

Michael Collins and Bloody Sunday

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The intelligence war between the British and Irish Intelligence Services.

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Until Easter Week 1966, the statue of Lord Nelson stood peacefully on its column in Dublin Square. It was blown up on the eve of the 50th anniversary of the Easter Rebellion, which the British had finally subdued on that very spot. Although the figurative decapitation of the hero of Trafalgar made the front page of The New York Times, the event was but a footnote to history, recalling one of the most newsworthy stories of the early 1900's, The Irish Revolt.

For nearly four hundred years prior to the Easter Rebellion of 1916, Irish nationalists had been fighting British colonialism without success. The most striking difference between the Easter Rebellion and the uprisings of the past was that this new Irish revolt occurred at a most unpropitious moment for the British. The war against Germany had strained and exhausted the economy of Great Britain. Resources to arrest the growing insurgency in Ireland were not available.

Despite the disruptive effects of World War I on Great Britain, it would have been unrealistic, even in the land of the leprechaun, for the Irish to expect to defeat by conventional military tactics the world's foremost military power. In fact, most of the leaders of the Irish nationalists felt that the opportunity for success rested squarely on their capability to exploit Great Britain's lack of will to continue a costly and domestically

unpopular war. Their eventual success in doing so constitutes a classic example of the effectiveness of unconventional warfare in forcing a powerful adversary to the negotiating table.¹ The Irish intelligence service was one of the architects of the victory.

The Director of Intelligence of the Irish Republican Army during the last act of the drama was Michael Collins, already a legendary figure when he was appointed in the summer of 1919. He had been in the movement since early 1916, and had earned the cachet attached to deportation and imprisonment for a year in a British jail. By 1919, the Crown was offering £10,000 in rewards for Collins "dead or alive."

Despite this tempting offer and hard times in Ireland, very few dared to offer assistance which would aid the British in capturing him. The few, who were tempted met a quick end. The familiar IRA calling card found on the bodies of informers, "Convicted Spy Executed by Order of the IRA," proved to be a sufficient deterrent. Frequently, informers were tried in absentia. It is sufficient to recall Collins' remark regarding the accused to guess at the outcome of these trials: "For the future the rule should be guilty until proven innocent."

Collins has often been described by both friends and foes as a coldblooded character. His remarks after the bloody execution of a number of British intelligence officers and informants bring out this aspect of his character.

My one intention was the destruction of the undesirables who continued to make miserable the lives of ordinary decent citizens.

I have proof enough to assure myself of the atrocities which this gang of spies and informers have committed. Perjury and torture are words too easily known to them. If I had a second motive it was no more than a feeling such as I might have for a dangerous reptile.

By their destruction the very air is made sweeter. That should be the future's judgment on this particular event. For myself, my conscience is clear. There is no crime in detecting and destroying, in war-time, the spy and the informer. They have destroyed without trial. I have paid them back in their own coin.²

Although informers were dealt with ruthlessly, Collins came close to capture a number of times. On one occasion a Black and Tan³ a raiding party besieged a house where Collins was present. He calmly walked down the stairs, brushed the intruders aside, and bolted out the door before they knew what had happened.

Soon after this incident, Collins had a master builder named Batt O'Connor construct a secret room, with sleeping quarters, on the same premises. O'Connor succeeded so well that the next time the Black and Tans staged a raid, Collins was able to continue a meeting then in progress without interruption.

The Collins Organization

Collins surrounded himself with a small group of counterintelligence operatives—soon labelled the Inner Circle—who directed the penetration of various British installations. Their network eventually extended from Ireland to America, England, and Egypt. It penetrated prisons, postal facilities, and government departments from the British headquarters in Dublin Castle to Whitehall itself. Sympathetic postal officials in London, Dublin and generally throughout all of Ireland, enabled the Irish service to intercept, and decode many of the oppositions' cipher messages.

Recognizing the need to compile information on their opposition, the Inner Circle very early in the struggle established a central records center, eventually called the Brain Center, within 200 yards of Dublin Castle. A lawyer's office provided the cover, and although its unusual clientele increased in number, this dual-purpose establishment went undetected.

Presumably the IIS established its "Brain Center" so dangerously close to Dublin Castle to hasten the dissemination of reports received from Broy, Kavanagh, Neligan and MacNamara, all trusted employees of the British, but agents of the IIS. This records center contained dossiers on personalities of security or operational interest including military leaders and government officials, as well as captured and stolen documents and extensive ciphering and deciphering material.

The British React

The British Intelligence Service (BIS) apparently lacked detailed information about the Inner Circle and the Brain Center, although it certainly felt their presence and Michael Collins' influence. In consequence, the BIS set out to capture Collins, hoping thereby to neutralize the Irish apparatus. One of the BIS' earliest efforts in this direction was turned into a propaganda extravaganza by the IIS. A convicted forger in a London prison, one F. Digby Hardy, mailed a letter to Lord French, Governor General of Ireland, offering his services as a spy. Lord French accepted the proposition. Hardy was to travel to Ireland and establish contact with the IIS.

Hardy's letter, however, had been intercepted and transmitted to IIS Headquarters, where Irish operatives began to amass a dossier of incriminating information concerning Hardy's past. Collins permitted Hardy to make contact with the IIS, and shortly thereafter arranged what Hardy had been led to believe was a conference with IIS officers. Those present were in fact American and British journalists anticipating the scoop that Hardy was shortly to provide.

During this meeting the leaders of the IIS confronted Hardy with his infamous past, his letter to Lord French, and his mission to penetrate the IIS. When Digby learned the true identity and purpose of his host, he made a full confession, hoping thereby to obtain leniency from his inquisitors. Because of Digby's cooperation, the IIS spared his life and gave him until the next morning to be out of Ireland. The story made international news headlines, and the BIS suffered a humiliating reversal before world opinion.

Not all British efforts were as transparent as the Hardy fiasco. An experienced BIS officer named Burn, alias Jameson, succeeded in penetrating the "Inner Circle" of the IIS and in winning for a short time the confidence of Michael Collins. Jameson had come to the attention of the IIS while feigning Bolshevism as a member of British Labor circles, all the while performing in the role of agentprovocateur. Jameson impressed Collins with schemes to obtain arms and money from the Soviet Government.

An unsubstantiated report from Dublin Castle, and the near capture of

Collins while engaged in a clandestine meeting with Jameson, provoked suspicions and the IIS prepared a plan to test Jameson's loyalties. With deliberate carelessness Collins permitted Jameson to see parts of a bogus document which referred to important papers held in the home of a pro-British ex-mayor of Dublin. Jameson in turn relayed this information to Dublin Castle and soon afterward the Black and Tans raided the ex-mayor's home. Predictably, perhaps, shortly after the raid Jameson's body riddled with bullets was found bearing the familiar IRA execution card.

In their penetration efforts IIS operatives were considerably more successful than the British. Early in the conflict, the IIS recruited and ran-in-place four Dublin Castle officials: Ned Broy, James MacNamara, Joe Kavanagh, and Dave Neligan. During their weekly debriefings, these agents passed valuable information to Collins at a Dublin safehouse owned by Tom Gay, an inconspicuous librarian. One of these agents, Ned Broy, who had access to the headquarters of the Dublin Detective Force, arranged to be on duty alone one night during which Collins was able to make a midnight visit and spend several hours of the early morning there reading secret documents and gathering valuable information.

Although Broy, Kavanagh, Neligan and MacNamara provided Collins with extremely useful information, the most valuable of all Collins' penetrations was the mysterious Lt. G., a member of British military intelligence and one of Collins' chief agents and confidants. Not only was Lt. G. able to pass information concerning troop movements, order of battle and military plans that enabled the IRA to ambush British troops and supply convoys, but he also provided Collins with advance warning of British plans to raid suspected IIS installations.

In Collins' personal notebook-diary, there appear seventeen notes initialed "G," of which the following is but one example:

"Don't overdo. The road to Parnell Square is too well trod. Fifteen men, including you, went there (to Vaughn's Hotel) last night between 9 and 11 p.m."⁴

Little else is known of Lt. G. but his case demonstrated the abilities of the IIS to recruit and run-in-place an unusually valuable and well-placed British military intelligence officer.

The Cairo Group

Despite the efforts of Dublin Castle to stymie the IIS, the British position in Ireland in 1919 had so deteriorated that the British authorities in Whitehall decided that radical measures were required. Heretofore the British had been concentrating on controlling the general public and only sporadically fighting the IIS. But Irish successes had nevertheless mounted. A major assault was in order. Accordingly, certain of the most experienced British deep-cover CI officers were called to Ireland and directed to seek out and assassinate the Inner Circle of the IIS.

At the time of the Irish Revolt most of these operatives were stationed in Cairo. One by one, they arrived in Ireland, travelling under aliases and using commercial cover, several taking jobs as shop assistants or garage bands to avoid suspicion.

The so-called Cairo Group was directed by two men, Peter Aimes and George Bennet. These individuals maintained liaison with three veterans of the campaign, Lt. Angliss, alias McMahon, who had been recalled from Russia to organize intelligence in South Dublin, an Irishman by the name of Peel, and D. L. McLean, the chief of intelligence at Dublin Castle. Besides being more experienced intelligence operatives than those earlier working in Ireland, the members of the Cairo Group increased the threat to the Irish because they immediately reorganized the British intelligence effort, which until their arrival had been decentralized and uncoordinated. They moved quickly to correct weaknesses. Their accomplishments led ultimately to the events of "Bloody Sunday."

Although the IIS was aware that changes were taking place on the British side, it was some time before it ascertained the identities of the Cairo Group. Their first break came following the execution of John Lynch, an Irish Treasury Official, by the Group. After this episode, Lt. Angliss, drunk and despondent, divulged his participation in the execution to a girl who inadvertently passed this information to an IIS informant. The remaining members of the group were identified after an unwitting landlady revealed to another IIS informant that several of her British guests regularly went out very late in the evening. At the time

Dublin was under a very strict curfew, and only authorized personnel were allowed on the streets. The individuals in question were taken under observation by the surveillance and enforcement arm of the IIS—called the Twelve Apostles⁵—which determined that they were in contact with previously identified members of the Cairo Group. To the Twelve Apostles, this meant that they were instrumentally involved with the Cairo Group.

In addition to the information provided by these sources, a comparatively low-level technical operation revealed the identity of another key participant in the Cairo Group. Shortly after the new British team arrived in Ireland, Michael Collins had received a typewritten death notice reading:

"An eye for an eye
A tooth for a tooth
Therefore a life for a life."⁶

Collins ignored the message but filed the letter, as he did all correspondence bearing upon his intelligence and related activities. Soon afterward, the IIS intercepted the following letter from Capt. YZ addressed to Capt. X, War Office, Whitehall, England:

Dear X,

Have duly reported and found things in a fearful mess, but think will be able to make a good show. Have been given a free hand to carry on and everyone has been charming re our little stunt. I see no prospect until I have got things on a firmer basis, but still hope and believe there are possibilities ...⁷

The IIS hurriedly recruited a typewriter expert, who determined that the typeface of the Captain YZ letter matched that of the death notice sent earlier to Michael Collins. Captain YZ was therefore linked to the Cairo Group and thereafter was the object of special investigation. In the end, by intercepting correspondence, examining contents of wastebaskets, tracing laundry markings, duplicating hotel room keys, and similar

efforts, all members of the Cairo Group were identified and placed under surveillance.

Before all this had been accomplished, however, the Cairo Group had begun to close in. Three IIS senior officers, Frank Thornton, one of the Twelve Apostles and the man responsible for maintaining the surveillance of the Cairo Group, Liam Tobin, the senior officer in charge of the IIS "Brain Center," and Tom Cullen, his assistant, were arrested. Unable to break the cover stories of Thornton, Tobin, and Cullen, the British interrogators released them. Tobin and Cullen were detained only a few hours. Thornton, however, underwent a gruelling interrogation for ten days.

These arrests understandably alarmed the IIS. Shortly after Thornton's release, Collins received information that the Cairo Group was planning more arrests. Fearful that additional interrogations would be successful and reveal IIS personnel and installations, Collins met with his staff and formulated the plans for "Bloody Sunday."

On 17 November Collins had written to Dick McKee, Commander of the Dublin Brigade:

Dick . . . have established addresses of the particular ones. Arrangements should now be made about the matter. Lt. G. is aware of things. He suggested the 21st. A most suitable date and day I think. "M" ⁸

Early Sunday morning, November 21, 1920, while most of Dublin slept, eight groups of IIS officers including the Twelve Apostles went into action. They executed eleven British intelligence officers. As many more marked for extinction escaped. McMahan and McLean were among those executed. Of the leaders of the Cairo Group, only Peel escaped. Most of the others who escaped had not been direct participants in the British plan.

The British reaction to "Bloody Sunday" was quick. Carloads of Auxiliaries ⁹ were almost immediately dispatched to Croke Park, Dublin where a large crowd had assembled to watch a football game. Accounts of what followed are conflicting, but one of the most widely reported stated that the Auxiliaries fired into the crowd, killing fourteen and

wounding many others. Despite the confusion, Dick McKee and Peadar Clancy, who both had participated in the liquidation of Bloody Sunday, along with an innocent visitor to Dublin were arrested and taken to Dublin Castle, where shortly thereafter they were executed.

Bloody Sunday remains a day of infamy in British history: and the day after remains equally infamous in Irish history. But once the violence of the two days is dismissed, it seems clear that the British plan to destroy the Irish service failed. By acting first the IIS had delivered the coup de main to the British intelligence network in Dublin.

Cathal Brugha, then Irish minister of defense and chief of staff, later assessed the outcome as follows, in words which were perhaps applicable to the conflict between the intelligence services:

"We proved for all time that no nation however great, can either govern or destroy a little country if the will of the little country be set. We proved it by The Invisible Army.' "¹⁰

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1 On 5 December 1921 a treaty was signed granting Ireland, less the six counties of Ulster (Northern Ireland) Home Rule. Under Home Rule, although Ireland remained within the British Empire, the Irish were given primary responsibility for domestic affairs with Britain retaining control over defense and foreign affairs.

2 Rex Taylor, *Michael Collins*, London, 1958.

3 The Black and Tans were not members of the British regular army but a new force recruited for service in Ireland. They were drawn heavily from the unemployed and received their name from their attire khaki coats, black trousers and caps.

4 Rex Taylor, *Michael Collins*, London, 1958.

5 The Twelve Apostles were responsible for surveillance and executions. Because they operated in friendly circumstances and enjoyed popular support, they were efficient and effective.

6 Jacqueline Van Voris, *Constance de Markievicz in the Cause of Ireland*, Amherst, Mass., 1967.

7 Piaras Beaslai, *Michael Collins, Soldier and Statesman*, Dublin, 1937.

8 Rex Taylor, *Michael Collins*, London, 1958.

9 In addition to the Black and Tans the Auxiliaries were recruited in England to serve in Ireland with the police. The men were ex-officers of the army, qualified for no pension, and were not under military discipline.

10 Shaw Desmond, *The Drama of Sinn Fein*, London. 1923.

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