

THE IRA: ORGANISATION AND TACTICS

There have in effect been a series of Irish Republican Armies: the "Old IRA" of the insurrectionary and civil war periods; the IRA of 1923-29 (the dissident anti-Treaty movement which became an illegal organisation in both parts of Ireland); and the IRA of today. Numerous splinter groups have also emerged. But today the term "IRA" almost always means the Provisional movement, including both its military wing (Provisional IRA) and political wing (Sinn Fein - "Provisional" has now been dropped from the title). The IRA and Sinn Fein were founded separately and initially had different aims, but today the leadership of the two overlap; their objectives are identical and their tactics are complementary.

THE SPLIT

Following the unsuccessful terrorist campaign of 1956-62 the IRA was completely discredited as a force. The task of rebuilding the movement was mainly undertaken by a pro-Marxist-Leninist group which favoured involvement in social protest organisations. But the movement had always been prone to splits and in 1969/70, following the unrest set off by the civil rights movement, it again split into opposing factions. The "Official" IRA and its political wing "Official" Sinn Fein, renounced violence and announced its intention to pursue its aims through constitutional politics (including contesting Dublin, Westminster and Stormont elections). The hard line republicans rejected this policy and formed a "Provisional Army Council" (the Provisional IRA), and set up their own political wing, Provisional Sinn Fein. The Official Sinn Fein later became known in the Republic as Sinn Fein The Workers Party and in Northern Ireland as Republican Clubs The Workers Party. In 1982, it became known as The Workers Party in both parts of Ireland.

At the end of 1974 a further group broke away from Official Sinn Fein and formed the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP). At first it disclaimed violence, but soon acquired a military wing, the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA), which is still actively pursuing a terrorist campaign.

ORGANISATION: THE PROVISIONALS

Sinn Fein operates as a political party and has regional committees and local branches covering the 32 countries (Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland). Although it is a legal organisation in both parts of Ireland, in the Republic Sinn Fein candidates, because of their support for violence and the Provisional IRA, are banned from giving any party political broadcasts from Radio Eireann or Radio Telefis Eireann.

The supreme authority in the Provisional IRA is technically the general Army Convention, a meeting of delegates from all levels which elects an Army Executive (though, in practice, the Convention does not meet while the Army is on a "war footing"). In 1977 there was a major re-shaping of the Provisional IRA's organisation. Disaffection with the violence and bombings had induced many among the Catholic population to pass information to the security forces about IRA activists. To tighten their security, the IRA replaced the traditional military style chain of command with a system of small cells or units controlled by the Provisional's Northern Command. The Provisional IRA however, which is an illegal organisation in both parts of Ireland, does not publish details of its structure or membership. When challenged, its leading members admit only to holding office in Sinn Fein.

TACTICS: THE PROVISIONALS

The Provisionals have two basic objectives: in the short term to force a British withdrawal from Northern Ireland, and then to achieve "a 32 county unified socialist republic". They do not recognise ~~xxxx~~ the government of the Irish Republic as being "legitimate"; in the longer term they are as much a threat to democratic institutions in the Republic of Ireland as to those in Northern Ireland.

The stated aim of "British withdrawal" enables the Provisionals to present their "armed struggle" as a "war of national liberation" against an

"imperialist" or "colonialist occupying army". This presentation of the issue ignores the fact that a large majority of the people of Northern Ireland have freely chosen to remain in the United Kingdom. The terrorist campaign has thus taken priority; but recently the Provisional leaders (increasingly dominated from the north) have been seeking to increase their movement's political awareness. The Maze and Armagh prison protests which culminated in the "dirty protest" and the hunger strikes of 1980-81 provided an opportunity to develop this side of their activities. Their success in two Westminster by-elections with "H-Block" candidates encouraged their decision to participate in Irish Republic general elections, and in the October 1982 Northern Ireland Assembly elections and in future local and general elections.

Sinn Fein has embarked on an "economic resistance campaign", the intention being for the party to become involved in protest action on economic and social issues and thereby to win political support for Provisional policies - As a whole. This campaign has never been very successful, but since the Assembly elections in October 1982 Sinn Fein leaders have stressed that their role as "elected representatives" is to focus largely on constituency matters such as housing and welfare.

The terrorist campaign is regarded as "a war of attrition against the security forces to cause as many casualties and deaths as possible so as to create a demand for their withdrawal" and as "a bombing campaign aimed to make British financial interest in Ireland unprofitable and thereby to curtail long-term investment".

An appeal for peace by the leaders of the four main Churches in the Republic of Ireland at the beginning of December 1974 was rejected by the Provisionals. But later that month a delegation of leading Provisionals met a group of Protestant clergymen and announced a "suspension of offensive military action" over the Christmas season, from 22 December until 2 January 1975. On the last day the Provisionals ordered a fortnight's extension. They

then resumed their campaign on a reduced scale. On 9 February, however, they announced that in the light of discussions between the Provisional Sinn Fein and representatives of the UK Government the ceasefire would be renewed. Two days later the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland announced that "incident centres" would be set up as "a point of contact in either direction"; parallel centres were set up by the Provisional Sinn Fein. But inspite of these efforts, the violence continued, and the Provisionals admitted responsibility for many early breaches of the ceasefire. By September attacks on the security forces and the planting of bombs in city centres had become more frequent. In November the government incident centres were closed.

Terrorism, mainly by the Provisionals, has been responsible for more than 2,200 deaths in Northern Ireland since 1969. More than 1,600 were civilians. More than 24,000 people have been injured, many of them blinded, made deaf or crippled by bombs exploded in crowded places.

Intimidation

Most Catholics oppose violence and terrorism, but the Provisional IRA has exploited Catholic grievances to build up a small residue of support in the community. Much of its passive support results from intimidation sometimes overt (in the form of sectarian attacks on homes) but more often anonymous (usually by letter or telephone call or simply a bullet in an envelope). In the past 12 years about 1,000 people have been injured, including youths of 14 and 15 years old, and at least one person killed, by so-called punishment shootings. The victims are usually shot in the back of the leg, sometimes destroying the knee-cap; or sometimes through the elbow. A further 145 people, mostly women, have been tarred and feathered.

Urban Targets

In 1971, incendiary devices were placed in leading Belfast department stores and, shortly afterwards, the Provisionals started to use car bombs on a wide scale. Since then the bombing of urban targets, military and civilian (ranging from police stations to offices, shops, bars, factories, hotels and even children's play areas), has become a central element in the campaign to make Northern Ireland "ungovernable". Recent examples of indiscriminate bombing of civilians have included a 200lb device which exploded near a nurses' hostel in central Belfast in June 1982, injuring 26 people (most of them nurses) and, also in Belfast in the same month, more than 300 homes and commercial premises were either destroyed or severely damaged when a massive 1,550lb car bomb exploded. The Provisional IRA admitted placing both devices.

In March 1973, the Provisionals began a bombing campaign in England when several bombs exploded in London, injuring more than 200. Apart from a lull of almost two years in 1976-78, the campaign has continued. The explosive devices have been detonated in public places and designed to cause maximum injury; some have been aimed at military personnel (usually when they are off-duty, or performing ceremonial duties), but most of the casualties have been among civilians, including many women and young children.

Attacks on the security forces

Between August 1969 and the end of April 1983 495 soldiers (including those serving in the Ulster Defence Regiment), and 114 full-time and 61 reserve members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary were killed in Northern Ireland. Many of the casualties have occurred when the victims have been off-duty; bombs are detonated without warning in public places, killing and maiming civilians as well as soldiers and policemen. Part-time and even former members of the security forces are also singled out for attack:

in December 1982 the driver of a school bus was gunned down in front of 15 school children because two years earlier he had been a member of the Ulster Defence Regiment.

In September 1977, in an attempt to put pressure on civilians working with the security forces, the Provisional IRA warned members of civilian search units that they had seven days in which to resign, and in September 1978 announced that all unmarked cars leaving army bases in Northern Ireland would be considered "legitimate targets" - thereby increasing the risk to the families of service personnel and to civilian visitors to military establishments. In April 1983, they also renewed a threat to murder anyone having contact with the army: "We are giving a repeat warning to those who trade or entertain British army personnel to cease this treacherous business". The Provisional IRA has also admitted responsibility for bombing attacks against personnel in a British Army of the Rhine barracks in August 1978.

Assassinations

In addition to members of the security forces, politicians, judges, civil servants and prison officers are prime targets for assassination. The murders of a judge (Catholic) and a resident magistrate (Protestant) by the Provisional IRA in September 1974 began a series of attacks against people prominent in public life. Recent attacks on members of the judiciary in Northern Ireland have included an attempt on the life of the Lord Chief Justice, Lord Lowry, in March 1982, and in January 1983 the "execution" as he left church of Judge William Doyle (Catholic) "because he was one of the Loyalist judiciary and, as such, was a legitimate target".

In October 1977, after several prison officers had been attacked in their homes, the head of the Northern Ireland Prison Officers Association, Desmond Irvine, was shot dead by the Provisional IRA. In November 1978, the Deputy Governor of the Maze Prison, Albert Miles, was killed at his

home in the presence of his family. A leading Unionist MP, the Rev Robert Bradford, was murdered in November 1981.

The Provisional IRA have also carried out assassination outside the United Kingdom. In July 1976 the British Ambassador to the Republic, Mr Christopher Ewert-Biggs, died when his car was blown up in Dublin and the British Ambassador in The Hague, Sir Richard Sykes, was shot dead in March 1979. In August 1979 Lord Louis Mountbatten, his grandson and another boy were murdered when his fishing boat was blown to pieces near Mullaghmore in the Republic.

For the Provisionals there is no ambivalence in conducting simultaneously terrorist and "legitimate" political campaigns; they see the one as reinforcing the other ("We go forward, an armalite in one hand, a ballot paper in the other", Danny Morrison, PSF Publicity Officer, at the 1981 annual conference or ard fheis).

ORGANISATION AND TACTICS: THE OFFICIALS

The Workers Party is governed by an Executive Committee elected at an annual party convention held in Dublin. It campaigns north and south of the border on broad economic and social issues; its Northern Ireland policy is to seek majority rule devolved government, with a bill of rights to protect minority interests, to facilitate the development of "class politics". But the Workers Party has made little political impact in Northern Ireland, and in the February 1983 general election in the Republic it returned only members to the Dail.

The Official IRA apparently decided early in 1970 that while the Provisionals were preparing to exploit the sectarian disturbances it could not confine itself to a posture of defence. During the Belfast riots in late October, Cathal Goulding, the Officials' Chief-of-Staff, stated that "... a military campaign is being planned now by the IRA against the British Army. We are going on the offensive...."

However, the Officials never threw themselves fully into their campaign, although their operations included the assassination of Senator Barnhill, a respected Northern Ireland Unionist politician; the attempted assassination of John Taylor, a junior Northern Ireland Home Affairs Minister; a bomb attack at an army base in England in February 1972, and the murder of a soldier on home leave in Londonderry in May 1972. The peace movement in Londonderry, which followed the soldier's death, was partly responsible for the Officials' indefinite ceasefire eight days later, though the ceasefire excluded actions "to defend our people".

Since then, the Official IRA has been largely quiescent. Today its activities are largely confined to bank and post office robberies, the proceeds from which are used mainly to fund the Workers Party.