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THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

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ABSTRACT

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This paper explores what might be termed the external relations of the Irish republican movement since the foundation of the Irish state. It reflects on the ways in which republicanism's various alliances have been analysed by the Irish, British and other states, and the impact of such analyses on state policies and actions. It asks whether "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity", rather than a shared sense of suffering amongst oppressed peoples, or attachment to some vaguely transnational political ideology—bolshevism in the 1920s, communism or nazism in the 1930s and 1940s, anticolonialism and socialism in the 1950s and 1960s—remains the best single explanation for Irish republicanism's eclectic range of ideological bedfellows.

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THE GEOPOLITICS OF REPUBLICAN DIPLOMACY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Eunan O'Halpin

I

This awkwardly titled paper discusses both the fact and the possible geopolitical consequences of Irish republicanism's external links with movements, ideologies and powers hostile to British interests in the twentieth century. In looking at aspects of what might be termed the external relations of the Irish republican movement since the foundation of independent Ireland, it reflects on the ways in which republicanism's various alliances have been analysed by the British and American states, and the impact of such analyses on policies and actions in terms both of Irish republicanism and of Anglo-Irish relations.

The discussion is unashamedly based on the premise that the best single motif for Irish republicanism's external relationships remains "England's difficulty is Ireland's opportunity". That hoary maxim, rather than a shared sense of suffering amongst oppressed peoples, or attachment to some vaguely transnational political ideology—Bolshevism in the 1920s, Stalinism and Nazism in the 1930s and 1940s, anti-colonialism and revolutionary socialism in the 1950s, 1960s and beyond—best explains militant republicanism's eclectic range of political bedfellows. Indeed it can be argued that it has been precisely Irish republicanism's ideological promiscuity which prevented all but the chilliest or most eccentric of western cold war warriors from arguing that Irish republican violence after 1969 could be explained largely in terms of Soviet manipulation.¹

Much recent debate on the Northern Ireland crisis has nevertheless centred on the ending of the cold war as a defining moment, in terms of the internationalisation of the search for an end to conflict and in particular of the involvement of the United States in the peace process. Such arguments rely largely on the assumption that geopolitical change has resulted in local change through facilitating the involvement of the world's remaining superpower, no longer preoccupied by the spectre of a powerful, insecure and unpredictable military and ideological foe in the Soviet Union. So far as I am aware, however, no one goes on to argue that geopolitical change and the collapse of state communism and of the Soviet threat to the West has rendered Irish republicanism less ideologically or strategically threatening, and the Northern Ireland problem consequently a more attractive quagmire than hitherto for the United States. In other words, even during the height of the cold war American policymakers, while they rightly pointed to interconnections between terrorist movements including the IRA, and to evidence of a degree of Eastern bloc support,

¹ See for example Goren, 1984: 171-2, which is on the boundary between legitimate scholarship and unsubstantiated generalisation.

did not portray the mainstream IRA as a Soviet puppet, still less as a potential Soviet military partner in the event of an East-West conflict.²

Nor, it appears, did the United States hold back from sticking its oar into the Irish question because of the strategic salience of a British controlled Northern Ireland in a possible East-West conflict—an argument which frequently appeared in Irish republican analysis in its most anti-Western phase in the 1970s and early 1980s. What is somewhat more plausible is the proposition that American engagement in the peace process reflects a gradual dilution, in post-cold war circumstances, of the Anglo-American “special relationship”. There are occasional hints from inside the American foreign policy and intelligence systems that this relationship is indeed undergoing a graceful attenuation as the global interests and preoccupations of the two unequal partners diverge and as Blair’s Britain moves towards accommodating itself within a distinct European Union security structure; it must be said that such talk is nothing new and that the two states still appear remarkably close in intelligence matters. There remains an even simpler explanation: continuity of American policy on Ireland since the first world war. The Northern Ireland crisis was, at least in the State Department’s anglophile eyes in the 1970s and 1980s, if not simply an exclusively British problem, then one in which the United States had no positive role to play beyond limited action against Irish republican fund raising and arms procurement and mild encouragement for Irish government moderation. President Carter’s 1977 statement on Northern Ireland fits in with that approach, because his vague offer of general help was in the context of supporting any settlement which the parties to the conflict would reach, rather than hinting at an independent peace forming or honest broker role for the United States (Dumbrell, 2000: 215).

A final question relates to the Provisional IRA’s world view: to what extent has its reorientation towards an ideological position broadly acceptable to mainstream American opinion been influenced by the spectacular disintegration of most marxist states, resulting in the loss both of role models and of quiet sponsors for armed action?

Using a handful of historical examples, I propose briefly to raise if not to answer a number of related questions. What have been the consequences arising from Irish republicanism’s eclectic variety of alliances and understandings with foreign states and movements? How have these been analysed by the British, Irish and latterly the American governments? How has such analysis influenced states’ perception of and policy towards militant republicanism? Does mainstream Irish republicanism have residual external ties, allegiances or obligations which would have alarming resonances for the troika of countries at the heart of the current peace process—Ireland, the United Kingdom, and the United States—or perhaps for some of Ireland’s EU partners or other friendly states? Can Irish republican IOUs offered during the long war of the 1970s and 1980s now be honoured—perhaps a quid pro

² But see the comments of Robert Chapman, a former CIA Latin America specialist, quoted in Godson, 1980: 149-50, where incidental links between a wide range of terrorist groups are construed as evidence of a single marxist international revolutionary structure ultimately controlled by the Soviet Union.

quo for ETA, back on the battlefield after an uneasy ceasefire, or for some Palestinian guerrilla group who gave a hand with training, weapons or operations—without antagonising the very governments which Sinn Fein now courts so relentlessly? Or is the newly respectable republicanism of Gerry Adams' Sinn Fein—pursuing inward investment, no strangers to the White House—now open to a variety of the charge levelled against de Valera in 1932 at a Fianna Fail ard-fheis shortly after he took office and declined to purge the public service, of forgiving its foreign enemies and forgetting its foreign friends (Andrews, 1983: 120)? In recent months we have seen ex-President Mandela and the ANC government in South Africa confronted with a comparable dilemma as they observe in embarrassed silence the wanton destruction of Zimbabwean democracy by their former comrade in arms Robert Mugabe.

II

I am not concerned here to dissect Irish republicanism's various external alliances over the last 80-odd years, but it is necessary briefly to take stock of them. The Easter rising was, after all, largely inspired and financed by Germany: that these "gallant allies in Europe" of the 1916 proclamation were themselves imperialists with scant respect for other states' independence was an incongruity with which the Irish revolutionaries could live, just as a later generation could accommodate themselves to alliances with more hideous tyrannies. Germany's modest investment of money and captured weapons proved a remarkably good one in terms of strategic diversion, albeit one on which she signally failed to capitalise either militarily or politically in the succeeding years: it was not until May 1918 that anything like a worthwhile follow-up emerged, and then it was the work not of strategists in Berlin but of politicised intelligence officers in London who manufactured the "German plot" out of what the cabinet secretary described as "evidence of the most flimsy and ancient description" in order to provide an excuse for cracking down on Sinn Fein in the wake of the Irish conscription crisis³.

From 1919 Irish separatism sought support from the new Bolshevik regime in Russia. This essay in revolutionary diplomacy prompted the British government in 1921 into a half-hearted attempt publicly to demonstrate a meaningful link between Sinn Feinism and Bolshevism and thereby to imply that in essence they were part and parcel of a single revolutionary wave which threatened the established civilised order. The reality, however, was that while some in the Irish labour movement were undoubtedly inspired by the Russian revolution, the Dáil government's interest in the new Russia was limited to securing mutual recognition of their respective claimed independent statehoods. Bolshevik interest in separatist Ireland also proved minimal, as the Dáil government's emissary Dr Patrick McCartan reported from Russia in 1921:

I am not so sure ... that self-determination for Ireland would raise much enthusiasm in official circles. Anything they are likely to do for Ireland will be done in the hope of

³ Hankey diary, 22 May 1918, Churchill College Cambridge, Hankey papers 1/5. Sir Maurice Hankey was secretary to the Cabinet from 1916 to 1938.

helping to break up the British Empire and thus further the world revolution (undated memorandum by McCartan [? June 1921], in Fanning et al, 1998: 156-8).

Later republican efforts to obtain weapons and money from Russia during the civil war got nowhere, while the only concrete outcome of a visit by a republican delegation to the Soviet Union in 1925 was a confused and short-lived understanding whereby the IRA was to collect military intelligence in Britain. The arrangement, maintained through a contact in Berlin, did not last long. There is in fact no evidence that the British ever became aware of this limited exercise in IRA-Soviet collaboration, although it was adduced two decades later by the Irish director of intelligence as proof of how a foreign power could harness Irish extremism for its own strategic interests, threatening Anglo-Irish relations in the process (O'Halpin, 1999: 275). In 1927 the IRA, by then under a degree of left-wing influence, committed the republican movement to side with Russia in any future Anglo-Soviet conflict. It seems unlikely that this second sighting of the Skibbereen Eagle weighed much in the scales for Stalin, but it indicated at least an ambition on some republicans' part to link their struggle to a wider revolutionary cause (O'Halpin, 1999: 72-4). Whether this resolution was ever rescinded is unknown.

That the British would be alarmed at any Soviet links with Irish republicanism, however tenuous, seems obvious. Bolshevism was regarded in British and American defence and security circles as the greatest single threat to the international order and, to quote an MI5 document, for almost the entire interwar period Soviet Russia was viewed, with Germany, as

One of the two real threats to British security ... Russia as a powerful military State controlling the Comintern organisation and utilising the national communist parties all over the world.⁴

On the face of it, consequently, one might expect to find evidence of British unease at Irish republican and communist links with the Soviet Union. In fact, however, concern is conspicuous by its absence in the available diplomatic and security records. Red scares had their day in independent Ireland, most significantly as a result of ill-judged government propaganda during the fevered 1932 election campaign which resulted in de Valera first coming to power. Even at the time, however, no-one outside Ireland appeared to take the charge remotely seriously: the British government, transfixed with worry at the prospect of having to deal with de Valera if he won power, saw him not as the Bolshevik stooge depicted by his Cumann na nGaedheal opponents, but rather as an irresponsible and unpredictable republican demagogue who would do all he could to wreck the Treaty and who might be an irritant in wider dominions relations. They were hopelessly out in their expectations of his likely tactics, if not entirely wrong in their analysis of his long term aims, but they at least avoided the trap of labelling him as Moscow's puppet (O'Halpin, 2000c: 65-7).

⁴ "The Security Service: its problems and operational adjustments 1908-1945, Vol. 1 (Chapters I to IV)", March 1946, Public Record Office, London (PRO), KV4/1, p. 22.

Nor, it appears, did the British worry much about good evidence of actual exchanges between republicans and communists in Ireland and the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s (in fact, in defiance of isolationist caricature it was the American State Department which was more inclined to fret about the slightest signs of communist influence in the new European states). This was despite the visible growth in left wing influence within the Irish republican movement after 1927, as well as increased contacts between the Irish left and the Soviet Union. The equanimity with which the communist movement in Ireland was regarded contrasts with Britain's acute nervousness about such matters elsewhere in the empire, particularly in India. There it was an article of faith amongst security officials—at least until June 1941—that the Indian separatist movement was under the indirect control, through the Communist Party of India, of the Soviet Union. The government of India expended enormous energy on the detection of communist wrongdoing throughout the interwar decades: indeed, mention of the Meerut conspiracy case of the early 1930s still brings an approving nod from old India hands, as I discovered in an interview with one last summer.⁵ Yet it was surely obvious even then that there was more to Indian nationalism than sly Soviet manipulation; furthermore, as any reader of Kipling or of his imitators well knew, the great game of British-Russian intrigue in the region long predated the Bolshevik revolution, and there were sound geopolitical as well as ideological reasons for it.

If the British overestimated the strength of covert communist activity in India, in short, they made no such mistake where Ireland was concerned. The new state was, its republican faction notwithstanding, manifestly rural, conservative and Catholic. If the British were at all concerned about the possibility of communist influence, they were presumably reassured through their interception and decoding of clandestine Comintern radio traffic in the mid-1930s. This indicated that Moscow, so far from seeking to stir the Irish pot for wider ends, did not even bother to deal with the handful of Irish comrades bilaterally. Instead the Soviets replicated the power relationships of the British empire which in principle they sought to destroy, leaving it to Harry Pollitt, the general secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB), to give the Irish their orders. Pollitt also passed on a monthly subsidy which was pitifully small even by Comintern standards. The decrypted traffic which has survived in British records suggests that no one in Moscow had the least understanding of actual political conditions in Ireland, or any sympathy for the travails of the perennially indebted and misfortunate Irish communists.⁶ Although these mid-1930s decrypts and other evidence indicated vague ambitions for combined action on economic and social issues with the republican movement within Ireland, furthermore, there was no hint that the Comintern planned to harness the Irish left for a wider subversive, sabotage or intelligence gathering agenda of the kind feared elsewhere in Europe and the empire. In this connection it is notable that, when war came in 1939, Whitehall's not entirely fanciful fears about CPGB orchestrated anti-war activities in the United Kingdom until June 1941 were not ac-

⁵ Interview with a former British official who worked on countersubversion in India between 1939 and 1941, Tipperary, August 2000.

⁶ The decrypted Comintern/CPGB traffic is in PRO, HW17/1 and 2.

accompanied, then or later, by any stated worries about Soviet manipulation of the Irish left against British interests. It is also significant that the lengthy inhouse war-time history of MI5's Irish section BIH never even mentioned either communist influence within the republican movement, or the known prewar war links between some Irish republicans and the Soviet Union. This was despite the fact that as a pan-island body the Irish communist network operated in both jurisdictions and thus would have appeared as a natural vehicle for subversive action against the war effort.⁷

In the 1930s republican diplomacy switched targets, with Sean MacBride, Sean Russell, Tom Barry and Seamus O'Donovan in turn focussing on Hitler's resurgent Germany as a power with which business might be done at Britain's expense. For a miscellany of reasons, from straightforward anti-British feeling to the memory of Germany as a former ally to the affinity with aspects of Nazi ideology felt by some republicans, serious contact was established between the republican movement and Germany in 1939. The Germans showed some interest in the IRA's potential for disruption, sabotage and intelligence gathering in the United Kingdom, and these contacts facilitated the development of propaganda and espionage links when the Second World War broke out. The German-IRA relationship was almost entirely pragmatic, as reflected in the involvement in Berlin in the planning of German schemes of the former International Brigade officer and IRA leftwinger Frank Ryan, although at least one of the people centrally involved at the Irish end was believed not only by the Irish authorities but by his friends to be ideologically attracted to Nazism and to regard himself as the future "Irish Quisling" (O'Halpin, 1999: 149).

The very existence of the German-IRA link, which had first come to British notice through an intelligence report from Berlin of July 1939, provided both Britain and independent Ireland with acute problems throughout the war period, and was a major and at times almost decisive element in British policy making. British military planners took it for granted that the IRA would operate in support of a German attack, and in the fraught weeks after the German assaults on the Netherlands and Belgium in May 1940, the British fully expected a German paratroop assault on Ireland in concert with action by the IRA "fifth column" as a prelude to or as part of an attempted invasion of Britain. On 31 May 1940 prime minister Winston Churchill was informed by his closest intelligence aide Desmond Morton that such an attack was almost certain, and that even if it did not soon materialise the IRA was sufficiently well organised, equipped and prepared to overwhelm the almost "derisory" Irish army on its own. A day later British diplomats in Dublin informed the Department of External Affairs that a German attack, to be supported by concerted IRA action, was not merely expected but was "imminent" (Churchill to Roosevelt, 15 May 1940, quoted in O'Halpin, 1999: 174). These calculations formed an important backdrop to the frenzied British search for ways to get Ireland into the war short of invading her before the Germans acted, with the esoteric concept of promoting a

⁷ "Note of the work of the Irish Section of the Security Service September 1939-1945", January 1946, PRO, KV4/9, cited hereafter as "Irish Section history". I am preparing this document for publication by Irish Academic Press as *MI5 and Ireland 1939-1945*.

Franco-Irish alliance on the basis of a shared revolutionary heritage rapidly being superseded by the better known proposal of eventual Irish unity in return for Irish participation.

British fears about the IRA's military potential to aid a German assault on any part of the island of Ireland gradually lessened in the face of energetic Irish government action and of better intelligence on Irish affairs, resulting in more sober assessments of IRA capacities, intentions and links with Germany. The related problem of German intelligence gathering, both activities assisted by republicans and independent operations, continued to create acute difficulties in Anglo-Irish and in Irish-American relations for almost the whole of the Second World War and in early 1944 seemed likely to jeopardise the maintenance of public neutrality (O'Halpin, 2000a: 71-83).

For our purposes what is most significant about the IRA-Nazi nexus between 1939 and 1945 is not its particular potential, achievements and failings, but the speed and ease with which the republican movement was able to shed the memory of this unfashionable alliance. They were helped in this by a number of domestic factors, including widespread Irish resentment at Churchill's intemperate attack on Irish neutrality in his VE day broadcast, and perhaps a quiet awareness that pro-German and even Nazi sympathies had not been confined to any one Irish party or movement, but had infected some Fianna Fáil politicians and even the first president of Fine Gael, General Eoin O'Duffy. What is perhaps more surprising is that during and after the war the British were not inclined to dwell on IRA perfidy in courting Hitler: in fact, in the latter part of the war and in the years which followed it was mainstream Irish neutrality and the Irish government's supposed sneaking regard for the Nazis which were the main target for British criticism and reproach.

III

In the postwar world, the intermittent foreign interactions of anti-state republicanism and of Irish left wingers evinced some interest as the cold war set in. However, the evidence suggests that the security services of Ireland's nearest neighbours east and west were disinclined to worry much about Irish republicanism as a potential fifth column in a time of tension with the Eastern bloc. They sought Irish information on the communist movement, it is true, but there was seldom more to talk about with Irish intelligence officers than could be handled in a few "good lunches" a year.⁸ The fact that Irish republican activities were excluded from the Anglo-Irish security dialogue perhaps contributed to the British tendency to see these as a local problem quite unrelated to the cold war. True, as the RAF's Sir John Slessor wrote in 1952, there was

⁸ Interview with Dr Cleveland Cram, formerly of the CIA, January 1998; comment of a former MI5 officer, August 2000.

a pretty nasty gap in NATO to which no-one has paid any attention recently, namely the completely defenceless position of EIRE, and the inability of NATO to make any use of IRISH bases.⁹

What was absent, then and later, was any concomitant fear that Irish republicanism could successfully be courted by the Soviets as a strategic cold war ally as previous generations of separatists had been by Imperial Germany and by the Nazis.

Yet there was considerable evidence available in the 1950s and 1960s of some intermingling of republicanism and marxism, and also clear indications that this development was encouraged, though certainly not initiated, by the Soviet Union as part of its general anti-western strategy (Patterson, 1997: 96-110; Goren, 1984: 171-2). Even when Northern Ireland was plunged into crisis following the Derry riots in August 1969, British intelligence organisations construed events almost entirely in local terms. In a sombre review of “the past week”, which “has seen the most serious disturbances in Northern Ireland since the 1920s”, the Joint Intelligence Committee’s Ulster Working Group adduced no evidence of external manipulation: under “International Links” it reported only that

Extremists in London have established links with Northern Ireland Civil Rights leaders. Known London Trotskyites are trying to gain international support for demonstrations; some foreign students were seen to be active in Londonderry.¹⁰

In subsequent years, both the Provisional IRA and the more marxist oriented Official IRA deepened their links with Eastern bloc countries and with some Middle Eastern states themselves close to the Soviet Union. They also developed quite extensive contacts with a variety of anti-Western terrorist organisations in the Middle East and in Europe. Eastern bloc material published since the end of the cold war, for example the contested but probably authentic *Mitrovkhin Archives* apparently based on KGB records, confirm the impression of a pattern of somewhat lukewarm and bemused Soviet and Eastern bloc support for the republican movement, and particularly its marxist wing in the 1970s and 1980s, with Moscow’s help being sought through the Irish communist movement (Andrew and Mitrovkhin, 2000: 492, 501-3).

The most interesting aspect of such external links is not their demonstrable existence, but the very limited impact which their discovery appears to have had on western analysis of what might be termed the republican movement’s geopolitical significance and potential in terms of East-West conflict. Despite Provisional Sinn Fein’s adoption of a patina of marxist terminology in the 1980s—in 1984 a leading Sinn Fein theoretician took umbrage when questioned about his claim that he was “a socialist first, and a republican only second”¹¹. This was despite evidence of

⁹ Slessor to First Sea Lord, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, and Lt Gen Brownjohn, 2 December 1952, PRO, DO35/3935.

¹⁰ JIC (A) (UWG) 29, 18 Aug. 1969, PRO, PREM13/2844.

¹¹ In a public exchange with this writer in the Rosemount Centre in Derry in October 1984.

Moscow gold and of East German succour for republican splinter groups, and despite the belated discovery of Libya's crucial quartermastering and financing of the Provisional IRA in the 1970s and the 1980s, there has been a dearth of what might be termed cold war centred analyses of modern Irish republicanism.

Put simply, few academic observers or even professional analysts appear ever to have believed that mainstream Irish republicanism was either the willing tool or unwitting catspaw of outside forces: rather, in the 1970s and 1980s even the most resolute cold war warriors continued to analyse the IRA in terms of its parochial anti-British and anti-partition agenda, and to note the relative insignificance of the more overtly marxist Official IRA and IRSP/INLA. The fact of militant Irish republican alignment with anti-Western regimes and movements—particularly important for the arms, explosives, training, and money necessary to keep the long war going—seemed to count for very little in either Britain or the United States (where Provisional propaganda naturally eschewed left wing rhetoric and stuck to old style denunciations of British rule). Aside from the occasional piece in the *Daily Telegraph*, and the idiosyncratic fulminations of the eccentric one-time deputy head of MI6 George Kennedy Young, even those most vehement in exposing and denouncing Eastern Bloc support for the IRA stopped short of arguing that the Provisional IRA were simply Moscow's puppets (Young, 1985: 72, 80-1).

This might appear to be no more than common sense. It does, however, contrast markedly with the difficult experience of Latin America since the 1960s, where even the most moderate and pacific advocates of land redistribution or greater social equity could expect to be branded as Eastern Bloc stooges by influential American policy makers. It also contrasts somewhat with the parallel debate over the tide of events in South Africa during the struggle for majority rule. In that case, the argument was forcibly and repeatedly heard in Britain, not simply on the right wing of the Tory party but from academics and commentators of some standing with links to the foreign policy and defence establishments, that whatever the failings of the apartheid regime, the popular movement against it had been hijacked by the Soviet Union and its local proxies. Such arguments are neatly encapsulated in the Institute for the Study of Terrorism's resonantly titled 1986 study *ANC: a Soviet task force?*, but they were also accommodated within conventional academic discourse on terrorism and the cold war (Campbell, 1986).

So why was mainstream Irish republicanism not daubed with the red brush, when movements and even elected governments in other parts of the world with greater commitment to democratic values, far greater popular legitimacy, and far less violent methods were? Is it perhaps because Eastern Bloc assistance to Irish republicanism since the late 1960s, while vaguely intended to produce diversionary dividends, was evidently not linked to any wider strategy or future plans, and was provided entirely without strings? Is it simply that no one who knew anything about the mainstream republican movement could seriously regard it as authentically revolutionary in an international context? Or is it the case that a movement which commanded such support within the traditionally conservative, anti-communist Irish-American diaspora could not possibly be depicted as marxist inspired or controlled?

I think that there is something in all of those arguments, but I want to put forward a further possibility. It is this: despite the fact of the German-IRA nexus during the Second World War, the British policy system has long been conditioned to look at Irish problems as something apart from the normal run of international business, neither deriving from nor relying on wider political trends and not to be confused with larger geopolitical challenges. In addition, even when the IRA's subversive and espionage potential was a major British security preoccupation during the Second World War, and despite other security problems posed by the permeability of the Irish border, because of the RUC's sensitivities MI5 had not been allowed to operate in Northern Ireland. After the war, furthermore, it appears that the study of Irish republicanism was left almost entirely to the RUC and to the Scotland Yard Special Branch (O'Halpin, 2000b: 149-50).

This hypothesis is supported by the fact that as late as St Patrick's Day in 1966, when there was considerable concern at the political level in London and Belfast about the possibility of IRA violence to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 rising, MI5 remained so preoccupied with the reality of Eastern Bloc espionage, and with the phantom of domestic ideological subversion, that it loftily declined responsibility for studying anything so local, familiar and idiosyncratic as Irish republicanism: that was a criminal matter for the Special Branch to handle (O'Halpin, 1999: 291).¹² We might also note recent statements at the Bloody Sunday inquiry, which if true indicate that when MI5 finally did take a direct interest in Northern Ireland in 1969, initially without the knowledge of the RUC Special Branch, the main job of the officer sent was the study neither of republicanism nor of Ulster loyalism but of local offshoots of British far right fringe parties.¹³ In November 1997 a senior Whitehall source, answering questions about the changing role of MI5 in the post-cold war world, was asked to identify what he regarded as the organisation's biggest mistake of the previous 30 years. He unhesitatingly replied "not taking the IRA seriously enough early enough".¹⁴

Anecdotal evidence also bears out the argument that in the late 1960s the British machinery of intelligence analysis and assessment was so preoccupied with the cold war that nothing else mattered: in the summer of 1968, as the Northern Ireland lid began to rattle, the Cabinet Office's Joint Intelligence Committee was solemnly pondering an accumulation of evidence of a Warsaw Pact military build up close to Czechoslovakia—"we knew the call sign of every field ambulance unit"—before cheerfully discarding as implausible, just before the Russian tanks began to clank towards Prague, the straightforward explanation that the Soviets were preparing to

¹² For British concerns about IRA activities to mark the 50th anniversary of the Easter rising see the material in PRO, PREM13/980.

¹³ Statements of "James" and "Julian", opened at the Bloody Sunday Inquiry on 14 June 2000.

¹⁴ Confidential seminar, London, 11 Nov. 1997.

invade a fellow Warsaw Pact country in order to put a stop to Dubcek's dangerous experiment in liberalisation.¹⁵

Analysis of the threat from Irish republicanism was not overly coloured by cold war perceptions and concerns: on the contrary, there appears to have been too great a division between the apparently local and sporadic Northern Ireland problem and the obviously geopolitical challenges of the cold war, with the energies of the policy system and of intelligence collection agencies going into the latter, not, as the Czechoslovak example indicates, always to great effect, while within the United Kingdom catastrophic trouble brewed unstudied by the state's intelligence machine. The collection agencies, by this argument, were simply not interested in the local question because the problem of republican terrorism had always been treated as *sui generis*, had never been seen in a cold war light, and was consequently not sufficiently important in geopolitical terms to merit their attention.¹⁶ Events in Northern Ireland soon forced a reevaluation of these priorities, as the establishment of the Joint Intelligence Committee's (JIC) "Ulster Working Group" indicates.¹⁷ In the following years the JIC and the Cabinet Office's newly appointed co-ordinator of intelligence Sir Dick White, who while a senior MI5 officer had managed Anglo-Irish security liaison during the 1940s and 1950s, were to spend considerable time attempting to bring order to the British intelligence effort against Irish terrorism.¹⁸

IV

Where does this leave mainstream Irish republicanism today in geopolitical terms?

The post-cold war spectres which haunt the imaginations of intelligence officials—rogue states acquiring weapons of mass destruction, environmental terrorism, Muslim fundamentalism—have no obvious Irish ideological resonances, although we should recall the dramatic benefits to the Provisional IRA of their links with Libya in the 1970s and 1980s. Furthermore, Sinn Fein's love affair with the White House has ensured that marxist rhetoric and inconvenient alliances have been quietly set aside in favour of the language of political pluralism, of human rights and of economically justified investment. In any case, revolutionary socialism is out of fashion: the Soviet Union and the peoples' republics of central and eastern Europe are no more, and Cuba and North Korea are scarcely inspiring political role models.

A combination of geopolitical and domestic factors has ensured that mainstream Irish republicanism, in a period when it has commanded the unprecedented attention of the United States, has effortlessly shed whatever marxist or other anti-western trappings it had acquired since the early 1960s. It would, however, be

¹⁵ Confidential remark of a former British official, December 1999.

¹⁶ Interview with a former intelligence officer, 1999

¹⁷ JIC (A) (UWG) 29, 18 Aug. 1969, PRO, PREM13/2844.

¹⁸ Interview with a former intelligence officer, 1999

wrong to infer a causal link between this ideological reorientation and the growing respectability of ceasefire republicanism in the post-cold war world. The reality is that, despite its various external alliances and its record of co-operation with Britain's enemies in both world wars, the republican movement was never analysed primarily in cold war terms by either the British or American governments. This is reflected in the fact that the monitoring of Irish republicanism in the postwar era was primarily seen as an RUC and Scotland Yard Special Branch task (supplemented to a limited extent by the military intelligence apparatus of the General Officer Commanding, Northern Ireland). In short, in spite of its history Irish republicanism was never seriously regarded as part of a broader threat to Western defence interests; consequently its close links with anti-Western states and movements during the last three decades have proved neither an embarrassment nor an obstacle as it seeks to build on its new found acceptability in America's corridors of power.

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