

Spies, Informers, and the 'Anti-Sinn Féin Society': The Intelligence War in Cork City, 1920-1921

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On 15 February 1921, in the city of Cork, Ireland, a military court consisting of three British Army officers assembled for the purpose of inquiring into the death of a local man the previous evening. (Such courts had been held in lieu of coroner's inquests since the passage of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act the previous summer.) Having assembled and viewed the body, the court proceeded to take evidence from three witnesses, including Fireman Dennis Murphy, who made the following statement. 'I belong to the Cork Fire Brigade', it says:

At 20.15 hours last night on receipt of a telephone message an ambulance was sent from Sullivan's Quay Fire Station to Tory Top Lane. I accompanied the driver. There we found lying in the road the body of the man now in the South Infirmary Mortuary. His cap was off and also his overcoat which was lying by his side. This card (produced, marked A) was lying on the overcoat. (The card about 6" by 4" has on it

CONVICTED SPY.

Penalty Death.

Let all spies and traitors beware.)

There were no signs of life in the body. We put him in the Ambulance and brought him to the South Infirmary. It was dark and I noticed no wounds on the spot. There was no one by the body when we reached it. I noticed no one and nothing to indicate what had happened. I do not know who sent the telephone message. The clothing of the deceased was not searched in my presence.

Having considered the evidence, the court found:

(1) that the deceased was William SULLIVAN, Aged 34, Single, an Army Pensioner residing in South Douglas Road, CORK.

(2) that the deceased died in Top Tory Lane [sic], CORK on the night of 14th February 1921 from the effect of gunshot wounds ...

(3) that the wounds were inflicted by persons unknown against whom the court finds a verdict of wilful murder.

Despite this verdict, there is no record of any subsequent investigation into the killing of William Sullivan.⁽¹⁾

Sullivan was just one of at least 26 Cork citizens executed for 'spying' by the insurgent Irish Republican Army during the Irish War of Independence (1920-1).⁽²⁾ These executions, and their justification, are at the heart of John Borgonovo's new book, *Spies, Informers, and the 'Anti-Sinn Féin Society'*. As Borgonovo explains:

This study attempts to answer four essential questions about those events. (1) Who were the Cork city civilians shot by the IRA in 1920-21? (2) Were they informers? (3) What was the context of the killings? (4) Was the IRA intelligence network capable of identifying civilian spies operating in city? (p. 1)

After consulting a wide variety of both published and unpublished Irish (and British) sources, and examining each case in some detail, Borgonovo has come to conclusions that are tentative, but still persuasive. At least some of these people, he argues, really were informers: while some others were genuinely under suspicion of informing; either way, in a majority of cases, there is a clear connection between their deaths and the intelligence war in Cork City.

This is an important point because, as Borgonovo explains, some recent revisionist histories of the War of Independence have suggested that the IRA's accusations of spying often served as a mere pretext for the persecution and murder of ex-soldiers and Protestants. Borgonovo denies this revisionist thesis, and his denial is based in part on a detailed examination of the IRA's intelligence service in Cork. This, he demonstrates, was much more effective than its British counterpart, and fully capable of rooting out spies and informers in its midst. What is more, according to Borgonovo, the IRA's Cork No. 1 Brigade did not shoot first and ask questions later, as many believe: their Brigade Intelligence Officer, Florence (Florrie) O'Donoghue, took his responsibilities very seriously, and insisted on accusations of spying being proved beyond a reasonable doubt before sanctioning an execution.

This is a compelling account that throws new light on the shadowy war between insurgents and counterinsurgents in Cork City between 1920 and 1921. Of course, like any historian, Borgonovo makes a

few small mistakes along the way. On p. 106, for example, he blames the Temporary Cadets of the Royal Irish Constabulary's (RIC) Auxiliary Division for initiating a wave of assassinations and attempted assassinations of Cork City Republicans in November 1920. 'These attacks coincided with integration of "Black and Tan" British constables into the Cork City RIC, and the arrival of a newly-raised company of Auxiliary Cadets' he says. 'The Cadets, composed of former military officers, seem to have instigated the reprisal campaign in the city.' This is probably not correct. On the one hand, the RIC had been posting Black and Tans to County Cork for months before November 1920: in fact, 25 of the 110 Black and Tans who had enlisted in January 1920 had been allocated to County Cork.⁽³⁾ On the other hand, the 'newly-raised company of Auxiliary Cadets' - K Company - did not arrive in the city until the beginning of December, a month after the reprisal campaign began. This fact is clear from the evidence presented to the second military court of inquiry into the burning of Cork - the notorious 'Strickland Report'. In his testimony, the commander of K Company, District Inspector W. O. Latimer, stated that "'K" Company was formed on paper in Dublin on Nov. 22nd. The first platoon assembled at Cork on Dec. 2nd. The company was completed as it stands at present at Cork on Dec. 8th'.⁽⁴⁾

As this example suggests, while Borgonovo makes excellent use of Irish sources (including the recently-opened Bureau of Military History), he does not always make effective use of British sources. In a recent letter to *History Ireland*, Borgonovo has asserted that 'British records for the period are fragmentary, incomplete, and often unreliable'.⁽⁵⁾ It's not clear how he came to this conclusion, since, to judge by his footnotes, he consulted very few of them. In fact, the UK's National Archives have preserved an enormous number of documents relating to the Irish War of Independence and no historian can afford to ignore its contents.

On p. 72, for example, Borgonovo complains (with justification) that 'it is extremely difficult to quantify Volunteer operations in Cork':

Although both police and local newspapers described major ambushes of British forces, minor actions and failed ambushes seemed to have gone largely unreported. For example, in July 1920, the RIC County Inspector reported seven IRA shooting attacks on city police (not including the assassination of Divisional Commissioner Smyth). No details of these incidents were included in the Inspector's report, and similar incidents went unreported during the rest of 1920.

This is correct, as far as it goes - but the RIC county inspectors' monthly reports are not the only available documents on this topic. Dublin Castle was also receiving weekly summaries of outrages against the police, which mention many of the 'minor actions and failed ambushes' that the county inspectors' monthly reports do not. In fact, some of these reports on minor incidents are more detailed than the reports on deaths and woundings. To take just one example:

CORK CITY. On 18.11.20 two members of the Auxiliary Police stationed at Woodstock, County Kilkenny, who are on duty in Cork, were attacked by a crowd of ten or twelve men at Parnell Place. Captain Jones was knocked down and deprived of his revolver. Major Moon fired five shots, and the attackers decamped. Two of the assailants are believed to be wounded. The two officers escaped without injury.⁽⁶⁾

Borgonovo could have used these records to supplement the RIC county inspector's monthly reports, and thereby acquired a clearer picture of IRA activity - especially since the weekly summaries of outrages distinguish incidents in Cork City from incidents outside, which the county inspector's reports do not. Nor can Borgonovo plead ignorance of these documents: W. J. Lowe used them as his chief source for an outstanding article five years ago;⁽⁷⁾ what is more, Borgonovo sometimes refers to these weekly summaries himself. ⁽⁸⁾ By digging deeper into records like these, Borgonovo could have strengthened the quantitative

analysis that he provides in Chapter Four to support his arguments about trends in revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence.

Another British source that Borgonovo neglects is the proceedings of the military courts of inquiry in lieu of inquests established by the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act. These are preserved in The National Archives as part of WO 35, and they frequently make fascinating reading. Take, for example, the case of William Sullivan. According to Sullivan's brother Philip, William had in fact served in the Army for seven years, enlisting before the First World War: after his demobilisation in 1919, he had re-enlisted in the Royal Army Service Corps for a year; since then he had been drawing unemployment donation. Somehow, on 12 February 1921, Sullivan obtained a cheque for more than £20 which he cashed on Monday the 14th. 'He took our mother into the town to buy some clothes for the children', said Philip Sullivan; 'She brought back about £5 worth of clothes, and spectacles worth about 15 shillings. He did not come home with her. I did not see him again alive'.⁽⁹⁾

Did the Crown Forces really pay their Irish informants by cheque? Whether they did or not, Sullivan's good fortune may have confirmed his guilt in the eyes of the IRA: around eight o'clock on the evening of 14 February, someone shot him twice, in the right side of the neck, shattering the spinal column. In his evidence to the court of inquiry, Philip Sullivan went on to say:

My brother took no part in politics, as far as I know. He did not help the police at all. He was not friendly with any police. As to politics he used to say that he had been through enough & that he did not want to hear anything about politics. I do not know of any reason why anyone should want to hurt him. He used to drink all he could get. He would look after the home first: he was a good brother. What he had left he would spend in drink. Out of the money he drew he gave my mother some, besides buying the clothes. I cannot say at all how much money he had on him when he left my mother in the town. I know of no people who would be likely to rob him. He was shot about ...⁽¹⁰⁾ mile from our home. The Police gave me three shillings as having been found in my brother's clothing.⁽¹¹⁾

In his book, Borgonovo asks why the IRA took Sullivan to Tory Top Lane before they shot him. 'The most plausible answer', he suggests, 'is that the Volunteers wanted to question Sullivan before killing him' (p. 57). Sullivan's abductors either wanted him to confess, or they wanted him to implicate his accomplices. To my mind, this new information makes the former seem more likely: it is easy to imagine the last pathetic moments of William Sullivan's life, with a gun to his neck, and angry voices asking him where he got that money. Borgonovo might have discovered many similar files, had he only looked.

In addition, while Borgonovo's references to Irish archival sources are models of clarity and consistency, his references to British archival sources are a bit of a mess. In his notes, for example, Borgonovo refers to the same type of RIC document in at least seven different ways.⁽¹²⁾ To his credit, he never neglects to tell us that these various reports are part of the Colonial Office papers - CO 904, to be exact - but in most cases, he does not mention their location: and when he does, he refers us to the old Public Record Office (PRO), rather than the new National Archives (TNA). Finally, despite Borgonovo's frequent references to the material preserved therein, his bibliography mentions neither the PRO nor TNA - although it does mention the Imperial War Museum and the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Studies. To the trained eye, these errors and omissions make Borgonovo's work look amateurish - and that is unfortunate. Though rather weakened in places by its neglect of British sources, Borgonovo's book is otherwise both solidly-researched and up-to-date. Its arguments are generally sound, and its conclusions are both interesting and significant. This is a professional piece of work

Unfortunately, some people seem to want more from this book than its author was able or willing to deliver. What Borgonovo has written is a valuable addition to the historiography of the Irish Revolution, but to judge from the way that the book has been advertised, *Spies, Informers and the 'Anti-Sinn Féin Society'* was

written (or at least published) specifically to refute the work of Peter Hart. The back cover promises readers that the author will provide 'unique evidence and conclusions regarding the situation in Cork city, which have not been published in any other work and directly contradicts some conclusions made in Peter Hart's *The IRA and its Enemies*'. In addition, as part of his own anti-revisionist campaign, Jack Lane of the Aubane Historical Society has blazed Borgonovo's findings abroad, claiming that they 'rubbish' Hart's research.(13)

Let's consider these claims. In Chapter 13 of *The IRA and its Enemies* (appropriately titled 'Spies and Informers') Hart writes:

'Informers' can thus be broken down into three categories: those the IRA suspected were 'guilty of offences against the Nation and the Army'; those they punished for those alleged activities; and those who actually did give information to the authorities. What the evidence shows is that these were three quite distinct groups, with little overlap in membership. That is, the great majority of actual informants were never suspected or punished; most of those shot (or denounced, expelled, or burned out of their homes) never informed; and those blacklisted were also usually innocent-but were not usually attacked.(14)

These generalisations are then supported with a data table that divides nine samples of 'spies and informers' into three categories - those who were suspected, those who were punished, and those who informed - and compares their occupations, their ages and certain other characteristics - in particular, Protestantism and military service. The information provided by this table fully supports Hart's generalisations: as Hart mentions in the text, 'Protestants, ex-soldiers, and those described as "tinkers" or "tramps" made up 14 per cent of informants, 27 per cent of suspects, and fully 67 per cent of those who were shot'.(15)

Now: Borgonovo does not directly dispute any of this. In fact, far from 'directly contradicting' Hart's conclusions, Borgonovo agrees with them - at least, when it comes to the reasons why the IRA shot a disproportionate number of ex-soldiers as spies. Like Hart, Borgonovo notes that suspected women spies were usually spared, along with Republicans and their families: and even though five Protestant Unionists were executed, some were merely ordered out of the city, and many others were left alone. Yet the Volunteers were willing to shoot ex-servicemen: why? 'Faced with numerous cases of complicity with the local Crown forces', says Borgonovo, 'the city's IRA leadership probably found it easiest to assassinate isolated men of low social standing, rather than prominent pillars of the community, close associates, or members of Republican families' (p. 91). This is almost exactly what Hart said in *The IRA and its Enemies*: 'Almost anyone could be an informer. Almost anyone could be suspected of informing. Whether one was shot (or burned out, or expelled), however, depended upon one's position within the community.'(16)

Borgonovo does offer some specific criticisms of Hart's work, but these are not always convincing. In particular, I think Borgonovo mischaracterises Hart's theory of a 'tit-for tat' cycle of violence. Borgonovo seems to think this means that 'the IRA executed civilians as informal reprisals for IRA losses' (pp. 85-6). But what Hart had in mind was clearly something much more complex, as he shows in Chapter 1 of *The IRA and its Enemies*, with his detailed narrative of the fallout from the shooting of RIC Sergeant James O'Donoghue. Indeed, some of Borgonovo's arguments in this section of his book seem rather strange. On p. 70, for example, he takes a pessimistic police report ('the state of the City and Riding have been bad') as evidence that the IRA could not have been shooting civilian informers that month as informal reprisals for IRA losses. But this seems to assume a rather heartless attitude on the part of the police official: surely, one reason he wrote that the City and Riding had been bad, was because so many civilians were being executed by the IRA?

Ultimately, the disagreement between Hart and Borgonovo rests on their different estimations of the overlap between Hart's three groups of 'informers': those who were suspected, those who were punished and those who informed. What Borgonovo has done in *Spies, Informers and the 'Anti-Sinn Féin Society'* is to demonstrate that Cork City was an exception to Peter Hart's rule: in Cork City, the overlap between these

three groups was much greater than a study of County Cork as a whole would suggest. Clearly, the Cork No. 1 Brigade's exceptional intelligence service made it possible to narrow the 'informer gap' that Hart found throughout the county. Borgonovo's research results have qualified - dare I say, revised - Hart's conclusions. And that is the way of historical research. At the risk of offending both authors, it seems clear to me that their works are complementary rather than contradictory. In order to 'rubbish' Hart's work, Borgonovo would have to show that his own findings were applicable across County Cork. This he does not (indeed, cannot) do. Borgonovo does think that 'the city was a microcosm of the larger struggle in Ireland' (p. 3). What is more, he hopes that, 'when studying the example of Cork city, the reader will consider its wider implications' (p. 2). But this is rather like writing a history of the Battle of the Somme and saying that 'the Somme was a microcosm of the larger struggle on the Western Front', while hoping that 'when studying the example of the Somme, the reader will consider its wider implications'. In fact, the battles at either end of the Great War, in 1914 and 1918, hardly resembled those of 1916, or each other. The same could be said about the battles fought at either end of revolutionary Ireland, or even rebel Cork, between 1920 and 1921.

Notes

1. The National Archives of the UK (TNA), WO 35/159b, Third witness (Brian Murphy) and Findings, court of inquiry into the death of William Sullivan, 15 February 1921. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. The exact total is a little unclear. In his notes, Borgonovo mentions 26 killings and seven attempted killings, for a total of 33 (p. 100, nn. 70, 71). But in his conclusion, he mentions only 31 (p. 179). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. TNA, HO 184/36, Royal Irish Constabulary General Register. [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. TNA, WO 35/88A, First witness (Dist. Insp. O. W. Latimer), court of inquiry into incendiaryism and looting in Cork City, p. 3. [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. J. Borgonovo, 'Peter Hart's review', *History Ireland* (May/June 2007), p. 7. [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. TNA, CO 904/149, weekly summaries of outrages against the police, November 1920, p. 258. [Back to \(6\)](#)
7. W. J. Lowe, 'The War against the R.I.C., 1919-21', *Éire-Ireland*, 37 (2002), 79-117. [Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See, e.g. p. 103, n. 119. In addition, these weekly summaries were compiled from even more detailed daily summaries, which are preserved as well. [Back to \(8\)](#)
9. TNA, WO 35/159b, First witness (Philip Sullivan), court of inquiry into the death of William Sullivan, 15 February 1921. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. The document is illegible at this point. [Back to \(10\)](#)
11. TNA, WO 35/159b, First witness (Philip Sullivan), court of inquiry into the death of William Sullivan, 15 February 1921. [Back to \(11\)](#)
12. As the 'County Inspector's confidential report for Cork (City and East Riding)' and the 'County Inspector's report for Cork (City and East Riding)' (p. 18); the 'CI report for Cork (City and East Riding)' (p. 35); the 'CI monthly report for Cork (City and East Riding)' (p. 65); the 'CI report for Cork City and East Riding', the 'CI report for Cork' and even just the 'CI report' (p. 98); and as the 'RIC County Inspector's report for May 1920' (p. 101). [Back to \(12\)](#)
13. Jack Lane, 'Peter Hart praises book that rubbishes his research' <http://www.indymedia.ie/article/81785> [2](accessed 20 August 2007). [Back to \(13\)](#)
14. P. Hart, *The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork 1916-1923* (Oxford, 1998), p. 303. [Back to \(14\)](#)
15. Hart, p. 303. [Back to \(15\)](#)
16. Hart, p. 308. [Back to \(16\)](#)

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