

Ferocious Times: The IRA, the RIC, and Britain's failure in 1919-1921.

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Abstract

The 1916 Rising was, in military terms, a shambolic failure. Despite the fact that Britain was locked in a gruelling struggle with Germany, the Rising was still utterly crushed within a week. How then, in the aftermath of victory against Germany, did Britain fail to win the subsequent struggle with the IRA between 1919 and 1921? This article assesses some of the key factors which played out in the conflict, drawing particular attention to the IRA's focus on the RIC and the consequences of this and then, later, how distorted perceptions of the proximity of success ultimately undermined British commitment. One of the most remarkable features of the conflict was the widespread belief among many on the British side (and more than a few in the Republican camp) that the IRA was on the verge of total defeat when the truce was agreed in 1921. The IRA had suffered heavy casualties and were running low on weapons and ammunition. Yet, somehow the movement prevailed. This article aims to shed light on how and why that happened.

Introduction

On Easter Monday, 1916, a few bemused onlookers watched as a school teacher and poet proclaimed an Irish Republic on the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin. Behind him, armed men were doing what they could to fortify the building, while elsewhere in the city, barricades were being thrown around other buildings seized that day. The Rising had begun, and it was doomed to failure.

That there would be violence of any sort seemed unlikely in 1910. That a violent nationalist insurrection could erupt and then within just a handful of years result in three quarters of Ireland breaking away seemed fantasy. In contrast, a loyalist insurrection centred on the North appeared a much more possible outcome for much of the preamble. Events in Europe, however, ultimately transformed the Irish situation. That, combined

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with the events of 1916, and even more importantly, clumsy political manoeuvring by a distracted British Government in the closing year of the Great War, set the stage for what would prove to be an uncontrollable insurgent conflict.

The original plan for Easter Rising had been for more than 20,000 armed men to seize control of the country. The 20,000 belonged largely to the Irish Volunteers, with a sprinkling of others, such as the small socialist Irish Citizens Army. Hidden within the mass of the Volunteers was the radical seam of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, whose leaders were the driving forces behind the planned coup. This leadership hoped that a mass outbreak of violence would act as a spur for further thousands to join the ranks of the rebels. England, to them, was vulnerable. The Great War had already been raging for two exceptionally bloody years. Massively committed to the fight against Germany on the continent, the British would be unable to suppress a large rebellion in Ireland, or easily take back control of the country once lost. Or, at least, so the IRB leaders thought. To succeed, however, the plan depended on a variety of factors, not the least of which was the arrival of 20,000 rifles and ammunition from Germany. The ship carrying the weapons, however, was intercepted at sea by the British, and on hearing this news, the rebel leadership divided. Most judged that an insurrection was now hopeless. A hard-line minority dominated by the IRB wanted to push ahead regardless. Contradictory orders were sent out to both cancel and continue the Rising. In the end, instead of 20,000 taking co-ordinated action throughout the country, perhaps 1,200 took to the streets of Dublin.¹

In the week of fighting which followed, about 1,600 were killed or injured and enormous destruction was inflicted on parts of inner-city Dublin. Most of the dead were civilians caught in the cross-fire, and when the rebels finally surrendered to the British Army, they were jeered and booed by Dubliners who, at least initially, blamed them entirely for the suffering and damage.²

This then was the unpromising prequel to what some would come to call the Irish War of Independence, and others, the Anglo-Irish Conflict. The week of fighting in Dublin would be followed by 30 months of relative peace and quiet (albeit with serious tension beneath the surface). It might have stayed that way for much longer if the British authorities had handled things differently. The first mistake happened quickly: while fires still smouldered from the fighting in Dublin, the authorities began executing captured men. Over a three week period, 15 were killed in staggered executions. As the days passed, and newspapers carried the reports of the latest deaths, the national mood perceptibly changed. Yes, the rebels had been blamed for the destruction of Dublin, but there was something sinister and very chilling about the steady stream of official murders in reprisal. "It was like watching a stream of blood" one woman would later write, "coming from under a closed door."³ The pointless execution of Roger Casement by hanging a few months later, served to only deepen sympathy for the survivors, most of whom would shortly be released from internment camps.

British government mishandling and misjudgement of the general mood in southern Ireland, ultimately turned a military fiasco into the foundation for a formidable insurgency. The executions in 1916, were followed in 1917 by the hunger strike and

death in prison of Thomas Ashe, who was buried with an emotional show of force by the Volunteers. At the same time, public anger was rising due to growing food shortages, the result of too much being exported to England, a policy which brought with it dangerously emotive echoes of 1847 and famine. The decisive factor though proved to be the Conscription crisis in 1918, when the government seriously toyed with the idea of introducing conscription in Ireland. This was an enormous error. Though eventually the government shied away from the policy, that it had come so close cemented public support around a now utterly transformed Sinn Fein and set the scene for a very different type of conflict to emerge in 1919.

Out of the Ashes ...

The forces which had attempted the Rising in 1916, had by 1919 evolved into quite a different animal. From early 1919 onwards, the Volunteers were increasingly referred to by the media and public as the Irish Republican Army (IRA).⁴ The name stuck, but it would be a mistake to argue that the IRA possessed a clear strategy for the conflict which was smouldering slowly alight in Ireland in 1919. They did not.⁵ Indeed, beyond a pragmatic principle that a massed uprising with fixed defences was to be avoided at all costs – the painful lesson of Easter 1916 – the IRA campaign would prove to be a constant work in progress, adapting to circumstances and resources, but gradually gaining in both intensity and sophistication. At the start of 1919, IRA leaders writing in the movement's newsletter, *An tÓglach*, sketched the outline of a strategy in only broad strokes:

England must be given the choice between evacuating this country and holding it by a foreign garrison with a perpetual state of war in existence. She must be made to realise that that state of war is not healthy for her. The agents of England in this country must be made to realise that their occupation is not a healthy one. All those engaged in carrying on the English administration in this country must be made to realise that it is not safe for them to try to "carry on" in opposition to the Irish Republican Government and the declared wishes of the people. In particular, any policeman, soldier, judge, warder, or official, from the English Lord Lieutenant downwards, must be made to understand that it is not wise for him to distinguish himself by undue "zeal" in the service of England in Ireland, nor in his opposition to the Irish Republic.⁶

The result in practice would largely boil down to terrorism in the cities and large towns and at times a guerrilla war of movement in the countryside. By the time a truce was declared in July 1921, the death toll from the conflict – perhaps 1,400 killed – still paled in comparison to the dreadful slaughter of the Great War which preceded it. The killing was spread over a 30 month period, though most of the deaths actually happened in the final year of fighting.⁷ Of those killed, about 624 were members of the security forces, 552 were members of the IRA and about 200 or so were civilians.⁸ The low overall tally of civilian deaths is perhaps the biggest surprise, compared not only to the violence of the

1916 Rising, but also with what would later happen in Northern Ireland in the closing decades of the century.

In their approach to the conflict, the IRA leadership drew its inspiration from an eclectic range of sources. The failure of the 1916 Rising left an abhorrence for any approach based on a mass uprising, but beyond that, it was not at all clear in 1919 what direction the conflict would take. IRA theorists were certainly deeply impressed by the achievements of the German commander von Lettow-Vorbeck, who with a force of only a few thousand men tied down over 100,000 Allied troops in east Africa and forced the British to invest extravagant resources in ultimately doomed efforts to bring the Germans to heel.⁹ At war's end, von Lettow-Vorbeck was still at large, planning his next offensive, and received a hero's welcome on his eventual return to Germany.

From an Irish perspective there were two key elements to note from von Lettow-Vorbeck's campaign.¹⁰ The first, and perhaps this was the crucial one, was that the enemy had been the British. Fighting the same opposition just a year later, there was no doubt considerable propaganda and morale value in highlighting the frustration the British had experienced in East Africa. Second, was the principle that von Lettow-Vorbeck's strategy from the start had been to avoid defeat. He fought only when the odds looked particularly good, the rest of the time he focused on simply keeping his forces away from the enemy and forcing them to chase. He travelled light and deliberately selected difficult terrain to go through, which would exhaust and wear down his pursuers. He effectively turned the conflict into a painful long-distance marathon, where as long as he was not caught, he could deny the British victory.

Ireland, however, did not offer the vast expanse of East Africa (one that was almost devoid of roads or railways) and while the IRA's flying columns in particular would try to emulate some of the spirit of that campaign, such approaches really only stood a serious chance in the more rugged parts of Munster and Connaught. The urban campaigns inevitably took on a very different feel.

Targeting Policing In Ireland

In assessing the fundamentals of the IRA's overall strategy – and bearing in mind its evolving nature – some core elements emerge. First, the military campaign was particularly focused on the police as the primary target, rather than the British Army, and this focus was arguably the crucial factor in the IRA's overall success.

There were two significant police forces active in the country in 1919. The Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) were responsible for policing in Dublin City and County, and had a strength of 1200. Significantly, the DMP also housed G Division. This was the lead unit for gathering and co-ordinating intelligence on the IRA. Though its role was absolutely vital, it was chronically understaffed with just 10 officers. Even worse it was fatally compromised by the fact that three of these officers were strongly sympathetic to

the IRA, and were independently passing a steady stream of intelligence to the IRA about the activities and information of the section.

While the DMP possessed 10 percent of the police strength in Ireland at the start of the conflict, they would suffer very few casualties in the ensuing 30 months of violence, just 11 officers killed. This represented only 2.5 percent of police fatalities in the conflict.¹¹ The IRA recognised from the beginning that most members of the DMP were anti-British in outlook, and strongly apathetic about enforcing actions against the IRA.¹² A deliberate policy was introduced then to avoid attacking and killing DMP officers. An exception however was made for active officers in G Division who ignored warnings from the IRA to curb their “zeal”. Such men were targeted heavily, especially in the opening stage of the conflict. While only 15 police officers were killed in the country in 1919, five of these were DMP officers, mainly detectives connected to G Division. Another five were killed in 1920, again with active detectives being singled out.

The DMP’s apathetic stance to the conflict was well recognised by other parts of the British security forces, with the head of the British Army in Ireland warning the government in August 1920 that “The Dublin Metropolitan Police are, in my opinion, quite past redemption” and that soldiers were needed to perform any effective anti-IRA policing operations in the city.¹³

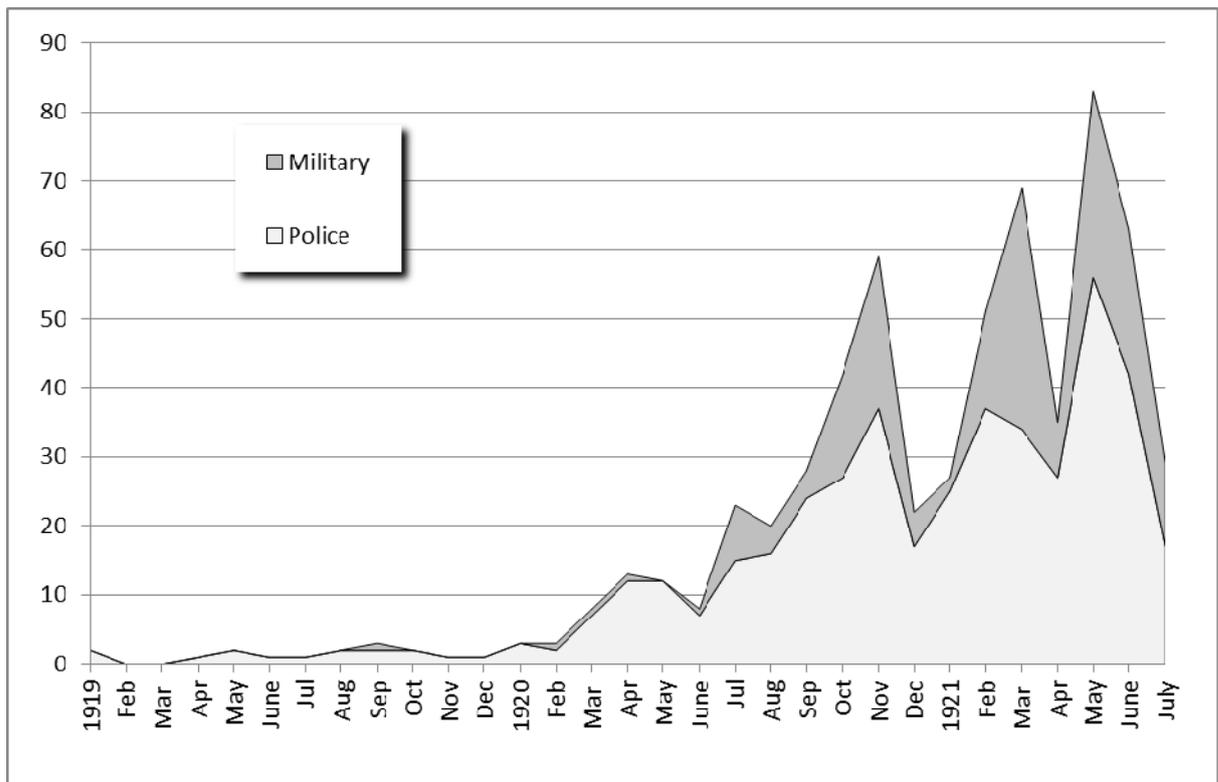
The situation with regard to the other major police force in the country was different. The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was the primary police force in Ireland and was responsible for everywhere apart from Dublin.¹⁴ In 1919, the force had just over 9000 officers, but was below its normal compliment of about 10,000. These men were thinly spread throughout the country in a total of 1299 barracks. A few of the larger city barracks could have close to a 100 officers stationed with them, but the vast majority were far smaller, and most rural barracks were very simple affairs with only 5 officers manning them.¹⁵ As the violence escalated these barracks would be a major target for IRA attacks and the smaller bases in particular would prove to be highly vulnerable.

While the IRA followed a largely hands off approach with regard to the DMP, this did not apply to the RIC. It is worth, however, noting the slow build up in violence. In the first year, just 15 police officers were killed in total, and for the only time, the larger RIC actually suffered proportionally less at this stage than the DMP.

There was however a sustained campaign of intimidation against the RIC. This encouraged many officers to resign or retire, and it also seriously deterred local recruits from joining the force. In order to make up the shortfall – and also to meet targets to expand the force as the conflict continued – large numbers of recruits from Britain would ultimately be brought in, radically changing the character and outlook of the force, and intensifying the conflict between it and the IRA. Indeed, if there was a central core to the IRA’s strategy in the conflict, it was that the primary enemy in the field was the RIC and that victory or defeat lay in destroying the RIC’s ability to operate amid, and integrate with, local communities.

Statistics kept by the authorities suggested that the RIC were the direct targets of about 18 percent of IRA ‘incidents’.¹⁶ This might suggest that the IRA’s primary focus may have lain elsewhere, but a more accurate sense of the IRA’s priorities can be seen in figure 1 which describes the deaths suffered by the security forces in Ireland. While attacks against military targets did increase to reflect the growing role played by the British Army as the conflict progressed, overall most of the casualties suffered by the security forces were police officers.¹⁷ Not only were they the targets of serious violence, they were also the targets of systematic campaigns of intimidation and ostracism. The intent of these was to isolate the police from local communities and to have the force increasingly seen as an occupying security organisation. In many parts of the country family members and friends of police officers were attacked and in a few cases killed. Locals who worked in any capacity to support the police were harassed and threatened.¹⁸ Women who associated with police officers were assaulted and had their hair cut off. Shopkeepers refused to serve police officers and their families. In Church, people refused to sit on the same aisles as RIC men and their families. “*Join the RAF and See The World. Join the RIC and See the Next*” proclaimed graffiti daubed on street walls.¹⁹

Figure 1: Security Personnel Killed in Ireland, 1919 – July 11th, 1921



Statistics drawn from: Abbott (2000) and http://www.cairogang.com/soldiers-killed/CAUSE_OF_DEATH/KIA/killed-in-action.html

The result was that recruitment to the police force within most of Ireland collapsed, while resignations massively increased.²⁰ The force lost a very large proportion of its native officers, and with them their strong local links and knowledge. The shortfall was only made up by recruiting thousands of men from Britain, primarily ex-military who had been demobilised after the Great War, almost all of whom were Protestant, and most of whom came from large British towns and cities.²¹ The police transformed from an organisation whose members broadly reflected the demographics of local communities, to one which was increasingly alien. In background, temperament and religion, the officers were increasingly poorly placed to connect effectively with the population and environment around them. All of which inevitably fed into the IRA's narrative that the police were a foreign force of occupation.

In June 1920, the pages of *An tÓglach* provided not only a rationale for why the RIC were targeted by the IRA, but also what in retrospective proved to be a generally accurate assessment of the state the RIC had been reduced to by that stage:

[The enemy's] front line in Ireland, his chief instrument of executive power was the "R.I.C." an armed force of Irish mercenaries with elaborate local knowledge, situated in strongholds in every part of the country, even the wildest and remotest. The "R.I.C." were his eyes and ears and his strong right arm in Ireland. A relatively small body of men as compared to the people of Ireland; they were able by their organisation and elaborate system of intelligence to dominate the unarmed citizens. ... To-day the first line of the enemy, the chief instrument of executive power has broken down and ceased to be effective. The "R.I.C." have been driven from their outposts, nearly five hundred of their strongholds have been evacuated and destroyed, and they have been forced to concentrate only in certain strong centres, where, in some parts of the country they are in the position of beleaguered garrisons. They are no longer effective for the purpose for which they were intended. ... Demoralisation has set in their ranks. ... There are lists of resignations from the force daily, and the effort of the enemy to fill up the gaps by English recruits is a confession of failure. The English recruits will not be effective for the purpose for which the "R.I.C." were established. ... English soldiers have not the local knowledge of the Irish "constables"; ... They are not likely to succeed where the "R.I.C." failed.²²

The RIC had indeed abandoned many outposts. IRA attacks against vulnerable barracks swiftly led to a policy of abandoning the smaller, rural bases. By the beginning of 1921, 452 police barracks had been closed across the country (over a third of the total number occupied in 1919). This effectively abandoned large parts of the country – primarily rural areas – to IRA dominance.

The remaining barracks were target hardened and in some cases ex-military men were hired as 'Defence of Barracks Sergeants' with the specialised task of making security preparations and taking command should the building come under attack. Police officers who had previously manned the abandoned barracks were now crowded into the

surviving ones. The result was that by 1921, the typical barracks was much better protected and heavily manned than in 1919, but this had come at the cost of relinquishing a permanent police presence in much of the country. Even so, IRA attacks against barracks continued, with 38 manned barracks being attacked in the last four weeks before the Truce, though none of these were overrun.²³

Assessing British Strategy in the Conflict

At a political level, the British approach to the conflict was hamstrung from the start by the Home Rule Act of 1914. This was supposed to come into effect in 1920 and it promised Ireland a considerable measure of independence from London. In 1914, John Redmond's nationalist but moderate Irish Parliamentary Party (IPP) dominated the Irish political scene and looked certain to dominate any new Home Rule institutions. By 1918, that had utterly changed. In the aftermath of the Easter Rising, the conscription crisis in 1918 and the other storms which had played over the Irish political landscape, support for the IPP evaporated. In the December 1918 General Election, the IPP went from holding 74 seats to holding just six, and some of these they only won because Sinn Fein agreed not to run against them in particular constituencies (in order to prevent Unionist politicians taking the seat). Sinn Fein, a tiny peripheral party a few years previously, won by a landslide, taking 77 seats. Unionist politicians won twenty-six.²⁴ The British government balked at the prospect of handing control over to men who had staged a violent uprising just two years previously, but then dithered aimlessly in slow moving efforts to replace the Home Rule Act with something more palatable.

Work started on the Government of Ireland Bill 1919, which was introduced in December 1919 primarily to fend off having to surrender control a few months later in 1920 as originally legislated. It took nearly another year for the Bill to become law, by which stage events on the ground in Ireland had deteriorated drastically, and the Act was largely irrelevant. At heart, however, having conceded the principles of Home Rule, some form of separation was inevitable. This meant that the British found themselves in the hazy position of fighting, not to keep Ireland firmly in the United Kingdom, but rather to try to determine who would govern after they left.²⁵ This was a desperately unpromising position and it helps explain the roots behind much of the flawed policy and strategy Britain followed.

A second issue worth bearing in mind, is that the British political leadership were distracted by other priorities, especially in the first 18 months of the conflict which saw only a slow growth of violence in Ireland, but a steadily deepening mobilisation of support for the IRA, and intensifying alienation toward the security forces. The aftermath of the Great War and the Peace negotiations in Paris galvanised interest and attention. The corridors of power in Whitehall regarded Ireland as an always troublesome issue, understood it poorly, gave it minimal attention, and assumed for too long that it could be resolved satisfactorily at a later point.

Added to this, the British military was stretched very thinly and was embroiled in a wide range of conflicts across the globe. These not only competed for political attention with events in Ireland, but also competed very strongly for military resources. At the start of 1919, while the British Army was still bloated from the Great War with 3.9 million men in uniform, there was huge pressure to rapidly deflate (not least because of the tremendous economic debts Britain had wracked up during the war). Wholesale demobilisation commenced and by 1921 the army had shrunk to just 250,000.²⁶ Nearly two thirds of this force were scattered overseas in an eclectic mix of countries and conflicts, ranging across Northern Europe, the Middle East, Asia, India and Africa. In many of these areas, the troops were in conflict with local forces. In others, they were heavily engaged in colonial “policing”. The demands were many, and the manpower was spread very thin.

Ireland, in comparison, was relatively well supplied. In 1919 there was a very substantial military presence in the island, some 40,000 strong.²⁷ The police presence was considerably weaker, about 10,000 men, but in theory, the authorities had a security force of some 50,000 reasonably well trained and experienced professionals to call upon as the slide into conflict began. These forces would be significantly increased as the conflict progressed. By the time the truce was declared, the police forces had been enlarged to 17,000 (1500 of whom belonged to the specially created Auxiliary Division composed of ex-military officers).²⁸ The military garrison had also been expanded, and over the summer of 1921 there were plans to bring in a further 19 battalions lifting British Army strength to 80,000 men. Spending on the military had considerably increased going from £5.5 million per annum in 1919 to almost £15 million per annum by June 1921.²⁹

Civil protest had added significantly to the costs of operating in Ireland. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the Munitions Strike of 1920 when first dock workers and then later railway staff refused to off-load or transport military munitions or personnel. This caused not only enormous disruption to the movement of military supplies but also required the British to divert substantial resources and attention to the issue of transportation, adding considerably to the economic cost of the conflict.³⁰ As the summer of 1921 progressed, costs were set to rise considerably higher again with the arrival of the 19 new battalions.

Shifting Sands: Perceptions and Reality in the Conflict

At the time the truce was declared in July 1921, perhaps surprisingly, there was a widely shared belief among most British Army officers that the IRA was on the verge of total defeat. Many of the officers believed that the IRA would have been completely crushed within “weeks” or at most “six months”. For these men, the government’s willingness to negotiate a settlement at this point was almost incomprehensible.³¹ This narrative came to dominate the post-conflict official reports compiled by the military.³² In *The Record of the Rebellion* compiled in 1922, the British Army argued that the IRA had been in a “desperate position” at the time of the Truce:

The rebel organisation throughout the country was in a precarious position ... The flying columns and active service units ... were being harried and chased from pillar to post, and were constantly being defeated and broken up by the Crown forces; individuals were being hunted down and arrested; the internment camps were filling up;³³

While a September 1921 report complained:

It is small wonder that the rebel leaders grasped at the straw that was offered, and agreed to negotiation.³⁴

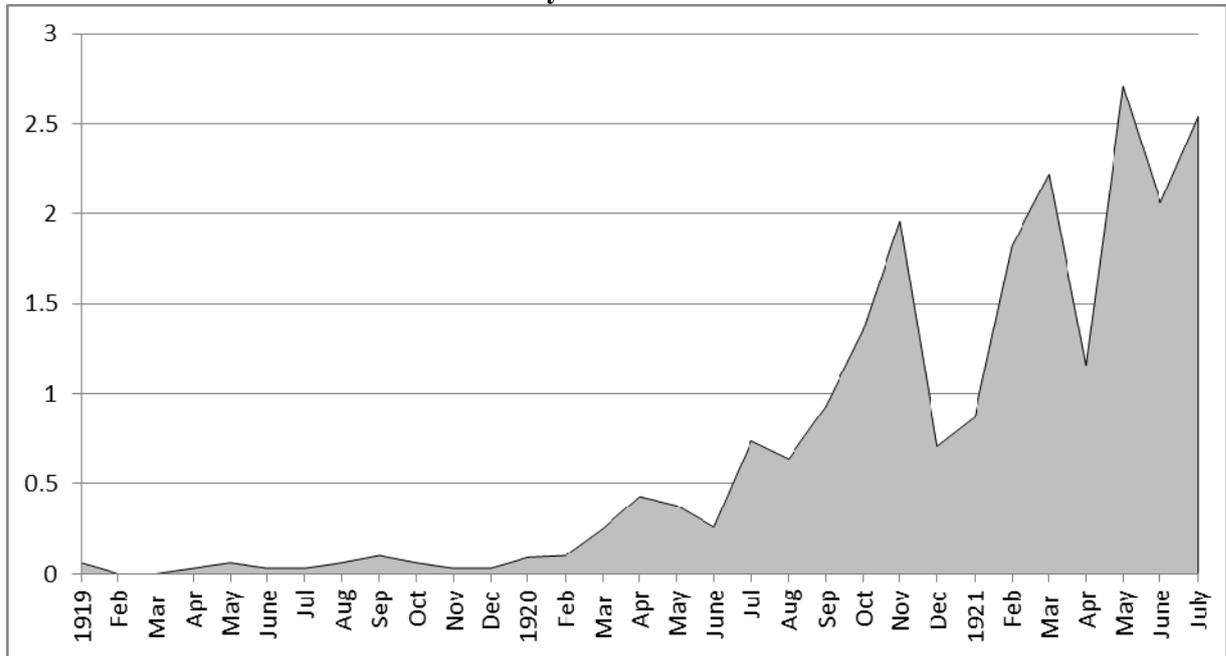
One month after the Truce had been signed, General Macready summed up well the general feelings within the military as to what had happened:

The feelings of Officers and men under my Command at the turn events have taken may I think be described as somewhat mixed. The prominent features are feelings of humiliation, disappointment, anxiety and, at any rate in the South West, of scepticism. Humiliation that even in so worthy a cause as the restoration of peace in this distracted country, it should be necessary to discuss terms with men they have been taught to consider the organisers of the murders of their comrades; disappointment that, just as it appeared possible that firm and decisive steps in dealing with the situation were about to be initiated, those responsible for the orgy of outrage of the past eighteen months should escape their just punishment; anxiety lest the snowball of concession should develop into an avalanche - and scepticism as regards the ability of the leaders of the I.R.A, to control their more militant followers.³⁵

Yet deeper examination of British perceptions of the conflict reveals sometimes wild oscillations in opinion and at times an often schizophrenic range of views. Further, a curious feature of the British perceptions is how disconnected they appeared at times to be from the violence on the ground. Figure 1 previously showed that the level of violence in the country steadily increased as the conflict progressed, and had entered its most intense phase in the closing months. Far from painting a picture of an insurgency coming increasingly under control, the death tolls suggested one that was steadily growing in severity.

This becomes even clearer in Figure 2 which outlines the average number of security force personnel killed per day. This does not support any argument that the IRA campaign in the summer of 1921 was being contained or was faltering. On the contrary, Ireland was clearly becoming a more dangerous place for members of the Crown forces in the closing six months of the conflict. What would have happened had the truce not occurred in July is a rich source of speculation, but any objective assessment of figure 2 does not support the view that the IRA was on the point of collapse or that the British were on the verge of a dramatic improvement in fortunes. If anything, the statistics point towards an increasing deterioration in the situation from the British point of view.

Figure 2: Average Number of Security Force Personnel Killed Per Day, 1919 – 11th July 1921

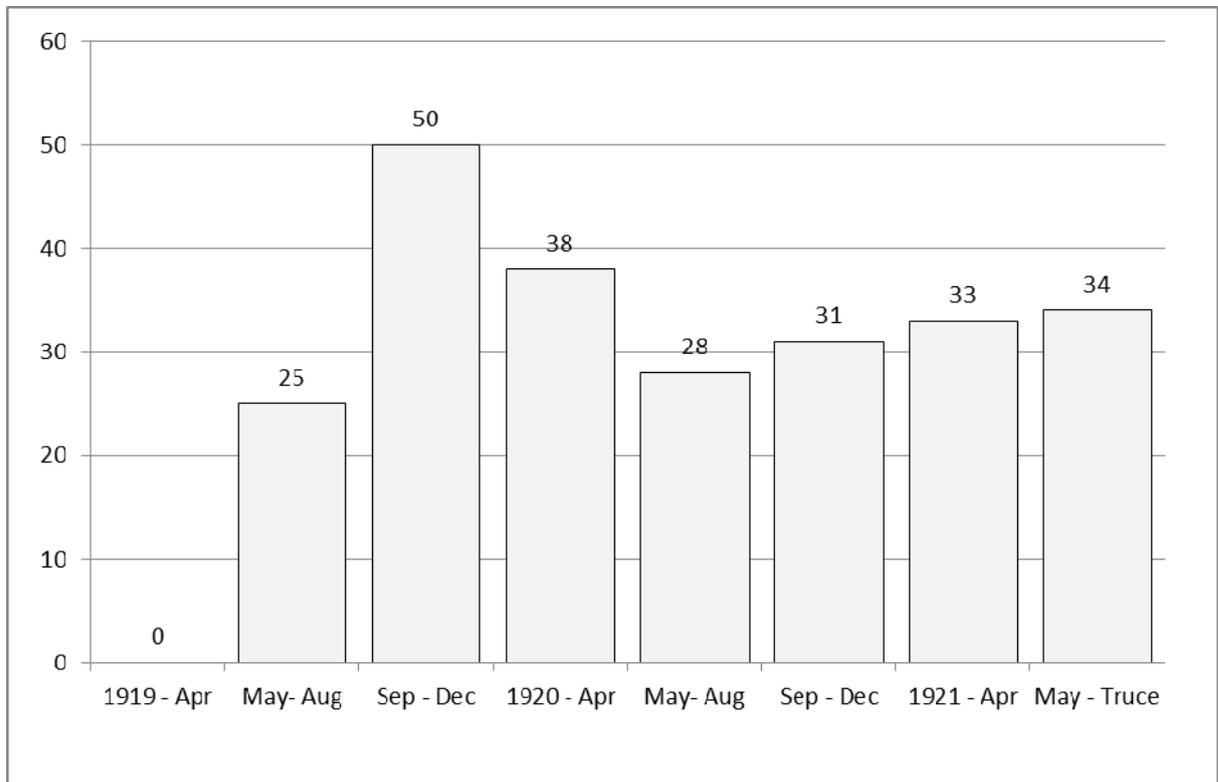


While the rhetoric of having the IRA on the defensive dominates most accounts from the closing 12 months, some indirect recognition of the general statistics can be felt with regard to claims that the IRA have been forced to change tactics and could no longer attack targets in the same manner as before. A repeated claim in these accounts is that the IRA switched to attacking individual off-duty soldiers and policemen, who were highly vulnerable.

However, figure 3 questions how realistic this overall argument was. The data for figure 3 was drawn from an analysis of the accounts of police fatalities compiled by Richard Abbott.³⁶ Through an exhaustive review of official records and media reports, Abbott was able to document the deaths of officers in the conflict, and his research provides the most authoritative account of police fatalities. The accounts of each death provided by Abbott were analysed for this study to establish the context of the death, and particularly whether other members of the security forces were present when officers were attacked.

The analysis shows that attacks against isolated police officers had generally always been a feature of the conflict. However, figure 3 suggests that in percentage terms the peak period for lethal attacks against lone police officers, had actually been at the end of 1919 and start of 1920. The final 12 months of violence showed a lower overall percentage of such attacks. There was a very slight but steady increase in deaths from such attacks in the closing year, but this was an increase of just 6 percent compared to the summer of 1920, and does not reflect a profound change in IRA tactics in this area as is sometimes argued.

Figure 3: Percentage of Lethal police attacks against lone targets, 1919 – July 11th 1921



Much of the debate on the performance of the British security forces in the conflict has been dominated in recent years by the perception of the military and to a much lesser extent the police, that they were betrayed by Westminster politicians who did not back them strongly enough, and caved in to the IRA just as a British victory was about to be achieved.³⁷

In defence of the politicians, however, the statistics of the conflict were not supporting the military men's view. In 1921 the Cabinet was receiving weekly casualty reports on Ireland, which showed that fatalities at the hands of the IRA were steadily rising and not declining. The economic cost of the conflict was also soaring and set to get much higher. Perhaps more damaging, the promising statements and perceptions about the progress of the conflict made towards the end of 1920 and early part of 1921, had proved to be mirages, and only harbingers for far tougher times.

An indication of the general positive perceptions of the conflict's progress, can be seen in for example Captain R.D. Jeune's account of a conversation with General Boyd, the military commander of Dublin in January 1921. Jeune was one of the few British Intelligence Officers to survive the Bloody Sunday attacks in November 1920, but despite that experience he still felt that the IRA were being defeated:

[Boyd] said ‘Well Jeune, I think we have broken the back of the movement now, don’t you?’ I replied ‘Yes, sir, and I think six months should see it out’, to which he answered ‘Yes, I think you are right. Hamar Greenwood (then Colonial Secretary, and in charge of Irish affairs) says two months, but I think that is rather optimistic’³⁸

Such optimistic appraisals within the ranks were also transmitted to the politicians. At a meeting in Downing Street on December 29th 1920, the Prime Minister had asked bluntly how long more would it be until Sinn Fein and the IRA were “entirely broken”? Four months was the agreed opinion of three of the senior Generals present – provided, they added, that the government did not agree a truce with the IRA in the interim.³⁹ By the start of May, then, the IRA would be broken and the government could impose a settlement.

Yet, when May arrived the IRA was patently not broken. Indeed, in that month the IRA killed more members of the security forces than in any of the preceding months of the entire conflict.

If that was not bad enough, also raised at the December meeting was the question of the likely outcome of any election held in Ireland in 1921. General Macready replied if an election was held before March there would be a general boycott imposed by the IRA in the South of Ireland. In a telling response to this news, the Prime Minister quipped that “if Michael Collins could stop three million people using their vote, it did not say much for the success of the policy His Majesty's Government was now pursuing.”⁴⁰ The Prime Minister was then told that after four months the IRA would no longer be strong enough to terrorise the population into doing their will at a general election.

The election was set for May, five months later. Sinn Fein did not boycott, instead they won a landslide victory. Reporting on this in May, General Macready bleakly reported to the Cabinet:

In all constituents in Southern Ireland, except Dublin University, Sinn Fein has had a complete "walk-over", not one single Unionist, nationalist or Labour Candidate being even nominated for any of the remaining 124 seats. There are only two conclusions to be drawn from these results. Either the people of Southern Ireland are solidly republican and support and approve of the Dail Eireann's policy of murder, outrage and boycott, or the gunmen have so terrorized their fellow countrymen that no one dare nominate or support an individual whose views are other than republican. Sinn Fein would have the world believe that the former is the correct conclusion, and that Southern Ireland is unanimously republican. This is not the case, though it is probable that Sinn Fein would have obtained a substantial majority had the Elections been contested⁴¹

Doubtless, the Prime Minister must have increasingly felt that events were continuing to “not say much for the success of the policy His Majesty's Government was now pursuing.” The military men would later argue they had been betrayed by the politicians

but the politicians could certainly be forgiven for having lost faith in any positive assessments that the military and security men offered.

In reports towards the end of 1920 and beginning of 1921, the Cabinet were repeatedly told that the morale and spirit of British troops in Ireland was good, albeit contained with the reports were warnings that all was not well in the regard. In July, General Macready noted that “the number of desertions and applications for discharge are heavy, which indicates that service in this country is not popular.”⁴² By November, Macready’s “not popular”, became Churchill’s “intensely unpopular”, when he wrote to the Cabinet that:

...there is no doubt that service in Ireland is intensely unpopular [with British forces]. I have repeated requests from officers of middle and senior rank to be allowed to retire or to be transferred. When a post is vacant in Ireland, sometimes six or seven officers refuse it in turn.⁴³

This downward turn continued, and reached alarming depths in a report to the Cabinet in May 1921. Serious doubt was also finding its way by then into the most senior military leadership. This can be clearly seen in the surprisingly bleak views provided by the military leaders regarding the planned Autumn campaign of 1921. Great hopes had been built that a major injection of reinforcements would facilitate a decisive campaign in these months which could deal a crippling blow to the IRA. As preparations for the campaign were made, however, both Macready and General Henry Wilson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, attempted to dampen expectations of what might be achieved. Their assessment began with a truly sobering account of the military situation as it stood then. As outlined first by Macready:

...I understand that you wish to be informed as to my candid opinion in regard to the morale and feelings of the troops at present stationed in Ireland. ... While, as I have said, I am of opinion that the troops at present in Ireland may be depended on to continue to do their best under present circumstances through this summer, I am convinced that by October, unless a peaceful solution has been reached, it will not be safe to ask the troops to continue there another winter under the conditions which obtained during the last. Not only the men for the sake of their morale and training should be removed out of the Irish "atmosphere," but by that time there will be many officers who although they may not confess it, will, in my opinion, be quite unfit to continue to serve in Ireland without a release for a very considerable period. To sum up, it amounts to this. Unless I am entirely mistaken, the present state of affairs in Ireland, so far as regards the troops serving there, must be brought to a conclusion by October, or steps must be taken to relieve practically the whole of the troops together with the great majority of the commanders and their staffs. I am quite aware that troops do not exist to do this, but this does not alter in any way the opinion that I have formed in regard to the officers and men for whom I am responsible.⁴⁴

General Wilson added in his report that he agreed with this dire assessment. The Cabinet were thus faced with the two most senior military commanders involved now telling them that the conflict had to be resolved within five months or disaster loomed.

True, the Cabinet had authorised reinforcements to Ireland which were now being assembled. This represented almost everything possible that could be sent – 19 Brigades – bringing the total strength up to nearly 80,000 men (and another 17,000 available in the different police forces). But the Generals were keen to dodge promising success, with Macready warning:

If the Government decide to place at my disposal all possible troops and material, every effort will be made to stamp out the extremists while the fine weather lasts, that is up to the end of September, but I am not prepared to guarantee that this object will be attained ...⁴⁵

This hardly enthusiastic assessment was backed up Wilson, who warned the cabinet: “Neither General Macready nor I can promise any definite result”.⁴⁶ Given such assessments, not surprisingly the Secretary of State for War, Sir Laming Worthington-Evans, was less than enthused about the prospects, and warned his Cabinet colleagues:

The position of the military forces in Ireland is anything but satisfactory. There is a risk that a position of virtual stalemate may continue throughout the summer and autumn and that winter will be a time of decisive advantage to the rebels. Officers and men have had little or no rest—there is no back area into which they can be withdrawn. ... I am anxious, therefore, to reinforce the troops in Ireland with everything not actually required elsewhere, so that an endeavour should be made to break the back of the rebellion during the three months, July, August and September. ... I am strongly impressed by the advice of my military advisers that there is grave risk of failure ...⁴⁷

The day after this warning was circulated, the IRA carried out the Customs House attack in Dublin. Some 130 members of the IRA raided this huge building which was the administrative centre of British government in Ireland and also the primary location for all Irish tax records. They seized control of the building and set it ablaze.⁴⁸ Large parts of the building were destroyed but nearly 90 IRA members were killed, captured or wounded before they could escape. Like the Tet Offensive in Vietnam, the attack was technically a military disaster but was nevertheless a spectacular propaganda success. It created yet another powerful impression that the IRA were far from beaten in the conflict and indeed actually looked like they were getting stronger.

Adding to the increasingly grim expectations were the reports of other senior military officers who visited Ireland in the early summer of 1921 and came away shocked by what they found. It is worth quoting the report of Colonel Sir Hugh Elles which was forwarded to the Cabinet in June 1921:

I found the real situation so much more serious that I imagine there must be very few officers, even at the War Office, who really know what the state of affairs is. The British Army in Ireland is besieged. ... the facts are that responsible officials cannot move without strong escort; money cannot be drawn from the bank without strong escort; despatch riders are being rapidly replaced by armoured cars; officers must move not only armed and in bodies, but with their revolvers very handy; in motor cars they carry them actually in their hands. Troops sleep in defended barracks—behind barbed wire. ... The outlook of officers is curious. ... I only met one man of any optimism and that was, I think, an optimism based on his official position. Of others, a very few were pessimistic, while the bulk were just fatalists. There is no evidence of morale getting low, but I thought I detected a great listlessness amongst all except the highly placed responsible people. ... One thing is abundantly clear: that to proceed on the present system of impotent defensive, and without Martial Law rigorously exploited, is useless. If you pour in more troops on the present lines, you are simply throwing good money after bad. Four divisions now are besieged in dribbles over, say, one-third of the country; six divisions would be besieged in exactly the same way over half the country. ... It seems in the highest degree improbable that an autumn campaign will finish the trouble. ... I am strongly reminded of certain phases of the Third Battle of Ypres.⁴⁹

For the politicians, only one thing was clear. It was time to make a deal.

Conclusions

In combating insurgency, the failures nearly always have more to teach than the successes. The odds are always stacked against the insurgents. They are almost always vastly outmatched by their opponents in terms of resources and manpower, so their eventual defeat is hardly surprising. When they win, however, it is worth sitting up and paying very close attention indeed.

Most modern historians of the IRA argue that by July 1921 the IRA were looking increasingly shaky, especially in Dublin. They had suffered heavy casualties, particularly when one factors in the number of prisoners in various jails and camps, and were also running low on weapons and ammunition. That said they still enjoyed enormous local support, had raised the killing levels to new heights, and had won the hearts and minds battle in the south of Ireland. The British failure to defeat the IRA is the result of a combination of factors, some of which have received only peripheral attention here, but two key issues have been drawn out.

First and foremost, was the struggle between the IRA and the RIC. At the start of 1919, the RIC was the most potent threat the IRA faced, and the Republicans knew this. This is perhaps best illustrated after the conflict, in a conversation in 1922 between an RIC officer and an IRA commander who told him:

... if we hadn't dealt with the R.I.C., there would have been no Free State. We weren't afraid of the army. We could always fool them, but your fellows had the most marvellous local knowledge, which was too much for us.⁵⁰

Direct violence, harassment and intimidation mutated the RIC, so that by mid-1920 the organisation's real value in the struggle had largely been destroyed. The decline in the RIC's effectiveness correlated with increasing violence in the country, and increasing casualties among the security forces.

While the security forces did enjoy some successes, and the IRA never overcame satisfactorily some problems (such as the shortage of weapons and ammunition), the scene was set for the second factor considered in detail here: the expectations of military and political leaders regarding the outcome and direction of the conflict. Persistent optimism in some quarters, and unrealistic assessments of the IRA's ability to not simply continue but to actually increase the level of violence, created false dawns regarding the likely resolution of the conflict. These, as much as anything else, inevitably sapped confidence that the conflict was winnable, and made a negotiated settlement increasingly the only realistic and appropriate avenue for the political leaders. The subsequent British Army narrative of betrayal at the hands of the politicians was disingenuous and failed to recognise the role that the military's faulty assessments played in the political decision-making and expectations. It glossed over, too, the failure to properly analyse the seriousness and growth of IRA violence, which was too often dismissed as being in decline or on the point of near complete rout.

What then are the key lessons to take away from the conflict? At a fundamental level, the conflict demonstrates the importance of psychology. The key factor proved to be the British government's belief that the IRA could be defeated, and that the mass of the population were not genuine supporters of Sinn Fein. In this framework, if the IRA could be broken this would clear the space for moderate nationalists to reassert their dominance of the Irish political space and for the British to then dictate a more acceptable form of Home Rule with much more acceptable Irish politicians.

It was, however, a deeply flawed framework built on a poor understanding of Ireland, the IRA and the progress of the conflict. In the end, the IRA's success ultimately boiled down to its achievement in destroying the state's confidence in this framework. By the summer of 1921, the British government no longer believed that victory was possible with the resources committed and en-route, or within acceptable timescales. Wars are won when one side breaks the will of the other to fight on. This the IRA achieved.

And yet, it could all have been very different. Had the British exercised restraint after the Rising, and imposed long prison sentences rather than firing squads on the captured leaders, the public mood regarding the Rising would have been very different. Added to this, more sensitive policies with regard to food shortages in the country in 1917 and 1918, and crucially avoiding entirely any notion of introducing conscription, would have produced a vastly different Ireland in 1919, one which could have followed Northern Ireland into a similar version of Home Rule in 1920.

Once the conflict started in 1919, the IRA's heavy focus on the RIC proved to be a sensible strategy. By mid-1920, the RIC were a broken organisation in much of the country, and the influx of British recruits and the growing role of the British Army played into the IRA's narrative.

It might still have been possible to suppress the IRA given substantially more resources and time, but as Bernard Law Montgomery (future Field Marshal and victor at El Alamein) concluded in 1924 after his own experiences in Ireland:

My own view is that to win a war of this sort you must be ruthless. ... Nowadays public opinion precludes such methods, the nation would never allow it, and the politicians would lose their jobs if they sanctioned it. That being so I consider that Lloyd-George was really right in what he did, if we had gone on we could probably have squashed the rebellion as a temporary measure, but it would have broken out again like an ulcer the moment we removed the troops.⁵¹

In the end, the British went into the struggle ill-prepared and were handicapped throughout by a weak understanding of the reality of both public mood on the ground and the IRA's capabilities and potential. As the conflict intensified, the government's hopes and expectations became increasingly divorced from reality, something that the senior politicians only really grasped in the closing months. Whether the military grasped this at all is another question. The after action assessments produced by the British Army in the years which followed showed that some important tactical lessons had been learned. At a strategic level, however, it was clear that the experience had not brought the military any closer to understanding what had been needed to succeed in the conflict. Such insights would only begin to emerge in British military doctrine in the aftermath of much later conflicts in the century.

¹ There were a handful of incidents outside of Dublin, but apart from the killing of 16 policemen in an ambush in Co. Meath, nothing of any significance happened elsewhere, see for example: Robert Kee, *Ireland: A History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson; 1980).

² Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: The Irish Rebellion* (London: Allen Lane, 2005).

³ Robert Kee (note 1) p.172.

⁴ Tim Pat Coogan, *Michael Collins* (London: Hutchinson 1990).

⁵ A point accepted by most historians of the conflict. See for example Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight For Irish Independence* (London: Allen Lane, 2013).

⁶ 'The work before us', *An tÓglach*, February 1, 1919, p.2.

⁷ Indeed, some historians have argued that it is a mistake to view the Soloheadbeg ambush in January 1919 as the starting point of the conflict, and that later stages represent a more realistic beginning. See, for example Joost Augusteijn, "Reviews of Books". *The American Historical Review* 108.4 (2003): 1218–1219; and also Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. at War, 1916-1923* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁸ There is still debate around the exact death-toll, though these particular figures are drawn from Michael Hopkinson's estimates which are generally regarded as among the most reliable: Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin: Gill and McMillan, 2002), pp.201-202.

⁹ For an excellent account of this conflict see Edward Paice, *Tip and Run: The Untold Tragedy of the Great War in Africa* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2007).

¹⁰ An indication of just how von Lettow-Vorbeck's campaign was viewed can be seen in the pages of the IRA's official newsletter during the conflict, *An tÓglach*. For example:

General Lettow-Vorbeck's campaign in East Africa affords perhaps more valuable instruction for the employment of the Irish Republican Army in its present circumstances than any other campaign that was ever fought.

'Lessons from East Africa: 1', *An tÓglach*, April 13, 1920, p.4

In general, analyses of guerrilla conflicts from a variety of eras and different locations were a frequent subject in the pages of the newsletter.

¹¹ Statistics drawn from Richard Abbott, *Police Casualties in Ireland, 1919-1922* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2000); and James Scannell, "DMP Casualties During the War of Independence," *Dublin Historical Record* 61, no.1 (2008): 5-19. In particular, Abbott's statistics on police deaths as a result of the conflict are the most comprehensive available and are relied on here. It is worth noting that a variety of other sources give conflicting figures, some higher, some lower, but none can match the extensive detail provided by Abbott.

¹² James Scannell, (note 11).

¹³ Cabinet Memorandum: *The Present Military Situation in Ireland and the Proposed Military Policy During the Coming Winter, General Macreedy, 6th August, 1920*. CAB/24/110 Image Reference:0050

¹⁴ John Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary: An Oral History* (Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University of Belfast, 1990).

¹⁵ Richard Abbott, (note 11), pp.57-58.

¹⁶ W.J. Lowe, 'The war against the R.I.C., 1919-21,' *Eire-Ireland* 37, no.3-4 (2002): 79-117.

¹⁷ Richard Abbott, (note 11).

¹⁸ Richard English, (note 5), p.21.

¹⁹ Robert Asprey, *War in the Shadows* (London: Little Brown, 1994), p.195.

²⁰ Jim Herlihy, *The Royal Irish Constabulary: A Short History and Genealogical Guide* (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1997).

²¹ Richard Abbott, (note 11), p.92.

²² 'Our Duty', *An tÓglach*, June 15 1920 p.2

²³ Figures taken from *Cabinet Weekly Survey of the State of Ireland Memorandum*, July 29, 1921, PRO CAB 24/126/72, p.4.

²⁴ Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 2002), p.21.

²⁵ Charles Townshend, (note 5).

²⁶ W.H. Kautt (ed), *Ground Truths: British Army Operations in the Irish War of Independence*. (Sallins: Irish Academic Press, 2014), p.2.

²⁷ Charles Townshend, (note 5), p.135.

²⁸ *Cabinet Weekly Survey of the State of Ireland Memorandum*, July 29, 1921, PRO CAB 24/126/72

²⁹ *Expenditure on Imperial Services in Ireland (Circulated for information, by the Chancellor of the Exchequer)*, June 3, 1921, (PRO CAB 24/125).

³⁰ W.H. Kautt (ed), (note 26), p.65.

³¹ William Sheehan, *British Voices: From the Irish War of Independence 1918-1921*. (Cork: Collins Press 2005), pp.151-152.

³² Notably in: *The Record of the Rebellion in Ireland, 1919-1921 and the Part Played by the Army in Dealing with It* (WO 141/93).

³³ W.H. Kautt (ed), (note 26), p.186.

³⁴ *The Military Situation In Ireland at the end of September, 1921*

³⁵ *Report by the General Officer Commanding-in-Chief on the situation in Ireland for the week ending 9th July, 1921*

³⁶ Richard Abbott, (note 11).

³⁷ William Sheehan, (note 31), pp.227-228.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.90-91.

³⁹ *Meeting held at 10 Downing Street, December 29, 1920* (PRO CAB 23/23/25).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Report by the General Officer Commanding in Chief, The Situation in Ireland for the Week Ending 14th May, 1921* (PRO CAB 24/123).

⁴² *'The Present Military Situation in Ireland and the Proposed Military Policy During the Coming Winter,'* Memorandum by General Macready, August 6, 1920 (PRO CAB 24/110/50).

⁴³ *'The Irish Situation'*, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War, November 3, 1920 (PRO CAB 23/23/2).

⁴⁴ Memorandum "B" By the Commander-In-Chief, *The Forces in Ireland*, (PRO CAB 24/123).

⁴⁵ Memorandum "A" By the Commander-In-Chief, *The Forces in Ireland*, (PRO CAB 24/123).

⁴⁶ Memorandum by the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, (PRO CAB 24/123).

⁴⁷ *'Ireland and the General Military Situation'*, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for War, May 1921, (PRO CAB 24/123).

⁴⁸ What is interesting is that apart from the considerable destruction caused on the first day, a significant amount of additional damage was also done to the building and material inside (including files) over subsequent days. It turned out that the Dublin Fire Brigade were less than enthusiastic about tackling the blaze, and after fires repeatedly broke out again over the following days, soldiers had to take over fire-fighting duties. As much as anything else, the Fire Brigade's apathy was yet another indictment of the lack of support the British authorities enjoyed in most of Ireland outside of Ulster at this stage. See: *Report by the General Officer Commanding in Chief, The Situation in Ireland for the Week Ending 28 May, 1921* (PRO CAB 24/123).

⁴⁹ *'The Military Situation in Ireland'*, Memorandum by Colonel Sir Hugh Elles, 24th June, 1921. (PRO CAB 24/125/77), pp.1-2.

⁵⁰ As quoted in W.J. Lowe, (note 16) p.117.

⁵¹ William Sheehan, (note 31), pp.151-152.