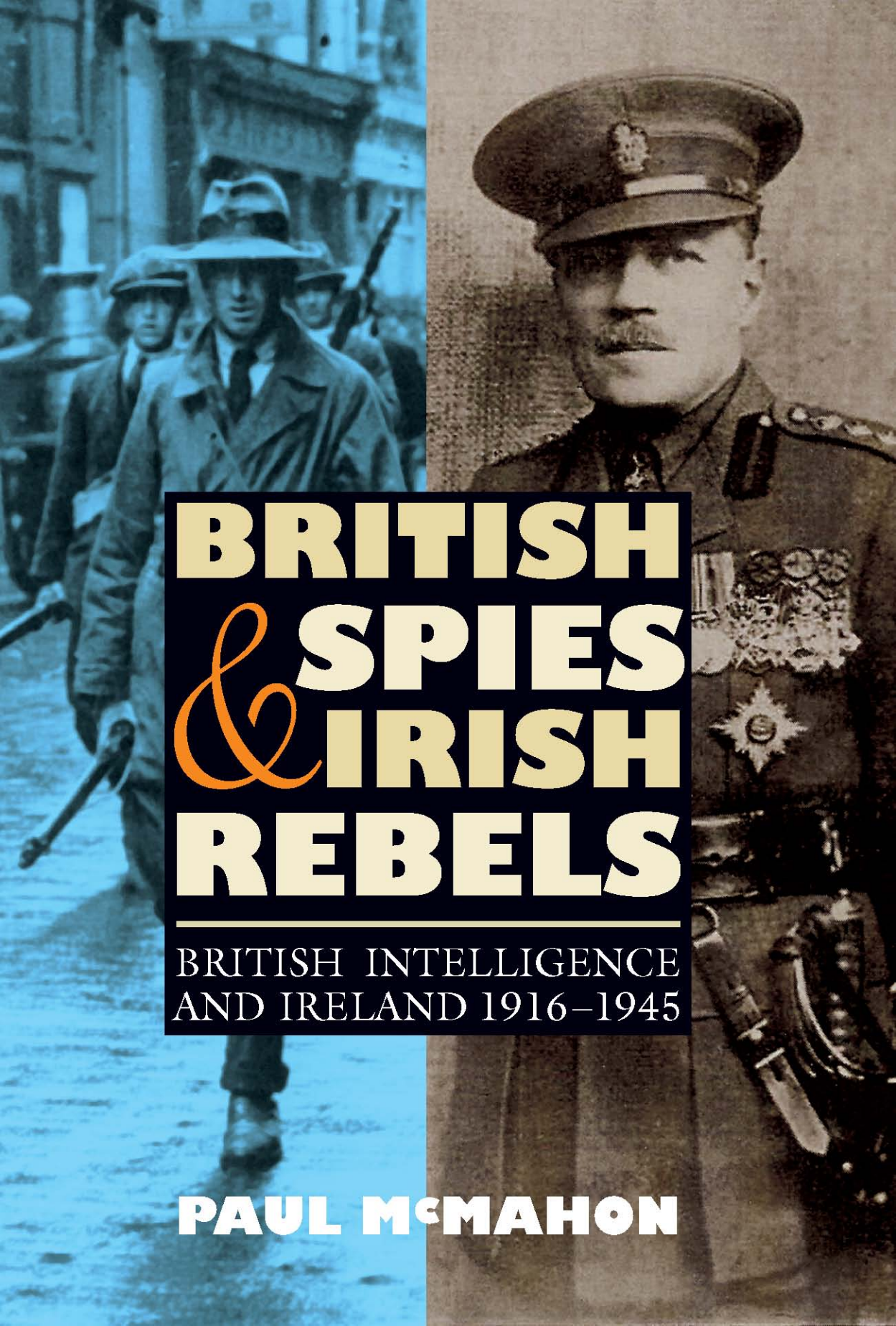

BRITISH & SPIES & IRISH REBELS

BRITISH INTELLIGENCE AND IRELAND 1916–1945

PAUL McMAHON

History of British Intelligence

British Spies and Irish Rebels

British Intelligence and Ireland, 1916–1945

Paul McMahon

History of British Intelligence

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Series Editor
Peter Martland

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Foreword

The main reason for anyone working in the field of intelligence history is to locate and place in perspective what has been described as the missing dimension of modern history: the role intelligence played in forming and executing policy in reaction to the great issues of the past one hundred years.

Until quite recently this has not been possible, because intelligence agencies in Western democracies simply did not make public either their archive or (except in some highly regulated manner) their history: indeed until the early 1990s the British intelligence community operated under the royal prerogative and had no legal or corporate existence. So, as historians were reliant on official histories, all they could glean were tantalising glimpses of events. In the circumstances of official denial, the very idea of creating an intelligence history series would have been frankly absurd. With few scholars working in this field and the governments of western democracies continuing to guard their secrets well, few intelligence files, even from the distant past, ever got to see the light of day in public archives. It was in this vacuum that ex-intelligence officers, such as Ian Fleming and John Le Carré, wrote sensational fictionalised accounts of life in intelligence communities. These gave journalists writing about current intelligence matters the reliable fallback of starting a newspaper article with some kind of James Bond or George Smiley reference. Scholars were forced to rely for their sources on personal contact, secondary material and memoirs. As a result, though some works were and remain excellent studies, providing the foundations upon which modern scholarship can be based, much of what was written we can see today as largely an antiquarian study of intelligence.

However, much has changed recently, during a period which saw the end of the Cold War and the opening up of government secrets to public scrutiny via freedom of information legislation. In nations like Britain and the United States, both scholars and the public have, for the first time, gained access to information that in its day was considered the most secret and sensitive. As a consequence, a growing number of works based on these files have been published. This process has attracted much new academic work in the field, notably at Cambridge and Queen Mary & Westfield College, London, where weekly intelligence seminars bring together those on the cutting edge of intelligence history. These researchers, working in many archives in the Western world and elsewhere, are rewriting the history of the turbulent twentieth century. The series History of British Intelligence, which is launched with Paul McMahon's *British Spies and Irish Rebels*, aims to be the leading forum for this new pattern of research.

Peter Martland, *Series Editor*

Acknowledgements

This book is the product of a decade's research, pondering and writing. It first sprouted while I was an undergraduate at University College Dublin; it grew to maturity during languid doctoral days at Cambridge University; it was hewn and crafted during a career break spent in New York and in London; and it received a final polishing in the tropical heat of Aceh, Indonesia. Over this time, I have accumulated many debts of gratitude. I would like to thank my supervisors in Cambridge, Professor Christopher Andrew and Dr Neville Wylie, and an early mentor in Dublin, Dr Richard Aldous. My appreciation goes to all the librarians and archivists who guided me towards the sources, especially those responsible for government and military records in London, Dublin and Washington, D.C. I also received generous help from Dr Emily Wilson, Professor Eunan O'Halpin, Professor Keith Jeffrey, T. Ryle Dwyer, Dr Mark Hull and the Rev. Brendan Bradshaw. The initial research for this book was made possible by financial assistance from St John's College, Cambridge, the Foreign Office Chevening Scholarship programme, the Economic and Social Research Council, the Arts and Humanities Research Board and the Robert Gardiner Memorial Fund. At a later stage, Dr Peter Martland, Chris Lane, Simon Duke, Dr. Joe Ó'Longaigh, and my father, Liam McMahon, undertook the heroic task of reading through long, and sometimes painfully raw, versions of the text (although any errors that remain are solely my responsibility). I would like to thank Carmen and Naomi for putting up with me while in difficult writer mode, and my brother for always providing good advice. Finally, I would like to thank the characters who people this book – the spies, the rebels and all the others who became entangled in the complex Anglo-Irish relationship. I have pulled into the light some who may have preferred to stay in the shadows, but I hope I have done them justice in my portraits.

Abbreviations

AARIR	American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic
ACA	Army Comrades Association
AIDA	American Irish Defence Association
AOC	Air Officer Commanding
BOAC	British Overseas Airways Corporation
BSC	British Security Coordination
BTNI	British Troops in Northern Ireland command
'C'	Chief of Secret Service (SIS)
CCA	Churchill College Archives
CID	Criminal Investigation Department
CIGS	Chief of the Imperial General Staff
CO	Colonial Office
COS	Chiefs of Staff
CPGB	Communist Party of Great Britain
D Branch	British secret service in Dublin, 1920–1
D/EA	Department of External Affairs
D/FA	Department of Foreign Affairs
D/J	Department of Justice
D/T	Department of Taoiseach
DMI	Director of Military Intelligence
DMP	Dublin Metropolitan Police
DNI	Director of Naval Intelligence
DO	Dominions Office
FO	Foreign Office
FS	Free State
G2	Irish military intelligence
GC&CS	Government Code & Cypher School
GHQ	General Headquarters
GOC	General Officer Commanding
HD(S)E	Home Defence (Security) Executive
HHW	Henry Wilson Papers
HO	Home Office
IMA	Irish Military Archives, Dublin
INF	Ministry of Information
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IWM	Imperial War Museum
JIC	Joint Intelligence Sub-Committee
JP	Joint Planning Sub-Committee
MEPO	Metropolitan Police
MI5	Security Service [British domestic intelligence]
MI6	Secret Intelligence Service [British foreign intelligence]
MOI	Ministry of Information
NAI	National Archives of Ireland
NI	Northern Ireland
NID	Naval Intelligence Division
NLI	National Library of Ireland
NMM	National Maritime Museum
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
PG	Provisional Government (Dublin)
PGI	Provisional Government of Ireland Committee (London)
PREM	Prime Minister's office
PRO	Public Records Office
PRONI	Public Records Office of Northern Ireland
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
RSS	Radio Security Service
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SIS	Secret Intelligence Service [British foreign intelligence]
SOE	Special Operations Executive
TNA	The National Archives, UK
UCD	University College Dublin
USNA	United States National Archives
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force
WO	War Office
X-2	Office of Strategic Services counter-espionage branch

In memory of Nora, my mother

Introduction

> 'Simply put, intelligence is knowledge and foreknowledge of the world that surrounds us.' [1]

In July 1920 an Anglo-Irish intelligence officer named Charles Tegart made the long sea journey from India to London. The son of a Church of Ireland minister, Tegart was born in County Derry, spent much of his childhood in Dunboyne, Co. Meath, and studied briefly at Trinity College Dublin, before joining the Indian police force in 1901. Over the next two decades he established a reputation as a resourceful and ruthless opponent of Indian nationalist revolutionaries. He was particularly famous for his disguises – a colleague once saw him dressed as a Bengali gentleman talking with pimps and prostitutes in the red-light district of Calcutta.[2] At the personal request of the British Prime Minister, Tegart was released from the Indian police in 1920, so that he could deploy his counter-revolutionary skills in Ireland. His task was to design a new intelligence system that would be capable of defeating the separatist campaign of Sinn Féin and the Irish Republican Army (IRA), then at its most intense. Twenty years later, after a spell in Palestine fighting Arab rebels, Tegart returned to the vexing Irish problem. With Europe falling to Hitler's advancing armies, British intelligence chiefs worried that neutral Ireland might be the next country to face German attack. At their request, Tegart travelled to Dublin in May 1940 to investigate conditions. His reports were disturbing. He claimed that 2,000 IRA leaders and German agents had been landed in Ireland by U-boat since the outbreak of the war. Together with members of the German legation in Dublin, they were 'buying up estates' on the west and south coasts, 'rooting up hedges' and 'leveling suitable fields' to make landing grounds for German aircraft. These 'Quislings' were 'awaiting the signal to declare a revolution at the moment that German troops land'. A German force of no more than 2,000 troops 'could probably capture the whole country' in days.[3] Tegart's reports were transmitted to the new Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, in London. Convinced that his picture was 'a true one', British ministers made a desperate offer of Irish unity in an effort to persuade the Dublin government to join the war, while British military chiefs planned a pre-emptive invasion of southern Ireland.[4]

Tegart's interventions in 1920 and 1940 mark the high points of Irish threats to Britain in the first half of the twentieth century. At one end was Ireland's violent struggle for independence, which began with the Easter Rising in 1916; at

the other was southern Ireland's clearest declaration of that independence – its neutral stance during the Second World War. In between, there was a period of difficult evolution that saw the partition of the island, civil war in the south, Anglo-Irish diplomatic disputes and recurrent republican violence. The British government struggled to understand or to come to terms with these challenges. One reason was its difficulty in obtaining good intelligence on Ireland. Because the country did not fall neatly into the normal structures of British intelligence, it was subject to neglect and confusion. The attitude of the British government veered between ignorance and alarm. Indeed, ignorance often bred alarm. 'What frightens Intelligence people', one Irish army officer observed, 'is not what they know but what they don't know and what they suspect.'[5] This only changed in the middle of the Second World War, when Britain developed excellent intelligence on Irish affairs, largely because of highly secret co-operation with the indigenous authorities in Dublin. The early failures, uncertain development and eventual success of Britain's intelligence engagement with Ireland are the subject of this book.

There is often confusion over what 'intelligence' means. In popular culture, the term is synonymous with spies and spying, a black art of statecraft. Scholars of intelligence have sometimes used equally narrow definitions: for some, it is limited to the collection of information by *covert* means, for example, using secret agents or the breaking of codes; others interpret it as the study of specialist (often secret) intelligence *agencies*. This book adopts a broad definition, which incidentally conforms to the meaning of the word when it first entered use in the sixteenth century: intelligence is the collection and processing of all information, whether open or secret, pertaining to the security of the state. British intelligence gathering in Ireland between 1916 and 1945 involved plenty of covert operations, specialist intelligence agencies and colourful spies; but information also flowed into government from diplomats, private correspondents and the press. Once there, it mingled with a cacophony of preconceptions, prejudices and political opinions that conditioned how the British perceived Ireland. It is necessary to examine all these inputs, and the way they were processed, to understand how British policy-makers learnt about Irish threats. By using this broader definition, a study of intelligence ultimately becomes a study of governmental *knowing*.[6]

Tegart's 1940 reports touched on all the threats to national security that had preoccupied the British government since 1916. The most important was the threat posed by Irish *militant republicanism*, a movement that advocated the use of force to achieve a united Irish republic, free of British control. It had a political wing, in the shape of Sinn Féin and other mutating political parties, but at its core was a paramilitary organisation, the IRA. It posed a direct subversive threat

in Ireland, first to the British administration before 1922, and thereafter to the two Irish administrations in Belfast and Dublin; it carried out terrorist acts on English soil in 1919–23 and 1939–40; it had an important international dimension and could affect Britain's relations with its allies, particularly the United States of America. The second major threat to British security was *foreign subversion* in Ireland by Britain's enemies: first Germany during the First World War, then the Soviet Union and the international communist movement after 1917, then Germany again in the 1930s and 1940s. Such activities, as well as threatening the Irish government, could be directed at Britain in the form of sabotage, espionage, and propaganda. Closely linked to this was the third major threat to preoccupy British intelligence: Ireland's potential *role in war*. Ireland possessed naval and air bases vital to Britain's communications and was an important source of military manpower; it also offered a tempting 'back door' for invasion of the British Isles and a base for subversive activities against Britain. This would be of critical importance at the end of this period, when Britain was fighting for its survival.

It would have been impossible to write this book a decade ago. Historians have pointed out that intelligence is often the 'missing dimension' in traditional accounts of domestic and foreign affairs, often because government files on this subject have remained closed.[7] However, the past ten years have seen the British and Irish governments open a vast amount of material on intelligence and security matters. Frustratingly, much remains classified; the historian is sometimes forced into the role of detective, piecing together evidence from incomplete sources. But there is now enough material in official and private archives to tell the story of British intelligence and Ireland for the first time. It is an engrossing tale, full of conflicting loyalties and unexpected paradoxes, which reflect the complexity of the Anglo-Irish relationship during these years.

As well as unveiling Britain's intelligence relationship with Ireland, this book explores some broader themes. On one level, it throws further light on the evolution of the British intelligence community. The latter had many early deficiencies, and it was not until the Second World War that it developed into the sophisticated system that survives today.[8] The story of British intelligence and Ireland largely follows this arc, although Ireland's anomalous political status often made it an unique intelligence case. At another level, this subject can also help us better understand the development of British policy towards Ireland and the 'high politics' of Anglo-Irish relations. Intelligence on (and misperceptions of) national security threats had a major impact on British decision-makers during this period, especially at times of crisis. Bad intelligence could lead to bad policy. Finally, this book contributes to the historiographical debate over the realities of twentieth-century Ireland. The historian F. S. L. Lyons has identified

a clash of four cultures in modern Irish history: nationalist, northern unionist, southern unionist and English.[9] This book focuses on the attitudes of the English (who had much in common with northern and southern unionists). Their views on the nature of Irish politics and society are often very different from orthodox nationalist interpretations. Post-modern approaches to history underscore the value of studying such alternative narratives in order to appreciate the complexity of the past. Thus, by looking at British intelligence, and British perceptions of Ireland, we not only learn something about Britain and how Britain thought; it can also tell us something about Ireland and how Ireland *was*.

British spies had been fighting Irish rebels for centuries before 1916. They dealt with the same threats that preoccupied London in 1940: secret republican organisations, enemy agents and the possibility of foreign invasion. In contrast to the twentieth century, the earlier British intelligence system proved capable of handling these threats. Irish revolutionary movements were crushed and Britain's foreign enemies gained little advantage from their would-be ally. However, it will be seen that the pre-twentieth-century experience contained legacies that help explain the difficulties of Tegart and his colleagues between 1916 and 1945.

The triumph of British spies over Irish rebels was epitomised by the experience of the United Irishmen in the 1798 rebellion. This uprising had all the hallmarks of later Irish revolutionary movements: an oath-bound secret society (the United Irishmen), republican ideals, a commitment to physical force and a willingness to obtain assistance from Britain's foreign enemies – in this case France. One of the principal reasons for its failure was the good intelligence available to the government. Some of this intelligence came from continental Europe, where Theobald Wolfe Tone was conspiring with French revolutionary leaders to mount a military expedition to Ireland. The British Prime Minister, Pitt the Younger, directed a number of informants on the Continent and encouraged the heads of British diplomatic missions to cultivate agents, especially among counter-revolutionary elements in France.[10] The British secret service recruited a Swiss agent who posed as a disaffected Irishman, infiltrated United Irishmen circles in Paris in 1798, and uncovered the French plans for an invasion of Ireland.[11] In Ireland the government at Dublin Castle oversaw an equally ambitious intelligence effort. Officials throughout the 32 counties – magistrates, custom officials, stamp officers – reported information on suspicious individuals, cargoes and publications. The staff of the Irish post office regularly intercepted, read and copied the correspondence of suspected subversives. Both Dublin Castle and the British military recruited some notorious informers at the highest level

of the United Irishmen: Thomas Reynolds provided information on a meeting of the organisation's Leinster Directory that led to their round-up on 12 March 1798; two months later the United Irishmen leader Lord Edward Fitzgerald was arrested on information disclosed by a Dublin barrister, Francis Magan. The government's best source was Samuel Turner, a member of the Ulster Revolutionary Committee, who presented himself in the house of Lord Downshire in London in October 1797 and gave full details of the preparations for rebellion, including critical information on the 'French connection'. The Castle's excellent understanding of the ramifications of the conspiracy allowed it to take decisive action against the rebels in the spring of 1798. One historian, in a recent article on this topic, concludes that 'Dublin Castle emerged as victor in the intelligence wars of the 1790s'.[12]

After 1798 the British government made political reforms and instituted an effective security apparatus to minimise the risk of another rebellion. Following the Act of Union in 1801, the Irish parliament was abolished and Irish MPs moved to Westminster. Though separate administrative departments remained at Dublin Castle, Irish affairs were put under the control of a member of the British cabinet – the Chief Secretary. The internal security and policing system that emerged under this regime was very different from the rest of the United Kingdom. In the 1780s the first police service in the British Isles had been established in Dublin, and in 1836 this was reconstituted as the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP). As an unarmed force, it shared some features with the contemporary London Metropolitan Police, but it differed in that it was under central, not local, control and possessed a detective division (the G Division) that played a significant role in investigating political crime. Also in 1836 the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) was formed to police the rest of the country. This was very unlike anything to be found in Britain: it was a heavily armed, semi-military force, subject to military drill and discipline, under tight central control, and possessing a Crime Special Branch that dealt with subversive political movements.[13] The RIC, which developed a reputation for loyalty and efficiency, provided a model for imperial policing in many parts of the world. Throughout the nineteenth century Ireland was at the forefront of modern developments in state counter-subversion and domestic intelligence collection.

The two police forces were notably successful in infiltrating and suppressing the Irish revolutionary movements that emerged during the nineteenth century. When the Young Ireland group planned a rising in 1848, the government was kept fully informed through its spy network and was able to take precautionary measures. Ten years later a more serious organisation emerged on both sides of the Atlantic – the Fenians. With parallel branches in Ireland and the

United States of America, and further members in Britain, it secretly plotted revolution. Yet, as before, all these branches were quickly riddled with informers. The Dublin Metropolitan Police pre-empted a planned revolt in 1865 by raiding the Fenian headquarters and arresting most of the leaders; they were convicted of treason felony and sentenced to penal servitude. When a desultory rising was finally attempted in March 1867 Dublin Castle was forewarned by its spies and able to crush it with ease. Over the next two decades a law officer from Dublin Castle, Robert Anderson, recruited and maintained a number of long-term agents deep within the Fenian movement. The most remarkable was Thomas Billis Beach (alias Henri Le Caron), who successfully penetrated the Fenian Brotherhood in America, rose to a senior position in the organisation and provided regular intelligence to the British government for over twenty years. When his role was finally revealed, it came as a complete shock to his erstwhile comrades. The American Fenian leader John Devoy, after conceding that Beach was 'the champion spy of the century' expressed regret that he had been allowed to die peacefully in his bed when the Irish nation was 'thirsting for his blood.'[14]

Until this time the security system in Ireland was far more sophisticated than in Britain. Liberal Victorian distaste for Continental-style 'political policing' precluded the development of a domestic intelligence agency in Britain. The re-emergence of the Fenian threat in 1881 forced a change in this attitude. The successors to the 1860s Fenian movement were two elaborate, oath-bound, secret societies: the Irish Republican Brotherhood in Ireland and Clan na Gael in America. Intent on waging war in England, they began a short-lived bombing campaign in 1881. A year later a group called the 'Invincibles' assassinated the Chief Secretary, Lord Frederick Cavendish, and the Under-Secretary, Thomas Burke, while they walked in Phoenix Park. In 1883 the Fenian bombing campaign was renewed on a greater scale in English cities, with bombs exploding at the Local Government Board in Whitehall, the Houses of Parliament, the office of *The Times*, several railway stations and even a public urinal within Scotland Yard itself.

Although this revolutionary violence had little political impact, it produced a major institutional change within British security. 'This is not a temporary emergency requiring a momentary remedy', the Home Secretary, Sir William Vernon Harcourt, wrote. 'Fenianism is a permanent conspiracy against English rule which will last far beyond the term of my life and must be met by a permanent organisation to detect and control it.' In March 1883 he created a 'Special Irish Branch' within Scotland Yard under the veteran detective Superintendent 'Dolly' Wilkinson. The Special Irish Branch and the police forces in Ireland mounted

an extensive security operation against the global Fenian organisation: police officers were stationed at British ports, in European cities and in the United States; more informers were recruited on both sides of the Atlantic. Due to this crack-down the terrorists were thoroughly defeated by early 1885. However, rather than disbanding the temporary security apparatus, in 1887 the government merged RIC officers who had been stationed at British ports with the Special Irish Branch to form a new, permanent organisation – the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police. It was given responsibility for monitoring *all* political crime in Britain. Thus, it was the experience of Irish republican revolutionaries that led to the creation of the first British domestic political surveillance agency. As a future chief of the Special Branch noted: 'Without the Irish there would possibly have been no Special Branch.'[15] The organisation continued to have a strong Irish influence for many years. Subsequent recruits tended to be drawn from the Irish police or Anglo-Irish families, because they had more experience of counter-subversion and showed fewer scruples than their English colleagues about engaging in 'political policing'. Similarly, although the 'Branch' diversified into monitoring anarchist groups, the Irish republican movement remained one of its chief targets.[16]

The British intelligence system was effective in crushing Irish separatist movements throughout the nineteenth century. This was one of the reasons for the decline in support for militant republicanism in the 1890s – to many would-be Irish rebels, success appeared impossible. The other reason was the policy of the British government. The Conservative Party instituted a policy of 'killing Home Rule with kindness', and, through reforms in land ownership, local government, and education, removed many of the social grievances that had fuelled political radicalism.[17] Anglo-Irish relations improved, and the majority of nationalist Ireland put their faith in the constitutional politics of the Irish Parliamentary Party, demanding not republican separation but Home Rule, a relatively limited form of self-government within the British empire.

Yet the long-running battle between the British state and Irish rebels left some important legacies. First, it shaped Irish attitudes towards British intelligence activities. Nineteenth-century Irish histories cited the work of informers as one of the main reasons for the collapse of the 1798 rebellion. W. J. Fitzpatrick included an appendix titled 'Informers Everywhere' in his 1872 book *The Sham Squire and the informers of 1798*; he concluded that 'secret conspiracies can do no good … informers will always be found to betray them.'[18] Irish society developed a special abhorrence of informers, and the 'British Secret Service' entered Irish folklore as an all-knowing, all-powerful sinister force. One DMP officer described how the British authorities were commonly perceived at this time:

> Their web was spread wide and of a fine mesh: they kept a lynx eye on every Irish organisation, big or small. It is well known that for centuries the Castle succeeded in penetrating Irish leftwing circles with the aid of secret services, police, informers, and that crack regiment, St. George's cavalry (i.e. gold sovereigns) … In every age an Irish Judas was hidden in the undergrowth.[19]

A new generation of Irish revolutionaries in the twentieth century, well aware of this history, would place much greater emphasis on guarding their secrets against British spies.

A second legacy of this turbulent past was to shape British perceptions of the Irish race. The Fenian bombing campaign, the Phoenix Park murders and persistent agrarian disturbances reinforced deep cultural stereotypes in Britain about the Irish people that were of far older provenance. In the early modern period, dehumanising portrayals of the 'mere Irish', and contrasts between English 'civilization' and Irish 'barbarism', were used to justify English conquest of the island. In the mid-Victorian period, political violence combined with mass emigration from Ireland to British cities to produce a wave of anti-Irish sentiment, best typified by the representation in *Punch* cartoons of Irishmen as drooling, crazed apes, or Frankenstinian monsters, bristling with weapons. The extent to which this racial and colonial stereotyping reflected opinion in Britain has been the subject of lively debate by historians, which reflects the difficulties of categorising national mentalities.[20] Naturally, there were varying representations of the Irish in British culture; even within *Punch*, there were positive, romantic images of the Irish as a 'pure' race unsullied by modern civilisation or as a beautiful feminine Hibernia. Nevertheless, there is convincing evidence that the negative stereotypes were far more numerous than the positive, and that most people in Britain perceived Ireland as an uncivilised, violent 'Other'. Even when Ireland was portrayed positively in the form of a feminine Hibernia, she was invariably menaced by a gun-yielding, simianised Caliban – the embodiment of militant republicanism and land agitation – and in need of Britannia's protection. Between 1860 and 1890 an indelible image of Irish savagery was stamped on the minds of the British reading public.[21] As we shall see, these stereotypes would distort British policy towards Ireland well into the twentieth century.

The final legacy of the nineteenth century tussle between Irish rebels and the British state was to reinforce the separateness of the Irish security system. The Irish police forces were very different from their British counterparts, and Dublin Castle handled political subversion in its own way. Even the Special Branch in London remained distinct from the new British domestic and foreign

intelligence agencies established in 1909 (which would gradually evolve into MI5 and the Secret Intelligence Service – or MI6, as it is popularly known). This was all very well so long as the Irish security system was effective and at the forefront of modern techniques. But by the start of the twentieth century this was no longer the case. The Irish police had become complacent and conservative. When outside British agencies were introduced, there was organisational confusion and a clash of cultures. As violent revolution reshaped the country between 1916 and 1923 the British government struggled to fit the Irish anomaly into its developing intelligence system; it would continue to do so until the Second World War.


SCOTLAND
Lough Swilly
Lough Foyle
Derry
DONEGAL
DERRY
ANTRIM
Larne
ATLANTIC OCEAN
TYRONE
Belfast
Pettigo
Omagh
Enniskillen
Armagh
DOWN
FERMANGH
ARMAGH
Sligo
MONAGHAN
SLIGO
LEITRIM
Dundalk
Carlingford Lough
Achill I.
MAYO
CAVAN
LOUTH
Westport
ROSCOMMON
Drogheda
LONGFORD
MEATH
Clifden
WESTMEATH
R.Boyne
Dublin
GALWAY
Maynooth
DUBLIN
Dun Laoghaire
Killiney
Bray
Galway
R.Shannon
OFFALY
KILDARE
Kildare
The Curragh
IRISH SEA
WICKLOW
Wicklow
CLARE
LAOIS
Ennis
Nenagh
Rineanna Airport
Shannon Estuary
Ardnacrusha
CARLOW
Kilkenny
Limerick
Foynes
TIPPERARY
KILKENNY
WEXFORD
LIMERICK
Soloheadbeg
Clonmel
Fenit
Tralee
Wexford
Dingle
KERRY
Kilmichael
Waterford
WATERFORD
ST GEORGE'S CHANNEL
Killarney
Valentia Is.
Macroom
Cork
Waterville
Cobh (Queenstown)
Glengariff
Ballycotton Bay
Berehaven
CORK
Bantry Bay
0 miles 50
0 km 80

PART I

The Irish Revolution, 1916–23

CHAPTER 1

Losing Southern Ireland

Ever since the first failed Home Rule Bill in 1886, nationalist Ireland, led by the Irish Parliamentary Party in Westminster, had patiently sought to achieve self-government through constitutional means. In 1910, for the first time in a generation, this appeared within reach. In that year a closely fought general election handed the Irish party under John Redmond the balance of power in the House of Commons. The Irish formed an alliance with the Liberal Party on condition that Home Rule would be part of the government's programme; over the next three and a half years, the reluctant Liberal Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, slowly pushed a Home Rule Bill through parliament. He faced stiff opposition. The Protestant unionists of Ulster cried that Home Rule was 'Rome Rule' and were prepared to go to any length to stay out of a self-governing Ireland. They were supported to the hilt by the Conservative Party. Matters moved towards civil war when unionists raised a 100,000-strong Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), which imported arms and was prepared to fight against the government if the Bill was passed. In reaction to this, nationalists formed the Irish Volunteers, eventually comprising 105,000 men, who threatened to fight if the Bill was *not* passed. The country now boasted two hostile amateur militias that recruited, drilled and procured weapons. In the end the spiral towards violence was interrupted by the outbreak of European conflict in August 1914. The Home Rule Bill was finally passed – with the proviso that north-east Ulster would be excluded – but its implementation was postponed until the end of the war.

It was assumed that the war would be over quickly. Although the fate of the Ulster counties was still uncertain, it appeared that the bulk of Ireland would be enjoying self-government before long. To nationalist Ireland, a great victory had been won, the culmination of decades of parliamentary agitation. John Redmond called on the country to support the war effort, and most Irish Volunteers – renamed the National Volunteers – followed his lead. However, within seven years Ireland had gone through a dramatic revolution. Redmond was dead; the Irish Parliamentary Party had ceased to exist; the moderate nationalist consensus in favour of Home Rule was no more. Instead, a majority now backed a party that had been on the fringes of Irish politics since 1905 – Sinn Féin. Demanding full independence from Britain, Sinn Féin swept the elections in 1918 and 1921.

Even more surprisingly, much of the country was prepared to support, or at least acquiesce in, a campaign of republican violence. An IRB-controlled faction of the Irish Volunteers had broken away from Redmond in 1914 and staged a rising at Easter 1916; between 1919 and 1921 the organisation, now known as the 'Irish Republican Army', waged an effective guerrilla war against the forces of the crown. The British government agreed to a truce in 11 July 1921 and signed an Anglo-Irish Treaty with Sinn Féin leaders on 5 December 1921, granting Dominion status and substantial independence to the southern twenty-six counties. Sinn Féin and the IRA had not obtained a full republic, but they had achieved far more than any previous separatist campaign in Irish history.[1]

The Irish revolution provided a template for separatist campaigns that the British state would face in many parts of the world during the twentieth century. It had a military aspect – a guerrilla insurgency against the security forces. It had a political dimension – the radicalisation of the general population. It posed a major challenge for the British intelligence system. Two types of intelligence were essential if the British state was to have any chance of victory. The first was *tactical* intelligence: information on the identity, location, strength, and intentions of the militants, which could be used for military operations, arrests and criminal prosecutions. The second was *political* or strategic intelligence: information on the state of opinion in Ireland, and the overall strength of the separatist movement, which was necessary for wise policy-making and the achievement of a favourable political solution. The British intelligence system did not always perform well on either of these dimensions. It was hampered by its own internal weaknesses, the effectiveness of its Irish opposition and the constraints imposed by British policy and the Irish political environment.

The rise of Sinn Féin

The first stage of the Irish revolution was essentially a political process, whereby the advanced nationalism of Sinn Féin squeezed out the Irish Parliamentary Party and established itself as the credo of Catholic Ireland. Yet its catalyst was a military rising at Easter 1916. The rising was planned in great secrecy by a cabal within the IRB Supreme Council, led by long-time revolutionaries and a new generation of quasi-mystical republicans. They sought to exploit the 8,000 radical Irish Volunteers under Professor Eoin MacNeill, who, refusing to support the British war effort, split from John Redmond's mainstream organisation in 1914. In 1916 the IRB plotters co-opted a small paramilitary labour organisation in Dublin – the Irish Citizen's Army – led by a talented socialist organiser named James Connolly. This was very much an international conspiracy. From

the United States of America, Clan na Gael urged on the militant wing within the IRB and the Irish Volunteers. The Clan also acted on behalf of the revolutionary leaders in Ireland to secure military assistance from Germany. The public figurehead of this international alliance-making was Sir Roger Casement, a British colonial civil servant turned revolutionary, who travelled from New York to Berlin at the end of 1914. His objectives were to recruit an Irish Brigade from prisoners of war in Germany and to persuade the German government to launch a military invasion of Ireland. He failed on both counts: the German government refused to send its own soldiers to Ireland, and all but sixty Irish prisoners of war rejected Casement's appeals. However, the Germans did agree to send a major shipment of arms (including 20,000 rifles) and to smuggle Casement ashore by submarine. This was to coincide with a general rising in Ireland set for Easter Sunday, 23 April 1916.[2]

It was the job of the British intelligence system in Ireland to uncover and pre-empt this plot. However, the security and intelligence apparatus in Ireland was less equipped to deal with this threat than at any time during the previous century. The more liberal regimes before the First World War had discouraged active surveillance of nationalist groups and cut secret service funds. The zeal and efficiency of the Irish police forces in intelligence work had declined because of complacency, bureaucracy and the expectation that major police reform would accompany Home Rule. By 1914 there were only twelve plain-clothes detectives in the G Division of the Dublin Metropolitan Police. They spent most of their time attending public meetings and watching the movements of political activists; they did not attempt to place long-term secret agents inside revolutionary groups (though they had a string of casual informers or 'touts'). In the rest of the country the Crime Special Branch of the Royal Irish Constabulary consisted of a small bureau of three officers in Dublin, together with part-time duty by a sergeant in each county and a constable in each district. They refrained from plain-clothes activity and aggressive agent recruitment, and relied on an antiquated record-keeping system. The failings of the police forces were evident to the British army. On the eve of the First World War its Irish Command drew up a paper condemning the RIC and DMP intelligence system and urging the government to create a proper Irish secret service to provide intelligence on militant groups. But Dublin Castle took no action: the liberal Chief Secretary, Augustine Birrell, and the Under-Secretary, Sir Matthew Nathan, were complacent about the republican threat and reluctant to interfere with Sinn Féin agitation or Volunteer organising.[3] Thus, whereas the Irish policing system had been at the forefront of innovation in intelligence-gathering techniques during the nineteenth century, by the twentieth it had fallen behind.

It is ironic that the intelligence system in Ireland went into decline just as the modern British intelligence community came into being. Before the 1900s there was no permanently established 'British Secret Service'. The collection of foreign intelligence through secret means was hastily improvised, usually in times of war; domestic intelligence gathering did not go beyond the limited activities of the Special Branch. This changed in the first decade of the twentieth century because of the perceived threat – based as much on fiction as fact – from a newly potent Imperial Germany. A series of bizarre invasion and spy scares, whipped up by the populist press, swept the country: many otherwise sane individuals, in the government and outside, believed that the Germans were not only poised to launch a surprise invasion of Britain, but had also recruited tens of thousands of spies and saboteurs among the German community residing in the country. (One of the first and most influential novels in this genre was *The Riddle of the Sands* by Erskine Childers. He would go on to become Sinn Féin Director of Propaganda and a major target for British intelligence, before facing execution by the Irish government during the Civil War.) Responding to this clamour, the London government established a Secret Service Bureau in 1909.

The new Bureau had two sections, which would evolve into the major institutions of British intelligence. The first was tasked with domestic counter-espionage and, despite numerous titles, would eventually become known as the Security Service or MI5. Its head until 1940 was Captain (later Colonel Sir) Vernon Kell, a meticulous army officer who spoke five languages, thanks to a cosmopolitan, well-travelled upbringing. The second section was tasked with foreign espionage and became known as MI1c, the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS) or MI6. (To avoid confusion, this book will use the appellation SIS throughout.) Its chief until the end of the First World War was Commander (later Captain Sir) Mansfield Cumming, a retired naval officer who went by the codename 'C' – a designation that all heads of SIS have used since. He was known for his habitual cheerfulness and his passion for mechanised transport: he was the owner of a small fleet of boats; he learnt how to fly in his early fifties; and when he lost a leg in a motor accident during the First World War, he took to propelling himself around the corridors of the War Office on a child's scooter. Cumming also had an Irish connection: in the late 1880s he served as private secretary to the Earl of Meath, and then as agent on his estates in Ireland, where he had some success in winning over hostile tenants.[4]

Before 1914 the two new agencies had an amateur ethos, tiny staffs and meagre budgets – their achievements were limited. But after the start of the war they expanded rapidly and carved out permanent institutional niches in the British government. The entire British intelligence community underwent a similar

process. The naval and military intelligence departments – with headquarters in London and local units attached to army commands and fleets around the world – saw dramatic expansion in size and function. There was also a change in how politicians viewed intelligence. Intelligence chiefs began to enjoy much greater influence in policy-making, and the government was willing to sanction much more aggressive intelligence techniques: most notably, Britain began systematically decrypting and reading the diplomatic communications of foreign powers. It has not stopped since. The British intelligence community increased its scope, developed a professional cadre, and made some notable contributions to the eventual Allied victory.

The expanded and professionalised British intelligence agencies began to play a greater role in Irish affairs after 1914, though the unusual status of the country meant that their involvement was limited and not always productive. The army took some steps to increase its intelligence capabilities: Major Ivor H. Price, a former RIC County Inspector, was appointed as Intelligence Officer to Irish Command. His chief contribution to Irish intelligence derived from his responsibility for wartime censorship in Ireland, especially the imposition of postal censorship on suspected individuals. Postal censorship was the primary source of information for domestic intelligence agencies in Britain during the First World War. However, its operation in Ireland was on a small scale: whereas the MI5 postal censorship bureau in Britain was 1,453 strong by the end of 1915, its Irish equivalent consisted of just ten men. As a result, only a small proportion of correspondence could be inspected; some important leaders of advanced nationalism, such as Padráig Pearse, were not on the list. Apart from postal censorship, Price had few other sources of intelligence of his own. He did not build up any sort of secret service in Ireland, instead relying on the reports from the RIC and DMP. Though exhibiting greater concern about the revolutionary threat than many in Dublin Castle, he never fully got to grips with the leadership structure of the Sinn Féin movement.[5] This was confirmed after the rising, when he interrogated Eoin MacNeill, the titular Chief of Staff of the Irish Volunteers. 'Price made a number of statements', MacNeill later recorded, 'designed to convey the impression that he was in possession of much inner knowledge.' The actual impression, MacNeill continued, 'was distinctly the contrary. In fact, in view of the open character of the Volunteer organization, the ignorance shown by the Intelligence Department was surprising.'[6]

Another agency with a developing, if tangential, interest in Ireland was MI5. This was partly driven by the personal interests of one of its senior officers, Captain (from 1915 Major) Frank Hall. A 'classic Ulster imperialist' from near Warrenpoint in Co. Down, Hall had organised the anti-Home Rule Ulster

Day demonstrations in September 1912 and served as Military Secretary of the Ulster Volunteer Force. He was an accomplished unionist gunrunner, importing machine guns from London in 1913 and taking charge of the landing and distribution of UVF rifles smuggled into Larne Harbour a year later.[7] On the outbreak of war he switched from subverting the British state to protecting it: he joined MI5. Hall first took on Irish affairs as something as a sideline, but in May 1915 he was made head of a dedicated Irish section (G3), which investigated 'all cases of suspected espionage, sedition or treachery in Ireland'; in September 1916 this was spun off as a new MI5 branch (D Branch) that was responsible for the Dominions (Canada, South Africa, Australia, and New Zealand) as well as Ireland.

The First World War files of MI5 are strangely reticent about the agency's involvement in Ireland. To some extent Hall was concerned about the threat of rebellion, examining intelligence on the foreign intrigues of Roger Casement and circulating it within MI5.[8] However, MI5 was mostly focused on German spies, not Irish rebels. For example, Hall tracked two German agents in Britain who travelled to Ireland in 1915: one was Anton Kuepferle, a naturalised American of German descent, who spent two days in Ireland after being sent to Britain by the head of the German secret service in New York; he was arrested and put on trial, but committed suicide before a verdict was reached.[9]

MI5 took a back seat on Irish affairs to two other British intelligence departments – the Special Branch of the Metropolitan Police and the Naval Intelligence Division (NID). They were headed by two of the most flamboyant and powerful intelligence chiefs in wartime Britain. The Special Branch was led by Basil Thomson. A son of an Archbishop of York, he had enjoyed an extremely varied career in the Colonial Service and then at home: he had been Prime Minister of Tonga (at the age of only twenty-eight), private tutor to the Crown Prince of Siam and governor of Dartmoor prison. 'My first native friends were cannibals', he recalled of his early colonial experiences, 'but I learned very quickly that the warrior who had eaten his man as a quasi-religious act was a far more estimable person than the town-bred, mission-educated native.' He became head of the Special Branch in 1913.[10] The Special Branch had traditionally dealt with Irish republican organisations outside of Ireland, but Thomson was also an aggressive empire-builder who attempted to carve out a role as intelligence supremo in the British government. He would play a major role in Irish affairs until his removal in November 1921. His ally, the Director of Naval Intelligence, Captain (later Admiral) Reginald 'Blinker' Hall, has been described as 'the most successful intelligence chief of the First World War'. His great influence in government was due to his control of the outstanding naval cryptanalytic department,

Room 40, which succeeded in breaking Germany's naval and diplomatic codes, although he also masterminded a bewildering range of other covert activities around the world.[11] He was renowned for his high-speed blinking (which gave him his nickname) and his piercing gaze: 'Hall can look through you and see the very muscular movements of your immortal soul while he is talking to you', an awed American ambassador to London wrote. 'Such eyes as the man has! My Lord!' [12]

Hall and Thomson threw themselves into operations in Ireland during the early stages of the war, when they became convinced that German U-boats were sheltering on the Irish coast, communicating with 'Sinn Féiners' and landing spies. This was part of a wave of 'spy mania' that partially infected politicians and intelligence chiefs.[13] Hall's characteristically bold response was to despatch a 510-ton steam yacht, the *Sayanora*, to snoop around the Irish coastline. It was crewed by members of the Royal Navy, who did their best to imitate Americans. A British major posed as its owner, and advertised his pro-German sympathies by sporting an up-turned moustache, Homburg hat and strong Teutonic accent. They set out to make contact with Irish republicans and to discover German intrigues, but they achieved little apart from exciting the suspicions of Irish loyalists: one dignitary rushed to London with a story that he had seen the *Sayanora* planting mines on behalf of the Germans in Westport Harbour. In addition to this far-fetched scheme, the Admiralty developed a secret coastwatching network among Irish residents.[14] Although details remain vague, it seems that its members were mainly drawn from the dependable loyalist class, organised by notables such as the Governor of the Bank of Ireland. They started the work under their own initiative, before being taken on by the Admiralty, which put the network in the hands of W. V. Harrel.[15] Little information regarding German activity in Ireland could have come from this network, for the simple reason that, apart from the IRB negotiations in Germany, such intrigues hardly existed. (Both the development of a secret coastwatching service among southern loyalists and the despatch of undercover ships to the Irish coast would be repeated in the Second World War, when London was gripped by similar fears about U-boat activity around Ireland.)

The limited and ineffective involvement of British intelligence agencies, the decline in the capabilities of the Irish police forces and the strict secrecy of the Irish rebels all meant that the government had very little intelligence on the preparations for rebellion being laid in Ireland. Only two significant informers – codenamed 'Chalk' and 'Granite' – appear in Dublin Castle records from this period, both run by DMP G detectives. Their information in the weeks leading up to the Easter Rising was incomplete and sometimes contradictory: for

example, Chalk quoted orders from a rebel leader to the effect that they were 'going out on Sunday. Boys, some of us may never come back'; but just a few weeks earlier Granite had reassured his handlers that there was 'no fear of any rising by the Volunteers'.[16] In contrast to their success with republican movements in the nineteenth century, the authorities never penetrated the inner circle of the IRB. As a result, they did not understand the manœuvrings within the Volunteer leadership in the weeks leading up the rising.

The British intelligence system had better luck in uncovering the foreign dimension of the revolutionary plot. The first evidence of the contacts between Irish revolutionaries and Germany came on 29 October 1914, when a 24-year old Norwegian-American named Adler Christensen walked through the doors of the British embassy in Christiania, Norway. He informed the surprised British Minister, M. de C. Findlay, that Sir Roger Casement had just arrived from New York *en route* to Berlin, where he planned to organise a German expedition to Ireland. Over the next two months Christensen returned to Norway and handed over letters, plans and charts belonging to Casement. Findlay accepted them eagerly, and, in a signed note, promised the Norwegian £5,000 for information leading to the capture of Casement. Findlay's reports on this supposed intelligence windfall were passed to the British Prime Minister and other members of the cabinet.

Christensen was Casement's translator, messenger, travelling companion and sexual partner. He was also a liar, a blackmailer and a fantasist. At some point, while concealing much of the truth, he revealed his contacts to Casement, who decided to allow the liaison to continue in order to ensnare the British Minister. Once he had collected enough evidence, Casement triumphantly revealed the story to the press, published Findlay's note and (erroneously) claimed that there was a British plot to murder him. The affair was a public embarrassment for the British government and the British Minister to Norway. Yet Christensen also passed on some valid information on Casement's activities, including copies of actual messages to rebel leaders in Ireland and the United States, together with names and addresses of correspondents – these individuals were immediately placed under postal censorship. The Christensen case prompted MI5 to open a personal file on Casement, which was soon populated with reports from returning prisoners of war describing the Irishman's unsuccessful attempts to recruit an Irish Brigade.[17]

The best intelligence on the foreign dimension of the Irish republican movement came not from Europe but from the United States, and specifically from the telegraph cables that passed between that country and Germany. Clan na Gael, led by John Devoy, managed the IRB's relationship with Germany in the

run-up to the Easter Rising: messages from Ireland were typically passed by secret courier to Devoy, who handed them to the German embassy in Washington DC, from where they were sent by enciphered telegram to Berlin. Because the transatlantic cables passed through British territory, the codebreakers of Room 40 obtained copies of all these messages, and were invariably in a position to provide Captain Reginald 'Blinker' Hall with timely decrypts. These revealed that the Irish Volunteers were preparing for a rising, that a German ship was bound for Ireland laden with arms, and that Roger Casement would be landed by submarine – all on Easter weekend 1916. British intelligence chiefs, therefore, knew what to expect, and this contributed to the failure of the German intervention. The Royal Navy intercepted the German ship, the *Aud,* on 21 April (Easter Friday), after she arrived off the coast of Kerry. Casement was captured by the local RIC on 22 April, just hours after stepping ashore. He was immediately whisked off to London for interrogation by the intelligence chiefs most active in Irish affairs – Captain Reginald 'Blinker' Hall of NID, Basil Thomson of the Special Branch and Major Frank Hall of MI5.[18]

However, the quality of Britain's foreign intelligence was stymied by the inability or unwillingness of British intelligence chiefs to use it properly. Though he had received some warning from the Admiralty about the impending arrival of a German ship, the commanding admiral of the Royal Navy in southern Ireland did not take vigorous measures to intercept it; the *Aud* was able to cruise around the Kerry coast for two days before being detected. If the IRB had organised a proper reception, it would have had time to land its arms. The capture of Casement by the RIC was quite fortuitous: they had received no special instructions on the matter. Worst of all, the Chief Secretary and the administrators at Dublin Castle, who had primary responsibility for Irish affairs, were left woefully ill-informed: they did not receive any special warnings based on the decrypted German messages in the weeks before the rising, and they received no details from the interrogation of Casement on 23 April (Easter Sunday).[19] In a later report on the organisation of intelligence, Basil Thomson admitted that there was 'certainly a danger that from lack of co-ordination the Irish Government may be the last Department to receive information of grave moment to the peace of Ireland.' [20] The reluctance of British chiefs to share intelligence with Dublin Castle was partly because they did not want to jeopardise a precious source (Room 40's decrypts); it was partly because the lack of communication between the Irish intelligence system and British agencies meant that neither side fully understood the implications of the information in their possession; but it has also been suggested that British intelligence chiefs deliberately withheld information from Dublin Castle because they wished the rising to go ahead. Casement later

revealed that his interrogators refused his request to be allowed to make a public appeal to the Irish Volunteers for the rising to be cancelled: one of his questioners had responded, 'It's a festering sore, its much better it should come to a head.' Thomson denied this accusation, but his explanation for their actions over the Easter Weekend is not very convincing; it is possible that British intelligence chiefs did manipulate the situation to ensure that an insurrection took place, thereby making a repression of the Irish militants unavoidable.[21]

As a result, when approximately 2,000 Irish Volunteers occupied key sites in central Dublin on the morning of Easter Monday, the civil and military authorities in Ireland were taken completely by surprise. Dublin Castle had interpreted a last-minute order from Eoin MacNeill over the weekend, cancelling the Sunday manœuvres, as a sign that the Volunteers had called off whatever demonstration they had in mind. In fact, this was a belated attempt by MacNeill to thwart the plans of militant leaders whom he no longer controlled. It caused much confusion, especially outside Dublin, but the IRB military committee did not call off the rising – they merely postponed it by one day. The inaction and passivity of the Irish authorities in the face of this threat is astounding. The Chief Secretary and Irish Commander-in-Chief were both in London during the Easter Weekend and made no efforts to return, even when they learnt of the sinking of the *Aud* and the capture of Casement. The officials remaining in Dublin Castle dithered over taking action against the separatist leaders on Sunday and eventually decided to postpone the matter until the next day. On Easter Monday, rather than garrisoning the capital, army officers went off to the horse races at Fairytown.

The complete lack of preparedness is illustrated by the insecurity of Dublin Castle on the morning of Easter Monday. It was defended by a tiny garrison: one unarmed DMP constable, six soldiers at the main gate, and a reserve of twenty-five in the adjacent Ship Street Barracks. A Volunteer force, under the command of Captain Seán Connolly, made a half-hearted attempt to take the Castle in the first hour of the rising. They shot the police constable, overpowered the six soldiers, who were quietly cooking their lunch in the guardroom, and entered the main courtyard; they could have pushed on to the take the entire complex if they had known how weakly defended it was. However, they decided to retreat when the military intelligence officer, Major Price, then meeting with officials to discuss the round-up of Volunteer leaders, ran into the yard blazing away with his revolver. Price may not have been the most effective intelligence officer, but his courageous action almost single-handedly saved Dublin Castle, the seat of British rule for 700 years and the most strategically important building in the capital.[22]

The Easter Rising represented a serious intelligence failure for the British state. Some exoneration lies in the extreme secrecy with which the rising was planned; the rebel leaders were a minority within a minority within a minority, and their furtiveness was one of the reasons why the rebellion went off at half cock. Yet it also reflects the poor performance of the British intelligence system. In contrast to the previous century, Dublin Castle was unable to place informers within the inner circles of the revolutionaries; this explains its inability to unravel the mystery behind the orders and counter-orders emanating from Irish Volunteers headquarters over the Easter weekend. British intelligence chiefs did have access to good intelligence on the foreign dimension of the Irish republican plot, but did not share or use this information wisely. Even when signals were available, the Chief Secretary and his civil servants chose to disregard them, preferring inaction to the risk of alienating nationalist opinion. During the nineteenth century, attempts at revolution had been foiled by a combination of pre-emptive intervention and military deterrent, which turned ambitious plots into inglorious squibs. A similar policy in 1916 may have had the same effect. Instead, the rebels were able to occupy Dublin for six days and mount an heroic, if doomed, defence that would have a dramatic effect on Irish politics.[23]

After the Easter Rising, Irish militant leaders laid down their guns and instead concentrated on turning Sinn Féin – erroneously credited with instigating the rebellion – into the political voice of nationalist Ireland. British policy played directly into their hands. The complacency of the pre-Easter 1916 era was replaced by a ruthless crack-down that transformed the rebels into martyrs and built support for the separatist cause. Martial law was declared by the newly established Military Governor, General Sir John Maxwell; sixteen Irish leaders, including Casement, were executed; and some 1,850 individuals, many innocent, were deported to England and interned under Defence Regulation 14b. This may seem lenient, given that Britain was in the midst of a world war; but in the Irish context it was an over-reaction.[24] Over the next two years the failure to achieve a Home Rule settlement killed the Irish Parliamentary Party, while the death of a republican hunger striker (Thomas Ashe) after clumsy forced feeding provoked further public anger. The position of Sinn Féin, by now a powerful mass movement, was cemented by the government's decision in March 1918 to impose conscription. The whole of nationalist Ireland rose against this measure. Though the government soon dropped it, the damage had been done. Sinn Féin swept the board in the December 1918 elections, winning 73 of the 105 seats. Its dominance outside Ulster was complete.[25]

What the British government needed in 1917 and 1918 was not tactical

intelligence on the activities of the Irish Volunteers, but political intelligence on the momentous shifts in Irish opinion. This might indicate how British policy was going wrong. By and large, this was provided by the RIC and DMP, which made good reports to Dublin Castle on the deteriorating situation in the country. Regional military intelligence officers, newly established under martial law, provided a similar function.[26] However, intelligence chiefs in London, now more influential than ever, were more concerned with tracking down minor Germany intrigues and proving that German manipulation lay behind the Sinn Féin movement. In the second half of 1916, MI5 produced evidence that the German secret service was stepping up its activities in Ireland. It discovered that an active German spy centre in New York was recruiting American journalists for missions in Ireland: one such person, George Vaux Bacon, toured the country between 25 November and 8 December, met with 'Sinn Feiners' and was 'definitely' engaged in espionage.[27] On numerous occasions between 1916 and 1918 London became convinced that German arms were being landed in Ireland; that German U-boats were a frequent presence on the Irish coast; and that the Germans were communicating with Sinn Féin leaders and disseminating propaganda in preparation for another major insurrection. A good example is contained in Basil Thomson's diary entry for 18 February 1917: he confidently asserted that there were two ships *en route* from Kiel, carrying 60,000 rifles, 6 million cartridges and 10 machine guns.[28]

Though there were some continuing contacts between Irish-American leaders and German representatives in 1916 and early 1917, the role of Germany was greatly exaggerated – Sinn Féin was an indigenous nationalist movement that drew strength from the grievances of the Irish people and the blunders of the British government, not a foreign conspiracy. The British misconception was caused by reliance on faulty intelligence sources. In February 1917 the British lost their best source of information on the foreign dimension of the republican movement – Room 40's decrypts of German diplomatic communications from America. In that month the United States broke off diplomatic relations with Germany; the German ambassador was recalled; and the messages ceased. Instead, Thomson and the two Halls began to rely on reports from spy-obsessed loyalist residents in Ireland. It appears that MI5 worked with the Special Branch to establish an informal intelligence-gathering network in Ireland in 1916. Few details about this shadowy agency have survived. It mainly consisted of private individuals loyal to the crown, who reported on local conditions, though it may also have employed more sophisticated techniques: Thomson describes in his memoirs how one of his agents 'secreted a powerful dictaphone in the secret meeting room of the Sinn Féin executive' at the time of the Irish Convention in

1917.[29] Information from these sources was circulated in highly secret reports marked 'Q', which was also the personal codename used by Major Hall of MI5.[30] These biased, informal sources produced a steady stream of alarmist information on German intrigues in Ireland, which the London intelligence chiefs replayed to British ministers and the Dublin Castle executive. The intelligence chiefs declined to reveal their sources, gave no indication that their information might be less reliable than before, and therefore produced warnings that the government felt obliged to act on.[31]

The 'German plot' arrests in May 1918 are a striking illustration of the apparent manipulation of intelligence in order to prod the Irish authorities into more forceful action. On 12 April 1918 a former member of Casement's tiny Irish Brigade, Joseph Dowling, was arrested after he landed from a German U-boat in Co. Clare. He claimed that the Germans were planning to send a military expedition to the country. Over the following weeks, 'Blinker' Hall and Thomson first persuaded the British cabinet that a coup was imminent and then pressed this notion on the Dublin Castle executive. As a result, it was decided to arrest practically the entire Sinn Féin leadership: 150 were picked up and interned in English jails on the night of 17–18 May. The measure backfired dramatically. The Irish leaders had been tipped off about the raid by informers within the police, allowing some of the most militant physical force advocates, such as Michael Collins, to evade arrest. In contrast, many moderate political leaders chose not to escape, as they realised that their arrest would provide a political windfall. They were entirely correct; when the British government was unable to provide convincing evidence of a 'German plot', nationalist Ireland concluded that it had been invented as retribution for the defeat of conscription. It helped Sinn Féin to its sweeping electoral victory, in which a number of those interned successfully stood as parliamentary candidates.[32]

Contrary to Irish opinion, the 'German plot' was not deliberately invented by British ministers; they sincerely believed that the threat was real. Between 1916 and 1918 British ministers did not recognise that Sinn Féin was a popular, indigenous movement, and instead clung to the notion that it was a German conspiracy; this delegitimised it and produced a vain hope that the problem would die away if the German intrigues were crushed. This was part of an overall failure to understand the political situation in Ireland and the likely implications of British policies. There was little urgency about thrashing out a political settlement acceptable to nationalist Ireland, and decisions such as the introduction conscription were entirely counter-productive. These political developments, rather than the security response to the Easter Rising, really killed the Irish Parliamentary Party and gave life to Sinn Féin.[33] It was the job of the intelligence

system to challenge the prejudices and wishful thinking that lay behind the British cabinet's decisions – to better educate policy-makers about the reality on the ground. Instead, the intelligence chiefs in London, obsessed with minor German intrigues, were as much a cause of obfuscation as enlightenment.

By the end of 1918 the British government was faced with an extremely difficult situation. The bulk of southern Ireland had become alienated from the state and backed a radical Sinn Féin party that demanded full independence. After the dramatic military sacrifice of the Easter Rising, Sinn Féin had confined itself to political agitation and electioneering, but in 1919 the shooting would start in earnest: the Volunteers, now more popularly known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), would wage an insurgency against the police and the British army. The British intelligence system and the British government would find it even harder to bring this under control.

The intelligence war

The period between January 1919 and July 1921 is known as the 'Anglo-Irish War', the 'Tan War' or the 'War of Independence'. It had a political dimension. After the general election in December 1918 Sinn Féin representatives abstained from Westminster and instead met in Dublin on 21 January 1919 to form their own parliament (or Dáil). They claimed to be the legitimate government of the country, despatched envoys across the world to obtain international recognition for the republic and attempted to set up a counter-state by establishing rival judiciary, police and government departments. However, these peaceful, political moves were overshadowed by an escalating campaign of violence by the Irish Republican Army (IRA). The first shots of the war of independence were fired on the same day that the Dáil first met in Dublin, when Seán Treacy and Dan Breen led a party of Irish Volunteers in an ambush of policemen at a quarry at Soloheadbeg, Co. Tipperary, killing two RIC officers. The ambush was carried out by a small number of Volunteers acting on their own initiative, and much of the violence that followed was of a similar pattern. It was conducted by a militant IRA hardcore, determined to use physical force, who were barely under the control of the IRA headquarters, let alone the Sinn Féin political leadership. They were not responsive to public opinion, and their actions initially conflicted with the wishes of the people. In 1918 support for Sinn Féin was not support for violence. However, by 1921 this too had changed. A large proportion of nationalist Ireland began to see the IRA as an army of liberation struggling against a foreign oppressor: violence had been partly legitimised.[34] This was the critical stage in the collapse of British rule in Ireland.

The War of Independence was largely an intelligence war. The Irish insurgency was like many others, in that a small group of militants used violence while much of the population was uneasy with the means, even if supporting the political ends. To mount a successful counter-insurgency campaign, the state required information on the identity of the fighters, their location, their intentions and the sources of their weapons – that is, good tactical, operational or criminal intelligence. It was essential to collect this in a way that targeted the militants without alienating the majority, so that the way would be left open for a political compromise. A surgical instrument, not a blunt instrument, was required. As a result, covert intelligence and counter-intelligence operations – involving undercover officers, secret agents and informers – would play a major role in deciding the outcome.

The importance of intelligence has long been recognised by historians, but there has been little research on how the British intelligence system worked in Ireland. Irish historians have traditionally referred in blanket terms to the 'British Secret Service', without differentiating the organisations or individuals involved. Many assume that the IRA – under the leadership of Michael Collins – was wholly successful in neutralising British intelligence, largely because writing on this subject has been based on Irish sources, in particular the memoirs of IRA leaders.[35] However, the release of British government documents over the past decade now makes it possible to tell the full story of the intelligence war between the IRA and the British state.

There were four distinct phases in this war. The balance swung from side to side, as each responded to advances in the tactics and organisation of the other. There was no simple triumph. The IRA had the upper hand in the covert struggle, but the British eventually obtained good intelligence through overt security measures, which allowed them to place substantial pressure on their opponents by 1921. Nevertheless, by forcing the British to resort to heavy-handed, politically damaging tactics (the blunt instrument), and merely by surviving, the IRA emerged as the ultimate victors.

The first phase of the war, from January 1919 to January 1920, resulted in the destruction of the intelligence capacity of the Irish police and Dublin Castle. This was a deliberate strategy of the IRA – the War of Independence was an intelligence war because the IRA determined to make it so. The mastermind behind this focus on intelligence was Michael Collins. Known to his colleagues as the 'Big Fella', he was a youthful Corkman with a genius for administration, a ruthless desire for power, and a boisterous, charismatic style of leadership: even his British enemies admitted that 'he combined the characteristics of Robin

Hood with those of an elusive Pimpernel.'[36] He had an immense capacity for work, combining at various times the roles of IRA Adjutant General, IRA Director of Organisation, Dáil Minister for Finance, and acting Dáil President. His most influential role was as IRA Director of Intelligence, a position that he formally assumed in January 1919. Collins was determined that the Sinn Féin rebellion would not be thwarted by informers as in the past. He later summarised his credo:

> Without her spies England was helpless. It was only by means of their accumulated knowledge that the British machine could operate. Without their police throughout the country, how could they find the man they wanted? Without their criminal agents in the capital how could they carry out that 'removal' of the leaders that they considered essential for their victory?[37]

His policy was to 'put out the eyes of the British', and he devoted much of his energy to counter-intelligence. In this he had much success. 'For the first time in the history of separatism we Irish had a better intelligence service than the British', one IRA member wrote. 'This was Michael Collins's great achievement and it is one for which every Irishman should honour his memory.' [38]

Collins's first step was to build up an extensive network of casual informants who could scrutinise the actions of the crown forces. 'There were spies everywhere', the British army lamented, 'and a very large percentage of the population were ready to act as extra eyes and ears for Sinn Fein and for the IRA even if they were not prepared to fight for them.' [39] 'Hotel waiters, tramway conductors, bus drivers, tap-room loafers and members of the Cumann na mBan [a republican women's organisation] were all willing agents', one British intelligence chief recalled.[40] The most important informants were in the postal, telegraph and telephone services. A highly developed IRA organisation copied most official communications passing through these channels: on two occasions in 1920 Collins captured Dublin Castle's mail bags, with the connivance of local postal officials.[41]

The next step in the IRA strategy was to actively penetrate the opposing security and intelligence organisations. Initially, this effort was focused on the Irish police forces. Pro-Sinn Féin officers in the RIC and DMP were persuaded to stay on, rather than resign, so that they could supply information: for example, when one man told Michael Collins that he intended to leave the RIC, he received an immediate response that 'under no circumstances' was he to resign, and that if he did so he would be 'looked upon as a coward'.[42] Numerous other RIC officers, some within the Crime Special Branch, secretly worked for the IRA throughout

this period. Collins also had priceless moles deep within the DMP and Dublin Castle. Ned Broy, a confidential typist at DMP headquarters, provided high quality information from 1917 until 1921, including the tip-off for the 'German Plot' arrests in 1918. David Neligan was a detective in the DMP G Division who met with Collins and pointed out officials for assassination. (He subsequently wrote a colourful book about his experiences.) Two other detectives, Joe Kavanagh and Jim McNamara, also provided information. Perhaps the most celebrated example of Collins's achievement came in April 1919, when Broy smuggled him into the G Division document room, where he spent the whole night examining police files on the Irish Volunteers – his own file made particularly fascinating reading![43] While much attention has focused on Collin's activities in Dublin, the IRA in other parts of the country were equally successful in penetrating the security forces: Florence O'Donoghue, for example, built up an impressive system in Co. Cork.[44]

The IRA used the information collected from these sources to go on the offensive. This campaign began with the boycott and ostracising of the RIC. In 1919 there were 11,000 armed officers and men in the RIC, situated in 1,299 barracks. Mostly sons of farmers, 70 per cent Catholic, they were well respected, closely integrated with the community, and had excellent knowledge of local events.[45] But now Sinn Féin decried them as the instruments of British repression and called for 'that terrible weapon, the boycott, immensely cruel' to be used against them: 'No one would speak to them or to their wives and children', a contemporary wrote, 'shopkeepers would not serve them, nor undertakers bury them.'[46] The societal consensus essential to all police work unravelled. This, combined with IRA intimidation, meant that members of the populace, even loyalists, became unwilling to give information to the police. One RIC Divisional Inspector complained: 'Before the war we knew everybody and what he was doing … Now we know nothing! The people are dumb.'[47]

His words of warning – 'Beware of a silent Irishman. He is dangerous' – were prescient. The IRA quickly escalated from social warfare to more violent tactics. Much of this violence targeted police officers with an official intelligence function. In 1919 Collins created his infamous 'Squad', a group of hardened gunmen tasked with carrying out targeted assassinations on the streets of Dublin. Collins first turned them on the G Division of the DMP: five were killed or wounded in 1919 and 1920. Outside Dublin many of the assassination attempts on the RIC were aimed at Crime Special Branch officers, especially those who actively pursued Sinn Féin or IRA leaders. Because of inadequate record-keeping, when one of these men was killed or quit the force, he often took with him all the intelligence that had been built up over many years.[48] The attack on the intelligence

apparatus was part of a wider IRA campaign against the RIC and the institutions of the British state. Regular RIC officers were assaulted and killed, weapons and ammunition were stolen, outlying barracks were raided and burnt to the ground. As a result, the RIC vacated 434 isolated barracks (approximately one-third) and concentrated in better-defended locations, abandoning large areas of the country. The RIC became detached from local communities and devoted much of its energy to simply defending itself from attack.[49]

By the end of 1919 the IRA had been successful in 'putting out the eyes of the British'. The British army lamented that 'the police source of information, at that time the only one on which the authorities could rely, was dried up and the intelligence service paralysed'.[50] This led to a doomed attempt at intelligence reform by the Dublin Castle authorities. The driving force behind the security policy was Field Marshal Lord French, an Anglo-Irish landowner and famous wartime military commander who had been appointed as Lord Lieutenant to Ireland in early 1918 with 'virtually dictatorial powers'.[51] At the end of 1919 he despondently concluded:

> Our secret service is simply non-existent. What masquerades for such a service is nothing but a delusion and a snare. The DMP are absolutely demoralized and the RIC will be in the same case very soon if we do not quickly set our house in order.

He set up a secret committee in December 1919 to advise on how to improve the intelligence system.[52]

This committee recommended two main steps. The first could be termed the 'Ulsterisation' of the Irish police. Chief Commissioner T. J. Smith of the Belfast police, a highly partisan Orangeman, was brought to Dublin as acting Inspector General of the RIC. One of his colleagues from Ulster, Detective Inspector W. C. Forbes Redmond, was made Assistant Commissioner of the DMP and put in charge of the G Division, which he attempted to revive through the importation of officers from Belfast. This coincided with an effort to sideline prominent Catholics in Dublin Castle, such as James MacMahon (the Under Secretary) and Joseph Byrne (RIC Inspector General). They were seen as, at best, insufficiently opposed to Sinn Féin, and, at worst, traitorous. It is possible to detect a 're-Orangeing' of Dublin Castle in this period, as French surrounded himself with partisan loyalists.[53] The British government, preoccupied with the Paris Peace Conference and other crises, allowed the management of Ireland to fall to an unrepresentative group of Anglo-Irish Ascendancy and Orange figures – a last, futile stand of Irish unionism.

Lord French's other initiative was to call on the assistance of intelligence

chiefs in London. In April 1919 he had unsuccessfully requested the loan of the head of MI5, Captain Vernon Kell.[54] When he turned to the newly knighted Sir Basil Thomson in early 1920, he received a more favourable response. Thomson was happy to expand his Irish activities because he was attempting to build an intelligence empire in Britain. In May 1919, in response to hysteria over the threat of Bolshevik revolution, he had been appointed as the head of a new Directorate of Intelligence. Incorporating the Special Branch, it was given responsibility for combating all domestic subversion and for analysing all intelligence on revolutionary movements for the British cabinet. Thomson despatched a number of agents to Ireland in early 1920. For a time, they were frequent passengers on the mailboats between Holyhead and Kingstown (now Dún Laoghaire). A regular Special Branch detective on these boats recalled stumbling across one undercover agent after he noticed how a man 'changed his complete make-up on the ship, put on a false moustache, parted his hair in the middle, changed his suit and hat, and landed in Ireland a totally different citizen from that he had been when he left England'. When challenged, the newly disguised man produced credentials from Scotland Yard. 'By jove', the detective remarked with a laugh, 'you and I are in the same business!'[55]

Both these attempts to bolster the intelligence system met with immediate, bloody and effective IRA responses. The rebels had some success in uncovering and eliminating the agents despatched by Sir Basil Thomson. The most famous case involved John Charles Byrnes, who went under the alias John Jameson: the First Lord of the Admiralty, Walter Long, later told the British cabinet that he was 'the best Secret Service man we had'. The thirty-four-year-old had the appearance of a well-travelled seafarer: he was small, with a very muscular build, and his arms were covered with a series of tattoos. Byrnes had made a career of deception. He had originally infiltrated the Sailors', Soldiers, and Airmen's Union in London as an undercover agent of A2 Branch, a highly secretive British military agency created after the war to combat Bolshevik agitation in the armed forces. He was then borrowed by Sir Basil Thomson for use in Ireland. He first won the confidence of IRA leaders in London, who asked him to travel to Dublin. There, he was able to secure an audience with Collins – a considerable achievement that could have had dangerous implications for the IRA leadership. Yet his identity was soon revealed by a leak from Dublin Castle. Detective Inspector Redmond boasted to a group of DMP detectives that a British agent in Dublin for no more than two days had been able to meet Collins; when this was relayed by IRA moles, the connection with Byrnes was made. (There is also some evidence that an IRA mole within Scotland Yard may have tipped Collins off about Byrnes's previous activities as an A2 Branch agent.) Byrnes was shot dead by the

Squad on 2 March 1920. One of his executioners, Paddy Daly, later recalled the incident:

> I told him that we were satisfied he was a spy, that he was going to die, and that if he wanted to say any prayers he could do so. The spy jumped to attention immediately and said, 'You are right. God bless the King. I would love to die for him.' He saluted and there was not a quiver on him.[56]

Byrnes's unhappy experience appears to have been typical of Thomson's agents in Ireland. The army concluded that 'a small amount of general and political information was collected through this source but none on which any action was possible'.[57]

The second aspect of the IRA response was a direct assault on the leadership in Dublin Castle. In its most daring act the IRA narrowly failed to assassinate Lord French. Detective Inspector Redmond was killed by Collins's Squad in January 1920 while walking back to his hotel in Harcourt Street; his movements were known because he had unfortunately chosen Jim McNamara (one of Collins's secret DMP helpers) as his confidential clerk. On 26 March 1920 Alan Bell, a member of Lord French's secret intelligence committee and former RIC district inspector, was taken off a tram on his way to work and shot dead. He had been investigating Sinn Féin finances, as well as the attacks on French and Redmond.[58] After this, the DMP 'for political purposes … practically ceased to function' and became a neutral force in the ensuing struggle.[59] The remaining detectives in the G Division stayed well out of trouble. One colleague described how two officers tasked with investigating the IRA 'spent each day on a pub crawl and did no investigating as they wanted to stay alive … they drank steadily from 10 a.m. until 6 p.m. – all whiskey – only stopping briefly for lunch.' [60]

The first phase of the IRA campaign brought about the destruction of the Dublin Castle intelligence system, severely weakened British rule in many parts of Ireland and allowed Sinn Féin to go a long way towards creating its own 'counter-state'. This led to a new security response between January and April 1920: the authorities decided on a policy of coercion towards the Sinn Féin movement. In this second phase the British army, which hitherto had stood aside from the fight, began to play a leading role. Army units accompanied the RIC on patrol, carried out raids and guarded barracks. They took the lead in the arrest, conviction and internment of prominent Sinn Féin and IRA members: 317 persons were detained between January and April 1920.[61]

Army officers were immediately faced with the problem of a lack of intelligence. They admitted that their information 'as to who was or who was not mixed up in the Sinn Féin movement was practically nil'; at the same time, it

was clear that police intelligence was little better.[62] As a result, from early 1920 the army began to develop its own intelligence system, 'filtering through from the smallest units and detachments up to the central office at G.H.Q.' in Dublin.[63] The intelligence staff at GHQ was augmented, with Brigadier-General (later Colonel) J. E. S. Brind taking charge and Colonel S. Hill-Dillon, formerly of MI5, as his assistant. They created a registry and card index system, with the aim of devising 'an Irish Republican Army List'. Intelligence officers, assigned to divisions, brigades and battalions, were expected to recruit informers and liaise with the police. Their degree of activity depended on the level of IRA violence and the proficiency of the RIC in their districts. Unsurprisingly, the 6th Division in Munster, which was the most troubled area in the country, had the greatest need for intelligence: it expended £2,032 in secret service funds in the twelve months after 1 April 1920. Its divisional intelligence officer, Captain J. O'G. Kelly, was particularly industrious and was commended for his 'fearlessness and keen intelligence'. In contrast, the 5th Division (in the central part of the country) spent £320 and the 1st Division (in the north) just £14, which illustrates the lower level of IRA violence and the better state of the RIC in those areas.[64] The army had come late to the show, and lacked basic knowledge at first, but out of necessity gradually built up a wide-reaching intelligence system.

The most striking feature of the military intelligence system was the extent to which it relied on the responsibility, ability and zeal of relatively junior intelligence officers at the battalion and company level. They were mostly young, rarely had any intelligence training and were usually new to their areas. Blending staff work with improvised detective activity, they were compelled to build up 'a sort of local secret service'. This meant 'considerable personal risk' and also the use of techniques of disguise and agent-handling not on the Sandhurst curriculum.[65] A youthful Kenneth Strong, a Scotsman who went on to serve as Eisenhower's intelligence officer during the Second World War, was thrown into this work as a Company Intelligence Officer with the Royal Scots Fusiliers. He described how he received £5 per month to pay secret agents:

> My agents were not of very high calibre. Sometimes a railway porter who noted suspicious train travellers; sometimes a shopkeeper who might report unusual purchases of food or medical supplies; a bartender who had noted the arrival of strangers in the neighbourhood. My area of responsibility was so small that unusual happenings soon came to the notice of local inhabitants. Contacts with my so-called agents had to be personal and this could be an exceedingly dangerous undertaking for the informant. To get to a rendezvous I would disguise myself, usually as the

> owner of a small donkey cart, but my English accent was against me and I had several narrow escapes.[66]

The army somewhat defensively concluded that 'the results obtained in Ireland were remarkable … considering how few of the officers employed on intelligence duties had had any previous experience or training, and when it is remembered that the system grew up almost haphazard and depended more on enthusiasm than on any instructions from above'.[67]

In most of the country, military intelligence officers, though donning occasional disguise, were attached to uniformed units and generally operated alongside them. The situation was different in the capital, where Dublin District Command was responsible for a large, sophisticated and purely clandestine secret service. This had its origins in the summer of 1919, when a small group of officers began undercover intelligence work against the IRA on their own initiative. In March 1920 they were taken under army control and formalised as the 'Special Branch' of Dublin District Command. Two months later their activities were expanded and placed under the control of a high-ranking intelligence officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Walter C. Wilson, a former English rugby international who was wounded twice on the Western Front, before serving on the British military missions to the United States and the Baltic states. With MI5 assistance, he formed a school of instruction in Hounslow (near London) from where recruits, mostly retired army officers, were sent to Dublin. These men operated in plain clothes, took up normal lodgings and attempted to blend in with the normal life of the city:

> Men were placed successfully in most of the steamship companies trading with Dublin, on the railways, as journalists or farmers and even in the I.R.A. They made friends with Dublin citizens of every class and both sexes, they mixed with crowds and they were arrested with officers and men of the I.R.A.

Some frequented the Cairo Café on Grafton Street and became known to the IRA as the 'Cairo Gang'. Although taken over and legitimised by the regular army, the Dublin District Special Branch maintained a distinct and independent ethos. The army later admitted that it was a 'peculiar organization, as secret service organizations generally are': it was built up by 'enthusiastic amateurs', it had its own 'constitution', and 'in the event of its official head taking action to which the original creators objected, they did not hesitate to raise their objections in unmistakable fashion'. Its members did not just collect information, but also took daring action, sometimes outside the law – an army history

euphemistically noted that the organisation was 'partly pure intelligence and partly executive.'[68]

One member, Captain R. D. Jeune, has left a memoir describing his experience. Jeune had served as an interpreter with the 1st Indian Cavalry Division in France in 1914 and 1915, and then commanded the 94th and 24th Trench Mortar Companies on the Western Front, participating in the battles of the Somme and Ypres. After the war he took part in the British Military Mission in Poland. On his return he joined up with the 'rather hastily improvised Intelligence Organisation' for Ireland and after a short course of instruction at Hounslow was sent to Dublin in early summer 1920. He recalled how the first batch of men initially posed as Royal Engineer officers, but this 'rather futile procedure' was soon dropped, and a variety of covers were later adopted. Their work consisted of 'getting to know the town thoroughly, tailing "Shinners", and carrying out small raids, with a view to collecting all possible information which would lead us eventually to stamping out the revolt'. One of Jeune's more memorable actions involved a surreptitious night raid on the house of the Sinn Féin leader Arthur Griffith, from which he carried off a number of 'subversive documents'. Jeune noted with some satisfaction a report in the Irish press the next day that Griffith's house had been raided by 'expert Cracksmen.'[69]

The Dublin District Special Branch grew rapidly during 1920: it consisted of seven officers on 1 June, fifty-one in July, and eighty-two in August, peaking at ninety-seven in November. In the course of the 1920–1 financial year it accounted for £20,000, which dwarfed the military intelligence effort in the rest of the country. The police authorities acknowledged that these officers were 'of great value in collecting intelligence in Dublin' and comprised the most important source during the summer and autumn of 1920 – they were commended for achieving 'admirable results … in the face of grave personal risk and danger'.[70] Even their Irish opponents conceded that they were 'crack operators' and 'brave men who carried their lives in their hands'.[71] In effect, the Dublin District Special Branch replaced the shattered G Division of the DMP and became the state's secret service in the capital. This is illustrated by the dwindling of the DMP's share of the secret service fund to just £405 for the 1920–1 financial year.[72]

The gradual increase in the security role of the army was part of an attempt at coercion by the Dublin Castle administration in the first four months of 1920, leading to the incarceration of a large number of prominent IRA members. However, this had little impact on the IRA campaign, which graduated to larger attacks on police barracks and government offices: for example, over the Easter weekend 300 barracks and twenty-two income tax offices were burned.[73] The government's coercive measures also proved unsustainable. IRA prisoners

went on hunger strike, demanding treatment as political prisoners, and this led to mass demonstrations culminating in a general strike. Dublin Castle backed down and released all those captured on 14 April 1920, much to the chagrin of the British army and local police forces, which had put so much effort into the initial round-up.

The botched handling of this episode, along with the continuing rise in IRA violence, demonstrated to London the incompetence and powerlessness of the Dublin Castle leadership. In the spring of 1920 the British government finally turned its full attention to the incipient rebellion on the other side of the Irish Sea. Whitehall's most senior civil servant, Sir Warren Fisher, was sent to carry out a review of the administration. He produced a damning report. He found 'absolute chaos in Ireland' and a Castle administration that simply did not administer: 'The Government strikes one as almost woodenly stupid and quite devoid of imagination', he scathingly concluded.[74] The result was a radical reform of the Irish administration, a thorough review of security policy and new initiatives to bolster intelligence collection. This third phase of organisational experimentation would last from May to November 1920.

The first step was a radical overhaul of the leadership of the Irish administration. At the top, the bluff, Canadian-born Liberal MP, Hamar Greenwood, became Chief Secretary for Ireland. Of limited ability, he never fully grasped the challenge in Ireland and was always one step behind events – one contemporary described him as 'a Canadian bagman and a windbag at that'.[75] Far more impressive was the troika of high-flying Whitehall civil servants handed control of Dublin Castle. Sir John Anderson was made Joint Under Secretary. He was widely regarded as one of the most brilliant administrators of his generation; he would go on to make the uncommon switch from civil servant to minister, serving as Home Secretary and Chancellor of the Exchequer during the Second World War (and lending his name to the famous Anderson air raid shelter). Alfred W. Cope became Assistant Under Secretary. Widely known as 'Andy', and a protégé of Prime Minister Lloyd George, he began as a detective in the Customs and Excise department before attaining a high rank in the Ministry of Pensions. The third member of this remarkable team was Mark Sturgis. A debonair aristocrat, educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford, his love of horses and high society was allowed full expression during his time at Dublin Castle.[76] One contemporary described him as a 'level-headed, cool man' who mixed easily in all circles.[77]

This complete overhaul of the civil administration was accompanied by two radical changes to the leadership of the security forces in Ireland. In March 1920 General Sir Nevil Macready was chosen as the new Commander-in-Chief of the British army in Ireland. His previous experiences made him ideally suited for

this position: he had commanded troops in aid of the civil power in England and Belfast, before serving as London Metropolitan Police Commissioner.[78] Macready had little love for Ireland: 'I loathe the country … and its people', he once commented, 'with a depth deeper than the sea and more violent than that which I feel against the Boche.'[79] His main goal was to protect the army, arguing that it should be either given the tools to fight a proper war against the IRA, or kept out of it altogether. Nonetheless, he was politically unbiased and aware of the futility of trying to solve a political problem with coercion alone. Macready refused control of the Irish police, a decision that he later regretted. Instead, the police was placed under the command of another new introduction from England, Major-General Hugh Tudor. Unlike Macready, Tudor had no experience of police work and little aptitude for the job, and he was selected by the Secretary of State for War, Winston Churchill, because the two had served together on the Western Front.[80] Tudor became a hawk on security issues and failed to recognise the political dimension of the Irish problem; history has not been kind to him.

These men directed the campaign against the Irish separatist movement until the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty (and, excepting Tudor, they would exert great influence on British policy towards Ireland for some time afterwards). On their appointment, they initially made an attempt at conciliation. It was hoped that moderate Sinn Féin could be induced to work the Government of Ireland Act, a new Home Rule settlement then passing through parliament. However, this attitude only bolstered the morale of Sinn Féin, weakened that of the crown forces and led to an escalation of violence during the summer of 1920. IRA tactics shifted from attacks on individual policemen and raids on police barracks to ambushes against army or police patrols conducted by 'flying columns' – groups of about twenty-five armed men on full-time active duty, supported by local IRA companies. This was the ideal form of offensive and defensive warfare. 'By trial and error', according to one historian, 'the IRA had stumbled on the type of warfare … extensively copied since from Latin America to Vietnam, in which the advantage of a committed and motivated force, local knowledge and support outweighs the numerical superiority and vast armed resources of the occupying force.' Its impact can be seen in the casualty figures for crown forces: in the first six months of 1920, just 60 policemen and soldiers were killed by the IRA; 495 died in the following twelve months.[81]

In July 1920 the worsening military situation led the government to consider a policy of rigorous coercion. Two options were available. The simpler was to impose martial law on the country and ask the military to suppress the rebellion. But this was politically unacceptable. Instead, it was decided that the civil administration and the police would retain responsibility for the maintenance of

law and order. Yet, though the veneer of civil primacy over security was maintained, the RIC in fact became heavily militarised. They were granted many of the powers of martial law by the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act of 9 August 1920. As it was almost impossible to obtain recruits in Ireland, large numbers of ex-servicemen from England were encouraged to join the RIC. Eventually numbering some 9,500, these new men were barely trained and hastily equipped: because of their khaki army trousers and dark green police tunics, many Irish derisively nicknamed them the 'Black and Tans', after a Limerick Hunt. From July 1920 they were joined by the Auxiliary Division, a group drawn exclusively from British ex-officers and paid a highly attractive £1 a day. Comprising 2,214 men, they were divided into mobile, heavily armed companies, operating virtually independently of the rest of the RIC.[82] 'They were a thoroughly dangerous mob', David Neligan recounted, 'and far more intelligent than the Tans.'[83]

The decision to wage a 'police war' had significant consequences for the organisation of intelligence. In May 1920 Colonel Ormonde de l'Epée Winter was appointed as Deputy Chief of Police and Director of Intelligence for Ireland. It was clear that Irish intelligence was deficient, and that there was a lack of co-ordination between the RIC, the army and Thomson's Directorate of Intelligence in London. Winter was given the task of creating a unified intelligence system under police control. The military was initially happy to cede this role to Winter and intended to graft their existing system onto his: Macready said that the way was open for Winter to make himself 'top dog' in Irish intelligence.[84]

Winter had a fairly conventional career: public school, the army and then India, where he was mainly concerned with pursuing gentlemanly sports such as tiger-hunting and pig-sticking. This was followed by service on the Western Front.[85] He had no particular experience of intelligence work, but he made up for this by conforming to the stock image of the spymaster: he had greased black hair, wore a monocle, permanently kept a cigarette dangling from the lips and surrounded himself with a dense cloak of secrecy – he preferred to be known by the codename 'O'.[86] 'He looks like a wicked little white snake', one colleague recorded, 'is clever as paint, probably entirely non-moral, a first-class horseman, a card genius, knows several languages, is a super sleuth, and a most amazing original.'[87] His 'non-moral' and 'original' character is illustrated by some of the extraordinary projects that he flirted with after finishing his work in Ireland. In the 1920s he offered his services to an Eurasian adventurer named Cherif Tidjani who, under the instructions of Abd-el-Krim, the leader of the Riffs, was trying to mount an insurrection against the Spaniards in Morocco. When this fell through, he was approached by a Slovak party and asked to give advice on how to organise a successful revolution against the Czech government; the plot collapsed when

the Slovak leader was arrested and sentenced to fifteen years' imprisonment. It is ironic that a man who had been at the forefront of the campaign against the Irish rebellion was so eager to lend his experiences to rebels in other parts of the world.[88]

On his arrival in Dublin, Winter threw himself into a number of ambitious 'cloak and dagger' schemes in an attempt to produce quick results. One of his first ideas was 'to photograph the entire population of Ireland back and front' to aid the identification of rebels.[89] This proved impractical, but he did set up a photographic section in his central Intelligence Bureau that tried to build up a photographic index of all suspected rebels – this led to the apprehension of some active IRA men.[90] Of less value was Winter's importation of fifty bloodhounds from England: he admitted that 'their employment seldom achieved satisfactory results'.[91] Similarly, a joint attempt with Sir Basil Thomson to encourage people to send anonymous information to an address in London backfired: it was manipulated by 'irresponsible jesters or active rebels', and merely produced 'accusations against well-known loyalists'.[92] With obvious relish, Winter also became personally involved in undercover detective work. On one occasion, he boasted to his colleagues about donning a wig and false moustache and 'pinching' Michael Collins's 'war chest' from a Dublin bank – Sturgis correctly remarked that this was probably illegal and 'hardly his job'.[93]

The cornerstone of Winter's intelligence offensive against the IRA was a secret service operated from a newly created 'London Bureau'. (This replaced the network started by Sir Basil Thomson, who conceded that Winter should have control over all future agents sent from England, thus ending his brief overlordship.) Winter's London Bureau was born in July 1920 from an alliance with the Indian secret service. It was initially headed by Charles Tegart, a famous Indian policeman regarded as 'one of the most expert Criminal Investigation officers in the British Empire'. The Prime Minister personally requested the Secretary of State for India to release Tegart for this purpose. He was assisted by G. C. Denham, a young policeman who travelled from Singapore at short notice over the summer. At the outset, Tegart warned that he did not have an ' "Open Sesame", some quick & ready method of establishing an Intelligence system in Ireland', pointing out that the suppression of the Indian revolutionary movement was 'the result of five years plodding and patient investigation'. He wanted to collect all papers on the subject first, sift through them, create card indices, compile history sheets on the 'enemy organisation', and only then suggest 'lines for attacking it'. This did not fit with Winter's desire to quickly despatch as many undercover agents as possible to obtain immediate results.[94] Their relationship soured, and, just four months after arriving, the Indian intelligence officers broke with

Winter and returned to their original organisations, leaving ill-feeling all around. The Bureau was next taken over by a military officer named Jeffries (with the rather unimaginative codename 'J'), who had been an undercover member of the army's Dublin District Special Branch. He was assisted by Major Cecil Aylmer Cameron, who later took over control of the operation. Cameron had run a military intelligence network in the Low Countries during the war. In keeping with many British intelligence professionals in this period, he was a rather unstable character: he had been imprisoned for insurance fraud along with his morphine-addicted wife in 1911 and would commit suicide in 1924.[95]

The Bureau recruited Irishmen living in Britain, supplied them with a special secret ink considered 'immune from discovery' and sent them to Ireland. Each agent then corresponded with the head of the London Bureau via a cover address. Sixty agents were despatched during the eight or nine months that the scheme lasted. Winter later boasted that 'only one of these agents met with a violent end', also that the network collected information that saved lives and prevented ambushes. However, a number of the agents were unreliable, and it is unlikely that they provided much important intelligence from within the Sinn Féin movement. This may account for their lack of casualties. The army certainly took a dim view of their effectiveness.[96]

The activities of the London Bureau, together with the rapid expansion of military intelligence, led to an influx of 'sleuths' in the summer of 1920, especially in the capital: Winter later recalled that 'an attempt was made to flood the country with agents, who would supply the ordinary information usually available to the Police under normal conditions'.[97] This coincided with a concerted crack-down by the heavily reinforced RIC and army, acting under the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act. There was an improvement in the intelligence available to the crown forces and many IRA men were forced to go 'on the run'. Captain Jeune of the Dublin District Special Branch recalled that 'in November, information was coming in well and we were beginning to get on top of the IRA, who were becoming desperate'.[98]

The increased intelligence effort did not go unnoticed by Michael Collins, who took a number of steps to neutralise the threat. At least one agent of the London Bureau was killed by the IRA, although his identity is not recorded. According to Winter, his death was due to his own 'carelessness', as he had left incriminating documents written in normal ink in his hotel room.[99] A much luckier, if completely untrustworthy, London Bureau agent, about whom many details survive, went by the name of F. Digby Hardy. (His real name was J. L. Gooding.) A lifelong fraudster, who had been in and out of prison since 1886, Hardy was serving a five-year jail sentence in England when he wrote to Lord

French, offering to work as a secret service man against the IRA. He was released and sent by the London Bureau to Ireland, where he met with Arthur Griffith. According to Winter, he betrayed his masters and 'proved himself a villain of the first water': he offered to lure Sir Basil Thomson to a meeting on Kingstown pier so that he could be assassinated by the IRA. Rather than take up Hardy's proposal, the Sinn Féin leaders decided to use him for propaganda purposes. Griffith invited press reporters to a secret meeting on 16 September 1920, convinced Hardy that the journalists were senior IRA leaders and urged him to present his proposal. Hardy duly explained to the assembled group his plot to kill Thomson, describing him as 'the man responsible for all the dirty work in Ireland'. At this point, Griffith dramatically exposed Hardy as a 'scoundrel', provided evidence of his prior criminal convictions, and warned him to leave Ireland immediately. The press wrote this up in full, and it led to the belief in Ireland that the British were willing to allow any criminal out of jail to fight Sinn Féin.[100] Having managed to offend both sides in the bloody intelligence war, Hardy was fortunate to escape from this episode alive.

The IRA had even greater success in penetrating the new intelligence system being created by the British military. Collins and his lieutenants bribed some British officers to provide information, although they were never fully trusted.[101] A more reliable source were the civilian clerks used by the British army – many of them worked for the IRA. The most important were two female clerks in Dublin and Cork. Lily Mernin, a young typist who worked in British army GHQ, provided daily copies to Michael Collins of confidential documents, including details of premises about to be raided, and names and addresses of undercover army officers. Her counterpart in Cork was Josephine Marchmount, a typist working for the British 6th Division headquarters. She provided a steady stream of secret army documents between 1919 and 1921, many of which can now be found in O'Donoghue's private papers.[102] In addition to these moles at the heart of the British army, the IRA could rely on the extended network of casual informers – lodgers, bartenders, cleaning ladies, cooks, post office employees, telephone operators and sailors – to uncover British intelligence operatives.

Through these means, IRA headquarters was able to identify members of the army's Dublin District Special Branch. It was decided to kill a large number of these men on Sunday morning, 21 November. The primary objective was to relieve some of the pressure from the IRA; but it was also a calculated political gesture to demonstrate that the IRA was capable of large-scale operations in the heart of the capital. Planning was entrusted to a twenty-seven-year-old Dublin man named Seán Russell (who would mastermind an IRA bombing campaign in England two decades later). Men from Collins's Squad and the Dublin IRA

carried out attacks on at least twenty individuals in twelve different locations. Twelve military officers were shot dead in hotels and lodgings houses, often in their beds, sometimes alongside their wives. Four officers were wounded. (On the same morning, two officers of the Auxiliaries were killed by an IRA party guarding the assassination squads. A landlord was also shot dead.) There have been some erroneous conclusions about the identity of those killed, which reflects continuing confusion over the organisations active in Irish intelligence at this time. Two of the British officers were victims of mistaken identity, and the role of two others is unclear. However, eight were certainly intelligence officers, either part of Dublin District Special Branch or Winter's intelligence department. The reputation of this day as 'Bloody Sunday' was fully earned later that afternoon when the police raided a Gaelic football game in Croke Park in search of the gunmen and opened fire, killing eleven spectators and one player.[103]

One of Collins's principal intelligence officers, Frank Thornton, boasted that 'the British Secret Service was wiped out on the 21st November, 1920.'[104] Although this is an exaggeration, the Dublin District Special Branch was 'temporarily paralysed'. Several of its most efficient members were murdered and the rest were brought into the Castle and the Central Hotel for safety. 'This … greatly decreased the opportunities for obtaining information and for re-establishing anything in the nature of secret service', the army later recorded.[105] Captain Jeune recalled that 'those of us who had survived were shut up under guard in a hotel, from where it was impracticable to do any useful work'. To some extent the organisation was broken up: Jeune left Ireland at that time and did not return, while Jeffries left Dublin to take over Winter's London Bureau.[106] Therefore, at least in the short term, the IRA action had the intended effect on the intelligence situation.

Its political effect was also dramatic, especially when coupled with events in Co. Cork: the most violent incident of the guerrilla campaign occurred one week later, when an IRA ambush at Kilmichael wiped out an Auxiliary patrol, leaving seventeen dead.[107] This led to a fourth phase in Britain's struggle against the IRA – a period of sustained coercion that lasted from December 1920 until the truce on 11 July 1921. In December martial law was proclaimed in the south, while in the rest of the country there was a major crack-down. The death penalty was enforced for carrying arms, curfews extended, and internment of IRA suspects introduced. Large-scale sweeps by troops and police in rural areas, and systematic house-by-house searches in urban quarters placed considerable pressure on IRA flying columns. 600 IRA men from all districts were immediately rounded up, and by the end of June 4,500 were interned in camps at Ballykinlar, Spike Island, Bere Island and the Curragh. The military believed that 'from this time

the initiative may be said to have passed to the crown forces for the first time since May, 1920.'[108]

There were also changes in the organisation and effectiveness of British intelligence. After spending six months engaged in 'cloak and dagger' detective work, and a frustratingly slow search for staff and office space, Winter finally began to build up a countrywide system that sought to integrate army and police intelligence activities. The result was a complicated system, consisting of a Central Bureau under his direction and nine 'Local Centres' in Dublin, Belfast, Dundalk, Athlone, Galway, Kildare, Limerick, Clonmel and Cork (with a 'sub-centre' in Derry). Military intelligence officers with police rank staffed these offices, recruited a network of local agents and made sure that information was exchanged between the RIC and army. During the first half of 1921 this system was unhurriedly rolled out through the country. In December 1920 Winter took over control of the Dublin District Special Branch from the army and renamed it the D Branch – it effectively became the Local Centre for Dublin. (Lieutenant-Colonel Wilson resigned in protest and was replaced by one of Winter's men, David Boyle.)[109] In January 1921 Winter created the first Local Centre in Belfast. Other Local Centres were not set up until March or April; the last, in Clonmel, was only formed in July one week before the truce. Winter's share of the Secret Service Vote gives some indication of the growing scale of his operation: in January 1921 his expenditure was only £655, in contrast to the £3,380 spent by the army's Dublin District Special Branch; by June 1921 he accounted for £10,000 per month, along with an additional undisclosed sum from RIC funds. By this time his intelligence staff had grown to 150, not including the undercover officers of the D Branch, or the many informers they employed.[110]

The flow of intelligence, and the pressure on the IRA, increased again in the early months of 1921. In Dublin the D Branch was rebuilt. Former or serving British military officers continued to man the senior ranks, but with money plentiful, a wide assortment of 'sub-agents' or 'touts' were recruited, often with little discrimination. One observer described them as 'poor wretches who were on the look-out for easy money'.[111] In a new innovation, Winter formed an RIC 'Identification Squad' and set it to work in Dublin. Led by Sergeant Igoe, it consisted of handpicked RIC officers, two from each county, who could recognise Sinn Féin and IRA leaders from their districts. Dressed in plain clothes, they wandered the streets of the capital and were able to make some arrests.[112] During this period raids on Dáil and IRA offices in the capital led to the capture of large quantities of important documents, including those of Michael Collins.[113] British activities in Dublin made it extremely difficult for the Dáil departments and IRA headquarters staff to function. The discovery of reports from IRA moles in