declined it because of his dim view of the RIC.¹⁰¹ This decision plagued the British effort the entire time; two military bodies trying to execute the same mission with little unity of effort. Insurgent attacks on the primary means of communications meant those in the field were without means of quickly coordinating their actions making the actual act of command and control extremely difficult. When arrayed against an adroit, well-informed opponent it is easy to imagine British leadership becoming frustrated and disillusioned.

Conclusions

Simply put, the insurgents "... proved too determined, too resilient and too resourceful to be put down by the military force which was employed against it."¹⁰² By better understanding the nature of this war and the character of its operations, the Irish singular purpose to destroy British will through diverse violent and non-violent operations allowed their lesser power to be massed against the enemy's center of gravity. Irish loose command and control and timely intelligence allowed them to hit hard with small attacks. Propaganda exploited these attacks by increasing support for the nationalist cause, effectively raising Irish will.

As pointed out by Charles Townshend in Britain's Civil Wars, law and order is a rather amorphous objective.¹⁰³ Demonstrating control became increasingly difficult for the British as the nationalist propaganda machine exploited every mistake and excess, draining their credibility. Ultimately British will collapsed under the weight of poor intelligence, disjointed command and control which never overcame its internal problems and a local populace who had lost respect for their law and order. This ill-defined objective caused a nation, victorious in the largest war in history just three years earlier, to be defeated.

Recommendations

What can we learn from this? First and foremost: to understand the nature of the war you are involved in you must learn why the other side is fighting. Capabilities and numbers give us plenty of data but say little about our opponents motivation, especially in insurgencies where some type of societal discontent is typically present. If we can remove this discontent we can remove the base and motivation of all but the most fanatical members and supporters. Removal of discontent contains positive actions (winning the hearts and minds) coupled with not committing negative actions (such as collective punishment and reprisals which hurt the innocent). When this is used with effective military and law enforcement operations insurgent internal support wanes, their own will diminishes and the cause eventually disappears. Taking actions which will induce the enemy to fight harder is counter to your goal.

There is a corollary to this: don't underestimate your opponent. Dehumanization may be necessary at lower levels to incite violence against enemy combatants; insensitivity at higher levels leads to slighting a possibly capable foe.

The second concerns command and control. If your force has unity of purpose, a shared vision and an inherent understanding of what needs to be done, the need for close control recedes sharply. As demonstrated by the Irish, this can be achieved at a very low technical level if all three of the above traits exist.

Last, in all levels of warfare intelligence is crucial, however in Low-Intensity Conflict where the necessity for precision targeting in the general sense is much greater, winning the intelligence fight is paramount. This must be dovetailed with propaganda to make the most out of the limited number of engagements while denying your opponent an opportunity to score points with their constituents at your expense.

Notes

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- ¹ The actual number is not verifiable anywhere. Estimates were from 3,500 to 5,000 active members.
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- ¹⁶ Moody, T.W. and Martin, F.X. eds. The Course of Irish History. p. 280-293.
- ¹⁷ Moody, T.W. and Martin, F.X. eds. The Course of Irish History. pp. 298-300.
- ¹⁸ Moody, T.W. and Martin, F.X. eds. The Course of Irish History. p. 294.
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- ²¹ Irish Free State President Douglas Hyde in Moody, T.W. and Martin, F.X. eds. The Course of Irish History. p. 296.
- ²² Moody, T.W. and Martin, F.X. eds. The Course of Irish History. p. 296.
- ²³ Moody, T.W. and Martin, F.X. eds. The Course of Irish History. p. 297.

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