

THESIS
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**THE NORTHERN IRA AND THE EARLY YEARS OF
PARTITION 1920-22**

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ABSTRACT

The years 1920-22 constituted a period of unprecedented conflict and political change in Ireland. It began with the onset of the most brutal phase of the War of Independence and culminated in the effective military defeat of the Republican IRA in the Civil War. Occurring alongside these dramatic changes in the south and west of Ireland was a far more fundamental conflict in the north-east; a period of brutal sectarian violence which marked the early years of partition and the establishment of Northern Ireland. Almost uniquely the IRA in the six counties were involved in every one of these conflicts and yet it can be argued was on the fringes of all of them. The period 1920-22 saw the evolution of the organisation from a peripheral curiosity during the War of independence to an idealistic symbol for those wishing to resolve the fundamental divisions within the Sinn Fein movement which developed in the first six months of 1922. The story of the Northern IRA's collapse in the autumn of that year demonstrated dramatically the true nature of the organisation and how it was their relationship to the various protagonists in these conflicts, rather than their unceasing but fruitless war against partition, that defined its contribution to the Irish revolution.

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed by myself, and that the work which it embodies has been done by myself and has not been included in another thesis.

SIGNED

DECEMBER 2003

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ABBREVIATIONS

ADC	aide-de-camp
Adj.	Adjutant
AOH	Ancient Order of Hibernians
ASU	Active Service Unit
Bde.	Brigade
BMH	Bureau of Military History
Bn.	Battalion
Brig. Gen.	Brigadier General
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
Col.	Colonel
Comdt.	Commandant
C/S	Chief of Staff
Coy.	Company
D/Int.	Director of Intelligence
D/I	District Inspector
D/Org.	Director of Organisation
GAA	Gaelic Athletic Association
IO	Intelligence Officer
IPP	Irish Parliamentary Party
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRB	Irish Republican Brotherhood
ITGWU	Irish Transport and General Workers Union
NA	National Archives (Dublin)
NLI	National Library of Ireland
O/C	Officer Commanding
PRO	Public Record Office (London)
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
QM	Quartermaster
RIC	Royal Irish Constabulary
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
TD	Teachta Dala (Dail Deputy)
UCDAD	University College Dublin Archives Department
UIL	United Irish League
USC	Ulster Special Constabulary

CHRONOLOGY

1920

<i>January</i>	Municipal elections. Nationalists win control of Derry council and a number of other urban authorities.
<i>25 February</i>	(Better) Government of Ireland bill introduced in the Commons with provision for partition of Ireland.
<i>April</i>	IRA launch attacks on tax offices and unoccupied police barracks across the six counties.
<i>June</i>	Rural county elections. Nationalists win control of Tyrone, Fermanagh, South Down and South Armagh
<i>13-25 June</i>	Sectarian violence breaks out in Derry.
<i>17 July</i>	Colonel G. F. Smyth (RIC Divisional Commissioner for Munster) shot dead in Cork.
<i>21 July</i>	'Shipyard expulsions' begin after Smyth's funeral in Banbridge. Catholic workers expelled from shipyards and engineering works. Rioting follows in Belfast, Banbridge and Dromore.
<i>6 August</i>	'Belfast Boycott' inaugurated by Dail in response to shipyard expulsions.
<i>22 August</i>	D.I. Swanzy shot dead in Lisburn. Catholics attacked in Lisburn, many flee to Dundalk.
<i>1 November</i>	Recruitment begins for the Ulster Special Constabulary.
<i>23 November</i>	(Better) Government of Ireland Bill enacted.

1921

<i>24 May</i>	Ulster Unionists win resounding victory in elections to new Northern Ireland parliament.
<i>7 June</i>	James Craig elected as first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.
<i>22 June</i>	King George V opens Northern Ireland parliament.
<i>11 June</i>	Truce implemented.
<i>July</i>	Attempt to immobilise USC after Truce resisted by the Unionists. British Government relents (USC remobilised September 1921).
<i>16 August</i>	Second Dail convened by Sinn Fein in Dublin.
<i>22 November</i>	Control of policing in Northern Ireland transferred to Unionist government. Sectarian clashes follow in Belfast.
<i>6 December</i>	Anglo-Irish Treaty signed in London.

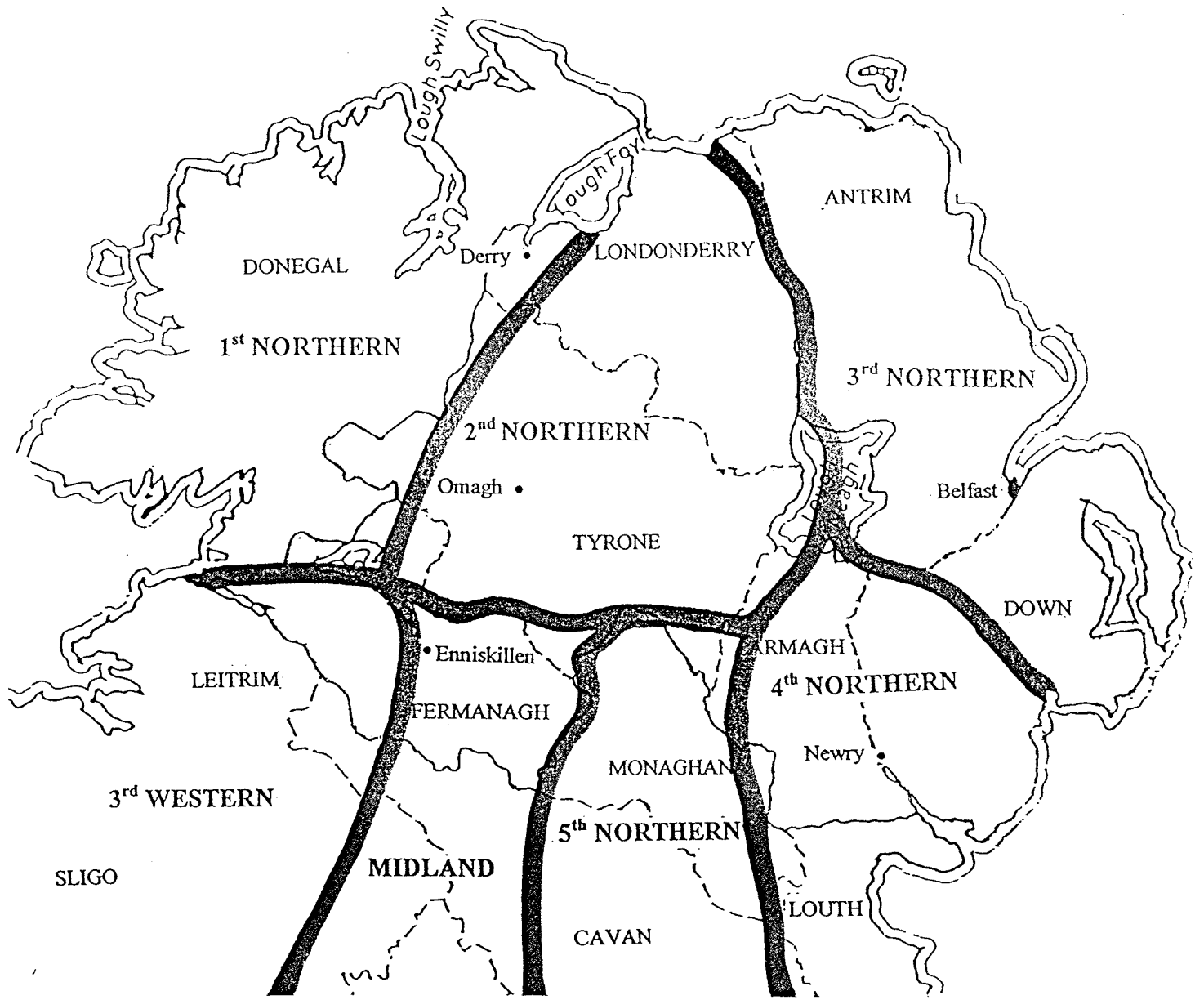
1922

<i>January</i>	Michael Collins sets up Northern Military 'Ulster Council' under Frank Aiken.
<i>7 January</i>	Treaty narrowly approved by Dail.
<i>14 January</i>	Provisional Government appointed under Collins in tandem with new Dail Ministry under Griffith. 'Monaghan Footballers' arrested in Dromore.
<i>21 January</i>	First Craig-Collins pact agreed.
<i>8 February</i>	Over forty unionists in Tyrone and Fermanagh kidnapped by IRA in retaliation for arrest of 'Monaghan Footballers'.
<i>11 February</i>	Gun battle between IRA and USC at Clones railway station.
<i>13-15 February</i>	'Clones Affray' leads to savage violence in Belfast.
<i>16 February</i>	British government set up Border Commission.

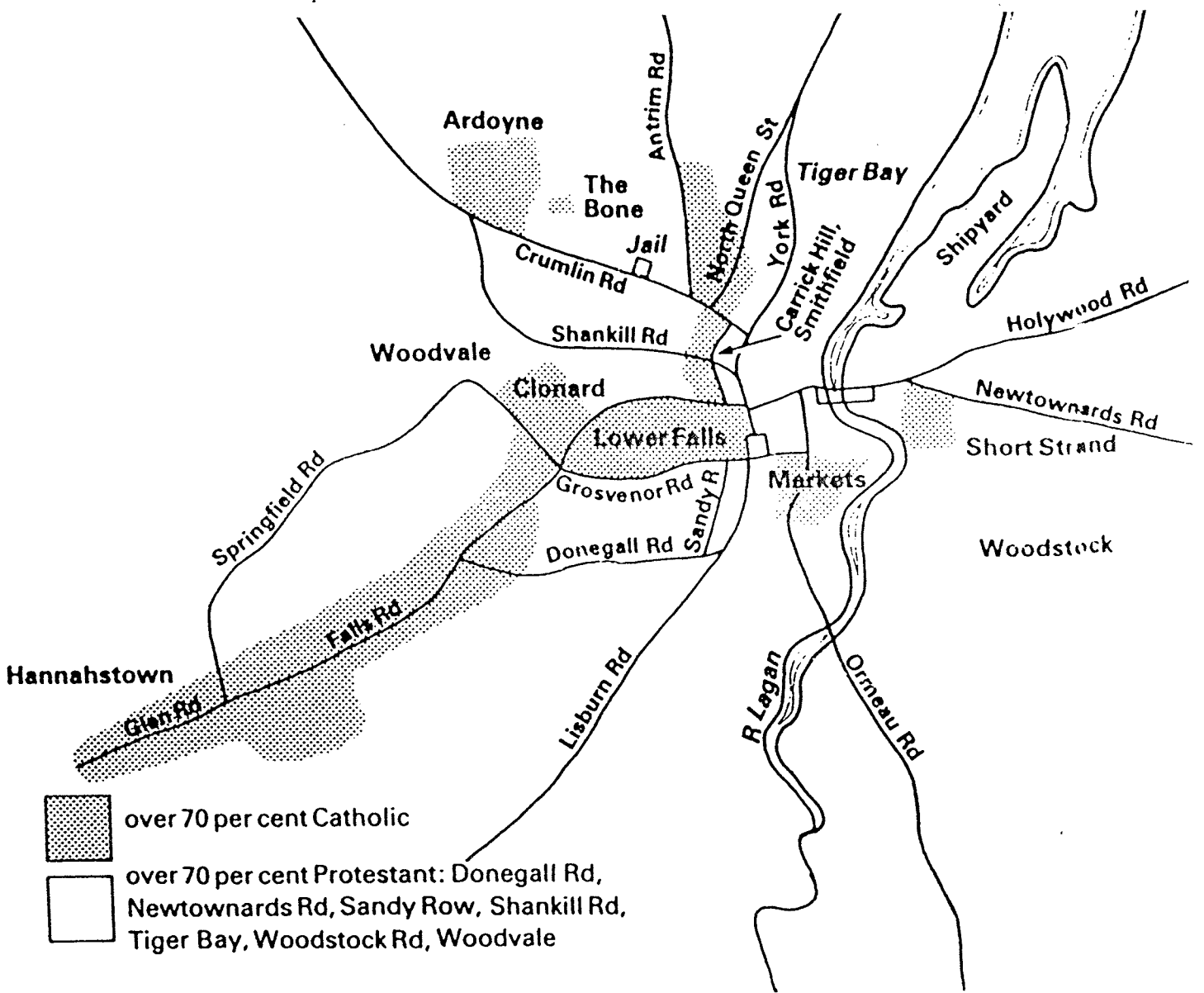
<i>14 March</i>	Sir Henry Wilson appointed as Military Adviser to the Northern Ireland government.
<i>18 March</i>	St. Mary's Hall in Belfast raided by Specials.
<i>24 March</i>	MacMahon murders in Belfast.
<i>26 March</i>	Army Convention establishes anti-Treaty Executive in defiance of Provisional Government Army leadership under Mulcahy.
<i>30 March</i>	Second Craig-Collins Pact agreed.
<i>1 April</i>	Arnon Street murders.
<i>7 April</i>	Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Bill introduced by Northern Ireland government with provision for internment without trial.
<i>14 April</i>	Republican IRA faction under Rory O'Connor establishes HQ in the Four Courts, Dublin.
<i>2 May</i>	2 nd Northern Division begin planned offensive with attacks on barracks in Londonderry and Tyrone (6 RIC and Specials killed over next few days).
<i>18 May</i>	IRA attack on Musgrave Street Barracks in Belfast.
<i>19 May</i>	3 rd Northern Division begin their offensive operations in east Ulster. Planned attacks called off in Armagh and South Down.
<i>20 May</i>	Collins and deValera sign electoral pact to maintain balance of parties in second Dail at forthcoming election.
<i>22 May</i>	Unionist MP William Twaddell shot dead in Belfast. Unionist government introduces internment.
<i>28 May</i>	Fighting begins around Belleek and Pettigo.
<i>1 June</i>	RUC takes over responsibility for policing in Northern Ireland,
<i>3 June</i>	British Army expel IRA from Belleek- Pettigo triangle.
<i>June</i>	Stephen Tallents arrives in Belfast to report for the British Government.
<i>16 June</i>	Pro- Treaty candidates win majority in election for provisional parliament in Southern Ireland.
<i>17 June</i>	IRA attacks on Protestant farms at Altnaveigh.
<i>22 June</i>	Sir Henry Wilson shot dead in London.
<i>28 June</i>	Provisional Government Army attack Republican garrison in the Four Courts initiating the Civil War.
<i>16 July</i>	Provisional Government Army units seize Dundalk.
<i>2 August</i>	GHQ meeting with Northern IRA officers at Portobello Barracks.
<i>14 August</i>	Frank Aiken leads attack to retake Dundalk.
<i>19 August</i>	Provisional Government Cabinet officially adopts a 'peace policy' in regard to 'North -East Ulster'.
<i>22 August</i>	Michael Collins killed in ambush in West Cork.
<i>11 September</i>	Proportional Representation abolished for local elections in Northern Ireland.
<i>November</i>	Ernie O'Malley finally orders Republicans to evacuate Donegal.
<i>7 December</i>	Northern Ireland parliament votes to opt out of the Irish Free State.

1923

<i>March</i>	Seventeen Republicans killed 'clearing mines' in Kerry.
<i>10 April</i>	Liam Lynch shot dead in the Knockmealdown mountains on the border between Tipperary and Waterford.
<i>27 April</i>	Republican offensive suspended by new Chief of Staff, Frank Aiken.



I.R.A. Divisional areas in Ulster March 1921-August 1922



Map of Belfast showing majority Catholic areas

INTRODUCTION

The Irish War of Independence and its aftermath has long been a fertile period for Irish historical writing. This brutal, although heavily localised conflict which saw the IRA pitted against the security forces of the British government has inspired both popular mythology and weighty academic monographs. From the political manoeuvrings at Westminster to the squalid realities of revolution in the Irish localities the period still retains a strong grip on the historical imagination. Ironically however one of the most important end results of this conflict, the partition of Ireland into two new self-governing administrations, has received only limited attention from historians. Indeed the events of the revolutionary period in the north-east of Ireland have themselves been similarly underplayed despite the fact that by any measure this was a serious, if not defining, aspect of the conflict.

Even a cursory examination of the period demonstrates that the subject of Ulster's role in the revolution is far more than an historical curiosity. In the two years running roughly from June 1920 to June 1922 what became the province of Northern Ireland was engulfed in brutal and vicious sectarian violence, most of it confined to Belfast. It is estimated that around 550 people lost their lives in this short period due to politically inspired violence. A comparison with the past thirty years of conflict in the North where approximately 3000 people have died, the victims of much more destructive modern weaponry, highlights the intense brutality of this earlier period. It is also

comparable to other parts of Ireland during the revolutionary period itself with Belfast suffering a proportionally higher loss of life than even the most violent counties in Munster.¹

As such this thesis is inspired by what is an obvious historical question. Obvious because with the importance of partition in the current political landscape, and also perhaps in the agendas of present-minded historians, not to mention the huge impact that the past thirty years have had on Irish historical writing itself, it seems natural to ask what role militant republicanism played in opposing Northern Ireland at the time of its creation, a time when it was evidently at its most vulnerable.²

With this obvious connection in mind it may be expected that such a question would have received extensive attention from historians. However, this is not the case. In fact it is arguable that not only the Northern IRA but also the minority Catholic population as a whole have, until relatively recently, been very much the forgotten people of Irish history. While historians such as Eamon Phoenix and Marianne Elliott have done much to address this anomaly the story of the IRA in

¹ G.B. Kenna (Father John Hassan) *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* (O'Connell, Dublin, 1922) pp.101-112. See also P.Hart *The IRA and its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork 1916-23* (Oxford, 1998) p.50.

² For an analysis of the effects of the Northern Irish 'Troubles' on Irish historical writing see D.G. Boyce, 'Past and Present: Revisionism and the Northern Ireland Troubles' in D.G. Boyce and A. O'Day (eds.), *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (Routledge, 1996) pp.216-235.

the six counties still requires further attention.³ The pioneering work of Michael Hopkinson and Tim Pat Coogan, whilst providing excellent accounts of the period, form only part of studies whose main focus lies elsewhere. More recently Jim McDermott has made a significant contribution to the study of the IRA in Belfast between 1920-22 although there still exists no dedicated work on the activities of the organisation in the rest of Northern Ireland.⁴ The current trend in Irish historical writing towards local and county studies, typified in the work of Peter Hart, Marie Coleman, Joost Augusteijn and Michael Farry, has yet to have made any impact on the six counties.⁵ With so many of these studies now complete, and many more on the way, this historiographical gap becomes ever more noticeable and the reasons for its existence less and less sustainable. As such this thesis will attempt to demonstrate that not only is the subject of the Northern IRA itself an important and interesting one but also that the reasons for its neglect are similarly enlightening.

Perhaps the most fundamental reason for this neglect has been due to the psychological impact of the past thirty years of political upheaval in Northern Ireland. The sheer length and immediacy of the recent

³ E. Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism: Nationalist Politics, Partition and the Catholic Minority in Northern Ireland 1890-1940* (Belfast, 1994); M. Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (London 2000).

⁴ M.A. Hopkinson *Green Against Green: The Irish Civil War* (Dublin, 1988); T.P. Coogan *Michael Collins* (London, 1991); J. McDermott *Northern Divisions: The Old IRA and the Belfast Pogroms 1920-22* (Belfast, 2001).

⁵ See P. Hart, *The IRA and its Enemies*; M. Farry, *The Aftermath of Revolution: Sligo 1921-23* (Dublin, 2000); J. Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* (Dublin, 1996); M. Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution, 1910-1923* (Dublin, 2002). See also David Fitzpatrick's seminal

conflict has relegated earlier periods of violence in Ulster to the position of mere dress-rehearsals for the main event taking place in the present. They are the unfinished battles of the past now finally reaching their conclusion in the modern era. Such attitudes have meant that the role of the north-east in the Irish revolution is extremely ill defined. Vague or emotive phrases such as the 'Troubles' or the 'Belfast Pogrom' have been employed to describe what is an extremely complex set of historical events with distinct phases of development. This failure to adequately define the period has been reinforced by a distinct possessiveness of the events of the revolutionary period on the part of Southern nationalists, typified by the employment of an identical nomenclature for the various phases of the conflict on both sides of the border. Thus, for example, the Truce period running from July-December 1921 is applied to the six counties despite the fact that more people were killed in Belfast during the last five months of the year than in the first seven.⁶

The context of the recent 'Troubles' in the north-east has also meant that any historical subject which involves a link between the IRA and Northern Ireland will almost inevitably be an extremely sensitive one. This has been demonstrated markedly by the lack of substantial historical sources for the period. Archival material, such as that now

study of County Clare, *Politics and Irish Life 1913-1921: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (Dublin, 1977).

⁶ Between 1 January and 11 July 1921 52 people were killed in Belfast compared to 71 between 11 July and 6 December. See Kenna *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* pp.103-6. For an interesting

released today, was simply not available to earlier historians. There was almost a paranoid fear, especially in Northern Ireland, that new historical revelations would do little but stoke the fires of sectarian conflict and either offend or reinforce one of the two competing ideologies. The absence of available archives meant that those who did research the subject tended to have something of an axe to grind. This approach is typified in the work of republicans such as Michael Farrell and rather defensive unionists, most notably Bryan Follis.⁷

The absence of archives however is only part of the story. There has also been a general unwillingness to investigate the Northern aspects of the conflict because they reflect badly on present-day mythologies. For unionists any scrutiny of the period will inevitably focus on their rather woeful security record and the violent oppression of the Catholic minority by elements within their own police forces, principally the notorious 'B' Specials. Unionists during this period are more readily identified as the besiegers of the Catholic minority rather than the besieged of their own historical tradition.⁸

discussion of the limitations of current definitions of the revolutionary period see P. Hart, 'Definition: Defining the Irish Revolution' in J. Augusteijn (ed.), *The Irish Revolution, 1913-1923* (Dublin, 1996).

⁷ See for example M. Farrell, *Arming the Protestants: The Formation of the Ulster Special Constabulary and the Royal Ulster Constabulary 1920-27* (London, 1983); B. Follis, *A State Under Siege: the establishment of Northern Ireland 1920-25* (Oxford, 1995).

⁸ In total 557 people were killed between July 1920 and July 1922 in Northern Ireland. 455 of these deaths occurred in Belfast (267 Catholics, 185 Protestants and three of unknown religion). However, as Catholics made up only one quarter of the population of the city the per-capita death rates were much higher. See Kenna *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom*; J. Bardon *A History of Ulster* (Blackstaff, 1992) p.494

Similarly Southern nationalists have little interest in highlighting the Northern aspects of the independence struggle mainly because it demonstrates their total failure to avert partition, typified graphically by their role in the shambolic Boundary Commission of 1925. It also shows up the extent to which the South was prepared to purchase its own independence at the expense of Irish unity.⁹ In this sense, as with the North, historical anomalies have been jettisoned in order to provide both states with an unambiguous justification for their existence. For unionists the events of 1920-22 do little but highlight the Northern government's rather shaky hegemony over its territory and its use of brutal methods to maintain it, whilst in the South it shows up the limitations of nationalist rhetoric in the Irish context. They have preferred to concentrate on the victory they achieved over the British in the War of Independence rather than the squalid failure of armed insurrection in the North. It is notable for example that in the recent film of the life of Michael Collins his personal crusade against partition of the first six months of 1922 is not even mentioned, let alone dramatised.

Irish republicans themselves have also got distinct reasons for ignoring the role of their forebears in attempting to undermine partition. The most unpalatable fact they face is that the Northern IRA was almost totally destroyed in the period 1920-22, failing to make

⁹ The most impressive studies exploring southern nationalist attitudes to the North are C. O'Halloran, *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism: an ideology under stress* (Dublin, 1987) and J. Bowman,

any inroads into partition and essentially ceasing to exist until the 1960s, so great was their defeat. Irish republican tradition is not noted for celebrating defeats unless, like the Easter Rising, they are 'glorious' ones and there was nothing glorious about this period, it was bitter, brutal and sectarian. The vast majority of those killed, both Protestant and Catholic, are innocent civilians, an extremely high proportion of them women and children. The manner of their deaths is also truly horrific and the IRA's role is a largely ambiguous and counterproductive one.

Doctrinal factors, most notably the Northern IRA's perceived pro-Treaty stance in the Irish Civil War, have also militated against the group's acceptance into the republican pantheon. As such it is the tiny and insignificant anti-Treaty element of the period which has gone on to secure the mantle of being the true Irish republicans. This has meant that Northern IRA veterans of the period have reacted with a mixture of embarrassment and secrecy to their role in the conflict. Unlike Southern IRA figures such as Tom Barry, Dan Breen or Ernie O'Malley who became popular celebrities due to their exploits in the War of Independence, writing best-selling books and appearing on television documentaries, virtually none of the key leaders of the Northern IRA are familiar to a general readership.

DeValera and the Ulster Question, 1917-73 (Oxford, 1982). For the complex workings of the Boundary Commission see G. Hand, *Report of the Irish Boundary Commission* (Shannon, 1969).

Perhaps the most potent example of this historical amnesia is the almost non-existence of republican songs about the Northern IRA and the lack of virtually any monuments to IRA actions in the six counties from the revolutionary period unlike in the South where songs, monuments and commemorations abound. A typical example of these forgotten fights is the 'Clones Affray' of February 1922 where in extremely dramatic circumstances a party of 'A' Specials fought a gun battle with the IRA leaving five dead and well over twenty wounded. At the time its impact was enormous leading to the suspension of British troop withdrawals from the South and nearly forty deaths in Belfast during the following three days. Today however the incident, like so many others in the North during the revolutionary period, is almost completely forgotten receiving only scant attention in even the most specialised of texts.¹⁰ The question to be asked is if such an event had occurred in Cork or Kerry would it have been so easily ignored? This lack of reference in Irish republican tradition to the Northern IRA, especially in an organisation so obsessed with its past, is perhaps the greatest testament to how these events have been quietly forgotten.

The end result of these various practical and ideological barriers has led to what the historian and political scientist Paul Bew has called 'partitionist history'. Bew argues convincingly that historians have concentrated overly on the internal development of either Southern nationalism or Ulster Unionism. Whilst knowledge of the two

¹⁰ This incident is examined in detail in chapter five.

traditions in Ireland has become increasingly sophisticated this has been achieved at the expense of all-Ireland perspectives. Obviously the victims of such a rigid north-south division will be anomalous groups such as the Northern Catholic minority who do not fit neatly into either state. This however is the very reason why the story of the Northern IRA is such an important one as it focuses on the fault-lines between the two ideologies and their respective foundation-myths showing up something of their inherent character and ideological limitations.¹¹

The structure of this thesis reflects very much the lack of reference to Northern republicanism in Irish historical writing. A narrative rather than thematic approach has been favoured principally because the story of the Northern IRA is a very complex one and a thematic approach it was felt would hinder rather than help an understanding of the flow of historical events in Ireland between 1920-22. As well as untangling the elements of this often confusing story the study will concentrate on those attitudes, activities and perspectives which the IRA in the six counties possessed which makes them deserving of the prefix 'Northern'. What is key to understanding this group of men, and one of the main themes which emerges from their history, is how they both come to define themselves and be defined by others as a distinct grouping apart from their compatriots south of the border. Indeed it is

¹¹ See P. Bew, *Ideology and the Irish question: Ulster Unionism and Irish nationalism 1912-1916* (Oxford, 1994); one potent example of this 'partitionist history' can be found in Dermot Keogh's

only through an analysis of the Northern IRA's relationship with its erstwhile Southern allies that the true nature of the organisation can be understood. As such the principal aim of this thesis is not only to examine the part played by the Northern IRA in attempting to undermine the Northern Irish state in its formative years, but also its wider role and contribution to the Irish revolution.

Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State (Dublin, 1994) where the North is deliberately left out of the study.

PART I

THE WAR COMES NORTH

CHAPTER ONE

FINDING THE FIGHT

The rebirth of Irish republicanism in the first decade of the 20th century had a distinct Ulster heritage. The resurrection of the Irish Republican Brotherhood and establishment of the Dungannon clubs was in large part due to the energetic activities of the Belfast-based republican trio of Bulmer Hobson, Sean McDermott and Denis McCullough. On the surface at least it appeared that Ulster was the new home for an equally new breed of radical republicans. However such radicalism was largely illusory; as the historian Austen Morgan has written, the republican movement in the north-east consisted of little more than ‘...big individuals in small organisations who leave for Dublin.’¹ Indeed after the split in the Volunteer movement of 1914 only a mere 200 men in Belfast remained loyal to the IRB controlled Irish Volunteers.²

The role played by these men in the Easter Rising of 1916 was little short of farcical. McCullough brought a motley band of 132 Volunteers and Cumann na mBan girls by train from Belfast to Dungannon with vague orders from Patrick Pearse to move into Connaught and link up with Liam Mellows to defend the line of the river Shannon. After arriving in Tyrone, a combination of opposition from the handful of local Volunteers, who refused to countenance leaving their own area, and a realisation of the sheer impracticality of

¹ A. Morgan, *Labour and Partition: The Belfast Working Class and the Belfast Labour Movement, 1868-1920* (London, 1991) p. 198.

² *Ibid.*, p.204.

Pearse's orders led McCullough to call off the entire operation and return to Belfast without a shot being fired.³

In the patriotic aftermath of the Easter Rising McCullough's pragmatic decision appeared to many young radicals as treachery. Sean Cusack, later to be an IRA officer in Belfast, recalled a conversation he had with McCullough after the aborted insurrection: 'He told me that he had been asked by his leaders to do something which was beyond the reasonable expectations of his small force...These reasons prompted him to discourage action in Belfast after they returned from Co. Tyrone on Easter Sunday. I told Mr McCullough that we all felt that he had to some extent let us down.'⁴ Similarly Roger McCorley, a future leader of the Belfast Brigade and barely fifteen years old in 1916, angrily stated: 'I feel that a few determined men could have taken action which would have compelled most, if not all, of the British Garrison to remain in Belfast. It was from this that my detestation of faint-heartedness in war originated.'⁵ It would be the uncompromising attitude of young men like McCorley rather than the cautious approach of McCullough which would later come to dominate the outlook of the IRA in Belfast.

³ For a full description of the events in Ulster in 1916 by some of its key participants see the statements of Sean Cusack (Bureau of Military History (BMH), National Archives (NA), WS 9); Frank Booth (BMH, NA, WS 229); John Garvey (BMH, NA, WS 178). See also Morgan *Labour and Partition* pp.205-6; J.McDermott *Northern Divisions*: p.13.

⁴ Sean Cusack statement (BMH, NA, WS 402).

⁵ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

The post-Rising arrests demonstrated markedly the weakness of advanced nationalism in the north of Ireland with only 83 of the estimated 1600 men detained coming from the nine counties of Ulster.⁶ As such reorganisation of the Irish Volunteers in Belfast during 1917 was on an extremely small scale. David McGuinness, later to emerge as a key IRA Intelligence officer in the Belfast Brigade, described the disorganised confusion which surrounded these early efforts to re-establish the movement: 'The first move to effect a reorganisation was the notification by word of mouth for Volunteers to attend a meeting at premises opposite the Forester's Hall at Mill Street. This meeting was most informal, no proper chairman, each man had apparently something to say and said it.'⁷

Four Volunteer companies, each consisting of at most forty men and based in the Catholic Falls Road area of the city, were existing in Belfast by early 1918. Each one was built around a hard-core of radical members of prominent Gaelic sporting associations and pipe bands in the city such as the O'Neill Crowley, Michael Davitt, John Mitchell and Sean McDermott GAA clubs. Added to these were the remnants of the old Fianna companies whose members would later graduate to the leadership of the Belfast IRA in the early 1920s. Under the guise of sporting and cultural gatherings basic military training was undertaken. This involved little more than drilling in the hills

⁶ Morgan, *Labour and Partition* p.206. For details of the internees from Ulster see S. O'Mahoney, *Frongoch: University of Revolution* (Dublin, 1987) pp.170-1.

⁷ David McGuinness unpublished memoir quoted in McDermott, *Northern Divisions* p.13.

around Belfast during the evening or at weekends under the constant observation of the RIC.⁸ Such activities defined the extent of Volunteer operations in the city well into 1919. Roger McCorley, despite his angry reaction to McCullough's perceived timidity in 1916, would later confide: 'One of the difficulties was that no one had any clear idea as to what form our activities would eventually take. There was a general idea that some day the signal for a rising would come and that we could drive the enemy into the sea with one fell swoop.'⁹

However, such a signal never came and, as elsewhere in Ireland, it was the wider political context that gave a renewed impetus to the faltering organisation. The by-election campaigns in South Armagh and East Tyrone, held in February and April 1918 respectively, gave the local Volunteer organisations a much needed focus for their activities.¹⁰ Volunteers from as far afield as Dublin, Clare and Dundalk came to the north-east in their hundreds to boost local attempts to ensure a Sinn Fein victory.¹¹ As well as carrying out canvassing, voter registration and the protection of polling stations the Volunteers also engaged in violent scuffles with the supporters of the Irish Parliamentary Party in the shape of the Ancient Order of Hibernians who retained the support of the majority of the Ulster Catholic population.

⁸ Thomas Fox statement (BMH, NA, WS 365); David McGuinness statement (BMH, NA, WS417); see also McDermott, *Northern Divisions* pp.13-14.

⁹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

¹⁰ M.A. Hopkinson *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin, 2002) p.16. See also J. Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* pp.62-3.

The rhetoric of these battles, if not the violence, was of the extremist variety as both sides fought for the role of being the true representatives of nationalism in Ireland. John Cosgrave, an Armagh Volunteer, angrily recalled the extent to which their political enemies would go to defeat Sinn Fein:

‘We then saw the unusual spectacle of Hibernians and Orangemen travelling together in the same public conveyance with the green Hibernian flag and the Orange Union jack flying side by side. The Hibernian election slogan “Up Donnelly” was supplemented by the Orange section with the additional war cry of “To hell with the Pope”. This unholy alliance between orange and green was the start of an intense opposition by the Hibernians to everything republican in our area.’¹²

Despite such claims unionists played a very minor role in this internecine warfare between the two brands of Irish nationalism. Cosgrave himself would admit: ‘In 1918 and 1919 the Volunteers got more annoyance and opposition from the Hibernian organisation than from the Unionists.’¹³

The confrontations between the Volunteers and Hibernians in South Armagh were particularly bitter. John McCoy, second in command of the IRA’s Newry Brigade, recalled Eamon de Valera arriving in his area

¹¹ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492); see also J.McDermott *Northern Divisions* p.14.

¹² John Cosgrave statement (BMH, NA WS 605).

¹³ Ibid.

with both of his car windows smashed in after an especially violent campaign rally at Crossmaglen. McCoy later stated that it looked as if the Sinn Fein leader had been in a fight.¹⁴ The intensity of the political violence surrounding the by-election would leave a legacy of bitterness in Armagh that would lead to brutal recriminations over the coming years. After the election itself many sports and cultural organisations in the county were broken up as the Hibernians and Volunteers moved away to create their own separate clubs.

Nevertheless the election campaign had breathed new life into the previously scattered and lacklustre Volunteer companies in South Armagh. By the end of 1918 the Camlough Battalion had been formed under the dynamic leadership of Frank Aiken. Soon after a brigade was constituted in Newry under Paddy Rankin, with Aiken as his deputy, covering both Armagh and South Down.¹⁵ This brigade would later form the basis of the powerful 4th Northern Division, which along with Belfast constituted the two most active IRA areas in the six counties. Despite the beneficial effects of the by-elections to the Volunteers, in the longer term the outcome looked ominous for the potential of republicanism to spread its appeal to the north-east of Ireland. The Sinn Fein candidates Patrick McCartan and Sean Milroy were both defeated, temporarily halting the Sinn Fein bandwagon,

¹⁴ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

¹⁵ Ibid.

which had been previously victorious in Roscommon, Longford, Clare and Kilkenny City.¹⁶

Along with the by-elections in the spring of 1918 fears that the British government would introduce conscription in Ireland to counter the German spring offensive in France also had a beneficial impact, albeit a temporary and qualified one, on the Volunteer organisation in the north-east. As in the south and west of Ireland the conscription crisis brought about a brief surge in the membership of the organisation throughout the six counties. In Belfast the number of Volunteers rose from around 100 to 240 although most of these recruits left when the threat of conscription had receded.¹⁷ It was a similar story elsewhere and summed up neatly by one Volunteer officer: 'Conscription in April 1918 brought many in but they did not stop in.'¹⁸ Michael Sheerin, an IRA officer from Derry, voiced the feelings of many older members to this new batch of recruits: 'They were no good. Most of them thought the IRA was some sort of organisation one joined if he wanted to be protected from conscription escorts. We swore very few of them into the movement, and saw little of them after the enrolment.'¹⁹ Nicholas Smyth, a Volunteer leader from Tyrone, echoed this view

¹⁶ The by-election results were as follows: East Tyrone-Patrick Donnelly (IPP) 2324, Patrick McCartan (Sinn Fein) 1305; South Armagh-Thomas Harbinson (IPP) 1802, Sean Milroy (Sinn Fein) 1222. See B. Walker *Parliamentary Election Results in Ireland 1801-1922* (Dublin, 1978) p.185. For the effects of these failures on de Valera and the wider Sinn Fein movement see Bowman *De Valera and the Ulster Question 1917-73* pp.33-37.

¹⁷ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

¹⁸ Neil Gillespie quoted in U. MacEoin, *Survivors* (Dublin, 1980) p.162.

¹⁹ Michael Sheerin statement (BMH, NA, WS 803).

recalling that even some old UVF members had joined up as a means of protection from the threat of conscription.²⁰

Despite the impact of these external factors on the Volunteer organisation in the north-east and the growing militancy of the movement south of the border, the six counties remained quiet and peaceful. While the threat of partition had played a major role in allowing Sinn Fein to undermine the IPP, militant republican activity was virtually non-existent in Ulster for the first eighteen months of the conflict. John McCoy noted the marked contrast between the situation in Ulster and that in the rest of Ireland: 'With us the Republican effort to organise was so limited in scope and making such slow headway that no particular notice was taken of it by the British Authorities and Unionists.'²¹ One RIC Constable based at Maghera in County Londonderry described the rather timid attempts at militant activity in his area, 'Ach the [RIC] boycott was not too bad, they didn't do that in Maghera; they didn't boycott you in Maghera. We played football with them. Life was comfortable enough. As long as you treated them decent and didn't go too hard on them. The troubles didn't have much of an effect. There was one ambush. They fired alright but a Sergeant Kelner was with me and Kelner was too wise for them. They didn't see Kelner until he jumped on them. Kelner gave them the best hammering ever they got, they went on their knees and begged of him

²⁰ Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721). For the effects of the conscription crisis throughout Ireland see M.A. Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin, 2002) pp.16-17, Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* pp.75-8.

to let them go.’²² The industrial disputes of 1919 inflamed by rising unemployment remained the principal areas of confrontation.²³ What other violence there was involved the usual sectarian scuffling typified by the attack of a loyalist mob on Catholic Celtic supporters after their match with Glentoran in the City Cup Final at Windsor Park in May 1919.²⁴

The lacklustre performance of the Northern IRA was not unique to the six counties when assessed in the wider context of the War of Independence with most areas outside of Munster and Dublin experiencing an extremely low level of IRA violence. The particular reasons for the Northern IRA’s inactivity however were specific to Ulster. The sheer difficulty of organising amidst such a large and hostile majority Protestant population made any form of IRA activity, especially that which required some level of acquiescence from the civilian population, such as the RIC boycott, extremely problematic if not impossible.²⁵ Unlike in the south of Ireland where the population were either cowed or displayed tacit support for the IRA, the six counties contained a strong and aggressive anti-nationalist majority. Joe Sweeney, the Donegal IRA leader, later outlined his torrid experience of this opposition after his arrest in early 1920: ‘...they brought us down by lorry to the docks in Belfast where they

²¹ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

²² James Gilmer quoted in J Brewer (ed.), *The Royal Irish Constabulary: An Oral History* (Belfast, 1990) p.99.

²³ For details of the engineering strike of 1919 and the economic background to the violence see Morgan, *Labour and Partition* pp.229-284.

deliberately left us standing beside a destroyer for about ten minutes so that the Orangemen there could throw anything they could get their hands on at us- lumps of coal...rivets, bolts.’²⁶

Extreme reactions such as this from sections of the unionist population meant that what few IRA units there were remained limited to areas with strong Catholic populations. Even within these communities Joe Devlin’s United Irish League and its affiliated organisation the AOH, would maintain their strong grip on the political loyalties of most Northern Catholics which had been so apparent in the earlier by-election campaigns. This was confirmed by the UIL’s success in the general election of 1918 where, despite being decimated in the south and west of Ireland, they managed to win four seats in the six counties. This included West Belfast where Joe Devlin won a substantial majority over Sinn Fein’s strongest candidate, Eamon de Valera.²⁷ Even by 1920 there were only 980 Sinn Fein members in Belfast compared to 6533 members of the UIL.²⁸

As such when overt sectarian violence erupted in Belfast in mid-1920 many nationalists still saw the Hibernians and the old structures of the Redmondite Volunteers as the natural candidates for the role as

²⁴ *Irish News*, 20 May 1919.

²⁵ Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* p.316.

²⁶ Joe Sweeney quoted in K.Griffith and T.O’Grady (eds.), *Curious Journey: An Oral History of Ireland’s Unfinished Revolution* (Dublin, 1982) p.161.

²⁷ Devlin received 8488 votes to de Valera’s 3245. For the background to the 1918 election in the six counties see E. Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland 1918-1973* (Columbia, 2001) pp. 18-24: B. Walker *Parliamentary Results in Ireland 1801-1922*. pp. 185-191.

defenders of the Catholic community. For example in 1920 Roger McCorley discovered that a local clergyman had in his possession sixty Martini-Henri rifles which he offered to the AOH for the defence of Catholic areas in the city. The IRA managed to intercept this message and went along to collect the rifles in the guise of Hibernians. The priest told McCorley that he was only providing them with the rifles on the express condition that the IRA did not get hold of them.²⁹ Indeed throughout the period the IRA would spend a great deal of time and energy attacking these political opponents in the nationalist community, a strategy which would do little but breed further division within the Catholic minority and militate against the possibility of unified opposition to the new Unionist government.

Such internal opposition meant that the IRA in the six counties lacked strong networks of support and made the organisation both politically fragile and extremely isolated. The Northern IRA, already made up of only a small fraction of Sinn Fein activists in Ulster, itself the junior nationalist organisation in the region, were by far the smallest political grouping in the six counties. As the historian Joost Augusteijn has argued: 'The silent acceptance of the Volunteers as the sole representatives of the Catholic community, which crossed most sections of the community in the South, was limited to a few small

²⁸ H. Patterson, *Class, Conflict and Sectarianism: The Protestant Working Class and the Belfast Labour Movements, 1868-1920* (Belfast, 1980) p.185.

²⁹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389); see also the recollections of two other Belfast Volunteers, David McGuinness and Sean Montgomery quoted in McDermott, *Northern Divisions* p.19.

pockets of hard-core support.’³⁰ As such IRA organisation was patchy and scattered in small pockets throughout the north-east with the majority of districts having no IRA presence whatsoever.³¹

The resistance from political opponents in both the Protestant and Catholic communities also impacted on the IRA’s attempts to procure weapons and equipment. As elsewhere in Ireland the need to acquire arms became an early and continuing obsession for the Northern IRA. Weapons were obtained from a wide variety of sources. Guns were bought from arms dealers and soldiers returning from France although raids on private houses, barracks and arms suppliers were the main methods of equipping the Volunteers.³² In 1919 raids such as those on Riddell’s gunsmiths in Belfast and a quarry near Hannahstown in order to steal explosives were as far as the Northern IRA went along the road to armed insurrection.³³ However, due to the scale of the opposition the organisation faced in the north-east, even such small-scale activities often led to a violent backlash.

Many weapons were still in the hands of old UVF members and presented a tempting, although risky, target for the IRA. These numerous minor confrontations not only bred further animosity between both communities but also defined many of the IRA’s later targets. For example, on 12 May 1920 an attack was launched on

³⁰ J. Augusteijn *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* op. cit. p.316.

³¹ F. O’Donoghue, *No Other Law* (Dublin, 1954) p. 247.

³² *Ibid.*, p.147-150.

Newtownhamilton barracks principally because the town was perceived as being home to some of the most aggressive members of the unionist population and ‘...it was considered advisable to give them a chance of showing their mettle when up against a serious local attack on what they had sworn to defend.’³⁴ Indeed vigorous opposition from loyalists meant that the Newry Brigade experienced particular problems obtaining arms. By 1919 the brigade had only six rifles, which McCoy recalled were ‘...more appropriate to a museum than an armoury.’³⁵ In May an attempt had been made to procure weapons with a large-scale raid on Ballyedmond castle in South Down which had previously been the headquarters of a local UVF battalion and was home to its old commander Sir Arthur Nugent. The attack had been under contemplation for the previous twelve months and by the time it was eventually launched all of the weapons had been removed. Such abortive raids meant that by the start of 1920 the Newry Brigade had only managed to double its number of rifles to twelve.³⁶

The difficulties experienced by even the most militant IRA units in acquiring weapons and the resolute opposition presented by large sections of both the unionist and nationalist communities meant that the first phase of the War of Independence had virtually no impact on the north-east. It was only in the spring of 1920 after GHQ ordered all

³³ Thomas Fox statement (BMH, NA, WS 365).

³⁴ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

³⁵ Ibid.

IRA units throughout Ireland to carry out raids on unoccupied police barracks and government buildings to commemorate the Easter Rising that the Northern IRA made a concerted effort to begin offensive operations. In April around six tax offices were attacked in Belfast and similar raids were recorded in many of the major towns across Ulster. Thomas Flynn took part in one of these raids on the Income Tax office in Queen's Square, Belfast: 'We had Volunteers working in this office, and after office hours, through these volunteers, we were able to gain admission. We overpowered the caretaker. We administered chloroform to this unfortunate man and tied him up. It was most fortunate that he was not suffocated or burned. All the papers and documents in the office were collected in trays and burned in the building.'³⁷ In Belfast the attacks were organised by two ex-employees, Joe McKelvey and Seamus Woods, both of whom would later take command of the IRA's 3rd Northern Division covering much of east Ulster. Woods later described his amateurish first attempts at arson confiding that he set himself on fire as well as the government records.³⁸ Elsewhere the attacks followed a similar pattern and more often than not were led, as in Belfast, by men who would later become key leaders of the Northern IRA including Frank Aiken who personally entered the Custom House in Newry and set fire to its records.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid. For details of the Ballyedmond raid see also *Irish News*, 12 May 1919.

³⁷ Thomas Flynn statement (BMH, NA, WS 429).

³⁸ Seamus Woods interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, University College Dublin, Archives Department (UCDAD), P17b/107). For further details of the raids in Belfast see McDermott, *Northern Divisions* pp.28-29.

Aiken and his small band of followers had transformed Armagh into virtually the only area in the north-east comparable to the more disturbed counties of Munster. Attacks steadily increased during 1920 after the tax office raids culminating in the fatal shooting of an RIC Sergeant near Crossmaglen in June. By the end of the year the Newry Brigade felt strong enough to launch operations on a larger scale although strident loyalist opposition doomed their efforts to failure. In December a plan was devised to launch an attack on the police barracks in Camlough, the home town of Frank Aiken, with a simultaneous ambush at the 'Egyptian Arch' railway bridge which lay half a mile from Newry.⁴⁰ The operation, carried out on the evening of 12 December, was a disaster. Persistent rain and snow showers made it impossible to set fire to the barracks and the attacking party were forced to beat a hasty retreat. The authorities had also been forewarned of the waiting ambush at the railway bridge and confusion over the moving of weapons between IRA units allowed the police to launch their own ambush which left three local IRA members dead and two badly wounded. The rest of the men fled across the surrounding fields and escaped into Louth and Monaghan as police poured into South Armagh and South Down. By way of reprisal they headed straight for Aiken's home in Camlough and burned it to the ground.⁴¹ Edward Fullerton, a local Volunteer, commented: 'Immediately after the Egyptian Arch ambush, the job of evading

³⁹ Edward Fullerton statement (BMH, NA, WS 890).

⁴⁰ Edward Boyle statement (BMH, NA, WS 647).

capture was a wholetime occupation with us.’⁴² The growing militancy of the IRA in Armagh was dealt a severe blow from which it had barely recovered by the time of the Truce.

Similar attempts to match the militancy of Aiken were poorly prepared and badly executed. On 20 June 1920 the IRA attempted a raid on Cookstown Barracks in County Tyrone. However the RIC garrison offered determined resistance and the local Volunteers quickly retreated. One of their number, Patrick Loughran, was shot in the stomach during the brief firefight, eventually dying from his wounds a few hours after the attack, the first IRA member to be killed in the six counties.⁴³ Other setbacks were to follow and again it was the ineptitude of the IRA that was the telling factor. Frank Donnelly, an IRA Commandant from North Armagh, took part in one such shambolic attack on Irish Street Police barracks in Armagh where a contraption made up of an axle box and a horse cart was filled with explosives and rolled up opposite the barracks. He admitted years later that despite the lengthy preparations: ‘The explosion did more damage to the houses opposite the barrack than it did to the barrack premises.’⁴⁴ It was a similar story elsewhere with attempts to capture Dundrum, Ballynahinch and Crossgar barracks all ending in failure.

⁴¹ By far the best account of the Egyptian Arch affair is given by John McCoy (BMH, NA, WS 492); see also Peadar Barry statement (BMH, NA, WS 853).

⁴² Edward Fullerton statement (BMH, NA, WS 890).

⁴³ Albert Tally statement (BMH, NA, WS 884).

⁴⁴ Frank Donnelly statement (BMH, NA, WS 941).

The story of this latter attack at Crossgar in East Down, launched in July 1920, is typical of the IRA's early amateurish approach. A local RIC Constable William Britton gave his version of the events as follows: 'They attacked Crossgar with rifle fire, the police station was a terrace house. Well they went into both houses beside the Barrack and tried to blow it up. They couldn't, they weren't well up in explosives...They mustn't have been well up in explosives because instead of blowing up, it blew out. They did the same thing at Ballynahinch. It went off but it went out. Well nowadays [i.e. the 1980s], you see, they're being trained. They weren't up to the standard they are now in the use of explosives.'⁴⁵

Roger McCorley had been appointed by Joe McKelvey to lead the attack at Crossgar. His account of the operation demonstrates graphically the incompetence and lacklustre attitude that pervaded the Northern IRA during the first two years of the War of Independence:

'As an indication of the bad training of the men in this area- there was a bombing party which was to go into the houses on each side of the Barracks when the attack took place and when the petrol was pumped in they were to throw in bombs to set the petrol ablaze. The men who were detailed for this bombing party had no idea of the mechanism of bombs which were of the Mills Hand Grenade type so I was given the job of instructing

⁴⁵ James Gilmer quoted in Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary* p.99.

these men. I brought the instruction down to the very minimum they would need. I instructed them to keep their hands on the levers after pulling the pins. When I had given this instruction I told them to remain where they were so they would not get picked for some other party. I was then called away to fix a rifle which some fellow had taken to pieces and could not re-assemble. I just got back in time to find one of the bombing party with the pin extracted from the bomb and was just about to let the lever fly off. He appeared to be under the impression that nothing would happen if he did not throw the bomb. I just saved it in time. There was considerable difficulty in keeping the men under control. Sometimes a man would find himself picked on two or three different parties owing to the fact that they were moving about the hall. We were practically a full hour late when we finally moved to attack the barracks.’⁴⁶

When the attack eventually began it was indeed the shambles that William Britton had remembered. The IRA Engineer, who McCorley admitted was facing ‘the realities of fighting’ for the first time, had placed the charges in the wrong position in the two adjoining houses which, when they exploded, left the barracks standing alone and unharmed. Before the bombs went off one of the party panicked and ran out into the street screaming. With the police now alerted and the plan compromised McCorley ordered a retreat but again the

⁴⁶ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

incompetence of his men caused problems: 'The general signal for the calling off of the attack was to be a blast on a whistle but the officer in command forgot to bring a whistle...The attack more or less broke itself off.'⁴⁷ Luckily the men were not pursued in their disorderly retreat, 'It seemed that the British forces were as inefficient as we were but they had not the same excuse.'⁴⁸ McCorley's conclusion was that the timid attitude of his men was to blame for the failure of the attack blaming '...a certain lack of determination to carry an operation through even at a certain cost in casualties.'⁴⁹ Indeed the few successes the IRA had in this early period were those which avoided direct confrontation with the enemy. James McElduff described his first action, an attack on Mountfield police barracks: 'It was already abandoned by the R.I.C., so it was a good target to start off with. We did not burn it. We went in and broke it up. We left it so it could not be repaired again.'⁵⁰

Overall however such attacks, whether successful or not, were little more than token attempts to show solidarity with more militant republicans in Munster and involved at most minor assaults by a few local radicals causing little significant damage. McCorley himself was particularly angry at the inactivity of the IRA in Belfast, blaming the leadership for '...not taking the matter as seriously as the general

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ James McElduff quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.173.

members of the company felt they should.’⁵¹ He and a few of the younger men had tried to carry out attacks but in McCorley’s words: ‘...only succeeded in giving us a bad name with the company and battalion officers.’⁵² In March 1920 for example he and another Volunteer, Thomas Fitzpatrick, had launched a bomb attack on a military vehicle pool in the Markets area of Belfast although as Fitzpatrick recalled: ‘That was a battalion job and it was done very quietly. There was no sanction from the brigade for it. At that time the brigade were averse to activities in Belfast for fear of reprisals on the Catholic population. Some of the younger men did not agree with this policy at all, especially Roger McCorley, and we carried out this operation without getting sanction.’⁵³ Under such pressure from this radical element the reluctant leadership eventually relented and allowed raids for arms to begin in the city although McCorley later blamed the meagre results on the fact that the raids were official and subject to tiresome restrictions.⁵⁴

Despite such impatience it would take another year for this radical young element to feel strong enough to challenge the older conservative leadership and their activities made little impact on the largely peaceful relations between Protestants and Catholics in the north-east. As one RIC constable recalled: ‘...relations were very good. There was very little IRA activity in County Down at that time. I

⁵¹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Thomas Fitzpatrick statement (BMH, NA, WS 395).

thought I was lucky getting to County Down at all, that I wasn't sent down South.' ⁵⁵ He goes on: 'You talked to your neighbours and went about with them. Except, I mean you went to separate churches but that was it. You drank with them if you were that way inclined and had the money.' ⁵⁶

With the IRA campaign in Munster however becoming ever more vigorous and with attacks, such as that on the barracks at Ballytrain in Monaghan during February, occurring only a few miles from the proposed six county border, the spread of violence to the North was almost inevitable. When it did erupt though, its origins had little to do with the Northern IRA. It was caused instead by unionist unease at the success for anti-partition candidates in the local elections of January and June 1920. A combination of Sinn Fein and UIL candidates managed to gain control over Fermanagh and Tyrone County Councils and ten urban authorities including Omagh, Enniskillen, Newry and Strabane. In Belfast five Sinn Fein candidates were elected to the city council and nationalists held majorities in thirteen other rural councils. However it was their victory in the city of Derry, the great symbol of Protestant resistance, that would finally ignite popular unionist opposition to the threat of violent republicanism spreading to the six counties. After three hundred years the city had its first Catholic mayor, Hugh O'Doherty, a Derry

⁵⁴ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

⁵⁵ William Britton quoted in Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary* p.93.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.34.

solicitor, who, along with removing the name of Lord French from the list of Derry Freeman, also refused to attend any functions where an oath of allegiance was made to the crown.⁵⁷

Tensions in the city had already been running high over claims that Catholics had replaced Protestant war veterans in the shipyards, an issue given greater significance by rising unemployment and the now 'disloyal' activities of the city council. Sporadic violence in May was followed by a far more serious outbreak in June. Between 13-23 June fifteen Catholics and four Protestants, including the son of the Governor of the Apprentice Boys, were killed during rioting in the city. These clashes dragged into the fray elements of the old UVF who fired shots from the city walls directly into the Bogside below. Barricades were thrown up across the city and large numbers of nationalists, of differing shades of political opinion, came forward to defend their areas. The IRA was inevitably drawn into the violence although what Volunteers there were presented flimsy opposition. Michael Sheerin, a prominent member of the IRA in the city would later admit: 'In the beginning of 1920 I had a company of about 50 men and was the only unit functioning in the city. 25% of these I held together by threats, the remainder were particularly unenthusiastic.'⁵⁸

⁵⁷ For the origins of the Derry violence see Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* pp.18-20; C. Fox, *The Making of a Minority: Political Developments in Derry and the North 1912-25* (Derry, 1997) pp.68-71.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland*, p.31.

The violence had caught these few Volunteers off-guard and as Sheerin recalls an ad-hoc force was assembled: 'On the second day of the trouble a prominent local member of Sinn Fein who had been in jail was released. He was held in high esteem by the clergy and through their influence all Catholic units including Hibernians and Foresters, soldiers, placed themselves under this orders.'⁵⁹ This man was Paddy Sheils, later to be O/C of the Derry Battalion. Dick McKee and Peadar Clancy, two of the most prominent members of the IRA in Dublin, also arrived to encourage the local Volunteers. This motley band set up their headquarters at St. Columb's College, which they defended stoutly against attacking loyalist mobs. They managed to hold out for a week until finally British troops opened fire on the barricades. All but a few Volunteers fled the scene leading Sheerin to bluntly report: 'The discarding of rifles and ammunition and the hasty disappearance of men was not edifying.'⁶⁰ British soldiers had eventually intervened after remaining aloof from the violence for almost a week and accusations were made by local nationalists that they had colluded with hastily mobilised UVF units during the fighting, eventually using force exclusively against the Catholic rioters. A truce was eventually agreed between church leaders and the short-lived violence in Derry was brought successfully to a peaceful conclusion.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.32.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

It was in Belfast, however, that the outbreak of violence would be most severe. The annual Twelfth of July celebrations were overshadowed by the steady rise of militant republicanism in the South and the holiday became a period of reflection in unionist circles resulting in increasingly radical calls to defend Ulster against Catholic aggression. Numerous letters warning of this impending doom appeared in the unionist press claiming for example that, 'The Roman Catholics are pouring into Ulster and increasing rapidly in this province where Protestants are emigrating and disappearing...the question is whether Protestants can rouse themselves to do anything apart from processions.'⁶² One writer even outlined where this defence of Ulster should begin: 'The Protestants of Ulster are asleep whilst Sinn Feiners, who are pouring into our province, are wide awake; they are busy organising, while we prate on the deeds of our forefathers and do nothing ourselves. To the shame of the Ulster Unionists be it said that Sinn Feiners can obtain situations in both offices and shipyards, in so called loyal Belfast while our Protestant men walk about idle.'⁶³ Another stated angrily: 'What, I would ask are our Ulster organisations doing to contact this menace of peaceful penetration? Processions and demonstrations are all very good in their own way, but we want something deeper than these...The old spirit which existed in 1914 is still alive in Ulster-it only needs wakening.'⁶⁴

⁶¹ See Michael Sheerin statement (BMH, NA, WS 803) and report on Derry violence in *Belfast Telegraph*, 22 June 1920.

⁶² *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 July 1920.

⁶³ *ibid.*, 15 July 1920.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 16 July 1920.

The symbols of siege that accompanied the celebrations acted as a call to arms for an already paranoid unionist population. Sir Edward Carson in a notorious speech at Finaghy on 12 July spoke to a crowd of 25,000 loyalists: 'We must proclaim today clearly that come what will and be the consequences what they may, we in Ulster will tolerate no Sinn Fein- no Sinn Fein organisation, no Sinn Fein methods... And these are not mere words. I hate words without action.'⁶⁵

The situation was extremely tense although it was ironically an event far away in Cork that triggered off direct confrontation in Belfast. On 17 July members of the Cork IRA shot dead RIC Divisional Commissioner, Colonel Gerard Smyth, in the County Club in Cork City. Smyth, a Protestant from Banbridge County Down, had made an aggressive speech to an RIC gathering in Listowel County Kerry that was seen as so extreme that some RIC men resigned on the spot. Emotions in the North were running high and Smyth's body was brought back to Banbridge for burial after a short delay caused by the refusal of railway workers in the South to have anything to do with its transit. His funeral, set for 21 July, coincided with the return of Protestant shipyard workers after the Twelfth holiday. Buried with full military honours in a local cemetery the highly charged atmosphere

⁶⁵ Ibid., 13 July 1920. See also *The Times*, 13 July 1920 where the meeting is referred to as a 'parade of anachronistic intolerance'.

eventually exploded in the town and Catholics and their property were attacked viciously in Banbridge and nearby Dromore.⁶⁶

Frank Aiken and John McCoy were themselves caught up in the rioting in Banbridge on the evening of Smyth's funeral. Driving back into Armagh after a brigade meeting they managed to enter the town after being warned of the dangerous situation by guards at a military checkpoint:

'A civilian-an Orangeman- came over to us. He had a revolver in his hand. He enquired who we were and where we were going. I told him that we had been stopped by the military, back the road, and that they had passed us through as ok and that if he was contemplating stopping us on our journey we would go back and report the matter to the military. He did not reply to this but continued to stare into my eyes. He then went across to the side-car and stared into Frank Aiken's eyes. During all this time I was enquiring if he was really intending to detain us. He never spoke. I let in the clutch and told him we were moving off. I accelerated the engine and moved slowly off again. When we got some little speed up we found that missiles were being thrown at us as we proceeded to run the gauntlet through the town where 10,000 Orangemen lined the streets.'⁶⁷

⁶⁶ For the background to Smyth's assassination see R. Abbott, *Police Casualties in Ireland 1919-1922* (Dublin, 2000) pp.96-103. For an account of the assassination itself see Sean Culhane statement (BMH, NA, WS 746); Sean Culhane interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/108).

⁶⁷ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

In Belfast, Carson's call to action still ringing in the ears of the returning shipyard workers, lunchtime meetings of loyalist worker's association were held at the yards of Workman and Clark and Harland and Wolff. These meetings soon developed into demonstrations against the presence of disloyal Catholic workers in the yards, eventually leading to at first sporadic and then systematic expulsions of Catholics from the premises. The situation became increasingly violent with some Catholics having to swim part of the River Lagan to escape after being pelted with bolts and rivets. The expulsions spread to the various mills and engineering works in the city with attacks at Musgraves, Mackies and the Sirocco Works amongst others. Around 7-10,000 Catholics and 'rotten prods', approximately 10% of the nationalist population of the city, many of who were ex-servicemen, were expelled, including the later IRA leader Joe McKelvey who had worked at Mackies on Springfield Road.⁶⁸ It was from the ranks of these expelled workers that the IRA in Belfast would draw many new recruits; as the RIC reported on one such new radical '...the experience here is that many ex-soldiers with good records became IRA criminals.'⁶⁹

⁶⁸ McDermott, *Northern Divisions* p.28. For detailed accounts of the expulsions see Morgan, *Labour and Partition* pp.265-284; Patterson, *Class, Conflict and Sectarianism* pp.115-42; Manus O'Boyle statement (BMH, NA, WS 289); Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* p.15.

⁶⁹ File on Patrick Barnes (Ministry of Home Affairs files, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), HA/5/2181).

The city was plunged into savage sectarian violence with loyalist mobs launching attacks into the numerous Catholic enclaves in the city where most of the expelled workers had fled. Bottles, stones and paving slabs, ripped up from the streets, were hurled at fleeing nationalists in prolonged bouts of vicious rioting. The fighting in the Short Strand was particularly savage with Catholic homes and businesses coming under sustained attack. Burning and looting of Catholic shops in the Newtownards Road was reported and it was alleged that the mob, many of them drunk on looted alcohol from Catholic owned pubs, tried to cut the hoses of firemen trying to quench the fires. St. Matthews's church on Bryson Street was attacked on the 22nd with rioters smashing windows and attempting to burn the building down. Only intervention by soldiers of the Norfolk Regiment eventually saw off the mobs. Attacks were also made on Clonard monastery where Brother Michael Morgan was killed after being hit by a bullet fired from the attacking crowd. The following day was marked by a sustained campaign of expulsions of Catholics from mixed areas who crowded into the congested Catholic enclaves in the city. Some Protestants were likewise expelled by the Catholic mob, helping further to delineate the geographical boundaries between both communities in the city. After five days the attacks finally abated. Nineteen people had been killed, eight Protestants and eleven Catholics with countless others wounded or made homeless.⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* pp.15-24; Ballymacarret Research Group, *Lagan Enclave: A History of Conflict in the Short Strand 1886-1997* (BRG,1997) pp.13-15; *Irish News*, 23-27 July 1920; *Belfast Newsletter*, 23-25 July 1920.

The response of the IRA leadership in the city to this eruption of mass sectarian violence was simply to ignore it. The brigade staff remained aloof and resolutely opposed to any kind of participation in what was viewed as the usual 'fratricidal strife'.⁷¹ For many IRA members such an attitude was both unrealistic and unpopular. Roger McCorley later described the tense atmosphere in the organisation at the time: '...in the initial stages of this attack the IRA policy was to treat it as a purely sectarian affair although British troops had opened fire on the Nationalist areas and killed a considerable number of people. Brigade headquarters even went as far as to court-martial one officer for taking part in defence of his own particular area against the attacks of the Orange mob. His defence was that it would not be very dignified for an IRA officer to stand by and allow someone else to defend his home for him.'⁷² The rank and file in Belfast were becoming resentful at the impotence of their leaders, some complaining that if they obeyed the brigade leadership they would not even be allowed to protect their own families.⁷³ Such protests forced their superiors to relent but only slightly. Volunteers would be allowed only to attack British troops, and only if they were making direct attacks on the civilian population. The younger radicals in the Belfast IRA however remained unhappy with this half-hearted response and their

⁷¹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

⁷² Ibid., see also Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

⁷³ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389); McDermott, *Northern Divisions* pp.37-39.

frustration continue to grow over the next six months, finally erupting in a virtual coup in the spring of 1921.

Despite these growing divisions the immediate issue for the IRA of whether to take part in the sectarian battles sweeping Belfast, in McCorley's words, '...settled itself in a very short space of time when the Orange mob was provided with uniforms, paid by the British and called the Ulster Special Constabulary.'⁷⁴ The attempts by the older brigade leadership to rein in its younger officers proved to be unrealistic in the violent context of summer 1920. Seamus McKenna, later to become O/C of the 1st Battalion in Belfast, commented, 'After a week or two, however, it was obvious that, if the Catholic population were to survive at all, it would be necessary for the Volunteers to protect them in some way, and accordingly the IRA became involved in a struggle against disciplined and undisciplined Orange factions, whilst at the same time having to bear in mind that their main object was to carry out aggressive action against the British forces of occupation.'⁷⁵

The decision by the brigade staff to reluctantly take on the responsibility for defending Catholic areas led to the drawing up of elaborate plans although McCorley was to admit, 'To my mind, at that time, such an operation was beyond our means.'⁷⁶ As such the

⁷⁴ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

⁷⁵ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

⁷⁶ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389). See also McDermott, *Northern Divisions* p.37.

defence of nationalist areas was worked out by a process of trial and error rather than with any regard for the unrealistic strategies of the IRA leadership. Thomas Flynn, soon to become a key member of the city's Active Service Unit, was one of those who had taken unilateral action to protect his own area from loyalist mobs in the summer. He later gave an account of how the IRA's defence of the Catholic community actually worked on the ground. The first move was the placing of IRA pickets, usually in the upstairs rooms of houses that lay on the borders between Protestant and Catholic districts. The violence followed a familiar pattern. Protestant and Catholic mobs would gather at these flashpoints and indulge in what IRA member Manus O'Boyle called a 'stone-throwing competition', which more often than not the loyalists, with their greater numbers, usually won. When they proceeded to follow up their attack the IRA would fire shots at the crowd, which rapidly retreated. Specials and police were then called in. They arrived quickly in armoured cars and cordoned off the houses from which the IRA snipers had fired. The Volunteers would beat a hasty retreat, fleeing across the gardens and backyards of the houses while the police carried out aggressive searches in the Catholic properties. It was often during these searches that many of the most brutal incidents occurred with the now inflamed loyalist crowd returning to the scene and ransacking the area.⁷⁷ Joe Murray admitted later that despite their strenuous efforts the IRA were not

⁷⁷ Thomas Flynn statement (BMH, NA, WS 429); Manus O'Boyle statement (BMH, NA, WS 289).

able to stop the Specials from moving into Catholic areas as and when they wished.⁷⁸

Despite the brutal nature of the violence in July such outbreaks and expulsions had occurred many times in the past when both political and economic tensions had risen to the fore. Roger McCorley referred to the sectarian violence of 1920 as taking its 'classical form' of expulsions from the shipyards.⁷⁹ Indeed the last major outbreak had occurred during the Ulster Crisis in 1912 with Catholic workers being temporarily forced out of Workman and Clark's.⁸⁰ In 1920 however with details of IRA attacks in the south and west of Ireland filling the pages of the unionist press in Belfast, and with nationalist advances in the local elections in the North itself, the usual return to peace in the city was unlikely. Whilst the IRA had little direct influence in terms of causing the initial outbreak of violence in Belfast it was their activities that would ensure that it continued. On 22 August RIC District Inspector Oswald Swanzy was assassinated in Lisburn. As with the killing of Colonel Smyth the previous month this action was to have dire consequences, leading in the short-term to brutal reprisals against the Catholic minority and in the longer-term the reinforcement of unionist fears about the dangerous threat posed by the IRA in the six counties.

⁷⁸ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

⁷⁹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

⁸⁰ Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* p.13.

Swanzy, like Smyth, was a wanted man in Cork. He was allegedly involved in the murder of Thomas MacCurtain, the Sinn Fein mayor of Cork City, in March.⁸¹ Michael Collins, through his RIC informant Sergeant Matt McCarthy, had located Swanzy in Lisburn who had transferred to the North for his own safety. McCarthy met with the lead Cork assassin Sean Culhane in a Belfast pub, McKearney's of Rosemary Street, to discuss the plan. Culhane then returned to Dublin where he met Collins in Vaughan's Hotel. As it was GHQ who would be financing the operation, Culhane had to convince the leadership that the assassination was viable and that he was the man to do it: '...after a frank discussion, he [i.e. Collins] remarked that the job was much too big for me. I probably looked immature as at the time I was not yet twenty years of age. He said it was a job for experienced men and mentioned about picking selected men from Dublin.'⁸²

Culhane however was determined that men from Cork should carry out the attack and he managed to convince Cathal Brugha and Richard Mulcahy that he should be allowed to lead the party to the North. The assassination squad came from the IRA's Cork No1. Brigade. It was led by Culhane, the Intelligence Officer of the 1st Battalion, who was symbolically presented with MacCurtain's own gun with which he was to carry out the shooting. He was joined on his trip to the North by Dick Murphy, 'Stetto' Aherne, C. McSweeney and Jack

⁸¹ See Hart, *The IRA and its Enemies* pp.78-9.

Cody although their first attempt to kill Swanzy in early August was marred by bad planning and had to be abandoned. The five would-be assassins had made their way to Belfast where they stayed in the house of Joe McKelvey's mother in Cyprus Street off the Falls Road. A car was acquired and they set off for Lisburn to locate Swanzy. However the inclusion of so many men in the attack party made the journey to Lisburn extremely problematic. Sean Cusack, who liased with Culhane, recalled: 'When the six men proceeded to enter the car it became very apparent that the car was not large enough to properly accommodate the men and driver, seven in all, and the driver drew attention to the overloading of the car. At this stage I drew Culhane aside and told him I had been worrying over the overcrowding of the car the previous night. Culhane informed me that he could not help it now as each man of his was determined to be on the job and all must go on the car.'⁸³ The car made unsteady progress towards Lisburn eventually breaking down halfway through the journey. The attack itself was called off and after the local men had returned to Belfast, the members of the Cork IRA went back to Dublin.

A second attempt was made two weeks later although Culhane decided to take only one other man with him, Dick Murphy. The others were sent home, disappointed, to Cork. Joe McKelvey, who Culhane recalls was 'exceptionally keen to participate',⁸⁴ arranged for

⁸² Sean Culhane statement (BMH, NA, WS 746).

⁸³ Sean Cusack statement (BMH, NA, WS 402).

⁸⁴ Sean Culhane statement (BMH, NA, WS 746).

Sean Leonard, a taxi driver, from County Sligo, to take the assassins to Lisburn. McKelvey was chosen to arrange the transport because it was felt his Belfast accent would not arouse suspicion. On the morning of 22 August Culhane and Murphy made their way to Lisburn where they met up with Roger McCorley and Tom Fox, who had been detailed to act as scouts. Leonard was told to keep the taxi's engine running and Joe McKelvey was ordered to wait a mile outside Lisburn to spirit the assassins away after the attack. Culhane approached McCorley and Fox:

‘They informed us that Swanzy had gone to church and gave the approximate time the service would finish. We remained on the opposite side of the street near the Church and made ourselves look as inconspicuous as possible and took special care not to speak for fear our southern accents would betray us to any passers-by.

‘We were not too long waiting until the congregation started coming from the Church so when I observed Swanzy and saw the direction he was taking I gave the tip to Dick Murphy and we moved towards the corner, about a block away from the church, where we had provisionally selected for the job. When he was only a few yards away from us I said to Dick “That’s him”. I fired the first shot getting him in the head and Dick fired almost simultaneously into his body.’⁸⁵

Swanzy was shot around 1pm shortly after attending a service in his local church. He died instantly. Culhane, who had also been responsible for killing Colonel Smyth, was allowed to fire the first shot as he had MacCurtain's gun although all four men were apparently involved in the shooting.⁸⁶ Directly after the attack they ran towards their car to where Leonard was waiting to drive them out of the town. However, a crowd of local Protestants, many of them from the church congregation, began to give chase, throwing missiles and shouting insults. The assassins fired some shots in the air but the mob, some of whom were armed, kept approaching and a bullet hit the windscreen of the waiting taxi. Roger McCorley later described his narrow escape:

'When we were running towards the taxi which was waiting about two hundred yards from where we shot Swanzy the mob started to run after us. I halted and fired back into the mob which then cleared off. This left me a considerable way behind the others. I was then attacked by an ex-British Officer called Woods who seemed to have plenty of courage. Although I was carrying a revolver in my hand he attacked me with a blackthorn stick and by a fluke I shot the stick out of his hand.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ McCorley to O'Donoghue, 6 March 1964 (O'Donoghue papers, National Library of Ireland (NLI), MS31313). See also the comments of Sean Montgomery quoted in McDermott, *Northern Divisions* pp.50-1. For general accounts of the shooting see *Irish News*, 23 August 1920, *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 August 1920.

When I got within twenty yards of the car it started off and I was unable to make the necessary speed to catch it.’⁸⁷

McCorley however did manage to clamber aboard, accidentally firing a shot in the car as he did so. The taxi itself could only manage a top speed of 30 mph and the local police chased the assassins out of the town. However, by a stroke of luck one of the wheels of the pursuing car fell off at an opportune moment and the IRA party managed to make good their escape.⁸⁸ After fleeing the scene the men handed their weapons over to Joe McKelvey who was waiting outside of the town and the four men made their way across country towards the Divis Mountains to escape any roadblocks. Only Sean Leonard the taxi driver was ever convicted for the killing. He received a fifteen-year prison sentence despite not having fired a shot in the attack.⁸⁹

The assassination of Swanzy, whilst being a successful reprisal in the eyes of the IRA, proved disastrous for nationalists living in Lisburn with almost the entire Catholic population of the town being expelled from their homes by rampaging loyalist mobs. Over 300 Catholic homes were destroyed before the violence fully abated. Fred Crawford, the old UVF leader, later recorded in his diary the scene of devastation:

⁸⁷ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

⁸⁸ Ibid. Thomas Fox statement (BMH, NA, WS 365); Roger McCorley interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCDA, P17b/98).

⁸⁹ Sean Culhane statement (BMH, NA, WS 746). For general accounts of the attack see also *Irish News*, 23 August 1920; *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 August 1920; *Abbott Police Casualties in Ireland* pp.113-115. For Leonard’s trial see *Belfast Telegraph*, 1-3 February 1921.

‘It reminded me of a French town after it had been bombarded by the Germans as I saw in France 1916. We visited the ruins of the Priest’s house on Chapel Hill. It was burnt or gutted and the furniture all destroyed. When coming down the avenue I found a small pair of manicure scissors that had been through the fire. I kept them as a souvenir of the event. We called at Mr Stephenson’s and had tea there. Mrs Thompson his sister was also with him. They told me of some very hard cases of where Unionists had lost practically all they had by the fire of the house of a Catholic spreading to theirs, and also of some very decent respectable families of the brutal cold blooded murder of Inspector Swanzie [sic] one does not wonder at the mob loosing [sic] its head with fury...it has been stated that there are only four of five RC families left in Lisburn. Others say this is wrong that there are far more. Be that as it may there certainly are practically no shops or places of business left to the RC’s.’⁹⁰

Culhane and Murphy left that same night for Dublin after a brief stop in McKelvey’s house in Belfast. Culhane, who travelled in a first-class train carriage to avoid suspicion, later recalled seeing Lisburn ablaze in the distance as he and Murphy headed south to safety.⁹¹

On arriving in Dublin they made their way to Vaughan’s Hotel to meet Collins and Mulcahy who Culhane recalled ‘...were profuse in their

⁹⁰ Quoted in P Buckland, *Irish Unionism: The Anglo-Irish and the New Ireland 1885-1923: A Documentary History* (Belfast, 1973) p.445..

congratulations'. Culhane handed MacCurtain's gun to Collins for safekeeping and although he promised to return it he never did.⁹² As the Corkmen celebrated in Dublin the nationalist areas of Lisburn were reduced to ruins. Again violence spread rapidly to Belfast a few days later with similar results. The ten days following 25 August would see mobs rampaging through the city leaving thirty people dead. It was only after the imposition of a curfew on 30 August that the violence began to recede.⁹³

The brutal events of the summer of 1920 had left unionists right across the six counties shocked and afraid. Attempts to re-organise the old UVF had begun in an ad-hoc fashion soon after the violence had started and had provided one of the key forces for quelling the earlier violence in Derry. Colonel Wilfred Spender and Fred Crawford, both veterans of the Ulster crisis, were instrumental in reviving the organisation.⁹⁴ Fears over the small number and unreliability of the largely Catholic RIC as well as the permanence of the British Army presence in the North led to calls from James Craig to formalise the UVF as some form of ancillary police force. Craig would also argue that the creation of such a force would do much to assuage unionist anger and channel it into what he referred to as '...a system of organised reprisals against the Rebels, mainly in order to defeat them,

⁹¹ Sean Culhane statement (BMH, NA, WS 746) See also Sean Culhane interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCAD, P17b/108).

⁹² Sean Culhane statement (BMH, NA, WS 746).

⁹³ McDermott, *Northern Divisions* pp.52-58.

⁹⁴ For the establishment of the USC see Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* pp.31-43.

but partly to restrain their own followers from acts which are regrettable, and in a large measure ineffective.’⁹⁵ Despite the dangers of arming what were highly suspect individuals, many complicit in the attacks on the Catholic community, and against the complaints of Macready and Anderson, the British government agreed to the creation of an Ulster Special Constabulary. It was in this force more than any other that the Northern IRA would find its most severe opposition.

Before the creation of the USC the Royal Irish Constabulary had remained surprisingly united in the face of the increasing tide of sectarian conflict. Protestant RIC men appeared little troubled by the presence of Catholic officers in the force. James Gilmer, a constable stationed in Londonderry, stated: ‘Relations were good...it was different when the RUC and Specials got together.’ Similarly Ernest Brookes, based in the same county, had fond recollections of his Catholic colleagues in the force: ‘They were all very good, I got on well with them all...No trouble, all loyal, fight to the last.’ William Britton, a County Down officer recalled that ‘...there was no hostility, they were all good friends’.⁹⁶ The summer of 1920 ended all this.

The Swanzy episode highlighted what would prove to be an insurmountable problem for the Northern IRA over the coming years. It would become increasingly clear that even the smallest of IRA

⁹⁵ Quoted in Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* p.37.

actions would provoke a brutal response from loyalist extremists. Throughout the conflict periods of violence would be presaged by IRA actions either along the border or in Belfast itself. Despite the obvious conclusions to be drawn the IRA were apparently blind to the link and this horrific cycle of reprisal and counter-reprisal would be repeated over and over again for the next two years. For the Unionist government the Northern IRA were a shadowy threat, a disloyal fifth-column in league with unruly elements in the South who would bring their nefarious activities to the North once they had reached an accommodation with the British. However, this support was slow to materialise and before January 1922 the Northern IRA would offer little serious threat to the fledgling Unionist regime.

The perception of the threat however proved to be more persuasive than the reality and was reinforced and perpetuated by both sides. Republicans, then as now, tended to talk up the level and impact of their activities whilst the unionist press did their utmost to paint a picture of Ulster under siege, reinforcing the skewed perceptions of an already fearful population. In Belfast the events of summer 1920 demonstrated that the IRA were very much following the ebb and flow of sectarian violence rather than shaping the events themselves, fighting a fairly hopeless battle to hold off attacks on Catholic areas and doing little but confirming the belief of the attacking mob that these areas were indeed under the control of the gunmen. The huge

⁹⁶ See Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary* p.67.

emphasis the Northern Irish government placed on security would bear testament to their paranoid perception of the situation. It became obvious that they mobilised to fight what they saw as a major offensive from a large force, thus further undermining the possibilities of IRA success in the six counties later on.

The outbreak of violence in the north-east had shown up the Northern IRA for what they were: inactive, small in number and hopelessly isolated. In their exposed position it quickly became clear that help was needed to organise some form of cohesive response to the excesses of the Unionist authorities. This assistance would come from their fellow revolutionaries in the South. Even accepting the later claims of Belfast IRA members that the Swanzy shooting had been a 'Belfast Job', it is evident that IRA members from the South had played a significant, if not crucial, role in the planning and execution of the assassination plot.⁹⁷ For the Northern IRA Swanzy marked the beginning of what would be a long and confused relationship with the South.

⁹⁷ Sean Montgomery typifies this defensive attitude stating that the shooting was a 'Belfast Brigade job; the Cork men were guests'. For this quote see McDermott *Northern Divisions* p. 51.

CHAPTER TWO

NORTH AND SOUTH

Despite the enormous upsurge in violence seen in the North after June 1920 the Northern IRA remained, outside of Belfast and parts of Armagh at least, disorganised and inactive. Whereas the summer of 1920 was undeniably a major turning point in that overt mass violence finally erupted in parts of the six counties, arguably the most important period of change for the Northern IRA itself came with the creation of IRA Divisions in the spring of 1921 and the resulting development of strong links between the IRA organisation in Ulster and GHQ in Dublin. The haphazard internal changes of summer 1920 appeared as little more than a confused attempt to adapt to the new context of spiralling urban violence in Belfast. These somewhat forced changes would be followed by the more fundamental and long-lasting influences wrought by the involvement of the South in Northern affairs.

The interplay between these internal and external factors would be the driving force behind the violence that would subsume the North over the next eighteen months. From the spring of 1921 until the brutal months of May and June 1922 the nature of this violence would be shaped more and more by the varying levels of Southern involvement and the influence of key Southern IRA figures on the policies and strategies of Northern republicans. Whilst at first the Northern IRA felt its beneficial effects in terms of material and psychological support, it also became increasingly apparent that it would have less control over the direction and duration of the conflict. As such in early 1921 the

seeds were sown whereby the Northern IRA became ever more dependent on the South. In the spring of 1921 however such concerns were of far less importance when balanced against the immediate impact of greater GHQ involvement. Only later when Southern support wavered, and finally collapsed, would the inherent weaknesses of the Northern IRA be exposed with devastating and tragic consequences.

Prior to the spring of 1921 the character of the South's policy towards the six counties was erratic and opportunistic. The assassination of Oswald Swanzy and GHQ's despatching of Peadar Clancy and Dick McKee to Derry during the previous summer are typical of the Dublin leadership's sporadic flirtations with initiatives aimed at combating partition. The failure of Sinn Fein to make a real priority of the North in its programme would inevitably mean that any future policy would be based more on expediency than political commitment. Such a policy would also be closely linked to Southern perceptions and aspirations.¹ This was typified by the placing of largely ignorant, although nevertheless important, Southern politicians in Northern electoral seats, a mistake which would be repeated again with the candidates to the new Northern Ireland parliament in May when only one of the six new Sinn Fein MP's was from an Ulster background.²

¹ A. Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland: Dail Eireann, 1919-22* (Dublin, 1995) p.166.

² M. Harris, *The Catholic Church and the foundation of the Northern Irish State* (Belfast, 1993). Eoin MacNeill (elected for Derry) came originally from Antrim. The other Sinn Fein M.P's were Arthur Griffith (Fermanagh and Tyrone), Michael Collins (Armagh), Eamon deValera (Down), Sean O'Mahoney (Fermanagh and Tyrone) and Sean Milroy (Fermanagh and Tyrone). See S. Elliott

Such ad-hoc policy making would leave little room for an appreciation of the subtleties of Ulster's political landscape. Sinn Fein's 'one size fits all' nationalism would prove particularly ill-suited to the demands of the IRA organisation in the six counties although the brutality of unionist opposition would consistently act to mask these fundamental flaws; as one historian has written: '...flaming nationalism had got them this far and flaming nationalism would see them the rest of the way.'³ As elsewhere in Ireland it was local initiative rather than central direction which dictated the level of IRA violence. In the North such local initiative was generally lacking. IRA activity was either non-existent or played a subordinate role in the broader shift to sectarian conflict within the six counties. The need for a vigorous Northern policy became apparent due both to the lacklustre activities of the majority of Northern Volunteers and the limitations imposed by Sinn Fein's abstention policy which meant that IRA violence was one of the few ways of combating partition.

The one major Southern policy initiative of the period, the Belfast Boycott, introduced after the shipyard expulsions of July 1920, would prove itself to be ill judged and counter-productive. The boycott of goods from Belfast and other Northern towns had developed as early as August 1919 when shopkeepers in Galway City refused to sell any items that originated in the Northern capital. After a petition from

Northern Ireland Parliamentary Election Results 1921-1972 (Political Reference Publications, 1971) pp. 3-20.

³ Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland* p.167.

Sean McEntee and Sinn Fein leaders in Belfast the Dail reluctantly accepted the call for a national boycott in September 1920.⁴ The rationale behind the boycott was to hit the unionist community where it hurt the most, and was based largely on a stereotypical view of Ulster Protestants as humourless and grasping capitalists. Joseph Connolly, the Belfast Sinn Fein leader, typified the attitude of many nationalists in his portrayal of the 'psychological make up' of the unionist business community: '...the Belfast business man as a rule, although there were exceptions, lived, ate, slept and got his major enjoyment out of his success in business. It was a combination of Samuel Smiles and Calvin and, however lacking it may have been as a soul-satisfying existence, it showed results in the ledger accounts in the ultimate balance sheets.'⁵

Despite such views the boycott itself achieved little but to cement further the commercial ties between north-east Ulster and the British mainland. It also failed to impact on the shipyards and engineering industry that had seen the worst of the loyalist expulsions and thus proved a total failure in achieving its avowed aim of reinstating the expelled Catholic workers. The boycott also contributed to the partition of the Irish economy with many Belfast-based banks being forced to close branches outside of the six counties. Those small businesses in Ulster that had had little to do with the expulsions were

⁴ Ibid., p. 168.

⁵ J. Gaughan (ed.) *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly* (Dublin, 1996) p.183.

hit hardest and became even further alienated from the South.⁶ Indeed some loyalists tried to hit back at the boycott with attacks on the business interests of known republican supporters. For example on 7 January 1922 ten masked men raided the railway station at Trew-and-Moy in Tyrone and destroyed hampers of bread and other goods made by a company with Sinn Fein connections.⁷ For the Northern IRA itself however the Belfast Boycott was greeted as a signal that the Dublin leadership were finally initiating decisive action against the Unionist government. Support for the boycott in Northern republican circles shows up how desperate many Volunteers in the six counties were for some kind of Southern lead and also provided the opportunity for inactive areas to contribute something for the cause whether that be the burning of railway carriages or the breaking up of bakery vehicles from Belfast. As Patrick Beagan, an Armagh Volunteer later admitted: 'To carry out any major operations in areas such as ours was an almost impossible project to make a success of. In dealing with the question of the Belfast bread carts, our problem was simplified, as the objectives for our plans came into our areas almost each day and we were both willing and capable of dealing with the situation.'⁸

⁶ The economic effects of the boycott are dealt with in detail in D.J.Johnson, 'The Belfast Boycott, 1920-22' in J.M. Goldstrom and J.A.Clarkson (eds.) *Irish Population, Economy and Society: Essays in Honour of the late K.H. Connell (Oxford, 1981)*.

⁷ RIC Bi-monthly report, 16 Jan. 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁸ Patrick Beagan statement (BMH, NA, WS 612). See also Patrick McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 911).

On the ground the enforcement of the boycott in many areas involved fairly minor activities such as the posting up of the names of blacklisted shops and the intimidation of traders and their customers. In some towns, such as Strabane and Cookstown, where the embargo was enforced vigorously, IRA men attacked the Catholic employees of boycotted businesses and placed men outside their shops to ward off any potential customers. Fire however was the main weapon used to enforce the boycott and incidents of incendiarism on premises and goods vehicles were reported right along the length of the border from Warrenpoint to Derry.⁹ This use of the Northern IRA to attack the economic heart of the unionist community, itself a hangover from Sinn Fein's brief flirtation in 1919 with labour agitation as a method of undermining unionist hegemony in the North, would persist throughout the period and formed the basic strategy of all militant republican activity.¹⁰ The joint-IRA offensive of May-June 1922 would be planned largely as an attempt to cripple the economy and infrastructure of Northern Ireland. The reduced strength and inactivity of the IRA in many areas however meant that the implementation of such policies was patchy at best and in some areas almost non-existent. As Peadar O'Donnell, the Donegal IRA leader reported, '...the Belfast Boycott was a bit of a farce in my area.'¹¹

⁹ File on the Belfast Boycott (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/111).

¹⁰ Mitchell, *Revolutionary Government in Ireland* pp.166-7.

¹¹ O'Donnell to GHQ, 19 April 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/18 [299]).

The rather naïve and simplistic perceptions of the North which had inspired the Belfast Boycott were also reflected in the attitudes of the Southern IRA leadership. Joe Sweeney recalled meeting Michael Collins in Dublin in 1921: ‘He questioned me about the state of things in the North, and when I told him how short we were he said, “Why the hell don’t you get into the barracks up there and arm yourselves?” So I said that that was easier said than done. We not only had the British to fight, but also the Unionists in east Donegal and the Ancient Order of Hibernians in west Donegal.’¹² Similarly in April 1921 the O/C of the Kilkeel IRA wrote to Richard Mulcahy of the difficulties in launching offensive action in such a hostile environment pointing out that ‘Owing to the fact that there are so many Unionists in this district, it is very hard to carry out any ambush.’ Mulcahy replied tartly to his superior: ‘Will you see what this officer is doing and see that he understands what work he should be doing.’¹³

Despite the uncompromising attitude of the Dublin leadership it readily acknowledged its failure prior to 1921 to engage with IRA units in the six counties. Mulcahy later wrote to Kerryman Charlie Daly, who in early 1921 was a frustrated GHQ Organiser in County Tyrone, ‘I feel very much for you that you have to slog away, while feeling, as you must have done so much out of touch with us.’¹⁴ Indeed despite the odd ‘spectacular’, such as the Swanzy assassination, GHQ interest

¹² Joe Sweeney quoted in K. Griffith and T. O’Grady (eds.), *Curious Journey* p.166.

¹³ Mulcahy to O/C 4th Northern Division, 14 April 1921, (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/17).

¹⁴ Mulcahy to Daly, 20 April 1921, (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/17).

in the North had been negligible. A combination of this neglect and the sheer difficulty of operating in such a hostile environment, not to mention the lacklustre Northern Volunteers themselves, meant that by the spring of 1921 most Northern counties still had no IRA brigade structure.¹⁵ Furthermore many areas contained no Volunteers at all especially those inhabited heavily by Protestants. In Lisburn for example Thomas Fox was only able to recall there being one IRA member in the entire town.¹⁶

The North was so quiet that it became something of a safe-haven for RIC men fleeing more disturbed areas in the South. Constable William Britton remembered the arrival of these hardened strangers into his sleepy area: 'There was a sergeant, he was transferred from Cork and who was under threat of death or something from the IRA. Well he was very strict, you couldn't please him, you know and the relations weren't very good.'¹⁷ Similarly officers who were considered more 'loyal' (often a euphemism for Protestant) were sent for duty in the South being replaced by older Catholics who were 'retired' to safer areas within the six counties. Richard Dawson Bates, the uncompromising Minister of Home Affairs in the province, would later write of the RIC that, '...the better type of men were drafted to the South and men who could not be trusted or who were inefficient were

¹⁵ Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* pp.156-9.

¹⁶ This Volunteer was W.Gilmore and according to Fox his home was one of the first to be burned down in the riots following the Swanzy assassination in August 1920; Thomas Fox statement (BMH, NA, WS 365).

¹⁷ William Britton quoted in Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary* (Belfast, 1990) p.56.

sent to Belfast. Over 50 per cent of the force in the city are Roman Catholics, mainly from the South, and many of them are known to be related to Sinn Fein.’¹⁸ Such changes in the make-up of the RIC in the North were to prove crucial in shaping the nature of the opposition the Northern IRA would have to face over the coming years. The sense of fear that inspired unionists to secure their own security force in the shape of the Ulster Special Constabulary was matched only by the opportunity which Southern IRA leaders saw in the North for advancing their own national aspirations.

As such the creation of IRA Divisions in Ulster in the spring of 1921 was far more than a re-organisation of existing Volunteer units. It also signalled the birth of the Northern IRA itself. Whilst in other areas of Ireland divisionalisation was seen as interference from Dublin and viewed warily as a sign of political centralisation, in the North the changes were far more fundamental and it was welcomed as a sign that GHQ was at last acting positively in prioritising Northern issues. GHQ involvement certainly made a difference. In the ten months from May 1920 to February 1921 thirteen members of the security forces were killed in the six counties. However in the four months from March to the Truce in early July this number had risen to 22. In Belfast the brigade report for April makes this clear: ‘The increase of activity in the Brigade has been fruitful.’¹⁹

¹⁸ Dawson-Bates memo, 9 January 1922 (PRONI, CAB 6/37). See also Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* pp.13-14.

¹⁹ Belfast Brigade report, 15 May 1921 (Mulcahy papers, P7/A/18 (112-3)).

By mid- April the only IRA Divisions formed in Ireland were the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Northern, originally called 'Ulster' Divisions, and the 1st and 2nd Southern. Interestingly enough these divisional areas encompassed some of the most active and inactive areas in Ireland stretching from the most rebellious parts of West Cork to the sleepy Protestant-dominated areas of Antrim. The creation of these early Divisions in such widely differing areas appears to have been inspired by contrary motives. In the South, as was so often suspected by the local radicals, the motives were control and centralisation. In the North the opposite was true. Whereas in the South GHQ Organisers were met with suspicion, in the North they met only disinterest and incredulity.²⁰

Of the new Northern Divisions only two, the 2nd and 3rd, were to have their areas entirely within the six-county borders. Derry was attached to the Donegal-based 1st Northern Division and Fermanagh was clumsily split between three Divisions whose main power base lay in the South. The crucial areas of South Down and Armagh formed the 4th Northern Division along with County Louth under Frank Aiken.²¹ The shape of these new Divisions demonstrated, at least on paper, that partition would not be reflected in the organisational structure of the army. It also made clear that important Southern commanders

²⁰ For the attitude of provincial IRA units in the South to the process of divisionalisation in the spring of 1921 see Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* pp.75-6.

²¹ See map of divisional areas on page 9.

such as Sean MacEoin and Eoin O'Duffy were responsible for large swathes of the six counties and in particular the crucial border areas. The failure of GHQ to recognise the unique context in which Northern Volunteers were acting meant that a unified command to co-ordinate IRA activities in the six counties did not materialise until January 1922 despite earlier calls by Daly for fortnightly meeting of all Ulster divisional commanders.²² The reluctance of GHQ to make IRA organisation coterminous with the six counties was the cause of constant problems and finally abandoned with fatal consequences in the summer of 1922.

With these organisational changes now in place, presaged by a meeting of Ulster officers in March 1921 which included Daly, McKelvey, Dan Hogan and Eoin O'Duffy, GHQ spelled out its new ambitious policy for IRA activity in the six counties.²³ On the surface it appeared both vague and unrealistic: 'Ulster is the English lever for governing Ireland. The Military importance of Ulster has increased in proportion as Dublin has passed into National hands. As a result, at the present time Ulster is becoming a bridgehead that the English cannot afford to lose and must spend lavishly to defend. Here then it is necessary to attack them with all the force that can be developed there. Military, Economic, Propaganda and the attack should be steady and persistent.'²⁴ Despite the almost laughable Napoleonic

²² Daly to GHQ, 27 May 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/18 [73]).

²³ Sean Corr statement (BMH, NA, WS458).

²⁴ GHQ memo, 24 March 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/17).

rhetoric of such orders one can detect a clear Southern perception which saw Ulster as a 'bridgehead' for the British from which supplies and men could be quickly rushed south. What would become apparent during the last four months of the War of Independence was that the renewed interest of the Dublin leadership in the North stemmed more from a wish to further the ends of Southern nationalism rather than to undermine partition itself.

GHQ's plan for spreading destruction and instability in the North, whilst welcomed by the young radical Volunteers of Belfast, was viewed by some as inappropriate and dangerously counter-productive. Memories of the Swanzy riots still persisted and an aggressive IRA policy was, for some, the last thing that was needed. In response to such mutterings of discontent from Sean McEntee, himself a Northerner with perhaps more insight than many in the Dublin leadership, Mulcahy was dismissive and scathing: 'I do not see any reason in the points urged, whether they be opinions of himself or of "one of the delegates from Antrim" for modifying in any way our instructions to Northern officers. I expect that the fact that McEntee is a member of the Volunteer Executive is fairly well observed in the North, owing to his total disassociation with any volunteer work, otherwise his pacifist views, generally, might be very disturbing in Volunteer circles in the North.'²⁵ Cahir Healy, the prominent Fermanagh Sinn Fein Leader, also argued against GHQ orders for

greater IRA activity observing that it would lead ‘...inevitably to sectarian warfare.’²⁶ His advice was also ignored. There would be no compromise therefore with those urging peaceful protest and it would take another eighteen months of bloodshed before such voices were finally heard.

Southern involvement would bring IRA violence to what had previously been some of the quietest areas in Ireland. From the spring of 1921 Southern organisers armed with instructions from GHQ would stir up trouble wherever they could. RIC Constable William Britton gave such an impression of his own quiet corner of County Down, ‘Support for the IRA in Killyleagh was very little. I don’t know of any except the one; he wasn’t a native of Killyleagh...’.²⁷ Many areas were not just quiet but had good positive relations. RIC constable James Gilmer, based in Maghera, found the Catholic population both friendly and helpful: ‘...the locals were useful, talk a bit. A lot of them, principally the priests, they’d give you information. We were very friendly with them. Relations with local people were good. They would back me or anybody no matter what I’d do, like, they were very good.’²⁸ Into such quiet areas the newly invigorated movement urged on by Southern zealots would spread radicalism and disharmony. Maghera would become the worst area for IRA activity in County Londonderry during 1922. Gilmer’s optimistic portrayal of the town in 1920 was

²⁵ Mulcahy memo, 7 April 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/17).

²⁶ Healy to Slevin, 28 Jan. 1956, quoted in Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland* p.36.

²⁷ William Britton quoted in Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary*, p.94.

replaced by the sullen observation ‘...it was bad all round’.²⁹ Relations within the Catholic minority were also soured by this new fundamentalism, demonstrated graphically in early June when two Ancient Order of Hibernian members Hugh O’Hanlon and James Smith were executed by the IRA as spies near Camlough, County Armagh.³⁰

These issues are brought into sharper relief by analysing precisely what Southern involvement actually meant on the ground away from the illusory rhetoric of GHQ. Outside of Belfast and Frank Aiken’s rather unique fiefdom of Armagh and South Down the IRA organisation was in dire need of support. As Joe McKelvey, the O/C of the new 3rd Northern Division wrote: ‘...when this Division was formed the Antrim and Down areas were both in bad need of organisation.’³¹ Whilst Antrim and East Down were effectively placed under the control of hardened Belfast leaders, such as Felix McCorley, brother of Roger, and Thomas Fitzpatrick, the counties of Tyrone and Londonderry had never been strong. GHQ had sent Charlie Daly to Tyrone in early 1920, replacing Roger McGinn as GHQ organiser, to reinvigorate what few local IRA units there were although he appears to have met with little success.³² He would later confide: ‘The slave mind and lack of enthusiasm and military spirit in the population in

²⁸ James Gilmer quoted in Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary*, p.95.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland* p.35. James McElhew statement (BMH, NA, WS 634).

³¹ McKelvey to Mulcahy, 16 Aug. 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/23 [44]).

this part of Ireland has a most paralysing effect. This has been my experience in Tyrone.’³³ However GHQ sought to rectify the situation with the appointment of the Monaghan IRA leader Eoin O’Duffy as the new Commandant of the 2nd Northern Division. O’Duffy’s association with the Northern IRA would prove vital in the coming years particularly due to his close relationship with Michael Collins. It was a combination of this exclusive access to Collins and his powerful IRB clique along with the trust he inspired amongst Northern Volunteers during his brief period as IRA liaison officer for Ulster during the Truce that would make O’Duffy GHQ’s unofficial leader of the IRA in the six counties.

In the spring of 1921 however such lofty aspirations were far from his mind. The reasoning behind O’Duffy’s appointment was to invigorate Northern IRA units with the express aim of taking pressure off more active areas in the South including his own beloved Monaghan. He wrote to GHQ in April 1921: ‘I would like to know my position as regards my own area Monaghan. After years of hard work building up the organisation in that county alone and unaided, I naturally do not like to sever my connection with it or lose my grip with it. In my letter to the C/S I made this clear, in his letter to me of 26th Jan he told me that if I accepted this position in Tyrone I would retain nominally and to a certain extent actually my control over Monaghan.’³⁴ GHQ

³² Patrick Maguire statement (BMH, NA, WS 693).

³³ Daly to GHQ, 24 Aug. 1921 quoted in Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland* pp. 49-50.

³⁴ O’Duffy to GHQ, 28 April 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/18 [104-7]).

responded: 'I can readily understand that you do not like to sever your connection with Monaghan, but you will easily appreciate the fact that the greatest help you can afford to your old area would be to get the surrounding districts up to the same degree of efficiency.'³⁵

O'Duffy arrived in Tyrone in March. What he found left him disillusioned and angry. Far from an eager but ill-supported set of Volunteers, he found ineptitude and disinterest: 'Generally I find the standard of efficiency at a very low ebb- very little knowledge of close order drill- no knowledge whatever of extended order- no special services was heard of and an absolute ignorance of the care and use of arms...I estimate that as far as 60 rifles are missing altogether, and practically all the rifles are in a filthy condition.'³⁶ Thousands of rounds of ammunition had also been lost or were unusable due to poor storage methods. The local IRA officers came in for particular criticism. O'Duffy found them far too 'easy going' and complained that they '...do not command the respect of the men'.³⁷ In the Gortin Battalion, he found an even worse state of affairs:

'This is by far the worst bn in Tyrone- neither the [battalion] nor the Companies did any military work since they were formed. The C'Dant is recognised as the principal poteen- maker in the County- his only occupation is going round the county running stills and the majority of the officers and men followed in his

³⁵ D/Org to O'Duffy, 14 May 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/18 [102-3]).

³⁶ O'Duffy to GHQ, 28 April 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/18 [104-7]).

³⁷ Ibid.

footsteps. The result is that drink has ruined this area. In one company Glenally there are 60 men in the company and 44 of these are recognised poteen- makers and are determined to continue. It is deplorable that in such a time as this any unit of the IRA or combination of units should go so far to lower the prestige of the whole organisation.’³⁸

Such antics he found had meant that the ‘...priests and people are disgusted with the IRA in this area in fact the only decent self-respecting young fellows are those outside the IRA.’³⁹

The 2nd Northern Division were a shambles and O’Duffy, who one Volunteer described as ‘a stickler for discipline’,⁴⁰ immediately dismissed large numbers of officers and men, promising ‘drastic punishment’ for those who failed to improve. William Kelly, a Tyrone IRA member, later wrote of the local men’s dislike of O’Duffy and his stern methods: ‘I am convinced that O’Duffy’s appointment was a mistake as Charlie Daly was a better man for the job. He knew the area much better and worked with the men for about twelve months beforehand. He knew all the officers in the area intimately and was a general favourite with all who had contact with him. This feeling of mine about Daly’s superior qualifications for the position of Divisional O/C, 2nd Northern Division, was generally shared amongst the

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. Joost Augusteijn has highlighted this disinterest in joining the IRA in his study of County Londonderry demonstrating that only 1% of adult Catholic men were members of the IRA compared to, for example, almost 7% in County Mayo. See Augusteijn *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* p173.

Volunteer officers over the whole Divisional area.’⁴¹ Another Volunteer Nicholas Smyth recalls how the quiet situation in Tyrone angered the new radical leadership that had been installed under O’Duffy. Mick Gallagher, soon to be appointed a brigade O/C, told Smyth that ‘...before things could liven up a few men would have to be shot.’⁴²

This was exactly what O’Duffy had in mind and his brief involvement in the North bred immediate, if ambiguous, results. John Connolly, an IRA Volunteer in Roslea, was ordered by O’Duffy to shoot a Special named Lester who had threatened a local Sinn Fein member. The attack on Lester failed although in response the RIC and Specials launched drastic reprisals against the Catholic population of the village. Nearly every Catholic house was burned including Flynn’s pub and the Market House, the two largest buildings in the area. O’Duffy, as Nicholas Smyth makes clear, decided to respond in kind:

‘He called a meeting in Derryhinlish for the purpose of discussing the question of reprisals. I attended this meeting and I cannot now remember the number of officers who attended the meeting. There were various expressions of opinion from some of the officers present as to the advisability of the [proposed] burnings and also as to the number of Unionist houses which should be burned...During the course of the meeting the door of the room in which the meeting was held was suddenly opened

⁴⁰ James McElduff quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors*, p.174.

⁴¹ William J. Kelly statement (BMH, NA, WS 893).

⁴² Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721).

and a stranger stepped into the room. This created a feeling of shocked surprise to many of us, especially when the stranger said to General O'Duffy "I have got you at last". It was lucky that General O'Duffy recognised the stranger as Frank Aiken, or he might have been shot. After Aiken's arrival, O'Duffy and he started a discussion of the Roslea business-Frank Aiken did not at first approve of the burnings, as he thought that the B men would retaliate by burning double the number of nationalist houses. O'Duffy struck the table and said "When you hit them hard they will not strike again". Aiken then said: 'Well, burn them and their houses'.⁴³

The date for the proposed raid was fixed for 22 March, deliberately chosen as it was exactly one month after the Specials had launched their attacks on Catholic homes in the village and O'Duffy wished to make it clear that the IRA operation was a reprisal. Members of O'Duffy's own Monaghan Brigade were brought in to carry out the attack and, as with the Swanzy shooting, the local IRA were ordered to act as scouts. They were split into small parties each consisting of 8-10 members each and given a specific target to attack, all of which were homes or farms belonging to members of the USC. Twenty-one houses in all were listed for burning with the attacks beginning at midnight. Two of the Specials were shot dead and another local man was dragged from his house and bludgeoned to death. One of the Specials, Samuel Nixon, was taken from his home and shot in the

⁴³ John T. Connolly statement (BMH, NA, WS 598).

street although it was decided not to burn his house as he had a large family. Members of both communities in Fermanagh were outraged by the incident and a truce was later agreed between Protestant and Catholic church leaders. For the local IRA fear of the inevitable unionist backlash left them with little choice but to leave their homes immediately despite having played only a minor role in the attacks: 'After the Roslea affair we had all to go on the run and sleep away from home. We could take no chances of either being seen by B. men or being captured by Crown Forces.'⁴⁴

The attacks at Roslea however were only the first act of O'Duffy's plan to bring the realities of IRA violence into the heart of the six counties. On 5 April he introduced an IRA levy in Tyrone and Londonderry and ordered that the 2nd Northern Division should begin extensive offensive operations immediately. Subsequently an RIC Sergeant was shot dead in Dromore and three Specials were badly wounded in an ambush near the town. The shooting in Dromore occurred when an RIC Sergeant, who appears to have suffered a mental breakdown, came onto the streets and started shouting anti-Catholic obscenities. He grabbed hold of a local girl, Eileen O'Doherty, and shot her in both legs. Her brother, a local IRA man, was told of the attack and after finding the delusional Sergeant shot him in the face.⁴⁵ On the following day a group of Specials took three suspected IRA members, John Devine, Dan Dogherty and Charles Slevin, from their homes and

⁴⁴ Ibid.

shot them half a mile outside the town. The IRA responded with an ambush at Dromore where they lost one man, Edward McClusker, and wounded four RIC men. The attacks continued in May when a 31-year-old RIC sergeant Peter McDonagh was killed near Mountfield.

The IRA attacks in April and May however had been patchy and many local volunteers refused to take part. William Kelly was ordered by O'Duffy to travel thirty miles to attack a party of Specials although he decided to go home instead.⁴⁶ O'Duffy himself left for Dublin to become Director of Organisation at GHQ soon after the attacks leaving the local IRA to face the wrath of the Specials who carried out large-scale raids and round-ups in the area. A local Volunteer Captain, James McElduff, after the shooting of McDonagh realised how dangerous this new aggressive policy would be for men like him in the six counties: 'I was not on the job myself but I thought it the best of my play to get out. I was on the run from then on.'⁴⁷

O'Duffy reported the situation in County Londonderry to be slightly better although he found that the men there were desperately short of arms, supplies and committed leadership. Derry itself, despite it being the scene of the initial outbreak of violence in June 1920, had remained remarkably peaceful. As one local Volunteer stated: '...things were very quiet here. There were very few attacks on the

⁴⁵ Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721).

⁴⁶ William J Kelly statement (BMH, NA, WS 893).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

police, no attacks at all on soldiers within the city, no buildings blown up, no ambushes, nothing like that. Derry in 1920, was very much a contented and loyal...naval base. The sort of things we read about in the South, even in Co. Tyrone, were inconceivable to our way of thinking.’⁴⁸ He also recalled that despite the growing chaos outside the city, relations between both communities remained cordial and that even in 1920 the British Army fielded a football team, the Dorsetshires, to play a match against a local Catholic side. He added tellingly that ‘The city was never nationally minded.’⁴⁹ The Commandant of the battalion, Paddy Sheils, appears to have called for a truce in the city, demonstrating a keen insight into how dangerous and counter-productive offensive IRA activity was for the local Catholic population. This insight was sadly lacking in figures like O’Duffy and Aiken as the events of the spring of 1921 had demonstrated all too clearly. One of the reasons for this peaceful outlook was the lack of substantial support for the IRA in the city. As Donal Kelly, a Sinn Fein local government official, admitted: ‘...in all truth, Derry at that time did not offer much variety in hiding places, for the only people to be trusted with important matters were those who were actually in the IRA movement.’⁵⁰ A flying column of twelve men was organised in the city in December 1920 for operation in Donegal although only six local IRA men could be found willing to join

⁴⁸ Neil Gillespie quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.162.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Donal Kelly quoted in B. Kelly (ed.) *Sworn to be Free* (Tralee, 1971) p.126.

up and the other half of the column was made up of men from different counties.⁵¹

Michael Sheerin put down the lack of militant activity in the city to stern opposition from church leaders and the remnants of the old Redmondite National Volunteers, as well as a general apathy amongst the nationalist population. Squabbles between the few radicals in the city and conservative leaders such as Sheils were frequent. In fact there were only around ten men in the whole city who could be described as active IRA members. This group, calling themselves the 'Ten Foot Pikers' (TFP), were an IRB offshoot which had been formed in 1917 and had attempted unsuccessfully to infiltrate all of the nationalist organisations in Derry. Sheerin, one of their leaders, would later admit that their occasional shows of aggression were little more than bravado: 'It merely involved detailing six or seven men to discharge shots at a fixed time in widely separated parts of the city. In most cases they fired them in their own backyard or through a skylight.'⁵² He continued: 'The killing instinct was not developed in any of the Units and none of us had the serious outlook said to be prevailing in other areas.'⁵³ When this instinct did emerge it merely confirmed how sensible the pragmatic approach of leaders like Sheils was. In November 1921 members of the TFP shot an RIC Constable,

⁵¹ Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerrilla Warfare* p.131.

⁵² Michael Sheerin statement (BMH, NA, WS 803). The main TFP members were Andy Hegarty, Tim Doheny, Lorken McGrath, Dan McCandy, Tom Rinehey, Jim Kerby, J. McGlynn, Sean Haughey and Michael Sheerin.

⁵³ Ibid.

Patrick Waters, during a bungled attempt to disarm him outside the General Post Office in the city. In response the Specials carried out vicious reprisal attacks on Catholic homes and businesses.

This peaceful situation however would be placed under strain during the spring of 1921. The threat stemmed from the aggressive activities of the maverick socialist republican Peadar O'Donnell. O'Donnell had been an organiser for the ITGWU in the city and attempted to organise a small Citizen Army detachment in the Bogside before finally throwing in his lot with the IRA. O'Donnell and his small but committed flying column, which included his brothers Frank and Joe, were quickly removed from the quietude of Derry although their destination lay not within the six counties but west across the border in Donegal.⁵⁴ Another column under Charlie McGuinness was also despatched to Donegal although its members were quickly rounded up and imprisoned in Ebrington Military barracks back in Derry. McGuinness would later escape only to return in February to rescue Frank Carty, the Sligo Brigadier, one of the few successes the IRA had in the city.⁵⁵ As with O'Duffy in Tyrone and, as we shall see, the Belfast men in Cavan, GHQ's principle aim appears to have been to use Northern Volunteers for its own Southern priorities. In such cases Northern men would either directly fight in the South or be

⁵⁴ The members of O'Donnell's column were Alfie McCallion, William Cullen, James Tyler, Seamus McCann, James McKee, Con Connolly, William Doherty, Jim Walsh, Tom Sullivan, Frank O'Donnell, Joe O'Donnell and Con Boyle. See Seamus McCann statement (BMH, NA, WS 763). For O'Donnell's career prior to joining the IRA see D. O'Driscóil, *Peadar O'Donnell* (Cork, 2001) pp.4-17.

responsible for easing the pressure on it. The reason why GHQ respected the Derry truce, and wished to maintain it, was because the city's men would be of far more use to the South fighting outside of the Six-Counties than inside it. GHQ orders to the Derry IRA graphically show the ulterior motives of the Dublin leadership: 'Engage the maximum enemy force and take the pressure off the South.'⁵⁶

O'Donnell however proved to be no respecter of such subtle conspiracies. He would time and again flout direct orders requesting that he remain outside of Derry and the six counties. In early 1921 he pulled off the first in a long list of blatant acts of self-promotion. After persuading Joe Sweeney that he could obtain arms from his Citizen Army contacts in Dublin, O'Donnell arrived at GHQ and with breathtaking audacity presented himself as the representative from Donegal. The process of divisionalisation was well underway and amidst the confusion at headquarters he was appointed as the new O/C of No2. Brigade by Mulcahy. He also met Michael Collins on this trip. Liam Archer, an IRA officer from the Dublin Brigade, was later sent to Donegal to investigate O'Donnell's activities. His report was damning: 'The feeling is therefore prevalent that an injustice has been done by the appointment to this position of a man who is only some six months a member of the IRA, who was an organiser for an

⁵⁵ Pax O'Faolin quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.142. See also Dominck Doherty statement (BMH, NA, WS 846).

⁵⁶ Michael Sheerin statement (BMH, NA, WS 803).

organisation regarded as being unfriendly to the IRA, who possesses little volunteer experience, and whose ability had not yet been proved.'

⁵⁷ In other respects also O'Donnell's antics appeared to be rapidly going out of control. He was said to be intercepting GHQ orders destined for other commands and constantly returned to Derry where he and his men set about gathering recruits and carrying out random attacks.

The most damaging of these incursions occurred on 1 April when, after a day of sporadic violence, two RIC men, Michael Kenny and John Higgins, were killed in the city. The April attacks occurred simultaneously at 8pm when the attackers, after gathering in the Shamrock Hall on the Bogside, moved out in small parties to attack selected targets. After the shootings O'Donnell and Seamus McCann, the killer of Sergeant Higgins, along with other column men left the city and made their way by bicycle to the relative safety of Donegal.⁵⁸ O'Donnell's men were also implicated in two bank robberies as well as spreading scurrilous rumours about the abilities of Paddy Sheils. Another concluded angrily: 'The result of the foregoing is that the O/C Bde [O'Donnell] is looked upon in Derry as untrustworthy and incompetent and matters have now reached a point, if he remains in command, where the O/C Derry will probably refuse to serve under him any longer and request transfer to another area.'⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Report from Liam Archer, 3 June 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/A/18 [277-297]).

⁵⁸ Seamus McCann statement (BMH, NA, WS 763).

⁵⁹ Report from Liam Archer, 3 June 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/A/18 [277-297]).

The one man who could have solved this conflict was the new Commandant of the 1st Northern Division (and thus O'Donnell's direct superior) Frank Carney, a prominent IRB man and Commandant of the South Fermanagh Brigade. The relationship between the two men was soured when O'Donnell cast aspersions on Carney's ability and accused him openly of 'skulking in Derry'.⁶⁰ He later told Ernie O'Malley: 'He was always in trouble for he was not liked, neither was he any good.'⁶¹ One of Carney's first moves was to dismiss O'Donnell as brigade commander and request from GHQ that he and his column be suspended from the Volunteer organisation. Carney however was captured at Sweeney's Hotel in Dungloe and subsequently imprisoned soon after taking up his command.⁶²

He was replaced as O/C by Joe Sweeney, who was far more lenient with O'Donnell's case and reinstated him as brigade O/C although he suggested that Derry be removed from O'Donnell's charge and become an independent battalion. GHQ leaders had made a similar suggestion: 'If Derry city Battalion is given to O'D[onnell] just now the new Divisional O/C will have local difficulties to attend which might hamper him in the rather responsible work he has undertaken.'⁶³ Despite O'Donnell's many transgressions it was his stirring up of trouble in Derry which was most unwelcome and notably the only

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Peadar O'Donnell interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/98).

⁶² Seamus McCann statement (BMH, NA, WS 763).

matter on which GHQ and his local superiors were agreed. In order to avoid any further 'local difficulties', seemingly a euphemism for unsanctioned IRA actions in the city, Derry was indeed made into an independent battalion command. GHQ's bold idea of integrated cross-border divisional organisation had collapsed in this area after only a few months. Although no-one mentioned it at the time, the existence of the border had made such a system unworkable in Derry. As such it was the reality of partition, rather than any nationalist belief in the primacy of Irish unity, which proved decisive in shaping the organisation and activities of the Northern IRA.

For the rest of the period Donegal's role in the conflict would continue to present something of a paradox. Its northern geographical position sat uneasily with its Southern political affiliation. Local factors, such as the remarkably high level of migratory labour also robbed many areas of Volunteers for lengthy periods each year. As one local RIC man commented: 'There was a lot of them used to go to Scotland, you see, for the harvest as labourers. Everybody went. They stopped then till the potatoes were done, and then they came back and whatever money they had they usually drank it.'⁶⁴ Added to this were the constant incursions by Ulster Specials into East Donegal. Sean Lehane, the Cork flying column commander who fought in Donegal in 1922, later confided: '...the Specials at that time were right almost up

⁶³ D/Org. to C/S, 21 June 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/18 [270]).

⁶⁴ William Britton quoted in Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary* p.34.

to Letterkenny.’⁶⁵ However such peculiarities, along with the county’s persistent identity crisis, also made it the most favourable position from which to launch attacks against the territory of the Northern government. As such Donegal would be inundated with strangers in the shape of IRA Volunteers seeking either to attack Northern Ireland or to escape from it. Friction between these outsiders and native IRA units would play a crucial part in undermining Collins’ Joint-Army offensive in the late summer of 1922 which signalled the final collapse of the Northern IRA.

Whilst events in Tyrone and Derry hinted at the cynical undercurrent which lay beneath the South’s use of Northern Volunteers, events in Cavan during May 1921 showed the relationship between North and South to be little short of blatant exploitation. On the 1 April, the same day as O’Donnell’s attacks in Derry, GHQ ordered the strongest brigade in the North, Belfast, to prepare and equip a flying column. This unit however would not be for use in the city or even within the six counties. Its destination lay over eighty miles away in Cavan, a ‘quiet’ county in IRA terms wedged between the more active areas of Longford and Monaghan.⁶⁶ The reasoning behind this decision

⁶⁵ Lehané to Military Pensions Board, 7 March 1935 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS 31340). For a rather idealised but still informative description of IRA activity in Donegal from 1917-1921 see J. Sweeney, ‘Donegal and the War of Independence’, *Capuchin Annual*, 1970.

⁶⁶ Tom Garvin contradicts this interpretation arguing that Cavan was, relative to population, the most active IRA county during the War of Independence. He argues that the majority of IRA activity in Ireland was confined to, ‘The old two-focus pattern of central Munster and border Ulster’. However only three RIC men were killed in the county during the whole of the conflict, one of the lowest totals of all Irish counties. The necessity for the Belfast column to be sent to Cavan in May 1921 is itself evidence of the lacklustre performance of local Volunteers. For direct comparisons between counties see Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* pp. 105-149. For Garvin’s argument see T. Garvin, *The*

appears to have once again been to alleviate the pressure on these stronger and better organised areas although it proved a total failure and collapsed in dramatic fashion after less than a week. Despite this a closer examination of the events themselves illustrate something of the nature of the early relationship between the South and the Northern IRA in the latter stages of the War of Independence.

The column consisted of thirteen men from the four companies of the 1st Battalion of the Belfast Brigade under the nominal leadership of Joe Magee, although that was as far as Belfast control was allowed.⁶⁷ The unit was to be wholly disassociated from the 3rd Northern Division and placed under the direct control of the GHQ Organiser for Cavan, Seamus McGoran. A similar number of Cavan men were to join the Belfast party to bring the column's strength up to around twenty-five men.⁶⁸ The local Cootehill Battalion in North Cavan was to make all the necessary arrangements for the arrival of the Belfast men although communication problems meant that they were only informed ten days before the advance party arrived.⁶⁹

The Belfast men were transferred to Cavan in small groups, travelling by train via a circuitous route through Redhills and Ballyhaise so as

Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics (Dublin, 1981) p.123. For the course of the revolution in County Longford see M. Coleman, *County Longford and the Irish Revolution, 1910-1923* (Dublin, 2002).

⁶⁷ The members of the column were Joe Magee, Seamus McKenna, Paddy McMahon, Seamus Finn, Charlie McKee, Joe McGlinchey, Pat Brannigan, Sean McCann, Peter O'Callaghan, Patrick Dougan, Sean McCartney, Thomas Fox and John McDermott. See Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

⁶⁸ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

⁶⁹ Report from Flying Column HQ Cavan, 10 May 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/18 [98]).

to avoid suspicion, the last group crossing the border on Tuesday 3 May. Their weapons were brought into Cavan, wrapped in rugs and carried in golf bags by a number of Cumann na mBan volunteers, some of who were related to members of the column including the wife of Thomas Flynn.⁷⁰ The final destination of the column was an abandoned farmhouse high up on Lappinduff mountain near Carrickallen. The timing of their arrival could not have been worse as a few days earlier, on 1 May, Cavan had been rocked by the shooting of two RIC constables near Arvagh in the south of the county, probably the work of members of the Longford IRA. The majority of the column arrived at the base on 5 May although immediately things began to go wrong. The Cavan IRA had made few preparations and the exhausted Belfast men were forced to spend two whole days organising the base themselves. The large quantity of supplies and weaponry promised by GHQ had also failed to materialise.⁷¹

By Saturday all of the Belfast men had arrived although Magee made what would prove to be a fatal decision by allowing three of them to travel to a local pub for a drink that evening. Seamus McKenna, his second-in-command, had complained angrily to his superior, although Magee assured him that the men could be trusted. McKenna believed the idea of letting anyone leave the base was foolhardy arguing that even from their accents it was obvious they were from Belfast. He also showed mistrust of two of the men because they were both ex-British

⁷⁰ Thomas Flynn statement (BMH, NA ,WS 429).

soldiers, a feeling that would be echoed by many members of the Northern IRA throughout the period. The men however did return after spending around four hours in the village pub.⁷²

A party of local Cavan Volunteers who arrived with a message that more would soon follow joined them in the early hours of Sunday morning. A few hours later, around 4am, a sentry reported seeing men at the bottom of the hill moving towards the camp. They were greeted originally as the second contingent of local men although were in fact a small party of British soldiers and police who had approached the base unseen from the North. In an effort to avoid such raids all roads leading to the mountain had been trenched although the local Volunteers had left them unguarded and they were quickly filled in by the police under the cover of darkness with the aid of forced local labour. Shots were fired at the sentries and the whole camp was awakened. The column, many of whom were asleep, were caught totally off guard and ran out quickly to engage the enemy forming themselves into three parties and dispersing in the woods which lay to the front of the camp. Sean McCartney, who had been sent down the hill to reconnoitre with John McDermott, was shot dead as the two men tried to clamber back to the safety of the base.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

Thomas Fox, one of the Belfast men, recalled his experience of the night:

‘Our position was on the forward slope of the high ground facing east overlooking a little valley with houses dotted here and there. To the right of the valley was a hill which shut off our view in that direction...The rising sun was shining brilliantly in our eyes, and it was difficult to locate objects in the valley. After some time I distinguished British soldiers and police at different places in the valley with whom we exchanged shots, they made no attempt to advance against us. Suddenly on our right where the hill was located I saw soldiers dashing from behind cover to reach our hill. Their purpose was obviously to outflank us. I succeeded in stopping some of them but others, including an officer got across and after some time fire was opened on us from the hill above us. Between the fires from above and below it was impossible to move. Others of the column who had less cover than we had were in a hopeless position. In the excitement nobody had thought of bringing a sufficient supply of ammunition to last for a couple of hours or more, and at this stage, about 7am, very little was left. Shortly afterwards the party in the centre having become untenable with only two or three rounds left and there being no escape we also surrendered.’⁷³

The report of Joe Magee was far more damning: ‘...from the start no discipline was maintained. Fire was opened and early in the engagement we had one killed and one wounded all parties were disconnected and communication impossible, enemy attempted to storm position on right but were forced to retire with I believe ten casualties. Desultory [sic] firing and sniping was kept up by both sides until we were practically surrounded and one party of four compelled to surrender. This caused remainder to break up and retire as best possible. In this retirement another of our men was slightly wounded. The entire parties were moving in different directions and were picked up by parties of enemy forces.’⁷⁴

A mixed party of around eighty military, RIC and Black and Tans had swiftly surrounded the base. The IRA party numbered seventeen in total consisting of the Belfast contingent and what remained of the local Volunteers. Only Magee of the column managed to escape along with two of the Cavan men into County Leitrim.⁷⁵ He appears to have fled the scene soon after the shooting started. Indeed Seamus McKenna, still smarting from his argument with his superior of a few hours earlier, blamed Magee directly for the catastrophe: ‘I felt it was time for the O/C of the column to take control and I began looking for him. I could see no sign of him and I started calling him by his Christian name during lulls in the firing. The echoes of my voice and

⁷³ Thomas Fox statement (BMH, NA, WS 429).

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ *Freeman's Journal*, 12 Jan. 1922.

of the shots were the only answers to my calling. I continued this calling, at intervals, for about an hour, I am sure, and my voice was heard all over the hillside. In fact, the enemy heard it and questioned us afterwards about it. Magee must have heard it before he cleared off as he apparently did.’⁷⁶All of the weapons except for seven rifles and forty rounds of ammunition were captured. Only Sean McCartney was killed although all of the other members of the column were captured. One Volunteer, Seamus Finn, was wounded along with one British soldier. The fighting had lasted for around three hours with the IRA surrendering at 7 o’clock in the morning.

McGee himself later blamed the disaster on ‘...friction in the working of the unit’ and the ineptitude of the local IRA who were ‘...very very slow and do not seem to grasp anything at all. They are just typical of this sleepy place and seem to hold enemy forces in great dread.’⁷⁷ He was especially critical of their failure to alert the base about the arrival of the RIC despite the fact that many of them actually lived along the route itself. In fact the Cavan men were next to useless and McKenna was shocked to discover during the fight that they had never even used a rifle before. When the fighting began the Cavan IRA simply melted away. After the fighting ended a British officer had to discipline some of the Black and Tans who had started beating a few of the captured Belfast Volunteers.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

⁷⁷ Report from Flying Column HQ Cavan, 10 May 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/18 [98]).

⁷⁸ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

The following day a party of Black and Tans returned and demolished what was left of the base and its surrounding buildings after which they set up a permanent post on the site. Local support in the area had been woeful and it seems likely that an informer had told the police of the presence of the Belfast men after seeing them in the local pub that evening. The captured Volunteers were all sentenced to death by court martial although they were to be saved by the signing of the Truce two months later after an abortive attempt to rescue them from Crumlin Road Gaol on 3 June was made by members of the Belfast ASU including Woods, McCorley and Sean O'Neill. Mulcahy, on hearing of the disaster, was outraged and gave short shrift to claims from the Cavan IRA that the attack had inspired local Volunteers to action, blaming it on a '...most appalling lack of training or negligence which, in view of the fact that it involves the lives of men and the morale of the county generally, is criminal.'⁷⁹

Despite the anger at GHQ it was made clear that the unit must be reconstructed, '...we cannot afford to drop the column idea now'.⁸⁰ There is little evidence however that a new Belfast unit was being prepared before the Truce. The reason appears to have been primarily financial. The Cavan experiment had virtually bankrupted the already poverty-stricken Belfast Brigade. McKelvey wrote to GHQ in August 1921: 'The arming, equipment and transport of this unit cost

approximately £150. One of the men of the unit was killed in action and the Belfast Brigade had to bear the expense of the funeral which amounted to £27. The Brigade was seriously affected by such and I would like to learn from you if it is expected to bear this cost.’⁸¹ With so many members of the Belfast IRA unemployed funds were a constant problem and one of the principal reasons why Southern support had been so welcomed in the city. The Captain of the Ballymacarret Company later stated that every member of his 120-strong unit was unemployed.⁸²

Greater GHQ involvement however did not apparently involve greater material help. McKelvey complained that his Division had received no arms whatsoever from GHQ and could not find money from his own men: ‘The Belfast Brigade has never at any time been in a very sound financial position: 75% of the men are out of work and after hostilities resume it is practically certain that the remainder will be also thrown out of work. The weekly subscriptions under these circumstances do not amount to much, accordingly I could not levy this Brigade. Antrim and Down could not raise funds to cover internal expense.’⁸³ He concluded bleakly: ‘I intend after the Truce to strike a levy throughout

⁷⁹ C/S to GHQ Organiser Cavan, 24 May 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/18 [100-1]).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ McKelvey to Mulcahy, 16 Aug. 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/23 [44]).

⁸² Manus O’Boyle statement (BMH, NA, WS 289).

⁸³ McKelvey to Mulcahy, 16 Aug. 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/23 (44)).

the Division but I candidly believe that its enforcement will be difficult.’⁸⁴

The spring of 1921 had seen both the creation of the Northern IRA and something of the role its Southern leadership saw it playing in the broader national struggle. The arrival of the Truce in July however would in many ways mask the realities behind these changes. The fundamental shift in power between North and South which occurred during the latter stages of the War of Independence was both interrupted and overshadowed by the hiatus of the Truce period in the latter half of the year. Despite the Dublin leadership’s insistence on a homogeneous political settlement for all thirty-two counties and the strengthening of its control over the Northern IRA, events in the north-east would continue to demonstrate how unrealistic such demands were.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

BELFAST AND THE TRUCE

Whilst the vagaries of Southern involvement seeped into IRA circles in the six counties it was, as ever, in Belfast that its greatest impact would be felt. Sporadic rioting and shooting had continued to plague the city, albeit on a much reduced scale, during the six months following the initial violent outbreak in the summer of 1920. From the spring of 1921 however the shape of the violence in Belfast would change dramatically. The IRA would now be waging a war against the backdrop of dramatic constitutional and political change which would punctuate and intensify the violence for the rest of the year: the elections in May, the Truce in July, the handing over of security powers to the Northern government in November and the arrival of the Treaty in December all led to cataclysmic periods of violence. Northern IRA activity would now be increasingly linked to the political machinations of its Southern leadership and the growing bond between North and South would finally be sealed.

Prior to the disaster in Cavan the IRA in Belfast were becoming more aggressive and confident in their activities. They also became more professional; the mass of ex-service men and expelled shipyard workers who had manned the barricades in the previous summer had melted away leaving only a hard-core of committed Volunteers. McCorley observed that ‘...the fight became more and more a fight between two disciplined bodies’.¹ Indeed Belfast fighting was not for the faint-hearted. To be a Catholic gunman in the city was a

dangerous occupation, arguably more dangerous than in any other part of Ireland. Roger McCorley's offer to GHQ to exchange officers from Belfast with the Dublin Brigade was politely refused.² Seamus McKenna later noted the difference between the two cities arguing that, whereas in Dublin 'the majority of the population were sympathetic and those who were not were afraid to display hostility in any way. The position was different in Belfast where we had three-fourths of the population bitterly hostile (and many of them actively so) worse than one would find in an English city.'³

The Belfast IRA's new professionalism would be matched by its opponents. The USC had been readied for action by the end of 1920 and the hard-pressed RIC was reinforced by full-time 'A' Specials allowing for over twenty previously abandoned barracks to be re-occupied across the six counties. In Belfast itself the 'B' Specials were held back until February not yet being viewed with the loathing they would later inspire in the Catholic community. Even then they were only to be allowed to patrol Protestant areas in the company of regular RIC officers. This idea however proved to be both unpopular and impractical and was increasingly ignored due in part to the perception of a growing IRA threat but also to a greater level of unity between the

¹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

² Roger McCorley interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCAD, P17b/98).

³ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

previously aloof and often mutually hostile branches of the security forces.⁴

The increasing security role of the 'B' Specials would do much to embitter community relations in the city. Allegations of drunkenness and looting began to surface almost immediately and raids on suspect houses by combined groups of RIC and Specials became commonplace.⁵ Their late night visits, heralded by the sound of banging dustbin lids, brought fear and confrontation into the heart of the Catholic community. Senator Joseph Connolly, a Sinn Fein notable in the city at the time, later described the stressful atmosphere: '...looking back over the period as we lived through it in Belfast, the memory of it is one of day-to-day strain, of constant tension of incidents, raids and arrests.'⁶ Due to the part-time role of the 'B' Specials most of the raids occurred between midnight and 3am. There were only occasional daylight raids, usually a swift reaction to an IRA attack in the city during the day. The nature of the raids varied, often depending on the officer in charge. Some were polite and courteous, others merely arrogant and destructive whilst a small anonymous minority set out to kill. Connolly's house in Divis Drive itself was raided no less than twenty-five times before the Truce. He regarded himself however as lucky because the local RIC Sergeant

⁴ See A. Hezlet *The 'B' Specials: A History of the Ulster Special Constabulary* (Belfast, 1977) p.43.

⁵ For examples of the excesses of some sections of the USC see Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* pp. 51-3.

⁶ Gaughan, *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly* p.195.

‘...always did his utmost to restrain his companions’.⁷ After a Christmas break in 1920 he was delighted to return home and find that, although his house had been raided and ransacked, little lasting damage had been done.⁸

The increasing number of raids meant that many Belfast IRA men spent long periods on the run in the city, rarely spending two nights in the same location, creeping from safe-house to safe-house in daylight or attending clandestine meetings after curfew to plan or carry out an attack. Most of these operations took weeks to plan, especially those in hostile areas of the city, and more often than not were cancelled before even being attempted. The experiences of Thomas Flynn, a Belfast IRA officer, were typical of those suffered by many Volunteers in the city during the last few months of the War of Independence: ‘The position in Belfast for about seven weeks before the Truce was so critical and the pressure on our Nationalist districts so great that I did not get any clothes off for most of the time. I was getting no regular sleep and I was reduced to a state of extreme exhaustion.’⁹ Despite being on the run many IRA men would stay within view of their own homes so as to be ready to respond to a visit from a murder gang. RIC Constable Robert Crosset, later made clear how central reprisal attacks were to crushing the threat from the IRA: ‘...we the Unionists of us, we didn’t let them away with it, for if

⁷ Ibid. p.187.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Thomas Flynn statement (BMH, NA, WS 429).

they shot three police, they shot three police in Ballyronan, you see, well we went and shot three of theirs, do you see.’¹⁰ The number of such tit- for- tat killings would increase dramatically all over the six counties from the spring of 1921 as both sides began to grow in confidence and proficiency. In South Armagh the notorious Igoe gang began operating in the area in late-1920. Operating from a makeshift base at the Beresford Arms Hotel in Armagh City they put up notices all over the county warning the IRA that severe reprisals would be carried out in response to any aggressive moves by the Volunteers.¹¹

In Belfast itself reprisals had started as early as the summer of 1920. On 25 September two IRA members shot dead Constable Thomas Leonard on the Falls Road after he resisted their attempts to disarm him. Leonard was the first RIC man to be killed in the city. The following evening a number of reprisal gangs led by D/I Harrison left Springfield Road police barracks and proceeded to the houses of three prominent republicans, Edward Trodden, Sean McFadden and Sean Gaynor. All three were shot dead.¹² The attacks brought to a head the ongoing disagreements between the young radical officers of the 1st Battalion, led by Roger McCorley, and the more conservative brigade staff who, as in the summer of 1920, were reluctant to sanction reprisal attacks. The tension within the Belfast IRA was further inflamed when many of the IRA leaders fled the city for the safety of

¹⁰ Robert Crosset quoted in Brewer, *The Royal Irish Constabulary* p.94.

¹¹ James Short statement (BMH, NA, WS 534).

¹² *Belfast Newsletter* 27 July 1920, *Irish News* 27 July 1920.

Dublin fearful that they would be the next targets of the murder gangs.¹³ In South Down there was a similar reaction by the brigade leadership. After the shooting of RIC Head Constable John Kearney in Newry on 21 November, they too fled over the border to safety. Patrick Casey, a Newry IRA officer, later stated that the leadership were ‘...moving too slowly for the more active spirits. The senior Volunteer officers, really men with feet of clay, vanished overnight, and so for a time the organisation in South Down was leaderless.’¹⁴

The timid response of the brigade leadership led the younger members of the IRA in Belfast to take matters into their own hands. A covert meeting was held whose principal aim was, in McCorley’s words ‘...to unseat what was called the peace party from power.’¹⁵ Seamus McKenna, the Vice-Commandant of the Cavan column and one of the most militant members of the 1st Battalion, recalled his own sense of frustration with his conservative superiors: ‘I made the threat that I would begin operations myself, along with another man or two, by shooting a couple of RIC men more or less indiscriminately, but I was asked to stand firm and wait patiently for a while as there was a change coming in leadership of the battalion and that the new man to be appointed, Roger McCorley, would not look to the Brigade for sanction for actions against the enemy.’¹⁶ McKenna felt, like many of

¹³ According to Seamus McKenna the leaders who left included ‘Wish’ Fox, Paddy Wynne and Andy O’Hare. See Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

¹⁴ Patrick Casey statement (BMH, NA, WS 1148).

¹⁵ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

¹⁶ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

his youthful colleagues, that the brigade council were too 'moderate minded' and was particularly critical of Joe McKelvey who he believed was only appointed as Divisional O/C due to his membership of the IRB rather than his personal fighting abilities.¹⁷

Indeed the influence of the IRB on the activities of provincial IRA units during the War of Independence was as varied as the level of IRA activity throughout Ireland. Whereas GHQ in Dublin was dominated by the IRB, its influence in the localities was more patchy. In some counties, such as Cork, IRB members formed the most radical elements of the IRA and were responsible for transforming the organisation into a brutal guerrilla force. In the North however the IRB acted as a force for restraint, holding back more radical IRA members through their domination of key commands. For example, John McCoy was informed by the O/C of the Newry Brigade, Paddy Rankin, a prominent IRB member, that if he failed to join the organisation his promotion to Brigade Adjutant would not be sanctioned. McCoy however refused, as did many of the young radicals in Belfast, most notably Roger McCorley, Sean O'Neill and Seamus McKenna. As such the later splits which developed within the Belfast leadership were caused not simply by the youthful impatience of these men but also

¹⁷ Ibid.

by broader divisions in the republican movement between IRB and non-IRB members.¹⁸

In response to the mutiny of the 1st Battalion, the Belfast Brigade staff threatened to severely punish any man who engaged in unsanctioned attacks on the police. This threat however proved counterproductive and led to what Joe Murray described as ‘...a more or less open breach between the Company officers and Brigade. At this time a threat of unofficial operations was made by members of ‘C’ company.’

¹⁹ The situation was finally brought to a head when two local Sinn Fein leaders who had practically no Volunteer experience were appointed to the brigade staff. This move proved to be the final straw for McCorley who demanded that the men be removed. The brigade council backed down and the initiative passed to the young militants of ‘B’ and ‘C’ companies with McCorley being appointed as Vice-Commandant of the 1st Battalion. McCorley claimed the support he had received in this struggle was due to the fact that he was ‘...one of those who strongly advocated that the executions [of RIC men] should take place irrespective of the consequences.’²⁰

One of McCorley’s key allies in his struggle against the brigade leadership was the Captain of the radical ‘B’ Company, Seamus

¹⁸ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492); Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 803). For the influence of the IRB on key provincial IRA units during the War of Independence see Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* pp.104-106, 127-8.

¹⁹ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

²⁰ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

Woods. The two men, would remain extremely close friends throughout the period and both would rise to be key leaders of the IRA in east Ulster. On the surface at least they were unlikely allies. McCorley's toughness and cold brutality sat uneasily with Woods' more sensitive nature and aptitude for administration. Seamus McKenna described McCorley as '...apparently devoid of any feeling of nerves, and would undertake any operation with no sign of disturbance or emotion on his innocent looking face'. Conversely he found Woods to be '...a different type, more human in his reactions but quicker at making a decision and carrying it out. To work with them on these street shooting jobs was a pleasant thrill.'²¹ McCorley later said of his friend: 'I always found Woods worthy of the greatest admiration. He was by nature highly strung but very cool in action. Never, on any occasion did he try to avoid any operations.'²²

With McCorley and his militant supporters now in the ascendancy they felt free to launch the attacks that they craved with or without the sanction of their leaders. Their first operation was a plan to assassinate numerous members of the Auxiliary police who were constantly passing through Belfast on their way to the South. Many of the Auxiliaries, before they made their way to Dublin, would stay at the Railway View Hotel, also known as Roddy's Hotel, close to Musgrave Street Barracks. At around 9pm on 26 January Roger McCorley, Seamus Woods, Joe Murray and Seamus McKenna were

²¹ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

ushered into the downstairs bar by a friendly employee, Vincent Watters, who directed the men to the snug where they waited until the very busy pub had emptied of customers. Seamus McKenna recalls the events that followed: 'When closing time came, we pretended to leave the pub by a side door. Watters, however, pointed out the way up the stairs and said our quarry was there. The four of us went upstairs. We opened the door of the wrong room. It was empty but, by that light, we saw another room. The three RIC men were in bed, two of them in one bed and one man in another, a single bed. They knew our purpose immediately. We threw open the door, switched on the light, and they started screaming. It was a particularly ghastly business, but we had to do it and it was done.'²³ The three victims, Thomas Heffron, Michael Quinn and Denis Gilmartin, had been in the hotel drinking all day and had just retired in a drunken state to their beds: Heffron and Quinn were both killed outright although Gilmartin survived with terrible wounds; as Manus O'Boyle commented 'All were killed except one who, although he received fifteen wounds, recovered but was a maniac.'²⁴

The shooting of the Auxiliaries and the refusal of the conservative brigade leadership to sanction further aggressive activities by the young radicals deepened the tension between the two rapidly polarising factions. After the burning of Cork City in early December

²² Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

²³ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

1920 Joe Murray claimed that GHQ ordered the Belfast IRA to burn down half of Belfast city centre by way of reprisal. This order highlighted not only Southern nationalist perceptions of Belfast as a 'foreign' city but also the unwillingness of the IRA leadership in the Northern capital to agree to what they felt was a reckless and dangerously counter-productive policy. For the extremist wing of the organisation however the decision of the brigade council to overrule the order merely confirmed them in their hostility to those who they felt had little stomach for the realities of revolution. Joe Murray himself witnessed McCorley's angry response to the cancellation of the arson campaign: '...he was very upset on the receipt of these orders and expressed the opinion that some so and so on the Brigade Staff should be shot.'²⁵

The decision proved to be the final straw for McCorley and Woods who, invigorated from the success of the Roddy's Hotel attack, initiated an open breach with the brigade leadership and set about the creation of their own Active Service Unit. Joe Murray, later to be a key member of this unit, recalled: 'After this operation of Roddy's Hotel we, the younger members of "B" and "C" companies, decided that now that we had made a start on military activities we would force matters on the Brigade Staff either to give us their blessing to form an Active

²⁴ Manus O'Boyle statement (BMH, NA, WS 289). For further details of the attack see *Irish News*, 27 January, 1921.

²⁵ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

Service Unit or we would “push them out”.’²⁶ Similarly McCorley himself noted: ‘From this point on, the younger element, who had control of the 1st Battalion, took the bit in their teeth and travelled under their own steam. We were still subject to a number of restrictions from the Brigade Staff who took up the attitude that our activities might jeopardise activities which the Brigade might decide to carry out. The attitude of the 1st Battalion was that it would be ridiculous to hold up activities merely on the off chance that the Brigade would decide to carry out something in the future.’ He continued: ‘We still had the difficulty of dealing with certain elements on the Brigade Staff who were not very favourably disposed to active service unit activities. However we ignored this influence.’²⁷

The members of the ASU were the elite of the IRA in Belfast.²⁸ The later leadership of the Belfast Brigade and divisional staff would be drawn from this small pool of militant activists. Woods and McCorley had to all intents and purposes taken control of the IRA organisation in the city. They immediately abolished the old system of elections for officers, and appointed men themselves after holding a series of grisly auditions for each prospective candidate which were, in McCorley’s words, to ‘...see how he reacted to the strain of service with the unit’.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

²⁸ The nucleus of this group was made up of Woods, McCorley, Joseph Murray, Seamus McKenna, Sean Keenan, Thomas Flynn, Tom Fox, Seamus Finn, and Seamus Heron. See Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

Only those who came up to standard managed to gain a place on the ASU.²⁹

The unit consisted of thirty-two men, eight from each of the four companies of the 1st Battalion. From their headquarters at Daniel McDevitt's tailor's shop in Rosemary Street small patrols were sent out day and night to hunt for targets.³⁰ This involved closely following suspect individuals around the streets of the city and listening to their accents; if they were English the men would conclude that they were Black and Tans or Auxiliaries and word was sent back to Woods and McCorley who would then set out to do the shooting. Indeed the leadership of the ASU were uncompromising and brutal, a fact endorsed by McCorley's instructions to the members of the unit: 'I had issued a general order that where reprisal gangs were cornered, no prisoners were to be taken. The enemy, after a short time, offered to surrender but our men in obedience to the order, refused to accept their surrender.'³¹

The unit's crude methods were employed dramatically on 11 March when they gunned down a party of Black and Tans in Victoria Street. Two were killed instantly and a third, William Cooper, died the following day from his wounds. McCorley, McKenna, Woods, Keenan and Heron were responsible for the shooting. They had followed the

²⁹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

³⁰ McDevitt was a veteran Belfast republican. McDermott, *Northern Divisions* pp. 221-2. See also file on Daniel McDevitt (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/650).

three men, who were laughing and chatting with two local girls, through Victoria Square towards Musgrave Street barracks where they were shot down in a hail of bullets. The IRA party fled immediately after the attack leaving the three Black and Tans and the two girls, both of whom were wounded, sprawled out on the pavement. A passer-by Alexander Allen, a Protestant shipyard worker and father to eight children, was also killed although Seamus McKenna later claimed that he had died when one of the Black and Tans had fired wildly as he staggered away mortally wounded. McKenna himself called the killings ‘...one of the neatest shooting jobs done in Belfast’.

³² Sean Montgomery, another Belfast Volunteer, described the brutal scene: ‘The O/C [i.e. McCorley] put four or five rounds into one and he said it took him a long time to fall.’ ³³

Just over a month later the ASU struck again. On 23 April two Auxiliaries, Ernest Bolim and John Bailes, were gunned down in Donegall Place at around 9pm. Bailes and Bolim had only arrived in the city the previous day and were in fact due to leave on the day they were killed although their journey had been delayed.³⁴ Joe Murray later left a detailed account of the attack that gives a fascinating insight into the workings of the ASU:

³¹ Ibid.

³² Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

³³ Sean Montgomery quoted in McDermott, *Northern Divisions* (Belfast, 2001) p.72. For further details of the shooting see *Irish News*, 12 March 1921.

³⁴ Belfast Brigade report for April 1921, 15 May 1921 (Mulcahy Papers, UCDA, P7/A/18).

'We assembled at the O'Donovan Rossa Football Club in Berry Street in the city centre. The Battalion O.C. (R.McCorley) outlined the scheme of attack on the Auxiliaries should they appear that afternoon, and he stressed the importance of getting in the first blow and that we must carry the fight to the enemy at the very first opportunity even at the risk of our lives. We left the club shortly after this and patrolled the city centre for a radius of about a mile in each direction. The fact of this being a Saturday evening in an industrial city where the streets were crowded with pedestrians, made the going very difficult and tedious. Our eyes and wits were strained with being on the look out for the enemy and at the same time keeping within range of each other and watching for signals. We had spotters on the look out at various points and we patrolled for a couple of hours but no sign of the enemy. A few of the Squad complained of fatigue and I, feeling much the same, brought this to the notice of the O.C. who then decided to abandon the hunt. Woods, McCorley and myself were returning home along Donegall Place. I crossed over to the opposite side-when I saw two Auxiliaries about a hundred yards in front travelling in the same direction. I made an effort to cross the street to join Woods and McCorley when a tram came between us and stopped. I ran around the tram and as I did so I heard four or five shots. When I passed the end of the tram I saw the two Auxiliaries lying on the ground and saw McCorley disappear around the corner of Castle Lane.

In the confusion caused by the pedestrians rushing here and there I ran in the opposite direction to McCorley and Woods. We all succeeded in making good our escape.’³⁵

Unlike the case of the Black and Tans the shooting of the two Auxiliaries led to swift and brutal revenge from the security forces. On the same evening, just before midnight three armed men visited the home of the Duffin family in Clonard Gardens. They entered the house and found Dan Duffin and his brother Pat in the kitchen. Both were shot several times in the chest and died instantly. Dan was 24-years-old and an IRA Lieutenant although his older brother Pat, a teacher, had no connection with the organisation. There is little doubt that their killers were from the RIC. District Inspector Ferris, an associate of Swanzy in Cork, was implicated in the killings after he was noticed returning to the scene of the shootings to collect a dog that had been left behind by one of the attackers. Two weeks later he was ambushed himself by McCorley and his men after leaving his local church although, despite receiving gunshot wounds to his stomach and neck, he managed to survive.³⁶ The ASU would continue a savage underground war with Ferris and his RIC squad based at Springfield

³⁵ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412). For details of the shootings see *Belfast Telegraph*, 24 April 1921.

³⁶ John Duffin survived the attack on his brothers. See his account of the events immediately after the shooting in the *Belfast Telegraph*, 25 April 1921. For details on Ferris see *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 May 1921; *Irish News*, 9 May 1921. See also McCorley to O’Donoghue, 6 March 1964 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS 31313).

road barracks although despite numerous attempts to kill him, he managed to survive eventually becoming an RUC County Inspector.³⁷

Other members of the gang however were not so lucky. Constable James Glover, who was believed to be responsible for the shooting of Gaynor, Trodden and McFadden the previous September, was shot dead on the Falls Road in early June. Glover was the only member of the three-man RIC patrol to be killed. McCorley later stated that the wounding of his two companions was deliberate, as he wanted to send a message to the RIC that the shooting was a reprisal.³⁸ The activities of the ASU continued right up until the Truce and its members were responsible for numerous arson and bomb attacks including those on the Reform Club and the Clonard and Tivoli picture houses, all of which were occupied by members of the military. The ASU however suffered a severe blow in early May when many of its key members were ordered to join the ill-fated column in Cavan. After the failure of McCorley and Woods' attempt to rescue their colleagues from prison failed, the activities and effectiveness of the unit reduced dramatically.

The increasing intensity of this subterranean war took place against the looming backdrop of the elections to the first parliament of Northern Ireland held in accordance with the Government of Ireland Act. Whilst in the South the elections were hijacked by Sinn Fein as a mechanism for establishing the second Dail, the decision on what

³⁷ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

posture to adopt to the poll in the six north-eastern counties became the subject of much debate during the spring of 1921. Some nationalists argued for a complete boycott of the proceedings believing that their involvement would give legitimacy to the new Northern government. Others however pointed out that a strong showing in the polls would do much to undermine the basis of partition. De Valera himself was wary of taking this gamble; warning that a poor result would allow their opponents to claim that the six counties formed an 'homogeneous political entity'. The importance of keeping the Northern nationalist vote united against Unionism and the need to bury, at least temporarily, the bitter feelings between Sinn Fein and the UIL led to a meeting between de Valera and Joe Devlin in February 1921. An election pact between the two nationalist parties was eventually agreed, after lengthy negotiations, the following month.³⁹

The decision to join temporarily with Sinn Fein, although a pragmatic political strategy, caused anger in many Hibernian circles especially considering the hostility the IRA had shown to the AOH over recent months. One such complaint, sent to Devlin after IRA attacks in County Monaghan, stated angrily: '...how could you as a Hibernian speak on behalf of such cowards. They went into the house of poor Mrs Phillips...took out her poor son aged twenty...and shot him dead for no other reason than that he was a Hibernian. That's the treatment meted out to Nationalists at Sinn Fein hands. Partition is a

³⁸ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

glorious thing, compared with the rule of those boys, and I wonder how any Nationalist can stand up and defend such men.’⁴⁰ Indeed IRA attacks on Hibernians and their property had become increasingly vicious during 1921 especially in areas, such as South Armagh, where militant republicanism was the dominant force.

Despite such hostility the pact remained largely intact and hopes for success were running high, especially after witnessing the widespread anger in many unionist circles at Craig’s decision to meet with deValera in early May. There was also a belief that labour candidates could potentially split the Protestant vote in some key areas. Such hopes however proved illusory and the ‘Partition Election’ held on 24 May 1921 saw a sweeping victory for the Ulster Unionists and disaster for the Catholic minority. Every Unionist candidate who stood was elected and Sinn Fein and the Nationalists managed to acquire only twelve seats between them to their opponents forty. Complaints of intimidation during the election began to surface immediately. Joseph Connolly later wrote: ‘Those of us who went through the six- county election campaign are not likely to forget it. Here the combination of police, Orange mobs and the whole personnel of the election machinery was set in motion to make it difficult, if not impossible for Sinn Feiners or Nationalists to record their votes.’⁴¹ There is little doubt that many of these claims were true although the fact that

³⁹ Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* p.108.

⁴⁰ Monaghan AOH member quoted in Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* p.118.

⁴¹ Gaughan, *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly* p.195.

turnout had been almost 90 per cent, demonstrated that such tactics had very little impact on the final result. The strong and unified performance of the Ulster Unionists had been a far more telling factor.

Despite the failure of anti-partition candidates to secure large numbers of seats they managed to poll almost a third of the votes with Fermanagh and Tyrone returning a nationalist majority. The elections also saw a shift in the balance of power in Northern nationalist politics with Sinn Fein overtaking the UIL as the principal opposition to the Unionists. Sinn Fein received over 20 per cent of the vote compared to only 12 per cent for the Nationalists.⁴² For the Northern IRA the political upheavals of May appeared to make little impact on their activities or outlook. Sean Milroy wrote to Mulcahy later in the year that the Volunteers displayed virtually no interest in politics or any desire to engage with the wider Sinn Fein movement, reporting ‘...an attitude of aloofness on the part of the Volunteers and implied attitude that the Sinn Fein clubs were not serving any useful purpose and that it was a waste of time and energy to trouble about them.’⁴³ Indeed McCorley, like many other militant IRA members, later

⁴² The election results were as follows:

	votes	%	Candidates	Seats
Ulster Unionist Party	341,622	66.7	40	40
Sinn Fein	104,716	20.5	20	6
UIL	60,577	11.8	12	6
Ind. Labour	3,073	0.6	4	0
Independent	926	0.2	1	1

See Elliott, *Northern Ireland Parliamentary Results 1921-1972* p.89.

⁴³ Milroy to Mulcahy, September 1921 quoted in Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland 1918-1973* p.56.

confided that he resented any activity that had about it the 'smell of politics.'⁴⁴

The rise to prominence in the North of Sinn Fein and the IRA, given impetus by the May elections, would be sealed by the signing of the Truce in early July. Sinn Fein's domination of the nationalist political agenda, and the Catholic minority's faith in the Dail government's rhetoric on the primacy of Irish unity in any future political settlement, brought the Northern IRA unprecedented popularity. Peter Carleton, a Fianna member from Belfast, described the reaction of the Catholic population of the city: 'I can remember when the Truce was declared in July 1921 "Thank God, said my mother, that I have lived to see this day". Everyone that could dig up a flag hung it out. The Truce meant far more to us than to the rest of Ireland.'⁴⁵ Similarly Seamus Woods, soon to become one of the most important IRA leaders in the North, recalled that prior to the Truce only 25% of Catholics were behind the IRA but '...with the signing of the Truce the Catholic population believing for the moment that we had been victorious and that the Specials and UVF were beaten, practically all flocked to our standard.'⁴⁶ Indeed when IRA internees were later released from Ballykinlar camp they received standing ovations from the Catholic

⁴⁴ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389). For other examples of the IRA's disdain for politics see Hopkinson *Green against Green* p.41.

⁴⁵ Peter Carleton quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.305.

⁴⁶ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

population of Belfast and volleys of shots were fired into the air in celebration.⁴⁷

Unionists reacted in a very different way to the prisoner releases. In Banbridge in early December a train carrying a group of internees home to Belfast was attacked by local loyalists who threw stones and fired shots into the carriages injuring one of the occupants. The mob then set to work attacking Catholic homes and business premises and sporadic violence spread throughout the town.⁴⁸ The timing of the Truce 11 July, only twenty-four hours before the traditionally most confrontational day in Ulster society, led, as in the previous year, to savage sectarian violence in Belfast. The 10th of July 1921, Belfast's 'Bloody Sunday', as it came to be known, resulted in fourteen deaths in the city and over 150 Catholic homes burnt down, with Specials joining loyalist mobs in attacking Catholic areas. The violence was a reaction to both the imminent cease-fire and an IRA ambush in Raglan Street the day before where one member of the security forces was killed and two others wounded.⁴⁹ July and August 1921 would witness some of the bitterest clashes yet seen in the city and the highest number of casualties since the shipyard expulsions of the previous summer.

⁴⁷ RIC Bi-monthly report, 15 Dec. 1921 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152). See also *Belfast Telegraph*, 9 Dec. 1921.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ For the violent events of the day see *Irish News* 11 July 1921, *Belfast Newsletter* 11 July 1922. See also Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom*, p.42.

Whereas in the rest of Ireland the July cease-fire was a period of uneasy peace and militaristic bravado, in Belfast the situation remained menacing and violent with more people losing their lives in the city during the last five months of 1921 than had done during the final seven months of the War of Independence. Thomas Fitzpatrick admitted many years later: 'The Truce was not observed by either side in the north', with David McGuinness calling the whole thing a 'farce'.⁵⁰ Roger McCorley himself wryly observed that '...the Truce lasted six hours only'.⁵¹ Despite the illusory nature of the Truce in Belfast the early signs in the rest of Northern Ireland were that the cease-fire would largely hold although after a few months the situation also began to rapidly deteriorate.

Uncertainty over the negotiations taking place in London was the principal reason for the steady rise in tension across the six counties, increasing as they did the fears of unionists whilst at the same time raising the hopes of nationalists. With the Southern issue now approaching a settlement, unionists became fearful that Northern IRA units would be reinforced by hardened rebels from the South whilst the British would try to appease Sinn Fein by giving ground on the Northern issue. This latter fear would prove to be unfounded although the former was proved correct in almost every respect with Southern IRA initiatives becoming the principal means of overcoming partition.

⁵⁰ See statements of David McGuinness (BMH, NA, WS 417) and Thomas Fitzpatrick (BMH, NA, WS 395).

⁵¹ Roger McCorley interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCDA, P17b/98).

Conversely the Catholic minority looked forward to a change in their fortunes and the swift end to the brief experiment of partition and their inclusion in some form of self-governing all-Ireland state. For the nationalist population in the north-east it was the ending of partition rather the extent of any new state's independence which was of primary concern.

Although the Truce was an ill-observed illusion in Belfast, and increasingly so in the rest of the province, the same regulations applied in the north-east as in the other twenty- six counties. The USC, much to the dismay of the Unionist government, was demobilised and the IRA given official recognition. Liaison officers were appointed for Ulster, the chief of which, Eoin O'Duffy, set up his headquarters at St Mary's Hall in Belfast which had long played a central role in charitable relief for the expelled Catholic workers in the city. On 16 July O'Duffy announced an end to all offensive IRA activity in the six counties and Volunteers began to tentatively police their own areas.

The increased prestige which accompanied this new role brought not only respect for the Northern IRA from the Catholic minority but also large numbers of eager new recruits. As elsewhere in Ireland thousands of young Catholic men flocked to join the IRA although with the Truce having little real meaning in the North they would not have the luxury of six months of prestige and peace afforded to similar

'Trucileers' in the South. Ironically it would prove to have been safer to join the movement during the relative quiet of the War of Independence and many of these new recruits would be involved in intense fighting right up to the summer of 1922, many also suffering the hardships of internment or life in the Provisional Government Army. Before the Truce the three IRA Divisions based in Ulster had an active nominal strength of only 1639. By October the number of volunteers had risen to well over 3000 with many brigades almost doubling in size. In Antrim for example the pre-Truce 'Brigade' consisted of a mere 111 Volunteers. This number increased to 260 after July although the average Company strength was still only 21 with some areas managing to raise fewer than ten Volunteers.⁵²

In order to accommodate this new influx of recruits numerous training camps were established across the province. Based in isolated areas, such as the Sperrin mountains and around Glen Swilley, most consisted of little more than a few old or abandoned buildings which acted as a temporary headquarters and arms dump. GHQ training officers were appointed from the South including such figures as Emmett Dalton, Ernie O'Malley and Dan Breen.⁵³ Some Belfast men also made their way south to Wicklow for further training. The ulterior motives of Southern involvement however, as in the spring of 1921, were again in evidence; Breen later writing that the training was

⁵² Divisional strengths June, July 1921 (Mulcahy papers, P7/A/23); Divisional strengths October 1921 (Mulcahy papers, P7a/18); 'Report on No.2 Brigade Training Camp, 23 Sept. 1921', Documents found in St. Mary's Hall, 18 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA 32/1/130).

undertaken ‘...in order that, if the fight were to be renewed, they [i.e. the Northerners] would play a more active part and thereby lessen the burden on the southern counties’.⁵⁴ Raids by combined forces of Specials and RIC were commonplace and by November there were believed to be only two small camps based in Fermanagh still operating in the province although sporadic revivals of training were reported throughout the Truce period. The 2nd Northern Division reported that 375 men went through the camps between September and mid-October before they were broken up.⁵⁵

Some of these new recruits appeared reluctant to extend their activities beyond anything more than symbolic membership of the organisation. In December a party of fifty IRA men raided a number of Catholic homes in Claudy and Dungiven where, after dragging fifteen of these raw recruits from their beds, they frog-marched them along the road to Sperrin camp. A subsequent raid by the USC released the captives and after a short gun battle five IRA men were arrested and charged with kidnapping.⁵⁶

When Joe Murray returned to Belfast during the Truce he noticed the significant impact which the arrival of these new recruits had made on the Belfast IRA recalling that his old Company was now made up

⁵³ Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721).

⁵⁴ D. Breen, *My Fight for Irish Freedom* (Tralee, 1964) p. 166.

⁵⁵ Report on 2nd Northern Division Training Camps (Mulcahy papers, P7/A/26). See also captured reports on 3rd Northern Division Training Camps in ‘Documents found in St. Mary’s Hall, 18 March 1922’ (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/32/130).

entirely of strangers.⁵⁷ By January 1922 the Belfast IRA had around 800 members although the new men proved to be deeply unpopular with many of the older veterans. Seamus McKenna angrily stated that ‘...about two thirds of these recruits- possibly three fourths- joined the IRA for sectarian reasons only, to fight defensively or offensively against the Orange gangs. Few of them had any conception of Irish-Ireland principles. Some of them undoubtedly became Republican as the result of their association with the old type of Volunteers, but, in my opinion, the majority of these pogrom recruits were lacking in the ideals and principles which inspired the men who joined the movement in Belfast and remained in it between 1916 and 1920.’⁵⁸

The Trucileers were viewed by many old IRA hands as little more than the Catholic mob under arms. These men, for some, had extremely dubious motives for joining the organisation, many merely wishing to continue their street battles with their Protestant counterparts as they had done before the Truce.⁵⁹ Thomas Fitzpatrick commented bluntly: ‘...we had a lot of trouble with the corner-boy crowd on both sides’.⁶⁰ Many of these new members were ex-British soldiers. They inspired mistrust and at times open hostility from veteran IRA members and most were not given any positions of responsibility in the organisation or provided with key information such as the names of leading officers

⁵⁶ RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 Dec. 1921 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁵⁷ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

⁵⁸ Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

⁵⁹ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

⁶⁰ Thomas Fitzpatrick statement (BMH, NA, WS 395).

and the location of headquarters.⁶¹ Some however did manage to rise through the ranks, much to the annoyance of some veteran officers such as Seamus McKenna: 'I was amazed how these ex-British servicemen had gained the confidence of the old senior officers of the battalion and brigade and were holding rank. I will give one example. The two sons of a man, who was killed by Orange terrorists, joined the Volunteers late 1920 or early 1921. Both these sons were ex-British servicemen and they had not the slightest shred of national ideals or principles. They joined the IRA as a means of avenging the death of their father.' He was particularly angry to find that two of the Belfast battalions had been placed under the command of ex-British servicemen during the Truce. Overall he concluded that the cease-fire had a negative effect on the IRA organisation: 'The Truce was, in my opinion, responsible for a considerable amount of decay in the Volunteer spirit and also for a lowering of values. I was in prison, of course, during the Truce but I kept myself in touch with events outside. The Belfast Brigade was so keen on building up its strength numerically that little thought was paid to other factors.'⁶²

The Truce itself was not expected to last and as elsewhere in Ireland the Northern IRA used the time to obtain weapons and settle old scores. These two aims would often coincide. Guns were readily available at the homes of 'B' Specials who could also be attacked and robbed into the bargain. In Claudy for example four masked men

⁶¹ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

called at the house of a local loyalist during the Truce and took £6 and his revolver. Shortage of arms remained a constant problem. Joe McKelvey, still smarting from the debacle in Cavan, wrote to Mulcahy: 'We are at a great disadvantage for want of arms and ammunition, and if a concerted attack is again made on a large scale there is a possibility of our being completely swamped.'⁶³ Indeed the IRA went to often extreme lengths to obtain guns during the Truce often with disastrous results. On 17 December a party of Volunteers attempted to buy arms from members of the Royal Artillery Mounted rifles at Balmoral camp but were quickly discovered leaving four of their number behind badly wounded.⁶⁴ Attempts were also made to procure arms from the USC camp at Newtownards with unknown results.⁶⁵ Such activities led consistently to retaliation from local unionists. In the case of the Claudy attack a gang of Specials attacked six IRA men attending Claudy Fair, beating them savagely.⁶⁶

Such small-scale confrontations dictated the character of the Truce outside Belfast. In Loughbrickland in early October a local Special Sergeant, Joseph White, harassed a party of local Volunteers and after beating them about the head with a stick, told them '...he would not allow more than three of them together, as they were low, bad

⁶² Seamus McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 1016).

⁶³ 3rd Northern Division report on Belfast during the Truce (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/23).

⁶⁴ RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 Dec. 1921 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152)

⁶⁵ 'Documents found in St. Mary's Hall, 18 March 1922' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/130).

⁶⁶ Reports on Truce breaches ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/4).

ruffians, and that he would soon put down Sinn Fein.’⁶⁷ At Hilltown during a Saturday night dance in early December two Crossleys full of RIC and Specials raided the hall and ‘threatened to scatter the dance’. One of the Constables, after recognising a local Volunteer, approached and said: ‘You are a refugee from Dromore and I will soon leave you in Hell or Heaven.’⁶⁸ Two days earlier in the same area two brothers, Bernard and James Murphy, were arrested and taken to the local police barracks where they were badly beaten during a two hour interrogation.⁶⁹

The IRA responded with similar attacks, abducting Specials in particular who, after being beaten senseless were adorned with crude placards reading ‘Truce Breakers Beware’. The situation in Armagh was particularly unstable with reprisal beatings and robberies becoming almost a daily occurrence. During the Truce Specials raided a Sinn Fein Dance and shot dead an IRA member named McKeown. Edward Boyle recalled: ‘They put the girls outside of the hall and then attempted to force the men and boys remaining in the hall to get down on their knees and curse the Pope.’⁷⁰ Gerard McCourt, a Captain in the Armagh Brigade, wrote in October that things were so serious that some of his men were already practically on the run. During the same month in Ballymaghery, County Down, local nationalists went on the rampage and a crowd of forty men abused an RIC Constable as he was

⁶⁷ ‘Documents found in St. Mary’s Hall, 18 March 1922’ (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/130).

⁶⁸ Reports on Truce breaches (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/4).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

leaving church. They followed him to the local police station which they promptly surrounded shouting 'We will kill the Orange bastards in the Barracks.'⁷¹ Patrick Maguire, a 2nd Northern Division officer, admitted that the IRA did their best to provoke unionists during the Truce marching back and forward through Protestant areas carrying arms, most of which had been stolen from unionists during the War of independence.⁷²

The Catholic community also felt the IRA's wrath as the newly confident movement sought out perceived collaborators and spies. In one such incident a servant girl of the local RIC District Inspector in Tyrone was dragged from her house and had her hair cut off by a gang of Volunteers. The IRA also launched attacks on their traditional enemies in the Hibernians, breaking up meetings, burning their halls or firing shots at individual members.⁷³ John McCoy recalls that some young Hibernians, in an attempt to hijack the Truce, stole guns from the IRA during the Truce and made their own attacks on the Specials.⁷⁴

The growing acceptance of Sinn Fein and the IRA as the foremost representatives of the Catholic minority during the Truce increased the tension between the two organisations dramatically. Hibernians

⁷⁰ Edward Boyle statement (BMH, NA, WS 647).

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Patrick Maguire statement (BMH, NA, WS 693).

⁷³ RIC Bi-monthly reports, Nov-Dec. 1921 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁷⁴ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

were angered at the new prestige and political dominance the agreement had given the IRA and Sinn Fein. Roger McCorley remembered the tense situation that arose during the Truce within Belfast's Catholic community:

'The people in the Nationalist areas turned out in thousands and started to wave table cloths and handkerchiefs. That same evening a most unexpected state of affairs came about. An element of Nationalists, under the control of the Hibernians, started to loot the Unionist business premises in the Falls Road area. They also set fire to the stabling yard of Messrs. Wordie, Haulage Contractors. It was obvious that this was due to pique at the fact that our people were now accepted by the British as the official representatives of the Irish people. On several occasions during the day our men had to turn out and fire on this mob. They fired over their heads but later on in the evening I gave instructions that if the mob gave any further trouble they were to fire into it. We also sent our patrols to arrest the ring-leaders of this group and bring them to Brigade Headquarters. This was done and we ordered several of the ring-leaders to leave the city within twenty-four hours, otherwise they would be shot at sight. This action ended this Hibernian attempt to break the Truce.'⁷⁵

In January the IRA, in a struggle over the symbols of this new ascendancy, raided the house of a Hibernian member in Keady to

recover band instruments which were taken from Sinn Fein members in Dartley over a month earlier. One Hibernian was badly injured in the attack.⁷⁶ Tom McNally, an IRA man from Armagh, later confided that the ‘...Hibernians were a menace because of their weakness’.⁷⁷

Outside of Belfast such brutal and localised violence made the latter part of the Truce period little different from what had preceded it or would follow. The continuing spiral of violence and disorder had also seen a huge rise in the number of robberies and petty crimes by those intent on taking advantage of the situation, further adding to the growing instability across the province. Charlie Daly related his experience of the dire situation in the Dromore and Cookstown areas of Tyrone: ‘The position of our people in the district was always bad but since the truce, it is becoming desperate.’ In Cookstown attacks by Specials had meant that ‘...the Volunteers of this company are unable to sleep in their own homes at night. They sleep together in a vacant house without any arms to protect themselves and in hourly expectation of being massacred. Raids on houses, indiscriminate shooting, holding up and abusing helpless people at night have become such common occurrences of late that they almost pass unnoticed...Only yesterday the Quartermaster No.3 Brigade who lives in Dromore came along to report that his home had been raided that morning by about 100 armed Orangemen who took his sisters from

⁷⁵ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

⁷⁶ RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 Jan. 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152)

⁷⁷ Tom McNally interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCAD, P17b/99).

their beds and compelled them to stand with their hands up in the yard while they were wrecking the house and furniture.’⁷⁸ The raiders stole £100 and some arms before firing shots over the terrified girls’ heads. The leader of the group was a local man believed to be responsible for the killing of the three Volunteers the previous April in Dromore. The report ends tellingly: ‘Such cases as this and even ones more serious are becoming so numerous that Truce or no Truce the Volunteers must take action to protect themselves and their people. There is nobody else to do this.’⁷⁹

Daly’s feeling of isolation however was soon proved to be misplaced as from now on the Northern issue would increasingly play a major role in the political and military strategies of the Southern IRA leadership. On 4 September 1921, in order to appease growing discontent in Northern IRA circles over the direction of Sinn Fein policy, both Michael Collins and Eoin O’Duffy attended a 10,000 strong republican rally in South Armagh, Collins’ Dail constituency. At this gathering they would spell out the two strands of policy, coercion and conciliation, which were to shape North-South relations for the next nine months. Collins played the role of conciliator, calling on unionists to join with the South in forging a new Ireland also promising Northern Catholics that ‘...we shall not desert them’.⁸⁰ It was O’Duffy who was left to spell out the alternative if this offer of co-

⁷⁸ 2nd Northern Division report, 14 Oct. 1921 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/A/26).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ *Armagh Guardian*, 9 Sept. 1921.

operation was refused: ‘...if they [i.e. unionists] decided they were against Ireland and against their fellow countryman we would have to take appropriate action. They would have to put on the screw- the boycott. They would have to tighten that screw and if necessary, they would have to use the lead against them.’⁸¹

This carrot-and-stick approach would be played out time and again in the first half of 1922 and directly inspired such seemingly contrary policies as the Craig- Collins Pacts and the joint-IRA border offensive. At a meeting in Enniskillen in November O’Duffy repeated the message. He was reported as saying that unionists ‘...would not stand in the path of the march of the nation to freedom. He did not want to advocate the use of lead- he had always been the first to give the right hand of fellowship to men of a different religion to his.’⁸² Collins’ calls for conciliation however were half-hearted at best and he would consistently turn to his more familiar conspiratorial methods. Even if genuine, unionist opposition was increasing day by day and as the two republican leaders left Armagh their car was pelted with stones by outraged local loyalists.

The final hardening of unionist opposition, to either coercion or conciliation from the South, was virtually complete when, on the 22 November 1921, security powers were handed over to the new Northern Ireland government. Under its new hard-line minister

⁸¹ Ibid. James McElhew statement (BMH, NA, WS 634).

Richard Dawson- Bates, the Ministry of Home Affairs would wage a constant and unceasing war against any form of dissent from within the Catholic community. Brutal outbreaks of violence inevitably followed and from this point on the Northern conflict began to increasingly resemble a civil war. The Northern government were given full responsibility for the USC with Westminster maintaining control over the army and the RIC, although the former would be conspicuous by its reluctance to engage in internal Northern security for the rest of the period, whilst the latter finally lost what little credibility it had in unionist circles and became more and more insignificant after the signing of the Treaty. The British had learnt their lesson from the War of Independence and equipped local loyalists to combat the IRA rather than shipping in auxiliary police from the mainland, a tactic which would be used in many other parts of the Empire, such as Palestine, in later years.

The nature of the forces that would ensure Northern Ireland's security was spelled out in November in a notorious memorandum from Charles Wickham, the RIC Divisional Commissioner. He made it clear that the re-established force would be an amalgamation of the various Protestant vigilante groups that had sprang up since the summer of 1920 including the Ulster Protestant Association and the Imperial Guards who had paraded around during the Truce in an ominous imitation of the IRA: 'Owing to the number of reports which have been

⁸² *Irish News*, 15 Nov. 1921.

received as to the growth of unauthorised loyalist defence forces, the government have under consideration the durability of obtaining the services of the last elements of these organisations. They have decided that the scheme most likely to meet the situation would be to enrol all who volunteer and considered suitable into Class C [Specials] and to form them into regular military units.’⁸³

The stage was set for a sectarian showdown and the November violence would see the IRA matching the actions of its enemies in making such a war inevitable. Their new targets were blatantly sectarian. Bombs were thrown into trams bringing home Protestant shipyard workers in Corporation Street and Royal Avenue killing eight and wounding nine others. On 23 November Harbour Constable John McHenry was shot around 6pm in the Docks area and one week later a Protestant shipyard worker was also killed on his way to work. The reprisal of the Protestant mobs was predictably brutal. On 22 November fifteen people were killed and around 80 wounded with St. Matthews Church again being the symbolic centre of the storm.⁸⁴ The IRA themselves were also to suffer the wrath of the Specials. On 27 December an IRA officer David Morrison would be the last victim of the year. After shots were fired on a group of ‘B’ Specials, leaving one wounded, Morrison was caught in his home on Mayfair Street

⁸³ *Irish Bulletin*, 17 Nov. 1921. See also Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* p.57.

⁸⁴ For details of the tram bombings and the subsequent violence see *Irish News*, 22-23 November 1921, *Belfast Telegraph*, 23 November 1921.

preparing for mass and shot six times, once in the back and five times in the head.⁸⁵

The blatantly sectarian nature of the November violence boded ill for the future and it was indeed 1922 rather than 1921 which would see the greatest number of casualties in Belfast. On 6 December, with the signing of the Treaty in London, the Unionist authorities ominously ordered an end to the Truce following a week later with instructions to disregard the liaison arrangements. For the Northern IRA the Truce continued theoretically until March, ironically one of the most brutal months of the conflict.⁸⁶

The Northern IRA's place in the conflict had become increasingly clear during the year. They began as a small and inactive part of a national struggle, and a curious addendum to a local one, and ended it with committed, if qualified, leadership from the South and formalised unstinting opposition in the North. While the situation in the South was well on its way to a resolution, the Northern issue would finally move centre stage presenting a new set of problems and challenges for the Northern IRA. The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in early December would add further confusion to the already highly volatile situation in the North and once again, as with the enactment of the

⁸⁵ *Irish News*, 28 Dec. 1921.

⁸⁶ Reports on Truce breaches ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/4); E. Blythe 'Memo on north-east Ulster 1922-26' (Blythe papers, UCDDAD, P24/554).

Government of Ireland Bill in 1920, the end of the year would bring further ominous signs of the reality of partition.

PART II

OFFENSIVE

CHAPTER FOUR

THE OPENING OF THE BORDER CAMPAIGN

The six-month period between the ratification of the Anglo-Irish Treaty and the start of the Civil War in late June would be a defining period in the history of the Northern IRA. On almost every level the organisation would be transformed, receiving not only ideological and practical support from both sections of the otherwise bitterly divided IRA south of the border, but also playing a key role in broader political initiatives aimed at overriding the growing divisions over the Treaty. The shape of the conflict in the six counties would therefore be largely dictated by events in the South and the relationship between the Northern IRA and its Dublin leadership became an increasingly close one. Such an alliance however depended heavily on republican unity, as any wavering in the extent of Southern support would prove disastrous for the beleaguered Volunteers in the North. The events of 1922 would bear out this fact and the Northern IRA would become one of the most tragic victims of the wider splits that precipitated the outbreak of the Civil War. Before this final collapse however the organisation would make one final attempt to undermine the ever-hardening reality of partition by launching an all-out offensive against the recently established province of Northern Ireland.

The signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in early December 1921, following hard on the heels of the Government of Ireland Act, left Northern republicans confused and divided. For the Catholic population in the six counties it was the issue of partition rather than constitutional matters such as the oath which was the overriding

concern and as such Northern reactions to the Treaty were heavily influenced by the role any proposed Boundary Commission would play in the future. Whilst many nationalists living in the border regions and the majority Catholic counties of Fermanagh and Tyrone saw the Treaty as their opportunity for swift inclusion in the proposed Irish Free State, those in Belfast and east Ulster would never be able to secede from Northern Ireland no matter how generous the findings of the Boundary Commission. One Belfast republican later stated: 'The Treaty was a tragedy when it came. We all knew that. We knew in the North that we had been left out.'¹

This fundamental division in Northern nationalist circles was further inflamed by the ambiguous way in which the border issue was dealt with in the Treaty. With Article 12 stating vaguely that the boundary would only be adjusted '...in accordance with the wishes of the inhabitants, so far as many be compatible with economic and geographic conditions'.² This imprecise phraseology and the lack of a definite timetable made it almost the ideal document to cause even further conflict and uncertainty in the North between and within both communities, raising as it did the hopes of many nationalists whilst at the same time causing further alarm in an already paranoid Protestant population. Furthermore this lack of a clearly defined mechanism for dealing with partition allowed both sides to place radically differing interpretations on what the shape of any future

¹ Patsy O'Hagan quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.169.

settlement would look like and increased the likelihood of further violent outbreaks in the coming months.³

The unique political position of the Catholic minority meant that attitudes to the Treaty in the North were far more complex than those that developed in the South and as such cannot be understood within the same narrow parameters.⁴ For the Northern IRA their primary concern lay in undermining the increasing permanency of partition and they would welcome support from whichever side of the Treaty divide seemed most able to accomplish this end. This pragmatic attitude meant that the organisation in the North resembled, more than any other part of the Sinn Fein movement, the pre-Truce IRA and were essentially beyond categorisation as either pro-or anti-Treaty. As one contemporary observer remarked: 'The IRA in the six-counties are all anti-Treaty almost to a man. They however, are out against partition rather than the Treaty. They feel they have been let down.'⁵

John Grant, an IRA officer from Armagh, later explained his particularly Northern perspective on the Treaty:

² 'Articles of Agreement for a Treaty between Great Britain and Ireland', National Museum of Ireland.

³ For the British perspective on the border issue see K. Matthews 'The Irish boundary crisis and the reshaping of British politics, 1910-1925.' PhD thesis, London School of Economics, 2000; R. Fanning, 'Anglo-Irish Relations: Partition and the British Dimension in Historical Perspective' *Irish Studies in International Affairs* vol.2, no.1 (1982).

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the Treaty-split in the twenty-six counties see G. Maguire, 'The Political and Military Causes of the Division in the Irish Nationalist Movement, January 1921- August 1922' (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 1985).

⁵ McCartan to Maloney, 31 March 1922 quoted in Staunton, *The Nationalists of Northern Ireland 1918-1973* p.53.

‘As a Northerner and Six-Counties man I could not willingly accept partition. I do not mention this as an excuse for my anti-treaty attitude or as an apology for my republican activities as I realise that people born in any other part of Ireland were entitled to object on the same grounds if they so decided. The only difference, if any, is that in my case I did not have to ponder over the arguments used in the heavy Treaty debates in An Dail at the time the acceptance of the Treaty was passed, to decide the difference between tweedledum and tweedledee. My reason for rejecting the Treaty (“partition”) was all too evident at home.’⁶

The already heterogeneous political outlook of the Northern nationalist community was further splintered by the arrival of the Treaty especially when de Valera failed to amend the boundary clause in his alternative settlement, Document No.2.⁷ The Catholic minority became increasingly divided into a set of even smaller, and often mutually hostile, minorities. Opinions ranged from the traditional divide between Sinn Fein and Devlin’s nationalists, now given an added dimension by splits between border nationalists and those in Belfast, to ideological conflicts over the Treaty. As such the situation was extremely confusing. For example in Tyrone, one of the counties which had strong reason to believe it would soon come under the control of the Free-State government, 32 out of the 34 Sinn Fein Clubs came out

⁶ John Grant statement (BMH, NA, WS 658).

against the Treaty and areas such as Dungannon became a hot-bed of anti-Treaty activity.⁸ In County Down a Sinn Fein convention also plumped for the anti-Treaty side although this rejection of GHQ support was tempered with fears over the future; as one Sinn Fein leader in County Down put it: ‘...the majority of clubs are anti-treaty but nervous over our position here in Ulster’.⁹

Increasing tension between these various strands of Northern nationalist opinion led to further outbreaks of violence within the Catholic community. On 18 January it was reported that a group of 100 IRA men raided a Hibernian Hall in the Falls Road: ‘The men, a number of whom carried revolvers, took possession of the Hall. On arrival of the Military it was found that they had left. It is believed that they entered the Hall for the purpose of stopping “English Dances”.’¹⁰ A similar fracas at a Hall in Killeenan led to the death of a Hibernian member. The occurrence of such incidents began to increase rapidly as confusion grew over which side would hold influence in the North after the destabilising arrival of the Treaty.

Into this political vacuum stepped the figure of Michael Collins who more than any other politician would take on the role as unofficial leader of the Northern Catholic minority. Along with his IRB

⁷ For details of de Valera’s alternative to the Treaty, ‘Document no.2’ see *The Times*, 5 January 1922.

⁸ *Irish News*, 28 April 1922. See also RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 January 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁹ John King report on South Down Comhairle Ceanntair, 24 Jan. 1922 (NA, S1801Q).

¹⁰ RIC Bi-Monthly report, 31 January 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

colleagues in the Provisional Government Army leadership, O'Duffy and Mulcahy, he would move swiftly to assure the Northern IRA that its interests were high on their list of priorities. Frank Aiken recalled O'Duffy telling a meeting of Northern IRA officers in Clones early in 1922 that the Treaty was 'only a trick' and agreed to only in order to obtain arms and supplies to fight the British.¹¹ Whatever the realities it would be Collins' conspiracies, rather than any abstract belief or opposition to the Treaty, which would define the loyalties and activities of the Northern IRA during the first half of 1922.

Collins' Northern policy has remained something of a mystery for historians. Interpretations have tended to founder on the issue of his ultimate motivation. Some historians see his aggressive policy as being driven by a sincere commitment to the beleaguered Northern Catholic minority whilst others view it as principally an issue on which he felt he could unite the IRA and stave off confrontation in the South. The real answer is probably a mixture of the two and although Collins obviously cared deeply about the fortunes of the Catholic population in the six counties there is also a pragmatic element which can be portrayed as a crude attempt to avert a war in the South by starting one in the North.¹² Collins' role is certainly an ambiguous one although not ultimately unfathomable. The policy is perhaps better

¹¹ Aiken interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/193).

¹² Various attempts have been made to explain Collins' motivations and thus account for his Northern policy. See Coogan, *Michael Collins*; Hopkinson, *Green Against Green*; E. Phoenix, 'Michael Collins: The Northern Question 1916-22' in G Doherty and D. Keogh (eds.) *Michael Collins and the making of*

understood as an ongoing conspiracy just as much a reflection of Collins' personality as his political commitments. Whatever the realities Collins would engage in an immediate and sustained political, propaganda and military campaign against the Unionist government and would vigorously pursue his role as defender of the Catholic minority until his death in August 1922. However, the campaign itself, despite its many vicissitudes, would prove a tragic and total failure.

Collins' first moves to assert his authority over the Northern situation began soon after the ratification of the Treaty. At the behest of the British government he met with James Craig, the new Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, on 21 January. The principal aim of the meeting was to create a fresh context for North-South relations and agree a framework for future relations between the two new Irish administrations. The resultant agreement, later referred to as the First Craig-Collins Pact, promised an end to the Belfast Boycott in return for the reinstatement of the expelled Catholic shipyard workers in Belfast. Its most significant agreement however was that the representatives of Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State would deal with the boundary issue themselves outside of British government interference. This inevitably reinforced the implication in the Anglo-Irish Treaty that the South, and Collins in particular, were the acknowledged representatives of the Northern Catholic minority,

the Irish state (Cork, 1998) and more recently J. Regan, *The Irish Counter Revolution 1921-1936* (Dublin, 1999).

and for good or ill gave the South a key role in defending and furthering their interests.¹³

The Craig-Collins Pact made the convoluted debates in the North over the Treaty even further divorced from the wider attitudes of the IRA in the twenty-six counties. It also kept the situation very fluid and further militated against a hardening of attitudes to the Treaty in the North. Collins' first foray into Northern politics was not a popular one. His failure to consult the Northerners on any level caused consternation and vehement opposition from within the Catholic minority, far more than had ever been inspired by the Treaty. The changes to the workings of the Boundary Commission caused particular anger amongst border nationalists who feared that such tinkering would hinder any future smooth transfer of territory to the South which they felt was inherent in the original clause. For those in east Ulster it was his unilateral decision to end the Belfast Boycott, which came in for particular criticism.¹⁴ Joseph Connolly expressed the anger of the majority of nationalists in the Northern capital: 'It showed a complete lack of appreciation on Collins' part of the realities in Belfast. They realised that Craig has as much power to have the Catholics admitted to work in the shipyards as he had to give them visas to take them past St. Peter into heaven. It was "a tongue in

¹³ See M.A. Hopkinson, 'The Craig-Collins Pacts of 1922: two attempted reforms of the Northern Irish government' *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. xxvii, 1990.

¹⁴ See Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* pp.170-73.

cheek” promise on Craig’s part!’¹⁵ Despite the fact that the embargo had achieved little in the way of constructive results it remained an important symbol for the Catholic minority of the unity of the nationalist cause in Ireland.

While Collins began his first tentative moves in his individual crusade against partition, the Provisional Government, convinced that Craig could not deliver on his promises to reinstate the expelled workers, especially after a failed second meeting with Collins in Dublin on 2 February, continued along the familiar road of non-recognition and civil disobedience. From February, Northern teachers in Catholic schools were to be paid by the new Northern Ireland Ministry of Education. As a gesture of solidarity with their Southern co-religionists they opted out, as had some local authorities eighteen months before, pledging allegiance to the Dail government. They were to be paid by the Provisional Government in the South and this offer was eventually taken up by 800 schoolteachers in 270 Northern Irish schools. The payments continued until October 1922, achieving little but draining the fledgling Southern government of much needed resources.¹⁶ These rather half-hearted attempts to impede the establishment of Northern Irish institutions were accepted by Collins as the necessary and respectable face of Southern intransigence. However, in private Collins was to revert to his more characteristic

¹⁵ Gaughan, *Memoirs of Senator Joseph Connolly* p.185

¹⁶ For a thorough examination of the Northern Schools issue see Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* pp.188-191.

conspiratorial methods. His principal weapon in this campaign would be the Northern IRA.¹⁷

The first test of Collins' new aggressive policy came about almost by accident. On the same day that the Provisional Government was established in Dublin, senior officers of the IRA's Monaghan-based 5th Northern Division, including the Divisional Commandant Dan Hogan, were arrested at Dromore in County Tyrone en route to Derry. The 'Monaghan Footballers', as they came to be known, included Eamon Carroll, Pat Winters, Tommy Donnelly and John McGrory, all of them divisional officers.¹⁸ Ostensibly they were journeying as part of a Gaelic football team to take part in the Ulster championship final, although in reality this served as a front for a reconnaissance mission aimed at eventually releasing three IRA men imprisoned in Derry Gaol who were to be hanged on 9 February. The three Derry prisoners had been captured during the last few months of the War of Independence. Ironically their death sentences were passed after a bungled escape attempt by fifteen IRA prisoners in December 1921 where two warders were killed with an overdose of chloroform. One of the three men charged with murder was Patrick Leonard, himself a warder who had

¹⁷ This dichotomy between the policy of Collins and his Provisional Government colleagues is dealt with in Ernest Blythe's 'Memo on north-east Ulster 1922-26' (Blythe papers,UCDAD, P24/554).

¹⁸ Nicholas Smyth, Vice O/C of the Fintona Battalion, recalled a song the local Volunteers made up about the affair:

'Dan Hogan, a Peter the Painter had he,
And Donnelly had a Webley, the finest you would see;
McKenna had a Bulldog of very small bore,
And they lost the whole lot when they came to Dromore'. Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721).

assisted the escape.¹⁹ Later Eoin O'Duffy indicated that his belief that the increasing level of violence between the IRA and the USC was due principally '...to the evident intention of the Northern government to hang the three Derry prisoners' and the anger and instability this caused in border areas.²⁰

Collins seized on the opportunity these arrests provided for demonstrating his new hard-line policy to his IRA colleagues. After dispatching two of his 'Squad' members, Charlie Byrne and Joe Dolan, to England to assassinate the two hangmen detailed to execute the prisoners, a plan which misfired as the intended victims had already left for Ireland, a decision was taken to kidnap large numbers of unionist notables from across the border and detain them in return for the recently taken IRA prisoners.²¹

The kidnapping raids were to be planned by a shadowy new body established by Collins in early January 1922 called variously the 'Northern Command' or the 'Ulster Council'. Its aim was to co-ordinate IRA activity in the six counties and along the border although it can also be seen as an early attempt to gain at least nominal loyalty from Frank Aiken's well equipped 4th Northern Division. The council was headed by Collins and its leadership acted under the auspices of the IRB of which Collins was President of the Supreme Council. Locally

¹⁹ See Blythe 'Memo on north-east Ulster 1922-26' (Blythe papers, UCDA, P24/554).

²⁰ *Irish Independent*, 15th February 1922.

²¹ Coogan, *Michael Collins* p.346.

the Ulster Council was under the command of Frank Aiken as 'Director of Operations' with Sean MacEoin, O/C of the Midland Division, as his second-in-command. It included all of the commanders of the Northern Divisions and also paid the salaries of all Northern IRA officers and later the Belfast City Guard. The Divisional QM of the Midland Division was appointed as a general QM for the council and all supplies were placed in a central dump in Cavan.²² Eoin O'Duffy, arguably the most important IRA figure in Ulster, was instrumental in persuading Collins to endorse the kidnap raids. As the former leader of the Monaghan Brigade in the War of Independence he had maintained strong links with the local leadership, especially his close colleague Dan Hogan.

As such O'Duffy looked to his mentor Collins for approval to escalate the Northern situation. He wrote to Collins on 30 January: 'I have information from many sources this morning that there is grave consternation in the counties of Monaghan, Fermanagh and Tyrone over the continued detention by A- Specials of Commandant Hogan, and the officers of the 5th Northern Division and they demand authority from me to take immediate action to bring public opinion to bear on the situation...You understand that I have arranged for the kidnapping of one hundred prominent Orangemen in Counties

²² O'Duffy to Collins, 10 March 1922 (NA, S1801/A). Evidence of the planning of offensive IRA activity in January is given in 'IFS report on 1921 Northern developments relating to claims for pensions' referenced in Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* p.288. This item was available in the Fitzgerald family papers before they were reorganised but is no longer in UCADAD.

Fermanagh and Tyrone.’²³ He also reminded Collins of the need to appease criticism from the local IRA at this very sensitive time in terms of the burgeoning Treaty-split. The action itself had been planned for the 24 January but was postponed so as to give the Craig-Collins pact a chance to work. This strategy of de-escalating IRA activity around periods of political negotiation was a characteristic of Collins’ early Northern policy and would be repeated again with the Second Craig- Collins pact in March.

Ironically on the 7th of February the situation was further complicated when the British reprieved the three original Derry prisoners after direct pressure on Craig from Churchill and Chamberlain. Craig, angry and frustrated, insisted that this would be the last politically inspired release of prisoners he would allow, also calling for the Southern government to recognise the Northern courts blaming their policy of abstention for the severity of the punishments being meted out. Craig had seen the Derry prisoners as ‘...“trump” cards to be played if Sinn Fein failed to fulfil their promises’²⁴ and although now released he had other ‘trump cards’ to play in the shape of Hogan and his imprisoned officers. As such the kidnap raids went ahead as planned and on the night of the 7-8th February the IRA raided across the border in large numbers causing widespread devastation in Tyrone and Fermanagh.

²³ O’Duffy to Collins, 30 January. 1922 quoted in Coogan, *Michael Collins* p.344.

The raids were organised from a headquarters at Blacklion just over the border in County Monaghan. From here the attacks of the various IRA units from Longford, Leitrim, Monaghan, Armagh and Mayo were co-ordinated.²⁵ A number of vehicles were acquired and the IRA men, some wearing Provisional Government Army uniform, were organised into small mobile units and instructed to make their way to various pre-arranged points along the border. Each group appears to have had specific targets although as one of the raiders informed his captive the general aim was to ‘...pick up all Regulars and Specials we can find tonight’.²⁶

All of the raids were carried out simultaneously and the methods of attack were all very similar: ‘In almost all cases the motor cars were driven up to the houses, the victim held up at the point of the revolver, hustled into the motor car and taken away before the people quite realised what was happening.’²⁷ In some cases the raiders made other demands on their victims. At Ashfield Park in an attack on Captain Anketell Moutray, the 72 year old County Master of the Tyrone Orange Order, it was reported that ‘...the raiders told his housekeeper that they wanted him to sign a paper for the reprieve of the Derry prisoners and that after he signed the papers he would be

²⁴ Craig to Northern Ireland Cabinet, 26 January 1922 (Cabinet Conclusions, PRONI, CAB 4/30/1).

²⁵ See for example the recollections of Mayo IRA man Tom Ketterick (O’Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/95).

²⁶ File on kidnappings in Tyrone and Fermanagh (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/175).

²⁷ Ibid.

permitted to return.’²⁸ The abduction of Moutray caused extreme anger in the local community with the RIC District Inspector writing ominously: ‘I am afraid that drastic actions will be taken by the Unionists.’²⁹ The raids were most successful in the Aughnacloy area where the IRA managed to kidnap twenty-one local unionists and remove them unimpeded over the border.

In Fermanagh however things went less smoothly and the attacks, which began around 1 am, were met with considerable resistance from the local unionist population. Two gangs of IRA men in motor cars raided the home of James Cooper, a Unionist MP, although Cooper himself managed to open fire on his attackers who fled off into the night. A similar incident occurred at the home of a ‘B’ Special Sergeant named Elliot in an attack on his home in Enniskillen. He was able to beat off the raiders who went on to make further attacks on other houses in the local area although here too they met with stiff resistance. The local Specials were quickly alerted and eleven of the raiders were rounded up in the town, later being imprisoned in Castle Barracks along with three men captured hiding in the local Gaelic hall. All of the men were IRA officers from either Longford or Leitrim and were captured after an unsuccessful attempt to abduct a Major Falls who was absent from his home on the night of the raids. The attacks in Enniskillen had proved disastrous and it became obvious that isolated communities, such as those in Tyrone, rather than towns

²⁸ Ibid.

were preferable targets. A few miles away what remained of the Enniskillen raiders made another attempted abduction in the village of Lisbellaw. Around 4am the house of J.N. Carson, an ex-High Sheriff, was broken into. Carson, after making a frenzied attempt to resist, was shot and severely wounded. Again the IRA tried to make their captive sign a document, believed to be a call for the release of the Monaghan Footballers. Carson later commented that all of the men spoke with distinct Southern accents.³⁰

John Connolly, who had been detailed by O'Duffy to shoot Special Constable Lester in Roslea during March 1921, was personally ordered to kidnap the same man in the February attacks. His experience shows something of the opportunistic nature of the kidnap raids in Fermanagh:

'I went to Roslea but failed to get Lester as he was not there. I then looked around to see what would be the next best and I decided to kidnap a policeman. I went into Keenan's pub in Roslea, but found no policeman there. I got information, however, that there was a policeman in a house outside Roslea village where he was visiting a girl. I then went to a Mr. Kerr who had a car for hire and I asked him to have a car at my future brother-in-law's place as I was taking my future wife to a dance. I was waiting outside this place when the car arrived. I showed Kerr a revolver and told him I was on an official job and

²⁹ Ibid.

he was to drive me as directed. I was driven to the house where the policeman was. I knocked on the door and the owner- Robert Martin- opened the door. I said "Goodnight, Robert" and I walked past Martin in the doorway and the policeman in a room sitting with Martin's daughter. I told him that I was taking him to Laughbawn Camp as a reprisal for the arrest and detention of our officers. When I got time to examine my prisoner I found that he was a fine big fat Sergeant. The poor fellow was so scared that I purchased a half-pint of Whiskey for him in Scotstown and I gave it to him. When I arrived at Bawn Camp I found that I had the first prisoner of the night there.'³¹

The attacks in Fermanagh were not only more erratic and poorly organised than those in Tyrone but also far more brutal. An attempt to kidnap John Doonan at Lisnaskea was made difficult when he violently resisted. He was subsequently shot in both legs and when his servant girl tried to intervene she too was hauled to the ground and shot four times. The alerting of the USC to the attacks in Fermanagh led to a swift change of tactics by the IRA. In an opportunistic attack three 'B' Specials were kidnapped at Kilturk while two others were shot near Belcoo barracks in an ambush by a party of eight IRA men. The raids also spread to the area around Newtownbutler and at

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ John T. Connolly statement (BMH, NA, WS 598).

Lisnaskea the IRA were ambushed by Specials while attempting to remove eleven of their prisoners over the border.³²

Such difficulties meant that the raids in Fermanagh became quickly bogged down in prolonged firefights with the USC and many groups of IRA men remained behind to lay ambushes to impede pursuing Specials. One such incident occurred at Lough Killey Green on the Clones to Newtownbutler road where the IRA ambushed a Special platoon using machine guns and rifles. The Specials ran for cover and their attackers took the opportunity to burn their vehicles in order to slow the pursuit. Further firefights occurred near Wattlebridge and the RIC and Specials later found an abandoned machine-gun emplacement on the side of the road. Many of the local roads had also been trenched, and numerous trees were felled and laid across the main routes over the border. Telephone wires had also been cut to further impede the Specials and delay any moves to gather reinforcements for a concerted counter-attack. In all five Specials were wounded and twelve kidnapped along with two civilians in County Fermanagh.

The local IRA appeared to have little to do with the raids although attacks were made in County Londonderry and a number of unionist properties in the Limavady district were burned. Despite their lack of involvement it was the local IRA who would suffer most from the

³² File on kidnappings in Tyrone and Fermanagh (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/175).

unionist backlash and Specials immediately began raiding suspect houses and rounding up local Volunteers. In all forty-two unionists had been abducted and the majority were taken over the border into County Monaghan. Over twenty of them were observed under guard at Ballybay and it was believed that all finally ended up being held in the Clones Workhouse, the headquarters of the Ulster Council, and soon to be the scene of the most momentous confrontation since the start of the border campaign.³³

After the raids Collins wrote to both Arthur Griffith and Lloyd George feigning ignorance as to the kidnap plot. His response would become familiar over the next six months; publicly he would play the role of an outraged constitutional politician while covertly he and his tiny IRB clique made their own plans for spreading destruction and instability in the North. While diplomatic efforts to release the 'Monaghan Footballers' continued apace the local situation became extremely tense. In response to the kidnappings, Specials poured into the border areas. Bridges were blown and all but major roads were mined or trenched. The Specials set up checkpoints at the remaining border crossings and local farms were abandoned by their owners (the military build-up and the IRA's penchant for shooting farm livestock made both family and business life untenable). A stalemate ensued and both sides exchanged fire across the now fortified border areas. This sniping continued unabated until 28 March just prior to the

³³ Ibid.

Second Craig- Collins pact being signed. Craig threatened angrily to deport members of Sinn Fein to the South and cross-border traffic dwindled to almost nothing.

The tension was further increased on the 10th of February when a party of IRA men entered the village of Clady in County Tyrone and attacked the homes of local 'B' Specials, one of whom Charles McFadden was killed. The first phase of the border campaign had reached stalemate as both sides watched each other warily across the frontier awaiting a new series of attacks. Ironically however, the incident which broke this stalemate and pushed both North and South to the brink of open armed conflict, occurred almost by accident.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE CRISIS OF SPRING 1922

On Saturday the 11th of February 1922 at the railway station in the small border town of Clones, County Monaghan a gun battle took place between the IRA and a party of Ulster Special Constabulary. It resulted in five deaths including four of the Specials and the local IRA Commandant. Numerous other combatants and civilians were wounded. The events at Clones were inevitably interpreted in radically different ways by both unionists and nationalists. Both Craig and Collins would seize on the event as a tool in their wider political campaigns against each other and both made outraged pleas to Churchill for condemnation. For unionists what became known as the 'Clones Affray' was a massacre, ruthlessly planned and carried out by the IRA. Nationalists tended to paint the Specials arrival in Clones as akin to some form of invasion of Free State territory enhanced by the brutal and unprovoked murder of the local IRA commander whilst he was dispensing his duty lawfully upheld by the Truce arrangements. In reality the truth was neither of these.

Clones lay at the heart of the IRA's border campaign. The town was home not only to the recently kidnapped loyalists but also the headquarters of both the 5th Northern Division and, due to its strategic position only a few miles from the Tyrone and Monaghan borders, had also become the headquarters of the Ulster Council, within easy reach of both Aiken and MacEoin's commands in Armagh and Longford respectively. It was from here also on the 21st of April that plans would be finalised for the ill-fated joint-IRA offensive of May

1922. Both geographically and politically Clones lay at the centre of a storm that would soon erupt on its very doorstep.

The arrival of the Specials on 11 February was not their first excursion into Clones. Just over one year earlier on 23 January 1921 a platoon of fifteen 'A' Specials from Newtownbutler drove into Clones and broke into a local pub, proceeding to loot its contents and terrorise the local population. The RIC were alerted and opened fire killing one, later admitting that they thought them to be IRA men or rowdy civilians. The whole event proved to be deeply embarrassing to the government and the platoon was later quietly disbanded.¹

The party which arrived in February 1922 consisted of nineteen uniformed 'A' Specials led by Sergeant William Dougherty. Six of the constables were armed. They had left Newtownards via Belfast earlier in the day. Their final destination was Enniskillen where they were to reinforce the local USC platoons as part of the wider build up of forces along the Monaghan border. This route however involved changing trains at Clones and catching the 5.40 train travelling north from Dublin to Omagh. It certainly was a provocative route to choose especially when one considers that the British Army had evacuated Clones only days before to concentrate at the Curragh and Dublin.

¹ See Hezlet, *The 'B' Specials*, pp.56-7. See also comments of Finance minister ('Cabinet Conclusions', 9 October 1922 (CAB4/55/2, PRONI).

The IRA had taken over responsibility for security in the South from the British Army and the RIC, which was being steadily wound down.²

The clumsy choice of route did cause some consternation after the event within the Unionist government. General Macready, the commander-in-chief of British forces in Ireland, was also very critical of the decision to send the Specials through Southern territory.³ However no evidence exists to suggest it involved any sinister motives, some kind of administrative blunder being the favoured interpretation especially considering that the order had been given on 7 February, some hours before the kidnap raids and days before the military build-up along the border. The journey itself involved a wait of around twenty- five minutes at Clones station with the Newtownards train arriving around 5.15.⁴

The mood of the Specials appears to have been relaxed and jovial. One anonymous witness recalls their kindness in helping him with his bags and parcels as they alighted at Clones.⁵ Another witness, Reverend G.T. Boyd, the Presbyterian minister of Lisbellaw, was in a compartment with several civilians and with two of the Specials, one of whom was chatting with a local girl.⁶ If this was an invading force they were curiously relaxed about their mission. On arrival at Clones

² For details of the trip see file on Clones shooting ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11). For post-Treaty policing arrangements see T. Garvin, *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy* (Dublin, 1996) pp. 104-122.

³ Hopkinson, *Green against Green* p.80.

⁴ File on Clones shooting ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

Sergeant Dougherty gathered the six-man armed party together on the platform. William Preston, one of the armed Constables recalled: 'He formed us up two- deep and we answered our names.'⁷ The rest of the men made their way to the refreshment room. As Constable Albert Lyttle made clear in his statement: 'I, together with eight or ten more of the party proceeded to the buffet, where we remained till the train came in.'⁸

According to Constable William Flannery there were no other civilians in the buffet except for the serving staff. One or two others strolled about the station mingling with civilians and kicking their heels until the train arrived. No IRA men appeared to be present at the station although Constable John Guinness recalls noticing '...some suspicious looking young men on the platform all the time'.⁹ It is likely that at least one of these young men was responsible for alerting the IRA to the presence of the Specials and thus inadvertently turning an innocent journey into a tragic confrontation.

Meanwhile in the IRA's divisional headquarters at the Workhouse in Clones, Commandant Matt Fitzpatrick had recently arrived with some other officers. He was only twenty-five years of age at the time although he already had a long and active IRA career behind him.

⁵ *Belfast Newsletter*, 13 February 1922.

⁶ Statement of G.T. Boyd ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

⁷ Statement of William Preston, ('Secret Series' files, PRONI HA/32/1/11).

⁸ Statement of Albert Lyttle, ('Secret Series' files, PRONI HA/32/1/11).

⁹ Statement of John Guinness, ('Secret Series' files, PRONI HA/32/1/11).

Fitzpatrick had been one of the leaders of the Roslea attacks in March 1921 and according to John Connolly it was his party that was responsible for the shootings.¹⁰ He rose quickly in the movement, beginning the War of Independence as Captain of the Wattlebridge Company and finishing it as a key officer in the flying column of the North Monaghan Brigade where he formed a strong friendship with his then senior Dan Hogan. Hogan would later succeed his other friend Eoin O'Duffy as Brigade Commandant in Monaghan and was later appointed O/C of the 5th Northern Division. The link between O'Duffy, Hogan and Fitzpatrick was a close one in all probability strengthened by their membership of the IRB, which as we have seen lay at the centre of local involvement in Collins' plans for releasing the Derry prisoners.

Fitzpatrick's importance to the local leadership was underlined after he was injured in an attempted ambush in March 1921 and hospitalised under armed guard in Monaghan County Infirmary. On 30 March 1921 Hogan himself led a rescue party, consisting of almost the entire flying column, into the hospital and released Fitzpatrick who was due to be transferred to Belfast Gaol a few days later to face probable execution.¹¹ Fitzpatrick in February 1922 must have been wishing he could return the favour for the now imprisoned Hogan. His mood at the time can of course only be imagined but he would

¹⁰ John T. Connolly statement (BMH, NA, WS 598).

certainly have been wary and keen to respond to any aggressive moves by the Specials in his area.

Fitzpatrick responded rapidly to the news of the Specials' arrival. Quickly arming themselves he and three other officers leapt into a car and headed for the station, informing others to gather more men and follow him up as soon as possible. One of these officers, Lieutenant Patrick Rooney, refers to this being the 'first car' and it is certainly possible that these were the vehicles used a few days earlier in the border kidnapping raids. In the car with Fitzpatrick and Rooney were Battalion Vice-Commandant Joseph McCarville and another officer, probably Peter McKenna. They sped off, quickly covering the short distance to the railway station within minutes.¹²

Meanwhile the Specials were preparing to leave. The Enniskillen train had arrived and some of the party had taken their seats while others dawdled on the platform and drifted towards their carriages. The Specials sat together towards the rear of the train in four compartments. Three other trains were present on platforms at Clones at the same time but the Enniskillen train sat right in front of the station entrance. Sergeant Dougherty was very insistent on the Specials being seated together. Reverend Boyd had spoken to Dougherty before the train was due to leave. He had known him 'well

¹¹ The rescue party included many IRA men who would later play a key role in the Clones Affray including Seamus O'Donoghue and Joe MacCarville. See account of Donal O'Kelly in Kelly, *Sworn to be Free*.p.130.

for the past ten years' and recalls that Dougherty had ordered the two Specials who were in Boyd's carriage to the rear of the train.¹³ Dougherty was twenty-three years of age and had served in the British Army with distinction during the Great War. He had only recently been promoted to Sergeant, the Clones trip being his first command. As the last half-dozen or so Specials climbed aboard the train Special Constable Peter Martin, recalls that one of the railway porters came to the door of his compartment and pointing to the recently arrived IRA officers said 'They have it in for you boys'.¹⁴

Fitzpatrick and his three officers had entered the main door of the station and walked towards the engine. Fitzpatrick's first move was actually in the opposite direction to the Specials. Revolver in hand he walked to the engine to stop the train from leaving. Meanwhile other IRA units had begun to arrive. Rooney recalls the events as follows: 'When we got on the platform we turned towards the engine as the train was due to start. We then saw the engine was not attached. We turned back towards the rear of the train. Commandant Fitzpatrick was leading the men down the platform. I was behind him. On reaching the first compartment where there were Specials the Commandant shouted "Hands up! Surrender", Immediately there was

¹² *Irish News*, 15 February 1922.

¹³ Statement of G.T. Boyd ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

¹⁴ Statement of Peter Martin ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

a shot from the compartment and Commandant Fitzpatrick dropped dead in front of me.’¹⁵

Two unarmed Specials had responded to Fitzpatrick’s call and put their hands up. One of these men was John Cummings who later recalled: ‘...Immediately behind me when I looked round there was a man coming after me with a revolver. He said hands up...I was unarmed and my back was then to the rest of my comrades.’¹⁶ Joseph McCarville, one of the closest witnesses to the shooting claimed that the shot came ‘...from the compartment opposite which the Specials were standing’.¹⁷ However Robert Wilkinson, an official in the Department of Agriculture from Enniskillen, relates events differently. Sat in the centre of the train opposite the entrance he says he ‘...saw a gang of armed men come rushing in. They were shouting “hands up”, “Put them up” and fired some shots immediately. The first shots were fired by the IRA in uniform into the compartment next to me. At the same time I saw an IRA man falling.’¹⁸ The issue of which side had initiated the violence would become the subject of bitter argument over the following weeks with both sides claiming vociferously that they were the innocent victims of an unprovoked attack.

¹⁵ *Irish News*, 15 February 1922.

¹⁶ Statement of John Cummings (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI HA/32/1/11).

¹⁷ *Irish News*, 15 February 1922.

¹⁸ Statement of Robert Wilkinson (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI HA/32/1/11).

What followed these few disputed seconds however is more certain. Fitzpatrick, shot in the head with a single bullet, fell dead between two carriages. Immediately the situation exploded into chaos. The IRA dived for cover and a hail of bullets was launched at the Special's carriages. The IRA now numbered around twenty. Robert Henry, a reporter for the *Daily Express*, stated: '...some of the Special constables were in the train and others on the platform. Some men, who were in good formation, a sort of echelon, were firing with rifles at the Special Constables... a few minutes later a machine gun came into play from somewhere about the rear of the train.'¹⁹ According to Corporal Chinnery, a soldier travelling on the train, there were two bursts of firing about ten minutes apart although other witnesses claim the fire was continuous.²⁰

An anonymous witness relates the chilling scene as follows: 'After we had been seated about two minutes shots suddenly rang out, about six being fired into our carriage in quick succession, one of the bullets flashing across my face and grazing my hat... I could hear shots being discharged all over the train mingled with the yells and screams of the men in the other carriages. I heard one man appeal for mercy, and another call for his mother.'²¹ Frederick Browne of Enniskillen recalled seeing several individuals jumping out of the train on the opposite side only to be held up by an armed IRA man who forced

¹⁹ Statement of Robert Henry ('Secret Series' files, PRONI HA/32/1/11).

²⁰ Ministry of Home Affairs statement ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/12).

²¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 February 1922.

them back into the carriages where the main attack was being launched: ‘...several of the civilians with pistols and revolvers were moving up and down the platform and firing shots between the carriages, evidently at the escaping passengers at the far side of the train.’²² Hector Jeffers, a British soldier who was in a compartment with one of the Specials, stated: ‘I heard the thud of a bullet coming through the woodwork of the carriage, a few minutes after this the Special constable, said ‘I am hit’, and when I looked round he was bleeding from the mouth... His eyes closed and I think he died in a few minutes.’²³ The scene on the platform was chaotic. Some of the Specials caught in the open attempted to surrender only to be raked with machine gun fire whilst others either fled or returned fire from the wrecked carriages.

By all accounts Constable Robert MacMahon was the first Special to be killed. Three others were to follow: Sergeant Dougherty and Constables James Lewis and William McFarland. The train had been riddled with bullets, concentrated mainly on Carriage 85 where the Specials were located. Countless civilians were wounded including Patrick Crumley, the former nationalist MP for South Fermanagh. It was little short of a miracle that only four people were killed after such indiscriminate firing into a packed train. Eight other Specials were wounded to varying degrees. Constable John Cummings was hit by machine gun fire below the waist and as a result lost his right leg.

²² Statement of Frederick Browne (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

Constable George Lendrum had six machine-gun bullets in him but somehow survived. Others escaped unscathed although most, like Albert Lyttle, were very lucky. A bullet knocked off his cap and another passed harmlessly through his tunic.

As the firing began to die down many other civilians and Specials made their escape in any way they could. Robert Henry along with a few others jumped aboard a train on the next platform which was just moving out.²⁴ Despite the presence of IRA men all over the station a number of Specials had escaped from the train on the offside during the shooting. Constables Flannery (who had been shot in the neck), Irwin, Murray and Hamilton after getting out of the train in Flannery's words '...ran till we got behind a stone wall, and lay there till 7pm that night until the firing stopped. Myself and one of the men made our way into Newtownbutler and reported the matter to the Police.'²⁵ Albert Lyttle escaped through the front entrance of the station and made his way to what he thought would be the sanctuary of the local RIC barracks: '...the IRA followed me on a motor car and demanded me from the District Inspector'. Lyttle remained under siege at the barracks until Wednesday night when he was smuggled out by the RIC hidden in the mail car of a train heading north.²⁶

²³ Statement of Hector Jeffers ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

²⁴ Statement of Robert Henry ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

²⁵ Statement of William Flannery ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

²⁶ Statement of Albert Lyttle ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

For other Specials their escape was far more dramatic. William Preston described his own rather bizarre version of events after jumping from the train later in the piece: 'We went into an old house and loaded up again. I took up a street and saw about 50 men in the road. I opened fire on them and shot 3 men. I took to the fields and lay behind a ditch till dark...Constables Porter, Martin and Johnston were with me.' He then proceeded to hold up four local men: Peter McGovern, Francis McCadden and a father and son Robert and William Gregg: 'I made these men lead me to Newtownbutler station. Then I allowed Peter McGovern and William Gregg to go back. I brought Francis McCadden and Robert Gregg to the barracks... Gregg told me he was in Clones and saw about 100 men with a machine gun that was at 5.30pm in Clones.'²⁷ Preston's story although interesting is almost certainly an extreme exaggeration. None of those who escaped with him mention anything about his gun battle with fifty men or the reports of 100 men in Clones as early as 5.30pm. It is unlikely whether Fitzpatrick himself had even heard about the arrival of the Specials at this time.

Whilst this handful of Specials struggled north across open country back at the station the situation had finally calmed down. The IRA, now arriving in large numbers, gave orders for everybody to leave the train. The civilians were separated from the remaining Specials of which only three were unwounded. An anonymous witness told the

²⁷ Statement of William Preston ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

Belfast Newsletter that he ‘...saw these together with one wounded man, being whipped away prisoners in two motorcars. As I emerged from the carriage I saw the prostrate form of a constable lying flat on his face on the platform with blood streaming from him onto the railway line. As prisoners were removed I heard members of the IRA speak of the number of rifles and quantities of ammunition they had captured.’²⁸ Most of those items belonged to the Specials but also to Corporal Chinnery who, much to his annoyance, lost his entire kit including an officer’s sword. Another anonymous witness related his view of the terrible aftermath: ‘A number of passengers were ordered to clear the dead and wounded out of the carriages...The victims, numbering upward of twenty were carried from carriages and laid prostrate in the ladies waiting room. The passengers having completed the gruesome work of clearing the carriages, returned with their faces, hands and clothing saturated with blood.’²⁹

After being forced to clear away the dead bodies of the Specials all of the civilians were taken into the station yard and searched by the IRA. The intention seems to have been to arrest everybody present and take them to the local barracks for interrogation. However, an IRA officer arrived to calm the situation and ordered his men to put the shell-shocked passengers back on the wrecked train. Some members of the local IRA however, enraged by the shooting of Fitzpatrick, were bent on revenge. One of the Specials R.W. Gallagher was put against a

²⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 February 1922.

side wall of the station platform as if to be executed. Two IRA men then fired shots at the wall near his head and body taunting him as they did so. Luckily for Gallagher the same IRA officer arrived and halted the mock execution. In the confusion, whilst his would-be executioners were being berated by their superior, Gallagher escaped and jumped aboard the battered train as it was leaving.³⁰

The train itself left 45 minutes late, around 6.30pm. Despite the IRA allowing the civilians to continue their journey it appears that only a few took this opportunity. In Clones itself IRA units from Monaghan, Fermanagh and Cavan poured into the local area. They extinguished street lamps and put out lights in local shops and houses. Tensions were running extremely high. In Monaghan town a local girl was shot accidentally by the IRA around 9pm. When the train finally arrived at Lisbellaw, its carriages wrecked and covered in blood, the local population exploded in riotous anger. The *Belfast Newsletter* reported the sight of the train ‘...riddled with bullets... pools of blood on the floor of the compartment, in which were found some automatic revolvers and some bullets’.³¹

For those who had escaped only one, Robert Henry, was to encounter the IRA again. He had jumped aboard another train shortly after the shooting. On arriving at the next station he climbed out of the guards

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Statement of R.W. Gallagher (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11).

³¹ *Belfast Newsletter*, 14 February 1922.

van where he had taken refuge believing he was safe in Northern Ireland. However he was in fact in Monaghan town, even further inside Southern territory. Immediately he went to the local Post Office to send a telegram to his newspaper of what he had witnessed at Clones. He relates what followed: 'I then proceeded to a hotel, and in a few minutes five men entered. One of them produced a revolver, and told me to put up my hands. Under an armed escort I was taken to the IRA headquarters, where I was kept waiting a couple of hours. The original telegram which I had sent was brought to me, and I was told that it was not an accurate account of the conflict. I was advised to be very careful, to cancel my message to my paper in London, and to send instead an account of the affair which was dictated to me.' Henry was saved from this by the intervention of the local RIC District Inspector who persuaded the IRA to release him and allow him to travel back to the relative safety of Belfast the next day.³²

Henry had been held at the Monaghan courthouse which at the time was the headquarters of the 1st Battalion of the North Monaghan Brigade. In his statement he also adds: 'The IRA in Monaghan told me the reason they could not allow the engine to couple on was that they wanted to capture all the Specials and they were keeping the train until reinforcements came up.'³³ This last point gives an intriguing insight into the IRA's thinking, indicating that Fitzpatrick's intention

³² Statement of Robert Henry ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/11)

³³ Ibid.

may have been to imprison the Specials along with the other forty or so loyalists taken a few days before.

That evening the injured Specials were held in Monaghan Infirmary under an IRA armed guard. Some of the more seriously injured were released so that they could receive more specialised medical attention in the North. These included John Cummings who returned to Enniskillen the next afternoon where his injured leg was amputated. Those fit to travel were brought back to Clones from Carrickmacroos under heavy guard in order to attend a hastily convened inquest which would be held in a packed courtroom a few days after the incident on 14 February. The bodies of the four dead Specials were left over the border just outside of the town on the evening of the attack after the IRA had telephoned the RIC Head Constable at Enniskillen.

Despite the small scale of the Clones Affray, and the fact that it is now almost wholly forgotten, at the time it appeared that it would lead to dire consequences and spark off a major confrontation between North and South. The first ominous move in this rapid escalation was the immediate suspension of British troop evacuations from the twenty-six counties and the intensification of violence on the border between the IRA and the USC. The Northern government also requested immediate army reinforcements from the British. At the time eleven battalions were stationed in Northern Ireland, five in Belfast and three each in South Down and the west. General Macready however decided

that it was the Specials who should continue to guard the border whilst the regulars remained at various strategic points inside the six counties, a decision which would only lead to even more violent confrontations over the coming weeks.

Craig demanded permission from Churchill to send 5000 troops over the border to rescue the kidnapped loyalists and to occupy a portion of Southern territory for each loyalist still in the South. He also tried in vain to get 230 police cars and lorries, 150 machine guns and three armoured cars for his scheme from the RIC depot in Dublin which was busy winding down its activities. The order however was stopped by Churchill who was worried over the rapid escalation of the situation and fearful for the stability of the Provisional government in the South if such an invasion took place.³⁴ Craig changed tack and on 8 March called for twenty new USC mobile platoons of 'A' Specials and for the recruitment of 2000 more 'B' Specials.³⁵ At the time it seemed that the Clones Affray would not quickly be forgotten.

In order to appease Craig three extra battalions of British troops were sent to the North and a Border Commission was established on 16 February. The commission was to be based at Clogher near the border between Monaghan and Fermanagh and to act as an ad-hoc peace keeping agency offering arbitration in any future border disputes. It

³⁴ Correspondence between Craig and Churchill, 11-13 February (PRONI, CAB 11/1). See also Correspondence between Churchill, Cope, Craig and Collins, 11-15 February 1922 (PRO, CO 906/20).

consisted of three representatives: one from each of the parties involved. The Provisional Government appointee was Cornelius Ward, the Liaison Officer for Monaghan.³⁶ The commission itself achieved very little and eventually faded out of existence by the end of April. Macready was sceptical from the start: 'To those who knew anything of two of the component parts of the Commission, the IRA and Ulster representatives, the scheme was foredoomed to failure, though no doubt it looked very attractive in Whitehall... From the first, in spite of the loyal efforts of the British officers, the whole affair was a farce.'³⁷ In spite of these new initiatives border attacks would increase during February and March. On the 21st of February the British, in a final attempt to solve the impasse, released the Monaghan Footballers from Derry Gaol whilst the IRA responded by allowing twenty-six of the captured loyalists to go free. The British released Hogan and his officers, once again overriding Craig, although prisoners from the six counties such as Patrick Maguire, were left in gaol.³⁸

Despite these compromises six of the Specials injured at Clones were still in IRA hands two weeks after the event. The *Northern Whig* reported on the condition of injured Special K. Morton as critical. Henry Burnside who, although a Special, was not a member of the party but had been travelling in civilian clothes on his way to join 25

³⁵ This brought the totals up to 5,800 'A' Specials and 22,000 'B' Specials. See Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* p.95.

³⁶ For details on the commission see file on Clones shooting ('Secret Series' files, HA/32/1/11).

³⁷ Macready report quoted in Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* p. 81.

³⁸ Farrell, *Arming the Protestants* p. 93-4. Patrick Maguire statement (BMH, NA, WS 693).

Platoon at Enniskillen was said to have ‘...sustained terrible injuries to his left arm which may necessitate its amputation...the doctor says he must have been struck by about six machine gun bullets. George Lendrum had two bullets removed from his back. His condition is also very serious.’³⁹ By the end of February most of the original kidnapped loyalists had been released but the Clones Specials were still being held. They were John Baird and Albert York of Clady County Tyrone, Special Constable T.W. McBirney, an off-duty passenger on the train, and constables Lendrum, Morton and Burnside who were all recovering in hospital. Burnside eventually made a full recovery, returning to his unit in Enniskillen by the end of March. The rest of the Specials were released in batches throughout March. After careful acts of diplomacy all prisoners captured since January were released and the evacuation of British troops from the Curragh resumed on 27 February. The feared confrontation had been averted.

In many senses however the real victims of Clones were the Catholic population of Belfast. Between the 6th and 25th of February 43 people were killed in Belfast (27 Catholics and 16 Protestants) and 95 were wounded (69 Catholics and 26 protestants). Thirty-one of these deaths occurred between the 13th and 15th of February. The deaths included the horrific bombings in Weaver Street where, on 13 February, a bomb was thrown into a Catholic schoolyard in the York Road area of the city. Two children were killed instantly, with four others dying later in

³⁹ *Northern Whig*, 15 February 1922.

hospital from their wounds. Father John Hassan called it ‘...a more horrible outrage than any that had hitherto disgraced this savage city.’⁴⁰ Other horrors were to follow the next day. A nineteen-year-old Catholic man James Rice was attacked by a mob at 9pm in Ravenscroft Street. His hands were tied behind his back and he was shot several times whilst on the ground. His attackers then battered his skull in with revolver butts for good measure. His mangled body was found dumped in an alley a few hours later. The tension in Belfast was further fuelled by the emotive funerals of the four Specials killed at Clones, all of which took place on 14 February in various parts of the six counties. On 16 February the IRA added another victim to the rapidly growing list when they shot dead another Special, 21 year old Hector Stewart in Edlingham Street, Belfast. The number of victims of the Clones Affray and its aftermath had reached almost forty within only three days of the incident.⁴¹

Despite the rising death toll and the alarming decline in North-South relations the IRA border campaign proceeded, after a brief hiatus, with renewed vigour during late March and early April. Collins arranged for the setting up of a Belfast City Guard consisting of 60 men from the Belfast Brigade, fifteen coming from each of the city’s four battalions. This unit effectively replaced the old ASU of Woods and McCorley which had been so active during the previous spring but had been

⁴⁰ Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* p. 69.

⁴¹ For details of the Weaver Street bombings and the numerous deaths in Belfast over the following two days see *Irish News* and *Belfast Telegraph*, 14-16 February 1922.

seriously compromised by the arrest of so many of its members in Cavan. It was the City Guard who would be the spearhead of all offensive IRA operations in the city during 1922. Plans were also laid, again by the Ulster Council, to strike at a number of strategic barracks inside Northern Ireland. The attacks were organised by Collins' close colleague Sean McEoin from his command in Longford and, unlike the earlier kidnap raids, involved Volunteers from both sides of the border.

The first attack occurred in the early hours of Sunday 19 March. At around 2.30 am approximately twenty heavily armed Tyrone IRA men under the command of Thomas Morris bluffed their way into Pomeroy barracks after deceiving a guard into believing they were members of the USC.⁴² After gaining admittance the men made their way silently in stockinged feet to the garrison's sleeping quarters. The occupants were quickly overwhelmed and tied up. Sean Corr recalls that every member of the garrison was asleep when they arrived and he had some trouble waking them in order to tie them up.⁴³ The RIC Sergeant in charge of the barracks reported later that the leader of the IRA party chastised him saying, 'You should be ashamed to remain here in charge of an Ulster Garrison.'⁴⁴

⁴² The IRA party included Major Tom Morris, Frank Strong, Patrick McKenna, James McElduff, Frank Lynn, John Milvy, Tom Lucas, Charlie Gillan, Frank Ward, Patrick Slane, Frank Donnelly and Sean Corr. See Sean Corr statement (BMH, NA, WS 458).

⁴³ Sean Corr statement (BMH, NA, WS 458).

⁴⁴ File on Pomeroy barracks attack (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/179).

The IRA then proceeded to loot the contents of the building including seventy-five rifles, a large quantity of ammunition and numerous other items including bedding, furniture and bicycles which they loaded onto a lorry that had been commandeered from a local man, Peter McCullough, the day before. Patrick McKenna who was involved in the attack recalls that the lorry, which had been backed up to the door of the barracks, was so laden down with booty that the men had to give it a push to get it started.⁴⁵ The raiders then drove off in the direction of the Sperrin mountains as other IRA units moved in behind them, blowing bridges and trenching roads, to halt any pursuing Specials.⁴⁶ The attack on Pomeroy barracks was the last operation to be planned by Charlie Daly before he was replaced by Morris as Divisional O/C. Daly however would continue to retain the trust of many men in his old Division and in April he was approached to see if he could provide his old comrades with money and supplies.⁴⁷

That same evening, at around 8pm, a second attack was launched against the barracks at Maghera with similar results. Again no shots were fired and the garrison were easily captured and locked in the cells by the raiders. However one of the captives, Sergeant McKenzie, recognised two of the IRA men as being from the local area. The attackers had little choice but to take him captive and he was blindfolded, tied up and driven over the border into Donegal. After a

⁴⁵ Patrick McKenna statement (BMH, NA, WS 911).

⁴⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 March 1922.

⁴⁷ Sean Corr statement (BMH, NA, WS 458).

short period of imprisonment in an underground cell in Drumboe castle he was transferred to Ballyshannon barracks where he shared a cell with three captured anti-Treaty IRA men from Pettigo. McKenzie was only released on 19 August when Joe Sweeney, commander of the Provisional Government forces in Donegal, discovered him after capturing the barracks from the Republicans during the Civil War.⁴⁸

The final attack, on Belcoo barracks, did not take place until 28 March after an earlier raid on the barracks at Strabane was called off. A local RIC constable Sean McHale, a close friend of McEoin, was responsible for allowing the raiders to sneak into the building.⁴⁹ Approximately fifty IRA men took part in the attack and again large amounts of arms and ammunition were captured. Unlike the earlier raids however the fifteen-strong garrison were all taken prisoner and marched the short distance over the border into Cavan. They eventually arrived in Athlone where they were to remain imprisoned until 18 July. The attack was said to have lasted almost three hours.⁵⁰

Despite the success of these raids and the tireless attempts of Collins and the Ulster Council to disguise their involvement, it soon became apparent that the Unionist authorities were well aware of the key role played by leading figures in the Provisional Government Army

⁴⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 24 November 1925; see also file on Maghera barracks attack (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/179).

⁴⁹ See letter from MacEoin advocating on behalf of MacHale in latter's pension application, July 1952 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/196).

⁵⁰ File on Belcoo barracks attack (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/196).

leadership. Craig wrote to Churchill on 21 March: 'You will recollect that Commandant McKeon, in his speech in Cork quite recently, acknowledged that a Flying Column of IRA was organised for duty in Ulster and offered to lead it himself...While some local members of the IRA may have taken part it is certain the whole matter has been organised and men imported from the Irish Free State to take part in these raids.'⁵¹ The secret conspiracy behind the border campaign had been discovered and such revelations played no small part in undermining nationalist credibility when the British government decided to conduct their own investigation a few months later into who was responsible for the disturbed situation in the province.

Alongside the targeting of these specific barracks, general offensive operations in border areas also began to increase, with IRA attacks being recorded right along the vulnerable 250-mile long frontier from Strabane in the west to Newry in the east. From February IRA men from Armagh and South Down were moved over the border into camps at Ravensdale in County Louth and Castleshane in Monaghan. It was from here that the border campaign and May offensive would be planned. The camp at Castleshane was based in the commandeered ancestral home of the local unionist gentry, the Lucas family. It consisted of the house itself, a riding school and a few other buildings which were turned into arms dumps and living quarters for over one

⁵¹ Craig to Churchill, 21 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/189).

hundred Armagh Volunteers.⁵² The exodus of these men over the border was to be followed in March 1922 when the headquarters of the 4th Northern Division was moved to Dundalk. John McCoy recalled that many of his men had been reluctant to move from the old headquarters at Newry: 'The most important reasons of staying so long in Newry and with the danger of an attack by the British police and military forces was the moral effect it had on the rank and file of our men in Northern Ireland territory. There was no justification amongst our officers or men to think that they were asked to take risks by us whilst we were enjoying the security of Southern Ireland territory.'⁵³

Despite this hasty evacuation IRA attacks began to increase dramatically in border areas. On the same day as the raid on Pomeroy barracks a 'B' Special, Joseph Stinson, was dragged off his bicycle near Grangemore by a gang of six IRA men and shot seven times while he lay on the floor.⁵⁴ Many others would also become targets merely by straying too close to the border. Two such individuals, a Protestant civilian Robert Milligan and a 'B' Special Joseph Stevenson, found themselves surrounded by a group of IRA men near the frontier and were both shot several times. Mulligan was killed outright but Stevenson managed to survive albeit with severe wounds.⁵⁵ The

⁵² See statements of Charles McGleenan (BMH, NA, WS 829) and John Grant (BMH, NA, WS 658).

⁵³ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

⁵⁴ RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁵⁵ Ibid. See also 'Report on deaths in Northern Ireland, Nov. 1921-July 1922' (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/219).

following day sniping intensified in the areas of Aughnacloy and Caledon which had not only suffered badly in the recent kidnap raids but also witnessed mass expulsions of both Protestant and Catholic civilians from both sides of the border. Glaslough Orange Hall and Glasburgh Castle were also attacked by the members of the Monaghan IRA who requisitioned the buildings and used them as their headquarters for the duration of the border campaign. It was from here that an attack was organised on Killycarron House a few miles from Aughnacloy that was being used as the headquarters of the local USC platoon.⁵⁶

Numerous bomb attacks were also reported in March particularly in South Armagh with three 'B' Specials suffering severe wounds from bomb splinters during a surprise IRA ambush. A few days later in the same area a police patrol was also ambushed by the IRA resulting in the death of two Specials and the severe wounding of another. The IRA were said to have used machine guns in the attack.⁵⁷ On 31 March a party of seven police were ambushed in Hill Street, Newry with one Special being killed.⁵⁸ A further IRA ambush in the area on 6 April led to the death of USC Head Constable Alexander Compston who fell from his vehicle after being severely wounded.⁵⁹ Further to the east a unit of anti-Treaty IRA men in the Belleek-Pettigo area ambushed a

⁵⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, 20 March 1922. See also file on Belcoo barracks attack (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/196).

⁵⁷ File on Belcoo barracks attack (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/196). See also RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁵⁸ RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

USC patrol near Garrison in County Fermanagh leaving one Special dead and three badly wounded.⁶⁰

Such attacks made the border campaign an intense and brutal affair. Captured IRA orders made it clear that operations were to be conducted with the utmost speed and ruthlessness. All property owned by 'prominent Orange-men' was to be destroyed and 'All reprisals must be taken at once. Reprisals must be six to one so as to prevent the enemy from continuing same...Spies and Informers to be shot at sight. No mercy to be given.'⁶¹ The effects of this last order were felt bitterly in many Catholic areas during the IRA campaign. In one case a Catholic woman, Agnes Rafferty from Fintona, was abducted from her home by a gang of IRA men who, after shaving her head and tearing off her clothes, poured tar over her neck and back. A police report stated: 'This was done as a reprisal, the women having some days previously had two men from the locality arrested and returned for trial in connection with the Belfast Boycott.'⁶² In Belfast itself a Catholic man, Samuel Mullan of Havana Street, was shot dead by IRA gunmen whilst waiting in a queue of expelled shipyard workers outside a Hibernian hall on the Whiterock Road. It was believed that Mullan had been passing information to the police.⁶³

⁵⁹ RIC Bi-monthly report, 18 April 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Captured IRA orders, 2nd Northern Division HQ to brigade O/C's, 26 March 1922 in RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

⁶² RIC Bi-monthly report, 15 February 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

Many of these attacks were little more than opportune assaults by young Volunteers who roamed the border areas carrying out acts of intimidation and bullying. Edward Boyle described his contribution to the border campaign in South Armagh during April:

‘...we saw a man passing near us with a basket of eggs. We asked him for a few eggs and he refused us in a most offensive manner. We then took the basket and the eggs from him. He cleared off and proceeded straight into Newtownhamilton and as we knew later reported the seizure of his eggs to the Specials. After having a feed on the eggs we proceeded to the local Orange Hall- Mulladuff-and broke in the door. In the hall we found a number of wooden rifles which were apparently in use for drill purposes. We broke them up. We also found a large banner in the hall, with King William on one side of it, which we decided to take with us as a souvenir.’⁶⁴

Despite the substantial increase in IRA activity of all varieties and the undoubted success of the Ulster Council’s policy of selective attacks on isolated police barracks, the border campaign continued to prove disastrous for the Catholic population of Belfast. March would prove to be the most brutal month yet seen in the city with fifty-nine people losing their lives. Thirty-seven of the victims were Catholics who would again experience a severe backlash from extreme elements in the unionist population unnerved at the increasing level of violence in

⁶³ RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

the border areas. The RIC admitted in their report for the end of March: 'The patience of the 'B' men is almost exhausted and it will be very difficult to exercise restraint if this state of affairs continues.'⁶⁵

March 1922 would also witness many of the conflict's most notorious acts of atrocity. The most infamous of these occurred on Friday 24 March when a party of uniformed police broke into the home of Owen MacMahon and his family on the Antrim Road. His nineteen-year old son John, the only male member of the family to survive the attack later reported his experience of the night from his hospital bed:

'This morning about one o'clock I heard the hall door being smashed in. Five men rushed up the stairs and ordered my brothers and myself and Edward McKinney out on the landing. Four of the five men were dressed in the uniform of the R.I.C. but from their appearance I know they were 'Specials' not regular R.I.C. One was in plain clothes. They ordered us down stairs. When we got down, they lined us up in the room below, my father, my four brothers, Edward Mckinney and myself, against the wall. The leader said 'you boys say your prayers' and at the same moment he and the others fired volley after volley at us. I think I lay on the floor for half an hour before the Ambulance came. Three or four regular R.I.C came too.'⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Edward Boyle statement (BMH, NA, WS 647).

⁶⁵ RIC Bi-monthly report, 31 March 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152)

⁶⁶ Statement of John McMahon, 24 March 1922 (NA, S1801/A).

His mother, who begged the attackers on her knees for mercy, was struck on the side of the head and collapsed to the floor.

In all five men were killed: Owen MacMahon and his three sons Frank, Patrick and Gerald and an employee Edward McKinney. The MacMahons were a respected family in the Catholic community and owned a string of public houses across the city. None of the victims had any involvement with Sinn Fein or the IRA and were committed supporters of Joe Devlin who himself was a close friend of Owen MacMahon. Over 10,000 people attended their funeral in Belfast although despite the enormous sense of outrage and anger caused by the attacks nobody was ever prosecuted for the murders. It was widely believed however to have been the work of a combined gang of RIC and Specials under the command of D.I. Nixon, who would later be dismissed from the RUC in 1924 as punishment for his extremist activities.⁶⁷

The horror of the MacMahon murders overshadowed many other atrocities that occurred in Belfast during the following weeks. On 1 April the murder gang struck again after an RIC constable, George Turner, was gunned down on the Old Lodge Road. The area was flooded with Specials who proceeded to break into a number of houses in Stanhope Street and nearby Arnon Street. Bernard McKenna, a father of seven was shot in his bed. William Spallen suffered a similar

fate despite having recently returned from burying his wife, another victim of the conflict. At number 18 Arnon Street Specials smashed in the door with a sledgehammer and then used it to kill 39 year old Joseph Walsh, a six-month-old child Robert Walsh was also shot dead.⁶⁸ A wounded survivor, George Murray, later recalled the savage attack: 'One of the three policemen had a revolver and the other two had guns. These men went out. Immediately after seven armed men, five in police clothes and two in civilian clothes entered. They had a cage car outside the door. On letting down the child I had in my arms one of the party (who had previously decided as to which of them was to do the shooting) fired at me. They then left.'⁶⁹

A local priest told Father John Hassan of his visit to the house soon after the attack. He found Joseph Walsh upstairs in his bed:

'The skull was open and empty, while the whole mass of the brains was on the bolster almost a foot away. On descending they found a young lad, Frank Walsh, aged fourteen, crouching in the bedroom. Him they kicked and shot in the thigh, but not fatally. This was how Constable Turner was avenged. I asked to see the room upstairs. The wife shrank from conducting me. She had not ventured to enter it since that night. But the brother, an ex-soldier, had stronger nerves and showed me all the bolster soaked with blood, and the two straw mattresses,

⁶⁷ See files on DI Nixon ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/254-55). For further details of the MacMahon murders and subsequent funerals see *Irish News*, 27 March 1922.

⁶⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 1 April 1922.

deeply stained with it. He even raised them up and pointed out pieces of the skull upon the floor, and fragments of dried brain. How they managed to swing a sledgehammer in that narrow space I know not.’⁷⁰

Outside of Belfast similar reprisal attacks were carried out. In one particularly unsavoury incident a Catholic man Hugh McEneaney was killed on 11 March by a Protestant mob who were attending a funeral near Greencastle, County Antrim. McEneaney was driving his works van home when he ran into a group of mourners: ‘Someone shouted out that he was an RC and members of the funeral party fired revolvers at him wounding him in the body-He jumped off the van and ran towards his house where his wife tried to save him. Other men then came up and shot him dead.’⁷¹ Rioting erupted in the nationalist areas around Greencastle and the IRA made threats to kill some local Protestant officials. The threats were put down to the work of ‘Belfast Hooligans’.⁷²

For the IRA in Belfast, the first phase of the border campaign had been an unmitigated disaster. Not only had the vulnerability of the Catholic population to revenge attacks been graphically exposed but also the USC had markedly increased the number of raids and arrests of suspected republicans. One of these raids in particular would prove

⁶⁹ Statement of George Murray in report on Arnon street affair, (NA, S1801/A).

⁷⁰ Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* p.80.

⁷¹ File on ‘Incident at Whitehouse’(Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/176).

to be enormously damaging to the long-term security of the Northern IRA and its members. Around 7 o'clock on the evening of 18 March, St. Mary's Hall in the centre of Belfast was taken over by a platoon of 'B' Specials. The hall had been used for assorted activities including the arrangement of relief for the expelled Catholic shipyard workers and was the base for various other pseudo-political organisations. It had also been the headquarters of Eoin O'Duffy during his time as Chief Liaison Officer for Ulster during the early part of the Truce. On the night in question a whist drive was in progress on the ground floor and parties of Specials were dispatched to search the many offices and small rooms in the building. The hall was said to be in a state of 'indescribable chaos', although in an office which was used by the Saint Vincent de Paul society a brief case was found containing numerous IRA documents along with discarded ammunition, bombs and signal rockets.⁷³

The discovery of these documents was a triumph for the Unionist authorities. Not only did they reveal collusion between Southern IRA leaders in the recent attacks but also contained numerous reports from training camps that had been set up by the 3rd Northern Division during the Truce including the names and ranks of virtually every IRA officer in east Ulster. In one instance a letter from O'Duffy to 'Bob McDonnell' (i.e. Thomas Fitzpatrick), O/C of the Antrim Brigade, was

⁷² File on incidents at Greencastle (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/900).

⁷³ 'Documents found in St. Mary's Hall' (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/32/1/130). See also *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 March 1922.

found which made clear that ‘...a state of war existed and directing this officer to regard the truce as non-existent’.⁷⁴ The raid on St. Mary’s Hall had an immediate impact with many of the named individuals being rounded up and imprisoned. Others were forced to go permanently on the run.⁷⁵ When internment was introduced later in the year the St. Mary’s Hall documents would provide a comprehensive list of IRA suspects, a fact which explains why the scheme was to prove such a success in bringing the IRA to its knees so soon after its introduction.

Such attacks in Belfast meant that the border campaign achieved little of its early promise. Despite its demonstration that the IRA on both sides of the border could launch successful and damaging attacks against the Northern government it had done little lasting damage except to its own supporters in Belfast and the interior of the six counties. The Provisional Government in Dublin were well aware of the link between the violence on the border and Belfast but remained confused over the nature of the relationship: ‘It should be realised that the seat of the trouble is in Belfast and that all incidents happening in other parts of the six-Counties including those on the border are but reflexes of the operations in Belfast.’⁷⁶ However, there can be little doubt that it was the border violence which had provoked the savage

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Thomas Flynn and other members of the Battalion staff, Joe Savage, Patrick McGarragher and John Simpson, become immediate victims of the crackdown when they were arrested one week later. See Thomas Flynn statement (BMH, NA, WS 429).

⁷⁶ Provisional Government minutes, 10 June 1922 (NA, S1801/A).

confrontations in Belfast, a pattern that would continue to dictate the future direction of the conflict well into the summer.

The increasing brutality in the city and rising state of anarchy along the border led the British government to insist on another meeting between Craig and Collins at the end of March. The resultant agreement, the Second Craig Collins Pact, was more far-reaching than its predecessor and included calls for cross-community policing and widespread relief projects. The lack of trust between both communities however, especially after the savage violence of the previous two months, doomed the pact to failure. Its proud first clause stating that 'Peace is today declared' would ring increasingly hollow as violence erupted again in the subsequent weeks and months. The IRA, in line with Collins' carrot-and-stick diplomacy, scaled down their offensive operations in order to give the pact a chance of working⁷⁷ In practice however the agreement amounted to little more than what the historian Desmond Greaves has called a series of 'promises, prospects and uncertainties.'⁷⁸

The relative peace of late April, whilst certainly providing a genuine, if unlikely, context in which some kind of political solution could flourish proved to be little more than a brief hiatus. The bloodletting was not yet over and Collins' frustration would lead him to finally

⁷⁷ For the text of the agreement see *The Times*, 31 March 1922. For the origins and implementation of the pact see Hopkinson, 'The Craig-Collins Pacts of 1922: two attempted reforms of the Northern Irish government' *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. xxvii, 1990.

jettison any hopes he had of a negotiated settlement reverting once again to his faithful old methods of intrigue and conspiracy. Developments in the South would also mean that a peaceful solution to the crisis in the North appeared increasingly unlikely as the IRA finally split formally over the Treaty. The only way to avoid a war in the South it appeared would be to find a shared crusade behind which the whole organisation could unite. That crusade, tragically as it proved, was to end partition by force.

⁷⁸ C. Desmond Greaves, *Liam Mellows and the Irish Revolution* (London, 1971) p.305.

CHAPTER SIX

THE JOINT-IRA POLICY

The split in the Volunteer movement, which finally became official with the holding of the anti-Treaty Army Convention in Dublin on 26 March 1922, affected the Northern IRA like no other part of the organisation in Ireland. National unity was a vital component of the struggle in the North and any wavering in the extent of Southern support would prove disastrous for the beleaguered Volunteers in the six counties. As such the Northern IRA's experience in the spring and early summer of 1922 would directly reflect events in the South. Collins' political and propaganda war against the Northern government of the first three months of the year had borne little fruit and would be jettisoned in favour of exclusively military solutions. His decision to wring whatever concessions he could from the moribund Second Craig-Collins pact and then to 'let it break' is testament to his loss of faith in negotiated solutions.¹ The occupation of the Four Courts by sections of the anti-Treaty IRA in March led to a further emphasis on the growing divisions within the military side of the movement. The North however would be the one area where GHQ obsessively pursued army unity. The reasons for this are inextricably bound up with broader attempts to avert civil war and the use of partition as an issue that could unite the IRA overriding divisions over the Treaty.

Despite the unique context in which the Northern IRA were operating, and the assurances of both ideological and practical support from the

¹ See Hopkinson, 'The Craig-Collins Pacts of 1922'.

South the military split proved to be just as damaging as elsewhere in Ireland. Almost immediately Joe McKelvey, left to join the Executive forces, eventually being elected as a representative for Ulster along with Peadar O'Donnell at the second Army Convention in April.² However, McKelvey's position as O/C of the 3rd Northern Division was already under threat long before he made his decision to leave. He alone was held responsible for the desperate shambles that had ensued after the raid on St. Mary's Hall and as Woods declared: '...many Brigade officers demanded an enquiry into the circumstances of the raid, and were asking the Divisional Commandant to resign.'³

A meeting was scheduled for Friday 24 March, although McKelvey himself never returned to Belfast to face the enquiry. Woods would later claim that McKelvey who had '...previously signified his intention of remaining loyal to GHQ, turned Executive when he heard of operations going to commence.'⁴ The effects of McKelvey's departure were devastating: 'Practically all the other officers of the Brigade were prepared to carry on. His action, however, had a very bad effect as it amounted to desertion, and a large number of the men recruited during the Truce followed his example and ceased to be "active" members of the IRA. Two Battalions which had been formed during the Truce were so badly hit that I have since disbanded them.'⁵

² See information on Army Conventions (O'Donoghue papers, NLI, MS 31 249 [2]).

³ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

⁴ Ibid.

Several divisional meetings had been held at GHQ before the Army Convention although Woods recalls that:

‘...no officer in this Division (except the O/C) knew that such meetings were held or what happened at these meetings. All preparations had been made for delegates attending the Convention, they were under the impression that the Convention was being held with authority of GHQ, until they saw the M/D [Minister of Defence] statement in the Press on the Friday prior. When some of the senior delegates saw the statement they decided even then to go on to Dublin, as they would probably have an opportunity of getting into touch with GHQ for indeed as two senior officers remarked to me, GHQ as far as they knew had practically ceased to exist for a long time.’⁶

Two of these men were Roger McCorley, soon to be promoted to O/C of the Belfast Brigade, and Thomas Fitzpatrick, the leader of the IRA in Antrim. Their visit was not as innocent as Woods claimed, with McCorley later confiding that he and Fitzpatrick were both actually prepared to join the Executive: ‘...unless GHQ would make at least as good an offer of supplies as had been made by the Executive, which had been set up by the Convention, I would have no option but to advise the Belfast Brigades that they should support the Executive.’⁷ Again it was the issue of which side was most committed to

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

overcoming Partition that finally settled the Northern IRA's attitude to the Treaty, demonstrated graphically by McCorley's story of his visit to GHQ in the spring of 1922. After attending the Army Convention both men decided to visit Seamus Woods, who was working as Eoin O'Duffy's ADC at Beggar's Bush barracks. After an amiable conversation with their old friend, and soon to be Divisional O/C, McCorley recalled:

‘Woods then told us that the Chief of Staff, General Duffy, would like to see us and asked us if we would agree to meet him. We agreed. General Duffy then brought up the subject of our attendance at the Convention and I informed him that since we had been offered arms and ammunition by the Executive that I intended to support them and would advise Belfast accordingly. He told me that GHQ would be better placed to provide the arms which we required than the executive would be. He said that they had the markets of the world open to them. I told him that I understood this was so but that so far GHQ had not been very generous with supplies. I told him also that as far as I was concerned I was in the market for the first time and that my support would go to the people who would help us honour our obligations to the Nationalists in Belfast. I said I would not allow my personal opinions as to the rights and wrongs of the quarrel between GHQ and the Executive to influence me in this matter. He then made a definite promise that GHQ would provide all the supplies necessary within a short space of time. I told him that

if that were so I would be in a position to advise the Belfast Brigade to support GHQ with whom my personal sympathies lay.’⁸

Indeed McCorley himself was an early supporter of the Treaty although he admitted later that he hated the document and only backed it because it allowed Ireland to have its own armed forces. After this visit many other Northern officers made their way south to meet with O’Duffy where they received similar promises to those given to McCorley. On their return, meetings were held across Northern Ireland to discuss the situation with a majority of officers deciding to remain under GHQ which had made a substantially higher bid than the Executive for the support of the Northern IRA.⁹

As such the key impact of the split in the North cannot be understood in terms of measuring how many IRA men joined the anti-Treaty side but rather who these men were. After McKelvey left other high-profile departures would follow. Charlie Daly, O/C of the 2nd Northern Division, also attended the Convention along with the Divisional Quartermaster and the O/C of the South Derry Brigade, Sean Larkin, who would later be executed with Daly in Donegal. In the 3rd Northern the O/C of the Belfast Brigade Sean O’Neill had walked out paving the way for McCorley’s promotion as did the Quartermaster of the 1st Battalion and the O/C of the East Down Brigade. On a divisional level

⁸ Ibid.

the Vice-Commandant, Intelligence Officer and Divisional Quartermaster would also follow as would two of the four brigade O/C's of the 1st Northern Division. On the border the 5th Northern Division remained loyal to GHQ, due largely to O'Duffy's influence and the 4th Northern under Frank Aiken declared its neutrality eventually taking sides with the Republicans.¹⁰

Aiken's reaction to the wider divisions within the IRA is typical of the confused response of many members of the organisation in the six counties:

'I ordered all arms and war material in the Division to be concealed and that if we finally broke with GHQ, all Military posts and camps were to be evacuated, the Divisional organisation to be kept intact on Volunteer lines, until an ordered state of Government attaining in the South- we could attack the North with a chance of getting a united Ireland, which was always the immediate job to us as Northerners.'¹¹

His neutrality though was extremely fragile and was heavily compromised in March when two battalions and the staff of the 1st (Louth) Brigade under Patrick McKenna came out against the Treaty.¹²

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ See information on Army Conventions (O'Donoghue papers, NLI, MS 31249 [2])

¹¹ 'Position of the 4th Northern Division from January 1922-17 July 1922' (O'Donoghue papers, NLI, MS 17143).

¹² James McElhew statement (BMH, NA, WS 634).

However, the men in Armagh and South Down, the principal fighting areas in the Division, remained loyal to Aiken.¹³

The extent of these various defections meant that the military split in the North was far more substantial than has been previously realised. Indeed Florence O'Donoghue, an IRA Intelligence Officer in Cork and a member of the IRB Supreme Council, claimed that all three of the IRA Divisions based inside the six counties came out in favour of the Republicans.¹⁴ The split was certainly just as bitter as elsewhere in Ireland. The Adjutant of the 3rd Northern Division wrote scathingly of the anti-Treaty element in his area: 'Their ranks are full of men who have been dismissed from the Volunteers, some have been tarred and feathered by our forces, and some have been sent to jail by the late Divisional Commandant [i.e. McKelvey] who must have now ratified the appointments of the same men as officers in the Executive.'¹⁵ The Republican response was similarly harsh concentrating on the fragile loyalties of many Northerners to the Provisional Government: '...they got 300 men for the Free State Army, most of these would have been prevented by propaganda and most of them would have been quite willing to transfer to other areas as IRA men'.¹⁶ It was further argued that the Northerners had only joined due to '...economic pressure and in the hopes of fighting the Specials, they are at heart Republicans'.¹⁷

¹³ John McCoy (BMH, NA, WS 492).

¹⁴ See 'List of Divisions, Brigades, Battalions' (O'Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31424).

¹⁵ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to Mulcahy, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCAD, P7/B/77).

¹⁶ D/Org to C/S, 22 Dec. 1922 (Twomey papers, UCAD, P69/13 [80]).

¹⁷ Ibid.

In answer to these various resignations GHQ decided to install a new leadership in the North. Seamus Woods, the previous Divisional Adjutant of the 3rd Northern Division, took over from McKelvey in early April following Roger McCorley's replacement of O'Neill as head of the Belfast Brigade. The two young radicals of 1921 had finally ascended to the top of the IRA organisation in east Ulster. Despite such bitter feelings and the departure of so many key leaders, overall the rank and file kept faith with GHQ being persuaded by the assurances of Collins and his IRB clique that the North would remain a key priority for the Dublin leadership. GHQ, having played such a vital role in the creation of the Northern IRA, had formed a strong bond with the Volunteers in Ulster that would prove both difficult and undesirable to break.

Collins' solution to the splits in both the Northern IRA and the wider movement was the development of a plan aimed at securing the loyalty of both wings of the IRA by carrying out a united and concerted attack on the new Northern government. The policy had two general aims: to aid the beleaguered Northern minority, although how was rather unclear, and, putting it crudely, to avert a divisive war in the South by instigating a unifying one in the North. Even after the military split it was obvious that overcoming partition was the only issue on which there was substantive agreement between both sides of the Treaty divide, far more so than for Tom Barry's plan to attack

the British garrison in Ireland or Dick Barrett's call for a bombing campaign in England.¹⁸ The IRA in the North were desperate to encourage any moves which would place partition at the top of the nationalist agenda; as John McCoy later stated: 'It was very clear to most Northern Republicans that the Treaty was the last straw as far as they were concerned and any rumpus that might break up the Treaty position was good policy for them.'¹⁹ Indeed by March 1922 the situation in the six counties had deteriorated so badly that it appeared more likely that civil war would erupt in the North rather than the South.

For Collins overcoming partition had become a personal crusade. At a meeting of Northern nationalist leaders he made it clear that '...although the Treaty might have an outward expression of Partition, the Government had plans whereby they would make it impossible, and that Partition would never be recognised even though it might mean the smashing of the Treaty.'²⁰ From now until his death Collins would be increasingly overwhelmed by what Peadar O'Donnell called his 'weakness for intrigue and conspiracy'.²¹ Sean MacBride later made clear his faith in Collins' single-minded commitment to the North: 'I do not think this collaboration by Collins with us, was in any way a sham, or intended to mislead. Collins thought that way.'²²

¹⁸ F. O'Donoghue *No Other Law* (Dublin, 1954) p. 249. Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* pp. 96-7.

¹⁹ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

²⁰ 'Subject-Position of 2nd Northern Division in 1922' (Thomas Johnson papers, NLI, MS17143).

²¹ P. O'Donnell, *The Gates Flew Open* (London, 1932) p.31.

²² Sean MacBride quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.117.

Collins' means of gaining the consensus needed to instigate his joint-IRA offensive was the IRB. The organisation, which one historian has likened to Collins' 'extended family', had provided a key framework for controlling provincial IRA units, with admittedly mixed results, during the War of Independence.²³ As such it was the only body still functioning which retained sufficient loyalty to bridge the Treaty divide. Collins' position as President of the Supreme Council allowed him to exploit his final tenuous links with anti-Treaty leaders such as Liam Lynch, Rory O'Connor and Joe McKelvey. His own close confidants O'Duffy and Mulcahy would also be key players in organising the conspiracy and the many covert meetings of the IRB Supreme Council held during the spring of 1922 presented a ready forum for these secret debates. Florence O'Donoghue who attended many of these gatherings later confided that preparations for the May offensive were being laid as early as the first Army Convention in March.²⁴

The planned attacks, referred to by IRA members variously as the 'May Operations' or the 'Rising', were to be a co-ordinated offensive by IRA units on both sides of the border. Whilst the pro-Treaty side would be largely responsible for supplying the arms and equipment, the anti-Treaty IRA would provide the leadership. It was left to the Northern IRA to supply the majority of the actual manpower to carry

out the attacks. One of the principal leaders of this new 'Army of the North' ²⁵ was to be Sean Lehane, an IRA veteran from Cork, who had been O/C of the Schull Battalion and a member of the flying column of the 1st Cork Brigade during the War of Independence. He was also a close colleague of Liam Lynch, who had nominated him for his new appointment, and a long-standing member of the IRB. Lehane was no stranger to attacks on unionists and had been involved in various operations against Protestants in his native Cork. In one such incident a local Protestant man was shot dead and the farm of another named Daly, whose sister was believed to be an informer, was razed to the ground. According to Sean O'Driscoll, one of Lehane's subordinates in Cork, Lehane ordered him '...to burn out Daly's two farm houses and let them know why so it was done.' ²⁶

Many years later Lehane would explain how he came to be associated with the combined operations in the North. Following some preliminary meetings held soon after the Treaty was signed to discuss the Northern situation he recalled that '...in the early spring of 1922 further conferences were held at which General Liam Lynch and his staff and Michael Collins and his chief advisers were present, and at one of these meetings the same general attitude was upheld, and in order to remedy things both sides agreed to select officers for Ulster. It was decided that an IRA officer be appointed from the South, and a

²³ Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* p.18.

²⁴ O'Donoghue *No Other Law* p. 249.

²⁵ C.S. Andrews, *Dublin Made Me* (Dublin, 1979) p.238.

staff of officers to assist him... and under the direction of the IRA General Council to assist the present General Aiken...in war against Crown Forces along the border and further in land in the Six Counties.’²⁷

Lehane was appointed O/C of the 1st and 2nd Northern Divisions. Ironically Charlie Daly, who only weeks before had been removed from his Ulster command by GHQ, was made his second-in-command. His other senior officers were all from Cork and included the brigade commanders Mossy Donegan, Sean Fitzgerald and Seamus Cotter. The junior ranks were filled by Denis Galvin from Bandon, Jim Lane from Clonakilty, Denis O’Leary and Billy O’Sullivan from Bantry, Tom Mullins from Kinsale and John O’Donovan of Dunmanway. The instructions given to these officers were according to Lehane ‘...to get inside the border wherever whenever. To force the British General to show his real intentions; that was to occupy Ballyshannon, Sligo and along down.’²⁸

Mossy Donegan, Lehane’s trusted lieutenant, gave his version of events as follows: ‘We were ordered to the north by the Division or through the Division maybe more correct...We left in May 1922, going by lorry to Dublin and reported to the Four Courts. While there one day Lehane and I at any rate- were briefed by Liam Lynch, in I think

²⁶ Sean O’Driscoll to O’Donoghue, 11 April 1962 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31301[9]).

²⁷ Lehane to Military Pensions Board, 7 March 1935 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31340).

²⁸ Ibid.

McKelvies [sic] office. It was explained to us that our mission was to make war on the Crown Forces in the North on and inside the border, starting on the Donegal-Derry area and using Donegal as a base. We were to get co-operation from the Pro-Treaty forces in Donegal and were therefore to be careful to avoid any “incidents” with them which might militate against success in that direction.’²⁹ Roger McCorley was also keen to concentrate on their real enemies in the unionist population: ‘The idea in our May 1922 attack was to smash the Northern Government completely. As far as we could help it we didn’t attack the British.’³⁰ In his view the May Rising was aimed at nothing less than the ‘...downfall of the six-county Government by military means.’³¹ Despite McCorley and Donegan’s wish to confine their attacks to the Specials and the new Northern Ireland police force the RUC, regular troops under the control of the Provisional Government and the British would play key roles in putting down the offensive.

Despite the involvement of so many IRA leaders in the conspiracy the central role of the Provisional Government Army leadership was to be kept secret for fear of compromising their already strained relationship with the British government. Lehane later described the complicated arrangements: ‘Both parties- Republicans and Free State were to co-operate in giving us arms and supplies, but General Collins insisted on one thing, namely, that activities were to be in the name of

²⁹ Donegan to O’Donoghue, 27 August 1950 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS 31423 [6]).

³⁰ Roger McCorley interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCDAD, P17b/98).

³¹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

the IRA and that we were to get arms- rifles- from Cork No.1 Brigade, and that he would return rifles instead to Cork No.1 from those rifles handed over by the British. The reason for those stipulations was to avoid embarrassment for General Collins in dealing with the British Government in case a rifle fell into the hands of the British.’³²

Most of the weapons did indeed come from Cork although others were acquired from various IRA units in Munster. The exchange of arms however was a delicate operation to undertake and friction between the mutually suspicious parties began to surface almost immediately. Eoin O’Duffy complained bitterly that the Republicans were far too slow in carrying out his requests leading Liam Lynch to respond:

‘The C/S [i.e. O’Duffy] and A/G [Adjutant General] phoned me to forward 30 Thompson guns, 10,000 rounds. 303, and also 100 rifles, these latter to be exchanged as soon as could be arranged. The following supplies of arms and ammunition were forwarded within 36 hours; 30 Thompson guns, 8000 rounds ammunition T.M guns, 10,000 rounds. 303, 75 rifles. I also sent 10 machine- gunners. Any of these supplied, I afterwards learned, did not get to the North, and the gunners after being detained for a week or so at Beggar’s Bush, were ordered home to their own areas after being so urgently required by phone for

³² Lehane to Military Pensions Board, 7 March 1935 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31340).

the North. It is very easy to judge where the responsibility lies for the situation which now exists.’³³

Numerous transfers of arms had been arranged with some arriving as planned whilst others fell foul of the undercurrent of mistrust between pro and anti-Treaty units. Martin Walton, a Southern IRA officer, described his role in the arms-swaps: ‘I was a member of a party that was preparing to go to the North with a consignment of arms. They were mostly guns that we’d got from the British. All the identification numbers were filed off them...I don’t know how many of us were to go up there, but I knew over a hundred myself. But the guns never got there.’³⁴ John Joe Philben of the 4th Western Division made a similar attempt:

‘...seven or eight of us under Paddy Duffy were ordered to effect an exchange of rifles. Collins was badly put out at the attacks on Nationalists in the North. Beggars Bush had got new rifles from the British, and the idea was that if we handed over our rifles they would give us new ones. Anyway, we drove to Boyle in a Crossley tender with our rifles. When we got there we waited a while, and eventually two Free State officers arrived in a car and said to Paddy, that the lorry with the new rifles had broken down and that they would let us have them later on. Paddy said “You will get no rifles until I get the new ones”. The new rifles

³³ Quoted in O’Donoghue, *No Other Law* p.252.

³⁴ Martin Walton quoted in Griffith and O’Grady, *Curious Journey* p.275.

never appeared and Paddy brought the old ones back to Castlebar.’³⁵

Such abortive missions were commonplace and meant that a large proportion of the material sent to the North came directly from the British government’s supply of rifles to the new Provisional Government Army. Numerous Volunteers recall receiving new rifles with the serial numbers scratched off and a USC raid on 12 May at the home of Thomas Allen of Drumkeenan revealed ‘...evidence that a considerable quantity of arms had recently been brought into Armagh’.³⁶ In the house also were found a number of large boxes that bore the signs of being hastily opened. In one of the cases a new Webley revolver was found as were materials and instructions for the manufacture of mines. Patrick Casey remembered ‘...the tremendous activity in and about Dundalk. Thousands of rifles, sub-machine guns, grenades, boxes of ammunition, land mines, detonators etc. were passed over the border by various routes and dispersed through the six counties.’³⁷ The arms were transported across the border in oil tankers with others taken by sea and landed at selected spots on the Down coast. The 3rd Northern Division received around 150 rifles for each of its three brigades plus a similar number of revolvers for the IRA in Belfast.³⁸

³⁵ John Joe Philben quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.467.

³⁶ RIC Bi-monthly report, 16 May 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

³⁷ Patrick Casey statement (BMH, NA, WS 1148).

While a steady supply of arms found its way into Ulster preparations for the offensive were well under way. Planning had begun in the early spring and prior to Wood's appointment as O/C of the 3rd Northern Division, a number of meetings of the five Northern Divisional Commandants were held. The most important of these, and the first which Woods attended, occurred at Clones Workhouse on 21 April. Each of the leaders outlined the equipment they needed and the GHQ representatives assured them that it would be made available immediately. A date, which appears to have been 2 May, was agreed for the start of operations allowing almost a fortnight for the transport of arms to various IRA units in the six counties.³⁹

There had been a decrease in IRA activity all over Northern Ireland so that preparations and training could be carried out prior to the start of the offensive and to ensure that the arms transfers could be carried out without undue attention from the Specials.⁴⁰ The Unionist authorities did note the unusual activities of the IRA in various areas particularly in Down and Armagh where bands of Volunteers were said to be gathering together for some unspecified reason.⁴¹ A letter written to officers in the 4th Northern Division in early May makes clear how thorough the planning was: 'You will see that when the fight starts, there are one or two reliable men in each Unit or section, so

³⁸ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NA, WS 389).

³⁹ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

⁴⁰ Charles McGleenan statement (BMH, NA, WS 829).

⁴¹ RIC Bi-monthly report, 16 May 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

that in case a leader was wounded there is a reliable man to take his place. Train your men as speedy as possible.’⁴²

The plans for the offensive were indeed ambitious. John Cosgrave, an IRA Captain in the 4th Northern Division, was given detailed orders for his company in Armagh. He was instructed: ‘...first to take over a newly erected house a residence for the local clergyman- as an hospital. We were then to join up with the Lislea section of the Armagh Company and to deal with any local opposition from the Lisnadill B/Specials and from B/Specials in Markethill and Red Rock areas. After dealing with any local opposition we were ordered to move in the direction of Armagh city where we should join up with all the other battalion units from Armagh, and when the local military garrison was subdued we were all to move in the direction of Lough Neagh from where the 3rd Brigade [i.e. North Armagh] would launch an attack on the town of Portadown which we understood was a key point in the British defences.’⁴³ On paper at least the offensive involved a virtual full-scale invasion of Northern Ireland.

Such careful planning however was severely compromised when Woods called on O’Duffy to postpone the start of operations for three days as the arms and equipment being sent from GHQ to Antrim had only reached Belfast and would not arrive until after the official start-date. O’Duffy agreed to the request and called a further meeting of

⁴² Ibid.

Northern divisional commanders on 5 May where a decision was taken to re-schedule the start of the offensive. The 2nd Northern Division however were unable to postpone their plans and were permitted to proceed as previously arranged. Woods then added further confusion to the situation when he visited O'Duffy in Dublin a few days after the meeting and suggested that all of the planned operations should be held off until he made an attempt to attack Musgrave Street Barracks in Belfast. O'Duffy again agreed and promised that he would order out all Divisions on the day after the raid was attempted. As such the offensive was postponed for a further fortnight with the new start-date set for 19 May 1922.⁴⁴

The last-minute changes of Woods and O'Duffy would prove disastrous. Co-ordination was vital for the success of any proposed offensive in the six counties and the decision to allow the 2nd Northern Division to proceed virtually alone allowed for the piecemeal defeat of the Northern IRA by the Unionist authorities. Communication and co-operation between IRA units in the North had never been strong; as Tom McNally, a Belfast Volunteer commented: 'We had little association outside of ourselves and we had no faith in other areas.'⁴⁵ The isolated position of the 2nd Northern was exacerbated by the failure of the two pro-Treaty border Divisions to act. The reasons for this remains unclear and Ernest Blythe is the only figure who makes

⁴³ John Cosgrave statement (BMH, NAI, WS 605).

⁴⁴ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

⁴⁵ Tom McNally interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, P17b/99).

reference to it when he states rather vaguely that ‘...a decision appears to have been taken that there would be no fighting on the Border or around it which decision meant that there were no “offensive” operations carried out by the 1st Northern or 1st Midland or 5th Northern.’⁴⁶ Unbeknownst to Blythe however the 1st Northern were effectively split between Joe Sweeney’s local Provisional Government forces, who made no attacks over the border and the Republican-led ‘Joint IRA’ which was poised to strike under Lehane. The inactivity of these border Divisions and the delay in operations in east Ulster goes a long way to explaining the harsh criticisms the 2nd Northern received from the IRA leadership in Belfast. Roger McCorley later claimed that the IRA in the west ‘didn’t go off at all’, while Tom McNally was harsher stating that the 2nd Northern didn’t ‘do a damn thing’.⁴⁷

Such views however were far from the truth as the following RIC report for County Londonderry makes clear: ‘The really serious trouble in the County originated early in the month of May. On the night of 2nd/3rd...the Sinn Feiners carried out a wholesale attack on loyalist property and a number of mills and other buildings were burned or damaged. The police were also attacked at Bellaghy and Ballyronan and a sergeant and three constables were murdered.’⁴⁸ The report added that the IRA were ‘massed on the Border’ and making frequent incursions in the Strabane district. These latter attacks were the work

⁴⁶ Blythe, ‘Memo on the north-east Ulster 1922-26’ (Blythe papers, UCDDAD, P24/554).

⁴⁷ Tom McNally interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/99).

of the men under of Lehane and Daly in Donegal who were finally beginning to make their presence felt along the border.

The 2nd Northern began their offensive as arranged on 2 May with attacks on police barracks at Bellaghy, Draperstown and Coalisland, all of which were beaten off, although at Bellaghy one constable, John Harvey, was shot dead and three others badly wounded. Various key bridges and railway lines were also destroyed on the first night to hinder the government's attempts to move in reinforcements with over sixty feet of railway track alone being removed near Carrickmore. The following day three members of a police patrol were ambushed and fatally wounded at Ballyronan and attacks intensified in the areas around Cookstown and Annaghmore. Again, as in the days of the Belfast Boycott, it was fire which was the principal weapon of the offensive. Numerous mills and creameries were put to the torch, as were the homes of local loyalists and Specials. In one such attack near Annaghmore the IRA, after setting alight the home of one 'B' Special, shot another who had arrived on the scene shortly after and was trying to put out the fire.⁴⁹ Such attacks however could not be sustained for long. The failure of the border Divisions to act, the sluggish activities of the Joint-IRA in Donegal and the postponement of the 3rd Northern offensive left the IRA in the west of the six counties dreadfully exposed. These problems were added to by growing friction

⁴⁸ RUC County Inspector's report (Londonderry), 26 Sept. 1922 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA 32/1/290).

⁴⁹ RIC Bi-monthly report, 16 May 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

between pro-and anti-Treaty units around Dungannon when elements of No.1 Brigade declared their loyalty to their former Divisional O/C, Charlie Daly.⁵⁰

Once again however it was the reaction of the Specials that proved decisive. When the onslaught began it was relentless as the following IRA reports makes clear: 'The morale of the population in the greater part of co. Tyrone and in the overwhelmingly Protestant areas in Co. Derry is not good. Since the burnings and murders became general several families have been living in terror. Many don't go to bed at night fearing they may be burned out under cover of curfew. Families whose homes have been burned depend for shelter on their more fortunate Catholic neighbours or have fled to the Free State, while several young men have gone to England and Scotland.'⁵¹ On 6 May two Catholics, John Carolan, a school-teacher, and his nephew Denis Gilmartin, were dragged from their home by a party of armed men and shot dead in the street; their bodies were later found dumped in a flaxhole.⁵² Five days later on 11 May a gang of masked men entered the home of James McKeown in Magherafelt and directed all male members of the family down stairs. Three of McKeown's sons were shot repeatedly before the gang fled.⁵³ On 19 May the murder gang struck again after the IRA burned a mill near Desertmartin. John

⁵⁰ 2nd Northern Division report, 10 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

⁵¹ 2nd Northern Division report, 26 June 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

⁵² RIC Bi-monthly report, 16 May 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152). *Belfast Telegraph*, 7 May 1922.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, *Belfast Telegraph*, 11 May 1922.

Higgins, his son Frank, Henry McGeehan and James McGeehan were all taken from their home and shot dead in the road. James McGeehan's death was particularly embarrassing for the Unionist authorities as he was an American citizen on holiday visiting his family in the area.⁵⁴

The offensive did little but to further increase the hatred between the unionist and nationalist communities. As in the spring of 1921 violence and confrontation came to areas which had previously lived harmoniously: 'In the Maghera district of Co. Derry a large number of Protestants were in the habit of cutting turf at Glenshane Mountain (a Catholic District) but this season only a few ventured to come near the territory.'⁵⁵ This sense of fear was increased when the IRA took the opportunity offered by the offensive to deal with its enemies in the Catholic community. For example on 3 May the AOH hall in Coalisland was burned down and three days later a Jewish man, Israel Sagarsky, was found dead with a label tied to his wrist reading 'Convicted Spy'. Sagarsky, a native of Manchester, was said to have bragged that he was a 'Secret Service' agent although it appears unlikely he had any connection with the security forces and may have had mental health problems.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Irish News*, 22 May 1922; *Derry Standard*, 22 May 1922.

⁵⁵ 2nd Northern Division report, 26 June 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

⁵⁶ 'Report on deaths in Northern Ireland Nov. 1921-July 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/219). See also RIC Bi-monthly report, 16 May 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

The intense pressures on the isolated 2nd Northern Division meant that by the time the 3rd Northern offensive had got underway in late-May the IRA in the west of the six counties had already virtually collapsed. By the end of June the Division reported that all IRA activities, both pro-and anti-Treaty, had ceased. A report from No2 Brigade pronounced vaguely and desperately: 'The Brigade is not working properly.'⁵⁷ Many of the Volunteers chose to flee west over the border and join up with the Lehane and Daly in Donegal adding even further confusion to the increasingly tense situation in the county.

While the offensive in the west of the six counties began to flag, and its Volunteers were either arrested or fled west into Donegal, the 3rd Northern Division began their operations on the amended start date. The bold idea of Seamus Woods to attack Musgrave Street Barracks, which had caused such confusion earlier in the month, was attempted in the early hours of 18 May. The aim of the attack was to steal eight Lancia cars and four armoured cars along with other weaponry for use in the coming offensive.⁵⁸ In preparation for the attack IRA drivers had been sent over the border into Monaghan to learn how to operate the vehicles.⁵⁹ The IRA raiding party was led by Woods and McCorley in person and consisted of twenty-one officers from the Belfast City Guard, the brigade's new Active Service Unit.

⁵⁷ 2nd Northern Division report, 26 June 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

⁵⁸ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

⁵⁹ Thomas Fitzpatrick statement (BMH, NA, WS 395).

Earlier the previous evening Woods led the men into a school across from the barracks and hid there until 3.35am in order to avoid the curfew. A sympathetic RIC officer let them into the barracks through the rear of the building. Woods split his men up into two parties. The first, which he commanded himself, proceeded to the arms room where an RIC Sergeant was captured whilst the second, under McCorley broke into the guardroom where two Constables, Collins and McKeon, were stationed. The careful planning of Woods however would be compromised by the brutality of McCorley:

“The first party under Col. Comdt. MacCorley succeeded in disarming Const. Collins; Special Const. McKeon who is 6’2” in height tried to draw his revolver but Col. Comdt. MacCorley got into grips with him and beat him on the head with his revolver causing terrible loss of blood. When Const. Collins saw this he screamed and at once the whole area was awakened...The second party in the Arms Room had the Sergt. bound up and were preparing to tie the rifles in bundles of six and put revolvers into sacks. I was at this time trying to get the armoured cars and Lancias ready for travelling. When the firing started Special Const. McKeon tried to draw an Auto from his pocket and run but Col. Comdt. MacCorley dropped him.

Collins also tried to draw an Auto and run but Capt. Murray dropped him- fatally wounding him.’⁶⁰

McCorley had been hit in the crossfire and with the garrison now alerted Woods decided to cut his losses and flee with his men after failing to capture any of the intended weapons.

The reaction of the Specials to the attack was predictably brutal. Woods and his party fled to the Lower Falls area arriving around 3.55am. He later reported: ‘...the area was flooded with Lancia and Armoured cars filled with Specials. They swept the streets with machine gun fire and for three quarters of an hour the area was a regular battlefield...The whole Loyalist population is at a loss to know how such a raid could be attempted during curfew hours... They are in a state of panic.’⁶¹ It was the Catholic population of the city however who would experience real panic with twenty-two people being killed over the next two days. From the start of the offensive until the end of June the city would be engulfed in brutal mob violence leaving 82 people dead (52 of whom were Catholics) and numerous buildings damaged or destroyed by fire. The members of the Belfast City Guard were responsible for the arson campaign, carrying out attacks on unionist businesses and symbolic targets such as Orange lodges and the ancestral homes of Ulster’s elite. Warehouses, factories, mills, corporation buildings and stores, tramway depots, distilleries and railway goods yards were all targeted

⁶⁰ Woods to Mulcahy, 19 May 1922 (Mulcahy papers, P7a/173).

in the attacks.⁶² These activities were matched by those of the loyalist mobs who continued to use fire to purge mixed areas of Catholic families.

Despite the failure of the attack on Musgrave Street Barracks the 3rd Northern began widespread operations on the following day although co-ordination between Divisions was again the biggest problem. Woods later reported: 'Each Brigade made a good start and the men were in great spirits anxious to go ahead, but in a few days the enemy forces began to pour into our area as no other Divisions were making a move. Things became so bad in No.3 (East Down) Brigade where lorry loads of Specials were coming from Newry (4th Northern Divisional area) that on the 24th May the Divisional V/C [Vice-Commandant] went and saw the Chief of Staff. The Chief of Staff said he would order out the 4th Northern immediately; we kept the men in No.3 [Brigade] under arms in the hope of the enemy having to bring back their Specials to Newry.'⁶³

Indeed despite their detailed preparations the 4th Northern Division had failed to act. The men had planned a co-ordinated strike on Monday 22 May and were assembled in large well-equipped columns throughout Armagh and South Down. However Aiken had a last-minute change of heart and only hours before the planned operations

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

⁶³ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, P7/B/77).

were set to start sent orders cancelling the offensive in his Division. John Cosgrave, the leader of one of these columns, stated that he and his men were waiting in their assembly areas to move out on 22 May when the countermanding order arrived just before noon.⁶⁴

Patrick Casey, O/C of the South Down Brigade, was bemused by the last-minute cancellation:

‘I returned to Dundalk that evening as directed and I saw Frank Aiken. I asked him what was the position and he replied that our Division was taking no part in the rising, but that there was no cancellation so far as the remainder of the Northern counties were concerned. He gave as his reason the fact that the Armagh Brigade was not fully equipped and for that reason he felt justified in withdrawing his Division from action. I pointed out that the South Down Brigade was fully armed and that we should be permitted to take our part. He was, however, adamant and his orders were paramount. I told him also that our failure (Armagh and South Down) would mean, if nothing else, increased concentration of enemy forces in the other northern counties, but this aspect of things did not appear to interest him. On the following morning the rising in the rest of the Six County area did take place and was quickly suppressed with considerable loss of life and arms on our part. I could never understand Aiken’s real motive in not fighting his Division on

⁶⁴ John Cosgrave statement (BMH, NA, WS 605).

this important occasion. He remained in Dundalk barracks inactive and remote from his command and so petered out this latest, and maybe the last, rising in the Ulster area.’⁶⁵

With the Northern government’s introduction of internment on the same evening that Aiken called off the operations the Specials were able to pour into Armagh and South Down unopposed, making numerous arrests of the inactive members of the IRA columns. Other IRA units managed to flee south over the border where they set up a number of camps in Monaghan and Louth. One of the main bases was at Dungooley in North Louth. From here around 150 full-time IRA men would launch raids into South Armagh or attend weapons training in Dundalk: ‘The objective aimed at in all this intensive training was to turn out soldiers as well trained in the military sense and fitter in the physical sense than the British Forces we hoped to meet in the North.’⁶⁶ In Dungooley a special column of fifty men was organised, each member was fully equipped with a revolver and rifle and as John Grant, one of its members claims, better equipped than their British opponents over the border.⁶⁷

Although the offensive had been cancelled these columns were detailed to move into South Armagh and South Down to protect the Catholic population. This defensive operation also involved once again

⁶⁵ Patrick Casey statement (BMH, NA, WS 1148).

⁶⁶ John Grant statement (BMH, NA, WS 658).

⁶⁷ Ibid.

the kidnapping of prominent unionists in the area as hostages. Numerous such men were taken to Dundalk only to be released by Dan Hogan in mid-August after his pro-Treaty Division had taken control of the town.⁶⁸ Many of the attacks in Armagh were ad-hoc and opportunistic with small parties of IRA men moving across the border to await a chance to disarm, kidnap or shoot crown forces. The attacks were effectively a resumption of the border campaign of early 1922 and similarly characterised as a constant, niggling war of intimidation and reprisal.

The 4th Northern Division therefore would only begin its limited offensive in June. The failure of the IRA in Armagh and South Down to join the offensive was quickly made up for however by the brutal nature of these new attacks. The victims included not only the USC but also members of the Catholic community and above all innocent Protestant civilians. On 3 June two Newry Volunteers, Eddie O'Hare and Edward Fullerton, shot dead James Woulfe Flanagan, a Resident magistrate in the city.⁶⁹ Two days later a Special Constable, Thomas Sheridan, was shot dead at Annaghmore. In response the USC closed all of the bridges crossing the Newry Canal, effectively cutting the Division in two, and began a series of systematic and brutal raids in the border areas. Many young Catholic men were forced to cross the border each evening to sleep, with the poorest making do with barns or farmer's fields. James McElhaw, an IRA officer, commented: 'The

⁶⁸ Ibid.

whole atmosphere of the time as far as the civilian unionist and the civilian nationalist was concerned was one of something unpleasant if not horrible about to take place.’⁷⁰ He was right.

On 14 June the bodies of two Catholics, Thomas Crawley and Patrick Creggan, were found on the Lislea road, four miles from Camlough. Both had been shot through the back of the head. A party of ‘B’ Specials, some of whom were wearing plain clothes, had abducted them the evening before from their homes at Derrymore. Their bodies were deliberately placed over two mine holes, which had been dug by an IRA ambush party a few days previously. The shootings were obviously a reprisal for the increased presence of IRA columns in the area although neither Creggan nor Crawley was a member of the IRA. Creggan’s brother Michael, however, was an active local Volunteer.⁷¹

The IRA response to these shootings was savage. It was decided that an attack should be made on the small village of Altnaveigh, about a mile from Newry. The village was believed to contain the homes of some of the most militant ‘B’ Specials in the area who it was believed had been responsible for the killing of Creggan and Crawley. Indeed Michael Creggan had been arrested in the area in September 1920 and it appeared that the local residents had played a part in the targeting of his brother Patrick.

⁶⁹ Edward Fullerton statement (BMH, NA, WS 890).

⁷⁰ James McElhew statement (BMH, NA, WS 634).

In the early hours of Saturday 17 June a party of IRA men dressed in police uniform left their barracks at Dundalk and crossed over the border into South Armagh. Around 2.40 am a series of raids were launched on a number of isolated Protestant owned farms in the Altnaveigh area. During the attacks six Protestants were dragged from their homes and shot dead. The victims were John Heaslip and his son Robert, James Gray, James Lockhart and a husband and wife Thomas and Eliza Crozier. Four other men were also severely wounded in the attacks. The IRA gang, still in disguise, would continue their reign of terror throughout the early hours of the morning. Attacks were made on the homes of Margaret Reynolds and her neighbours in Derrymore where petrol bombs were thrown through their windows. Bombs were also rigged to the doors of the property and set to explode when the occupant fled from the fire inside. Mercifully both of these devices failed to detonate. Sporadic gun and bomb attacks were also made at Protestant homes in Ballymacdermott although no casualties were reported. A local USC platoon, under District Inspector Greenaway, was also ambushed by the gang at McGillis public house in Dromintee leaving one of the Specials dead. Three days later the bodies of two Specials, William Mitchell and Samuel Young were found near Keady. They had been detailed to defend local farms after the Altnaveigh attacks and had

⁷¹ RIC Bi-monthly report, 30 June 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152). See also *Irish News*, 15 June 1922.

cycled into Keady for supplies where by all accounts they were abducted by the IRA and driven a short distance away to be shot.⁷²

The Altnaveigh attacks caused horror right across Northern Ireland and in the ranks of the IRA itself. Patrick Casey was outraged by the attack: 'I remember that my feeling at this reprisal was one of horror when I heard the details. Nothing could justify this holocaust of unfortunate Protestants. Neither youth nor age was spared and some of the killings took place in the presence of their families. Writing this, 35 years later, I still have the view that it was a horrible affair- nothing could justify such a killing of unarmed people and I was surprised at the time that Frank Aiken had planned and authorised this.'⁷³ John McCoy, later reflected on the Altnaveigh attacks stating that they '...should be object lesson to the people of the North who are led to take offensive action against their fellow countrymen who have a different political outlook or worship at a different church.'⁷⁴

The killings at Altnaveigh united moderate members of both communities in grief as James McElhaw recalled:

'The fear inspired by Altnaveigh and what had gone before was not confined to any one party or section of the community. All were afraid of what was to come next. In neighbouring districts around Newry, Bessbrook and Altnaveigh area all the male

⁷² Ibid. See also *Irish News*, 18 June 1922, *Belfast Newsletter*, 18 June 1922.

⁷³ Patrick Casey statement (BMH, NA, WS 1148).

⁷⁴ John McCoy interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/116).

civilian population evacuated their houses at night and slept out in the fields. This state of affairs soon produced strange bed fellows for the Nationalists which included Hibernians and Republicans and the Unionists and Orangemen went together in many instances for company when sleeping out and promised each other protection, as for instance, the Unionists promised their Nationalist friends protection if the Specials come along and the Nationalists promised vice versa if the IRA arrived on the scene.’⁷⁵

The sectarian character of the attacks in Armagh was an ominous sign for the future and had already been preceded by similar IRA actions in Belfast including, once again, attempts to bomb trams filled with Protestant shipyard workers.⁷⁶ Joe Murray believed that most of the attacks were carried out by members of the Catholic mobs who had joined the IRA during the Truce and whose only motive was revenge against their enemies in the Protestant population. He was unhappy about the poor discipline of certain members of the Volunteers: ‘These reprisals were generally unofficial, there was a tendency on the part of some of our members to take strong action against the unionists and against official orders. For instance, a party of nationalists on a reprisal for the sniping of a catholic woman in York Street, Belfast, carried out a raid on the unionist quarters and entering a cooperage they lined up the five employees and shot them.

⁷⁵ James McElhew statement (BMH, NA, WS 634).

Four of the victims of this attack died.’ He continued: ‘The officers of the IRA were now beginning to find some difficulty in maintaining control of the rank and file. This only applied to the post-Truce element of our membership.’⁷⁷

With the offensive beginning too early in the west and not at all in Armagh and South Down it was the 3rd Northern Division that would have to bear the brunt of the fighting. Woods later reported to Mulcahy that a fortnight after the attack on Musgrave Street Barracks ‘...as nothing was happening in other areas, we found it necessary to disband the Columns and leave the men in groups of three or more to move about as best they could, in the hope of re-mobilising them when operations became general. After a period of over five weeks the demoralisation has practically completed its work and the position in Nos. 2 and 3 Brigades to-day is that the Military Organisation is almost destroyed.’⁷⁸ The adjutant of the 3rd Northern Division echoed this view: ‘Owing to increased enemy activity consequent to operations carried out during month of May, it has been almost impossible to do anything in No.2 and No.3 Brigade areas.’⁷⁹

The Belfast IRA felt isolated and alone: ‘...the men see no sign of receiving any support from any of the other Northern Divisions inside the Six-County area, and that they can get no guarantee from their

⁷⁶ *Belfast Telegraph*, 12 May 1922.

⁷⁷ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NAI, WS 412).

⁷⁸ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, P7/B/77).

officers that these Divisions are going to assist in the future, in order to withdraw the enemy activity... [This] is having a very serious effect upon the morale of our troops in these areas.’⁸⁰ The failure of the other Divisions to act he felt meant that ‘...the enemy were able to pour in lorries of troops from the neighbouring Divisions, owing to the latter’s inactivity.’ Three trainloads of Specials were pouring into Belfast each day during the offensive and the bright evenings of May and June made it difficult for the IRA to travel to different areas to provide assistance or to get help into Belfast.⁸¹

Outside of Belfast and East Down the 2nd Brigade of the 3rd Northern Division in Antrim suffered a similar fate. Away from the grand schemes of Collins and Lynch the reality of the combined operations in May was one of small-scale attacks followed by a brutal backlash from the Unionist authorities. Antrim was arguably the most difficult county in Ireland for the IRA to operate. Its population was nearly 80% Protestant and the small Catholic population of less than 40,000 were heavily concentrated in the Glens in the north of the county. IRA activity in Antrim had been virtually non-existent until the time of the May offensive. The focus of events had always been south in Belfast and it was from there that the Antrim IRA drew its leadership. Thomas Fitzpatrick and his close colleague Felix McCorley had been placed in

⁷⁹ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to Mulcahy, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Roger McCorley statement (BMH, NAI, WS 389).

charge of the brigade in 1921.⁸² Despite the title 'Brigade' the Antrim IRA in June 1921 consisted of only 107 members and of these only a small number were active. With the arrival of the Truce however the brigade had over doubled in size reaching around 260 members by August 1921.⁸³

The offensive got under way as planned on 19 May. It was to last for approximately one week with virtually all of the violence confined to the first two days, more IRA activity than Antrim had seen over the previous two years. Operations began with an attack on Martinstown Barracks which quickly turned into a siege. The IRA column led by Fitzpatrick drove into the town and broke into the Railway Hotel next door with another group attacking the barracks directly. The assault lasted for approximately two hours, from 11pm-1am, although a combined force of RIC and Specials numbering seven managed to hold out and send up Verey lights to call for help. Reinforcements soon arrived from Ballymena, although they were delayed by an attempted ambush along the way. By the time they arrived the IRA had fled and the barracks remained intact.⁸⁴

The next day saw the most intense period of activity with attacks launched on Ballycastle and Cushendall barracks and a large number of arson attacks and raids on banks and post offices. The telegraph

⁸² Thomas Fitzpatrick statement (BMH, NAI, WS 395).

⁸³ Divisional Strengths, 27 August 1921, (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/A/23).

⁸⁴ *Belfast Telegraph*, 20 May 1922.

office, bookstall and stationmaster's office at Ballymena railway station were also burned in the early hours of 20 May. Antrim would also see the largest number of attacks on 'big houses', the great symbols of unionist authority. On 20 May Crebilly castle was burned, as was the home of Unionist MP Ronald McNeill. On the same night Shane's Castle, the residence of Lord O'Neill, was also attacked. Around twenty IRA men entered the watchman's hut and blindfolded the guard. They then took his keys and removed Lord and Lady O'Neill and all their servants to the kitchen where they were locked up. One of the servants was shot and wounded for trying to resist. The residence was then burned to the ground.⁸⁵

Such high profile attacks however were not sustainable. With Specials now pouring into Antrim the 2nd Brigade began to disintegrate and a decision was made to dump all arms and to go on the run. A small number of die-hards held out for a few more days but to all intents and purposes the offensive in Antrim was over. The attacks would be paid for a month later on 23 June when three Catholics John Gore, John Hill and James McAllister, only one of whom was in the IRA, were shot dead by Specials in Cushendall.⁸⁶ Apart from sporadic attacks in South Armagh and the as yet untried Joint-IRA units in Donegal, Belfast was the only place in the North where IRA activity still remained a threat.

⁸⁵ File on violence in Antrim (Ministry of Home affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/222 and HA/5/225).

⁸⁶ Farrell, *Arming the Protestants*, p. 163-6. Thomas Fitzpatrick statement (BMH, NAI, WS 395). See also Felim MacGuill statement (BMH, NA, WS 609).

The difficulties caused by the enormous rise in the number of Unionist government forces in east Ulster were added to by the increasingly extreme tactics of the anti-Treaty IRA in the city. The forces loyal to GHQ now faced an enemy within who inspired as much hatred as did their unionist opponents, a view expressed graphically by one battalion officer: 'The Executive forces in our area are composed of men who were court-martialled for drunkenness and various other offences and put out of the IRA. These men recruited from the Civilian population several desperados, who are there merely for the sake of getting a gun for a hold up and serve their own purposes. Only six IRA men turned to the Executive forces from our battalion. Some of them admitted they joined the Executive forces for financial reasons.'⁸⁷

The activities of the anti-Treaty IRA would do even further damage to the already fragile relationship between the Catholic population and the IRA as noted in a report from the Divisional Adjutant: 'The operations of the Executive forces have been the cause of trouble to our troops since their formation. They have been ill-timed and carried out in places which afforded the least danger. The men who were responsible have shown no consideration whatever for the civil population, they have destroyed their morale and have turned them against the IRA in general. The Catholic people in Belfast are not yet

so far advanced as to be able to distinguish between the Executive and the Official IRA and the present position of the Division we can not explain it to them, consequently...the majority of the civil population look upon all as the IRA and condemn all accordingly.’⁸⁸

These ill-timed activities included an attack on two Specials in the Millfield area of Belfast on 31 May, one of whom, Andrew Roulston, died later in hospital. The brutal reaction to this attack would make the final day in May one of the worst since the offensive began. Eleven people were killed that evening, nine of them Catholics with over fifty others wounded. The Specials, as Woods later reported, ‘...ran amok and shot up practically every Catholic area in the city... This was the hardest blow the civil population had got and it almost broke their morale.’⁸⁹ Indeed many members of the USC, angry and frustrated, joined with loyalist mobs in looting and burning Catholic homes and businesses. Around 10.15pm a group of Specials raided and looted houses in King Street where three Catholic boys, the oldest of whom was fourteen, were beaten up and put against a wall in a mock execution. The Specials, having looted a Catholic pub, then stayed in the street shooting and drinking into the early hours.⁹⁰ In Grosvenor Street, cheering crowds of loyalists burned down a number of Catholic homes forcing many elderly people to flee to safety in their night-

⁸⁷ Report from Adjutant, No.2 Battalion, Belfast Brigade, 26 June 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

⁸⁸ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to Mulcahy, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

⁸⁹ Woods to Mulcahy, 29 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, P7/B/77).

clothes.⁹¹ Areas around the Lower Falls and Old Lodge Road were subject to savage attacks by Protestant mobs. At the house of Dr McSorley in Donegall Pass his housekeeper was covered in petrol and set on fire after being brutally beaten.⁹² Over 100 Catholics were forced to flee the Carrick Hill area, many leaving Belfast overnight for Glasgow despite the vain attempts of local IRA units to hold off the attackers.⁹³

Further anti-Treaty IRA attacks occurred in June although their targeting of Catholic civilians also rose dramatically. Financial gain appeared to be the prime motive for their activities. Anderson's feltworks in the Short Strand, a Catholic business, was robbed of £350 by a gang of armed men. Similarly on the 13 of June the anti-Treaty IRA burned down the business premises of a Mr. McLardy in Russell Street causing bitter resentment in the local Catholic community, many of whom were employed by the company.⁹⁴ The Noble stables in Seaforde Street were also burnt down killing thirteen horses. The IRA adjutant for the area later reported the effects of this attack: 'This brutal deed has caused widespread hostility to our forces on the part of the Catholic population.'⁹⁵ The building had also

⁹⁰ For these incidents and the differing perspectives of both sides on the violence in June see Belfast Brigade report, June 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/77), 'Incidents-June 1922' (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/151B).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Report from Adjutant, No.2 Battalion, Belfast Brigade (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/77). For details of the 31 May shootings and subsequent violence see *Irish News*, 1 June 1922.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

offered cover against loyalist snipers who could now fire right up the length of Seaforde Street into the heart of the nationalist district.

Protestants also suffered severe attacks. In one instance the cottage of a Mrs Thompson was raided on 6 June by armed men who demanded money. When she refused she was dragged out into the street and beaten up.⁹⁶ Bank raids and attacks on postmen also rose markedly and many Catholic businesses were forced to hand over their takings to IRA gunmen. In response to these attacks the 'official' IRA arrested some Republican officers who responded in kind by kidnapping the vice- O/C and Intelligence Officer of the 1st Battalion. The Divisional Adjutant reported: 'This act almost led to bloodshed, as our troops were forced to take precautionary aggressive measures in the event of the officers not being released.'⁹⁷

Whether such attacks were indeed the work of the anti-Treaty IRA as Woods claimed was increasingly unclear and, in the unrelenting savagery of late May and early June, increasingly irrelevant. The enormous death toll and increase in the number of savage reprisals meant that the days of the offensive were numbered although it was the reaction of the authorities to the assassination of Unionist MP William Twaddell on 22 May which would have the most far-reaching impact. Twaddell was confronted by four men in North Street around 10.30 am after leaving his shop on Lower Garfield Street. He was shot

in the chest and in the back and was finished off with six bullets whilst lying on the ground.⁹⁸ As with the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson in London almost a month later, ironically similarly carried out by an individual with a wooden leg, the killing of Twaddell inspired decisive action from the Unionist government.⁹⁹ With parts of the province now descending into virtual anarchy, and fears increasing over the apparent political unity in the South with the electoral pact between Collins and de Valera, the Special Powers Act was brought into full operation.¹⁰⁰

For the British government in London of far more concern were the activities of the IRA far to the west in Fermanagh. The county had remained extremely quiet during the offensive and it appears that the paralysis which had gripped the border Divisions had put paid to the possibility of any concerted IRA attacks in the area. Ironically however it was here that one of the most dramatic events of the offensive took place around the small border villages of Belleek and Pettigo. The origin of the fighting over the small salient of land on the western side of Lough Erne was the dramatic collapse of the IRA's 2nd Northern Division in early May. The constant pressure on the Volunteers in Tyrone and Londonderry led to a decision by those IRA men not yet

⁹⁶ 'Incidents-June 1922' (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/151B).

⁹⁷ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to Mulcahy, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

⁹⁸ *Belfast Newsletter*, 23 May 1922; file on Twaddell (Ministry of Home Affairs, PRONI, HA/5/224).

⁹⁹ Michael Pratley, a Belfast Volunteer, was accused of the murder of Twaddell by a witness who claims to have seen him escaping although the case was never proven. Seamus Woods was also charged for the shooting although the case quickly collapsed. See *Belfast Telegraph*, 27 March 1924; also see file on Twaddell (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/224).

interned to head west into Donegal to regroup and seek assistance from Lehane and Daly. Many headed for Derry whilst others, mostly from Tyrone, made their way to the border crossing at Pettigo. Since the border campaign had started the frontier itself had become extremely ill-defined with border posts largely abandoned and small parties of IRA and Specials roaming the frontier areas exchanging fire and insults in acts of threatening bravado. The Unionist government's decision to finally stamp its authority on its territory after the shooting of Twaddell led to a reassertion of its territorial responsibilities. This decision, along with the arrival of large numbers of six county Volunteers in the area, would lead to a weeklong battle for the Belleek-Pettigo triangle.

The Tyrone Volunteers who arrived into Pettigo in late May were welcomed by the local anti-Treaty IRA leader Danny Gallagher who set them up in the local barracks. Nicholas Smyth, O/C of the newly arrived Northerners attempted to contact Charlie Daly and made a visit to meet him at Bundoran. Daly however had already left on a tour of Donegal with Sean MacEoin, obviously as part of the wider planning for the attacks soon to be launched across the border; as Smyth himself stated: 'I had great hopes they were planning something big for the Six-Counties.'¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ See T. Towey 'The Reaction of the British Government to the 1922 Collins-De Valera Pact' *Irish Historical studies*, vol. xxii, no. 85, March 1980.

¹⁰¹ Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721).

Life for the Tyrone men in Pettigo was dull and monotonous at first as they patrolled the streets of the village and set about training for some unspecified future time when they would move back into Northern Ireland. On Saturday 27 May however this quiet situation changed dramatically. A large party of Specials, numbering around 100, crossed Lough Erne in a pleasure steamer *The Lady of the Lake* and landed near Belleek. They proceeded to take over Magherameena Castle as their headquarters only to be attacked by a large IRA patrol. The Specials decided to retreat back over Lough Erne eventually landing on Buck Island. The following day a relief column of Specials attempted a rescue but they were ambushed and forced to pull back with one casualty. The Specials then began to move on Pettigo whilst the IRA moved to block all of the bridges crossing from Fermanagh into the salient.¹⁰²

In Pettigo itself the IRA made hasty preparations to resist the attack as Smyth himself recalls: 'The tension was great. The whole town had become very quiet and you could hear a pin drop when suddenly a shot rang out somewhere up the street. This was followed by three or four more single ones. This seemed to signal, because the whole place became alive with sound in a few minutes. Bullets were hitting the wall just over our heads and large lumps of lead were dropping on top of us. Our rifles were soon too hot to hold and the air was filled with

¹⁰² J. Cunningham, 'The Struggle for the Belleek-Pettigo Salient, 1922' in *Donegal Annual*, 34, 1982.

the smell of cordite. We had 100 rounds of ammunition each and most of it was gone before the enemy withdrew.’¹⁰³

Sporadic gun battles continued around Pettigo throughout the next twenty-four hours with the Specials eventually retreating. Over the following few days British Army units began to arrive in large numbers. On Thursday 1 June a combined force of Specials and military made a concerted effort to take the town but fell back again under heavy fire from the IRA. A group of Specials in an attempt to enter the salient from the west moved into Donegal territory at Waterfoot and shot two local girls in the villages of Lettercan. The 100 strong IRA garrison in Pettigo were by now virtually surrounded and on Saturday 3 June the final attack came with the British launching a heavy artillery bombardment on the village and a simultaneous assault along the Belleek road. The British use of artillery proved decisive with three IRA men dying in the attack. A number of Provisional Government soldiers, who had moved in to occupy Belleek Fort, were also shelled out of their position. The Northerners, around fifty of who were forced to surrender, had little choice but to evacuate the area and escape into Donegal.¹⁰⁴

The fifty or so Tyrone men who had managed to escape from Pettigo were picked up by Provisional Government troops and driven to

¹⁰³ Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721).

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. See also joint account of the affair by John Travers, James Scollan, Nicholas Smyth, Denis Monaghan, Felix McCabe (BMH, NAI, WS 711).

Donegal town where they occupied the workhouse as a temporary barracks. After a few weeks they felt ready to go back on the offensive: ‘...we made a plan to go back to the north and collect some rifles and revolvers which had been dumped. It is very difficult now to visualise what our intentions really were in going to procure the arms in the north. Our sympathies were with the republicans in their fight in the south, but our keenest interest was our own job in the north.’¹⁰⁵ Before they could carry out this scheme however local Provisional Government troops were ordered to place them under arrest and they were moved en masse to the internment camp at Finner.

In purely military terms the Belleek- Pettigo incident was the closest the Northern IRA came to engaging in a pitched battle with regular British soldiers. In itself, whilst having its dramatic moments, it was little more than a local skirmish. As Moss Twomey later wryly observed: ‘There were quite a few “invasions” of Fermanagh.’¹⁰⁶ The incident however was significant for a number of reasons. It was the first time since the summer of 1920 that the British Army had become directly involved in the fighting, a fact which led Collins to complain: ‘British troops who have hesitated with commendable patience for many months against savage anti-Catholic mobs in Belfast, have shown an astonishing readiness to become involved with our troops on the six-county border line.’¹⁰⁷ Its impact on the British

¹⁰⁵ Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 609).

¹⁰⁶ Moss Twomey to O’Donoghue, 10 Sept. 1953 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS 31421).

¹⁰⁷ Collins quoted in Phoenix, *Northern Nationalism* p. 231.

government was also significant and it increased tensions between London and Dublin dramatically. Lloyd George wrote to Churchill: 'Our Ulster case is not a good one', warning his colleague to '...keep to the high ground of the Treaty-the Crown, the Empire. There we are unassailable. But if you come down from that height and fight in the swamps of Lough Erne you will be overwhelmed.'¹⁰⁸ Indeed Mossy Donegan later wrote that the Belleek-Pettigo affair was exactly the kind of incident that the joint-IRA policy had been set up to provoke.¹⁰⁹ It was the necessary involvement of British troops however that caused most concern in London.

British frustration had been steadily growing at the excesses of the Specials and the Northern government's failure to establish peace in the province. The Belleek- Pettigo incident seemed to confirm their fears. Lloyd George complained angrily: 'We have surely done everything that Ulster can possibly expect to ensure its security. Fifty-seven thousand armed men ought to be equal to the protection of so small a territory. If they require any more they can get them. It is our own business as a great Empire to be strictly impartial in our attitude towards all creeds.'¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* p.86. For an insight into the dramatic effects of the crisis on the relationship between London and Dublin see *The Times*, 1 June 1922. An indication of the extent of the pressure on Collins and a contributing factor to the Provisional Government's subsequent 'peace policy' is obvious in his comments on the need to 'conciliate the Northern Unionists' in the *Irish News*, 10 June 1922.

¹⁰⁹ Donegan to Lehane, 15 Sept. 1950 (O'Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31423 [6]).

¹¹⁰ Quoted in Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* p.86.

In response to such concerns, and by way of assuaging Collins' constant demands for a public enquiry into the Belfast violence, the British Cabinet instructed Stephen Tallents, a leading civil servant and secretary to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, to investigate the workings of the Unionist government and the progress of the Second Craig-Collins pact. On the latter point he concluded shrewdly that the agreement failed '...because it dealt with minor issues before the major issues, which really governed them, were decided. The future of the Provisional Government seemed to be in the balance; the Northern Government was not acknowledged by the Catholic minority in the Six-Counties; Southern Ireland was unsettled; the Boundary Commission under Clause 12 of the Treaty loomed, and still looms ahead and the organised conspiracy of violence to make the Government of Northern Ireland impossible was intensified in May. In currents such as these the light anchors of the March Agreement were soon swept away.'¹¹¹ Tallents was also very critical of the 'B' Specials and particularly of Dawson Bates: 'If I had to choose a precise wish for immediate fulfilment in Northern Ireland, my first selection would be the kindly removal of the present Minister of Home Affairs to a less responsible ministry.'¹¹² Tallents' arrival in the North however coincided with the apogee of the IRA offensive and as such occurred at the worst possible time for a favourable response to the complaints of the Catholic community. Churchill himself stated: 'The prime and continuous cause of all the horrors which have taken place in Belfast

¹¹¹ Tallents to Masterson-Smyth, 4 July 1922 (PRO, CO/906/30).

is the organisation of two divisions of the Irish Republican Army in the Northern Territory and the continuous efforts by extreme partisans in the South.’¹¹³

The desperate brutality which the offensive had inspired in Belfast had pushed the British government, as in 1972, to contemplate the viability of the Northern Irish government and as such the Northern IRA had by a circuitous route and almost in spite of themselves, come very close to success. Seamus McGovern, the 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant, stated that middle-class Protestants were wary over the excesses of the Specials and fearful that they would be the next targets of the Orange mob. He also felt that Protestant businessmen were concerned over the damage that the IRA’s arson campaign was having on the economy. This, he wrote, ‘...shows up how near we are to victory provided that the Six County problem is concentrated on by all concerned.’¹¹⁴

However this was not to happen and it was the final act of Collins’ aggressive Northern policy, the organising of the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson, the military advisor to the Northern government, in London on 22 June, that would turn British attention away from the internal workings of the Unionist government to the chaotic situation

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Quoted in Coogan, *Michael Collins* p.364.

¹¹⁴ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to GHQ, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

south of the border.¹¹⁵ Under immense pressure from London the Provisional Government ordered its forces to attack the anti-Treaty IRA headquarters at the Four Courts in Dublin, thus beginning the Irish Civil War. In the midst of this new conflict the political situation in the six counties receded into the background. For the Northern IRA itself what followed would be little short of tragedy.

¹¹⁵ Hopkinson, *Green Against Green* pp.112-4. Peter Hart has recently challenged the vies that Collins was involved in the plot; see P. Hart, 'Michael Collins and the assassination of Sir Henry Wilson', *Irish Historical Studies*, xxviii, no.110 (Nov. 1992).

PART III

DEFEAT

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ARMY OF THE NORTH

Nowhere better was the tragic collapse of the Northern IRA demonstrated than in Donegal, where the IRB's joint-IRA policy collapsed in ignominy and brutal recrimination. The events themselves are extremely confusing, mainly due to the presence of so many different IRA contingents in the county: Sean Lehane and his Cork officers, the local Donegal IRA, refugees from the west of the six counties and numerous other small parties and individuals from as far afield as Kerry. All of these groups had come north to fight the Unionist government although their conflicting loyalties and motives would cripple the offensive almost before it began. It was the outbreak of the Civil War that would finally seal its fate.

One of the major problems for the joint-IRA offensive was timing. Although fundamentally a part of the same scheme as the May Operations, which saw attacks launched within the six counties itself, the Donegal part of the plan did not get fully underway until many weeks later. Mossy Donegan, one of Lehane's key deputies, recalls that he and his fellow Cork officers only left for Dublin in May.¹ By the time operations began in Donegal the 2nd and 3rd Northern Divisions were already virtually defeated and internment was well underway. The main reasons for this delay were the ongoing discussions taking place at the Four Courts between Michael Collins and the Executive IRA leadership centring around a common policy on the North and an end to the threat of civil war. These convoluted debates would

continue right up to the hour of the attack on the Four Courts and Lehane was forced to travel repeatedly between Donegal and Dublin in order to obtain the final go-ahead. Lehane himself was a key participant in these truce discussions. According to Sean MacBride, his efforts to secure some kind of reconciliation led him to attend the famous meeting of anti-Treaty leaders with de Valera, Liam Deasy and Gibbs Ross at Beal na Blath, held ironically only a few days before the most important advocate of joint-IRA co-operation, Michael Collins, was killed at the same location.²

The day before the Four Courts was attacked the unified Northern offensive was still the great hope to avert confrontation. Moss Twomey recalls Dick Barrett returning to the Four Courts after midnight and ‘...his joyful reaction to the news that the breach was being healed, and to give a push for full support of Lehane and the others who were ready to leave’. According to Twomey an agreement was reached that very night: ‘I recalled they (the two Liams) [i.e. Deasy and Mellows] saying that everything would now be fixed up again...I believe that agreement revolved around a common policy of war on the British in the Six Counties.’³ The bombardment of the Four Courts however would begin only a few hours later. One of the great ironies of this event was that the huge explosion that destroyed the building was

¹ Mossy Donegan to Florence O’Donoghue, 27 Aug. 1950 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, M531421).

² Sean MacBride quoted in McEoin, *Survivors*, p.257.

³ Moss Twomey to O’Donoghue, 5 July 1952 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31421).

caused, at least in part, by the igniting of lorries filled with mines preparing to head north to Donegal.⁴

Despite the delays, and the absence of key figures for long periods in the south, many attacks had already been launched. Indeed the early signs for the joint-IRA offensive seemed promising as the following report in *The Times* for June 1st makes clear:

‘Reports continue to reach the city of the commandeering by irregular IRA troops in Co. Donegal of food from Unionists, and refugees from that county are arriving daily...petrol is reported to be running short for the I.R.A. motors in Donegal, and I hear that the authorities are considering the question of prohibiting consignments of petrol leaving the Northern area...Extraordinary rumours reached Derry to-day from Strabane, describing a Sinn Fein attack on the town. The position really is that trenches exist on each end of Lifford Bridge, which forms, the boundary and that police replied to Sinn Fein fire throughout last night and until 5 o’clock this morning.’⁵

The reporter also showed a keen understanding of the nature of the forces engaged in these attacks: ‘It is understood that at Lifford Bridge the regular and irregular I.R.A. forces are working together.’⁶

⁴ Donegan to Lehane, 15 Aug. 1950 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31423).

⁵ *The Times*, 1 June 1922.

⁶ *Ibid.*

James McElduff, a 2nd Northern Division officer, himself took part in these operations: ‘Sean Lehane planned a series of attacks with mines along the border. I can remember filling them with the war flour. Sean Lehane came in then, “are you fit for the border”, he said, “I am fit”, said I, “we are attacking Bishmount and will try to push on as far as Castlederg”. Me and a chap called Ted Devlin went down to Clady, but something went amiss because the column was nearly surrounded near Derry and we had to retreat again.’⁷ Lehane himself later stated: ‘We went as ordered and carried out our instructions as far as possible. There were plenty of incidents to show that, it was for the officers concerned, a period of crowded active hostility.’⁸ Mossy Donegan later complained that he had too few men to make the kind of dramatic attacks he had envisaged: ‘Hit and away activities at posts on or inside the border, destruction of block Houses, upsetting communications, such are the types of activities carried on.’⁹ The attacks certainly caused concern for the Unionist authorities. Even as late as September the RUC at Limavady were reported to ‘...have received information from a fairly reliable source...that a secret society is being formed at present at Moville, the object of same being to send small parties across the Foyle to Ulster territory and burn homesteads of Protestant people’.¹⁰

⁷ James McElduff quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors*, p.180.

⁸ Lehane to Military Pensions Board, 7 March 1935 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31340).

⁹ Donegan to Lehane, 15 Aug. 1950 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31423).

¹⁰ County Inspector’s report (Londonderry), Sept. 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/32/1/290).

Time however was not on Lehane's side. Even before the Civil War began tensions in Donegal had been running high and members of Lehane's forces were constantly harried and arrested by Provisional Government troops. McElduff was himself captured at Ballybofey although as he recalls: 'We were not held long...Lehane heard about us in Raphoe, he sent a warning to the Free-State Captain, and we were released. The Civil War had not yet started.'¹¹ Similarly Northern security forces, having finally gained the upper hand in the east of the six counties, could now turn their attention to their exposed western borders. As such the majority of the fighting appears to have been attacks on railways and communications and sniping at military posts across the border. Whilst such attacks fell far short of the virtual invasion of the North that was for some implicit in the aims of the offensive it did keep the Northern situation on the boil and theoretically at least provided a rallying point for the two bitterly divided wings of the IRA.

The start of the Civil War however changed everything. Lehane noted: 'Hitherto our attention and activities had been confined to the "Border" and the Truce between Beggar's Bush, and the Four Courts.'¹² Indeed he recalled that things had been going well '...until civil war intervened, after that a good many Republicans took sides with the National Army and consequently thinned our ranks'.¹³ He was totally

¹¹ James McElduff in quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p181.

¹² 1st Northern Division Report, 19 Sept. 1922 (O'Malley papers, UCDA, P17a63).

¹³ Lehane to Military Pensions Board, 7 March 1935 (O'Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31340).

unprepared for the sudden change which came about amongst both the Provisional Government troops and his own forces. His constant visits to Dublin had assured him that the war could be avoided, later stating that ‘...the expectation of a satisfactory settlement prevented active organisation.’¹⁴ Indeed Lehane and his divisional staff were still in the south when the Civil War started and many of the officers were arrested by Provisional Government units as they made their way north.

Even without such setbacks the joint-IRA alliance was a difficult coalition to maintain, made up as it was of southern anti-Treaty elements and Ulster IRA units from both sides of the border. Lehane had brought with him a staff of officers and other Volunteers from Munster numbering at most one hundred. Added to this were the remnants of the 2nd Northern Division who had fled west after their May offensive collapsed to escape internment in the six counties. The majority of these men appear to have come from the anti-Treaty 1st Brigade who joined up with Lehane and Daly at their headquarters in McGarry’s Hotel, Letterkenny. A split in Tyrone had led to the amicable dividing of the remaining arms and equipment between both IRA sections with the anti-Treaty element under William Kelly, Archie McDonnell and John Ogle heading to Donegal to fight with Daly.¹⁵ Training camps were set up for these men at Rockhill and Glenveagh castle where Peadar O’Donnell amongst others made an appearance.

¹⁴ Ibid.

The joint-IRA forces were completed by a number of local Donegal IRA men who had remained out of the Provisional Government Army. Facing this heterogeneous force were around two thousand Specials and RUC based along the border and in East Donegal. However it was the large number of Provisional Government troops, numbering around 2000, under Joe Sweeney who provided the greatest opposition.

Sweeney's role in the joint-IRA offensive was a curious one. He and his men, above anyone else, would do most to frustrate the possibility of unified action. The reason for this appears to be that Sweeney was not party to the conspiracy; as he confided to Ernie O'Malley: 'I got no encouragement from Collins or from GHQ about helping the North.'¹⁶ However, this is not strictly true, as he would later plainly admit:

'Collins sent an emissary to say that he was sending arms to Donegal, and that they would be handed over to certain persons-he didn't tell me who they were-who would come with credentials to my Headquarters. Once we got them we had fellows working for two days with hammers and chisels doing away with the serials on the rifles. Eventually I met Charlie Haughey's father in Greencastle, in the hills above Omagh, and he presented the credentials. About 400 rifles in all were taken

¹⁵ Sean Corr statement (BMH, NA, WS 458).

¹⁶ Joe Sweeney interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/97).

to the Northern Volunteers by Dan McKenna and Johnny Haughey.’¹⁷

Sweeney certainly appears to have played a major role in equipping the Northern IRA although it is difficult to say exactly how much he knew of Lehane and his Cork officers. Whatever the truth however the start of the Civil War would see a full-scale attack by Sweeney’s troops on the joint-IRA positions.¹⁸

Before the attack on the Four Courts the joint-IRA units had control of large areas of the Donegal border, with contingents at Castlefin, Lifford, Raphoe, St. Johnstown, Buncrana, Carndonagh and Carrigans, which became the base for those Volunteers who had fled west from Tyrone and Londonderry and also contained most of the swapped arms. As one Volunteer from the 2nd Northern Division stated: ‘We had controlled much of Donegal before that, but now the staters rolled over us and occupied the country. Our old tactics were no match for them.’¹⁹ On 29 June Provisional Government troops took over Ballymacool House. Buncrana and Carndonagh were also occupied the following day. Lehane ordered the Joint-IRA garrisons at Castlefin and Lifford to retreat to Raphoe in preparation for a large-scale withdrawal to a new headquarters at Glenveagh castle in the mountains of West Donegal. The men from Derry were also withdrawn

¹⁷ Sweeney quoted in Griffith and O’Grady, *Curious Journey* p.275.

¹⁸ The mystery of Sweeney’s role still persists. Thirty years later Moss Twomey told Florence O’Donoghue to contact Sweeney and find out exactly why his men attacked Lehane. See Twomey to O’Donoghue, 26 Aug. 1952 (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31421).

¹⁹ Neil Gillespie quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.163.

from Skeog and St. Johnstown to Inch fort with only five men being left to guard the post at Carrigans.

Whilst the joint-IRA men moved west into the interior of Donegal, the O/C of the 2nd Northern Division Thomas Morris, later to be appointed head of the new North-Eastern Command at the Portobello meeting, declared neutrality and remained with his men at Lifford. This complex situation was made even worse when Specials threatened to move on Lifford if the attacks made by Lehane's men on the local railways did not cease. In what seemed like a final hope for IRA unity Morris declared his intention to hold the town against any such offensive from the unionists. Lehane seized on this opportunity and sent a contingent of his own men to Ballymacool House but Morris immediately demanded their withdrawal. Lehane stated that: 'Despite his assurance of neutrality he later co-operated with the Staters and also seduced our men at Ballymacool into joining up with him.'²⁰ In a last desperate effort to avoid confrontation with Provisional Government troops Lehane sent a force under one of his Cork officers, Seamus Cotter, over the border to attack the Specials at Strabane and Clady. He later reported: 'This was moreover decided by the reluctance of a good many of our forces especially those from the "six Co's" who formed the majority, to become involved in a fight against the Free State Forces. Ourselves, also having come North for the sole purpose

²⁰ 1st Northern Division Report, 19 Sept. 1922 (O'Malley papers, UCDAAD, P17a63).

of fighting the “Specials” wished to do everything in our power, even to the verge of what might appear weakness, to avoid such a calamity.’²¹

Such hopes of reconciliation however were quickly dashed as Provisional Government troops continued their offensive. By 5 July Joe Sweeney’s men had surrounded Cotter’s column at Castlefin. He immediately issued his demands to Lehane’s men: ‘...Sweeney’s terms were that if we agreed to evacuate all our positions and disband the garrisons he would allow them [to] retain their arms. Men from the South would get a “safe conduct” out of Donegal and could take their arms.’²² Such an agreement was wholly unacceptable to Lehane and Daly and an ambush by their men at Drumkeen on 11 July destroyed any hope that a local truce could be agreed. Another column of twenty-five men was sent to Skeog but was captured by Sweeney after disobeying direct orders to withdraw. In the Skeog attack Lehane recalled ‘...the gunners, if any, Sweeney had were unable to work the guns and he asked for and got British gunners from the British fort at Dunree’.²³ The attack on Skeog and Inch fort was a disaster and half of the swapped arms were captured by Provisional Government troops.

As the possibility of attacking the North became more remote many men from the six counties abandoned the struggle altogether further thinning the ranks of Lehane’s Volunteers and helping to redefine the

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

conflict as one between pro and anti-Treaty units. Some Northern Volunteers chose to remain with what was rapidly becoming the local Republican leadership seemingly out of loyalty to their old O/C Charlie Daly. Others however sided with the Provisional Government and were sent south to train at the Curragh. One such Volunteer commented: ‘...it was a case of join the Free State Army or get out of Ireland altogether. I could not go back to the North, and if I stayed on in the South I was liable to be interned.’²⁴ Many of the 2nd Northern Division men who had joined up with Lehane and Daly were quickly rounded up in large numbers. The famous ship the *Lady Wicklow*, which landed Provisional Government troops in Cork during the Civil War, was also used for the more unsavoury task of transporting these captured Northerners to prison in Dublin. One of these prisoners, Neil Gillespie recalled: ‘We lay seven days in the *Lady Wicklow*, most of it anchored in Dublin Bay and during that time we did not get a bite to eat.’²⁵

There was now no going back and Lehane’s new headquarters at Glenveagh castle was evacuated on 10 August. The eighty strong garrison, with all of their posts now taken, went out as a flying column although he soon realised that maintaining such a large force was impractical: ‘After a week it was found impossible to billet and feed such a large body of men in such poor districts where they were

²⁴ James McElduff quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.181.

²⁵ Neil Gillespie quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors*, p163.

operating.’²⁶ The only option was for this large group to split up and it was divided into three smaller units. Two groups of twenty were sent to operate in west and north-east Donegal respectively and Lehane himself led the other forty or so men, which included what remained of his Cork officers, to South Donegal. Even this latter group proved too large and was again divided up, fifteen men were sent to the south-east of the county but were quickly captured as was another eight-man section who were rounded up near Ballyshannon.²⁷

After learning of these disasters Lehane received a further blow when the flying column originally sent to work in West Donegal, after hearing of the capture of the other groups, ditched their arms and disbanded.²⁸ The captured men were all six-county Volunteers and had shown little stomach for what to them was an irrelevant conflict. Patrick Maguire later stated: ‘Those Northern IRA had no interest in the Civil War, as their concern was the protection of their kith and kin in the Six Counties and the eventual unity of the country.’²⁹ Lehane himself reported frankly: ‘It must be admitted that most of the prisoners, both armed and unarmed didn’t show much fight or much inclination to avoid arrest.’³⁰

²⁶ 1st Northern Division Report, 19 Sept. 1922 (O’Malley papers, UCDDAD, P17a63).

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Patrick Maguire statement (BMH, NA, WS 693).

³⁰ 1st Northern Division Report, 19 Sept. 1922 (O’Malley papers, UCDDAD, P17a63).

The once mighty joint-IRA was by now a shadow of its former self and consisted of little more than a small group in the north-east under Daly and around twenty men with Lehane in the south. These units were made up almost entirely of Southern Volunteers along with a few local die-hards loyal to Daly who Lehane reported ‘...except for the destruction of communications is able to do little more than avoid capture. This with the exception of a small section in the East and a few scattered riflemen in North Donegal is the only body of men operating in the Division. It is exceedingly difficult existing at all. The population is for the most part hostile and it couldn’t be much worse in the “Six Co’s”- and is so poor that supporting a column of any effective strength is out of the question.’³¹ His only pathetic hope was that ‘the B[lack] and T[an] methods of the Free Staters’ would help turn the situation in their favour.’³²

Aside from any military failures one of the principal reasons why the joint-IRA offensive had collapsed so dramatically was due in large part to the bitter hostility that Lehane and his southern colleagues inspired in the local population. One aspect of this virulent opposition was straightforward political disagreement. Lehane reported in September: ‘The Civilian population here is practically 90 per cent Free State.’³³ He added a month later: ‘We have left no stone unturned...but the people don’t want a Republic. They want money and ease...’. Such

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

feelings were enhanced by a distinct local hostility to the presence of these troublesome strangers and as Lehane reported 'our southern accents sell us'. He was led to conclude: 'There is not a fighting chance as the people are out of sympathy with us because we are strangers...and they have friends they would help in the barracks rather than us.'³⁴

The church appeared to be one of the prime instigators of this local opposition. Lehane would write to Ernie O'Malley, the senior IRA officer for the region, in October: '...what does GHQ decide on for dealing with the priests. I had a note from Daly...in which he states that the confessionals are used for getting information...In East Donegal (where we are at present) the Protestants are by far our best friends, the reason being I suppose that they are free from church tyranny.' Medical assistance for his stricken men was also impossible to find and he was led bleakly report: '...there is no doctor going to lose his job for me. We set up a sort of hospital first but it was raided and wrecked and the patients made prisoners and the nurses badly abused.'³⁵

This hostility from the local civilian population was also expressed by members of the Donegal IRA itself. In the whole county Lehane could only find seven men who were prepared to join up with his column.

³⁴ Report from 1st and 2nd Northern Division field H.Q., 15 Oct.1922 (O'Malley papers, UCDDAD, P17a65).

³⁵ Ibid.

The local units appeared to resent the presence of Lehane and his officers and some refused to take their orders or provide them with any assistance: 'In South Donegal for instance they broke up the best Coy. we had by arresting the Captain and 1st Lieutenant. The others absolutely refused to help us or scout for us when we came back; as a matter of fact, one of them went over to the enemy.' The local IRA were not only unfriendly but also apparently incompetent as Lehane reported to O'Malley: 'Last week the last batch of Donegal men I sent to their native place for protection and in order that they might keep barracks sniped in West Donegal, were taken two days after I saw them last. Perhaps they were not to be blamed but what can I do with them. I cannot keep a column as you see, and when I send them to the areas they know, they are rounded up always in 2 or 3 days.'³⁶

The situation had become desperate and Lehane's isolated position led anti-Treaty GHQ to order Frank Aiken to provide the men in Donegal with supplies. Liam Lynch wrote to O'Malley on 18 September: 'I hope you are pressing the O/C, 4th Northern Division to assist the 1st Northern by letting them have some Arms, ammunition and supplies...They should also let them have some clothing of which they appear to have captured a large quantity. I see no reason why they should not be able to equip and supply the small force now in the 1st Northern with anything they require...Therefore it is that I am anxious that you get a report as to what can be done for them by O/C 4th

³⁶ Ibid.

Northern.’³⁷ Aiken, however, did nothing. Moss Twomey later blamed such failings on the ‘...confusion and lack of a general plan, when the Four Courts were attacked. Aid after that could only be supplied through 3rd Western Division (Pilkington). I am sure that Liam [Mellows] did urge Pilkington...to send him [i.e. Lehane] supplies but they were so full up of their own local war, that, true to tradition, they were loath to spare supplies or stint themselves.’³⁸

By October Lehane had decided to dispense with columns and split his remaining men into small groups travelling only by night. Daly went to West Donegal and Lehane moved into the east of the county. Although it was now obvious that he had suffered a crushing defeat Lehane felt a duty to remain and fight. He wrote to O’Malley: ‘I don’t like the idea of leaving Donegal myself and most of the fellows don’t, but at the same time we are only part of an army and in my opinion we are only faking fight here and stealing about from place to place like criminals. I suppose it is only a matter of time until we are rounded up or more probably put out of action... I wish those others from the South were somewhere else also. I honestly don’t care to be responsible for their massacre some fine morning soon.’³⁹

In November 1922 the anti-Treaty GHQ finally accepted the shambles of the joint-IRA policy and ordered Lehane and his officers to leave

³⁷ Lynch to O’Malley, 18 Sept. 1922 (O’Malley papers, UCDA, P17a63).

³⁸ Twomey to O’Donoghue, 17 July 1922 (O’Donoghue papers, UCDA, MS31421).

Donegal. The situation had become impossible, especially after Liam Deasy ordered Mossy Donegan to return back to Munster. Lehane wrote a last communication to his second in command Charlie Daly: 'I have received an order from E.O'Maille [O'Malley] [advising] us to leave Donegal at once and withdraw our men. I believe our work here is impossible. We have to steal about here like criminals at night and it gets on ones nerves.'⁴⁰ Daly, however, proved more optimistic than Lehane and decided to remain with his small band of followers in West Donegal.

With the departure of Lehane this group of five or six die-hards was all that remained of the joint-IRA offensive. Lehane and his officers made their way south via the midlands eventually arriving back in Munster where they were captured and imprisoned alongside O'Malley in Mountjoy Gaol. Denis McNellis, the former Divisional Engineer of the 1st Northern Division, became O/C of what was left of the local anti-Treaty IRA. One of his first duties was to answer criticisms from Frank Aiken who, after giving no help to the 1st and 2nd Northern Division for the past seven months, wrote to McNellis angrily: '...could you keep Sweeney's troops occupied...if you only kept his communications cut, both rail and road or sniped his posts occasionally'.⁴¹

³⁹ Report from 1st and 2nd Northern Division field HQ, 15 Oct. 1922 (O'Malley papers, UCDDAD, P17165).

⁴⁰ Lehane to Daly, 10 Nov. 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/86).

⁴¹ Aiken to McNellis, 27 Jan. 1923 (Twomey papers, UCDDAD, P69/35[268]).

The final tragic act of the joint-Army policy came in March 1923 with the capture and execution of Charlie Daly and three other members of his column. Seamus McCann later related the story of their capture:

‘Charlie and his little party were getting it tough with a large well equipped army on his tail. They would only spend one night in any townland, it was tough going. They had just arrived in the townland of Dunloy and were dead beat. They had just lay down with their boots on when the house was surrounded by a large force of military. Charlie reached for his rifle half asleep. But before he could do so he received a blow from a rifle butt.’⁴²

Daly and six others were taken away and imprisoned in Drumboe Castle. Three of the men later ‘signed out’; Dan Coyle from Falcarragh, James Donaghy from Dungiven and Jim Lane from Clonakilty, but Daly and the others refused. Joe Sweeney, the bane of the joint-Army operations for so long, would be responsible for the executions. Tom Heavy, a Mayo IRA man, noted Sweeney’s brutal streak when imprisoned with Peadar O’Donnell who felt certain he too would be executed: ‘It was Joe Sweeney, his old comrade, who would have to do the job. And he would too. They were like that.’⁴³

Many years later Sweeney described the events surrounding the executions:

⁴² Seamus McCann to O’Donoghue, n.d. (O’Donoghue papers, NLI, MS31315).

⁴³ Tom Heavy quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.451.

‘When we captured Charlie Daly, who was O.C. of the Republicans in my area of Donegal, and I remember there wasn’t a shot fired in this operation...The terrible thing was that Daly had to be executed. We had received word from Dublin that anyone captured carrying arms was to be court-martialled and sentenced to death. I had to do the job myself, to order a firing party for the execution, and it was particularly difficult because Daly and I had been very friendly when we were students, and it is an awful thing to kill a man you know in cold blood, if you’re on level terms with him...I wasn’t present at the execution myself, but to make sure there was no foul-up the firing party were all picked men, and they were told that they were to put them out of pain as quickly as possible...I didn’t agree with it, but they were orders and you had to do it.’⁴⁴

The decision to shoot the Republican prisoners was taken after an ambush at Ballymacaward in West Donegal earlier that month. Peadar O’Donnell later claimed that Dan MacGee, a Free State soldier, made an attempt to rescue Daly but failed.⁴⁵ The four men who were executed were ironically not from Donegal, showing perhaps something of the nature of the unusual coalition that formed the Northern IRA, and as Daly’s sister would later argue some of the local hostility to strangers which had earlier dogged Lehane: ‘General Joe Sweeney, himself a Donegal man, saw to it that they were not from

⁴⁴ Joe Sweeney quoted in Griffith and O’Grady, *Curious Journey* p.306.

that county.’ Aside from Charlie Daly the three others were Dan Enright and Tim Sullivan, both Kerry men like Daly himself, and Sean Larkin, O/C of the South Derry Brigade from Magherafelt.⁴⁶

The story of the collapse of the joint-IRA offensive has an air of tragic inevitability. While hopes of reconciliation between IRA units on both sides of the Treaty-split remained, unified action in the North was a viable alternative to civil war. Indeed more than any other issue it provided a repository for the hopes of those wishing to avert confrontation in the South. As such the Northern IRA were very much the glue holding the two sides together. However when they finally split apart at the end of June 1922 the joint-IRA policy became an irrelevance overnight. Its passing would destroy not only the idealistic hopes of those seeking to overcome partition but also the Northern IRA itself.

⁴⁵ O'Donnell. *The Gates Flew Open* (Cork, 1965) p.160.

⁴⁶ May D'alaigh quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors*, p.369.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NEW POLICIES, NEW ENEMIES

Whilst the Northern IRA's May offensive caused enormous destruction throughout the six counties, such a policy proved impossible to sustain. The sheer scale of the violence in May and June had pushed Northern Irish society to breaking point and a resolution to the conflict, whatever that might be, was almost inevitable. In this endgame it was the Northern IRA who would emerge as the emphatic losers leading to what John McCoy called '...the rape of Republicanism in Northern Ireland'.¹ Indeed their defeat was to prove so total that it effectively crippled the movement in the North for decades after and no serious attempt was made to challenge the Northern state again for the next fifty years.

The outbreak of the Civil War in the South was a bitter blow to the Northern IRA, transforming the situation almost overnight and shattering the fragile alliance that lay at the heart of the organisation in the six counties. Conversely for the government of Northern Ireland the onset of hostilities south of the border was a godsend, effectively letting them off the hook and ending any chances of British interference or the re-negotiation of the Government of Ireland Act. A few months after the Civil War began the RUC were happy to report: 'The record of political crime for the past few weeks is practically nil...The improvement is undoubtedly largely due to the withdrawal of militant Shinnners to the Free State to join either the regular or irregular IRA. "Fighting" is a more paying job there than here, and on

¹ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

the whole less risky.’² James Short, an IRA officer from Armagh commented: ‘The outbreak of the Civil War had a most demoralising effect on the outlook of the IRA in the Six Counties area. The Northern Government were not slow to realise the weakening effect the Civil War had on the position of the IRA within their area and they applied the pressure.’³ One Belfast Volunteer put it more simply: ‘...they knew they had won’.⁴

A hasty withdrawal of Southern support would follow and it was the Treaty rather than partition that now came to define conflict in Ireland. In such a situation the Northern IRA appeared as little more than a curious anachronism. In the words of Joe Murray they became a ‘lost legion’.⁵ Desertion by their allies in the twenty-six counties was added to by opposition from within Northern Ireland itself. A brutal unionist reaction to the offensive crippled any lingering chance of success although, perhaps more fundamentally, opposition began to emerge from within the Catholic minority itself.

The Catholic population of Belfast, after two years of sustained and brutal violence, of which they had borne the brunt, finally cracked under the pressure of this new unionist onslaught. The following letter from Seamus Woods to Richard Mulcahy tells graphically of the severe collapse in civilian support for the IRA in the city:

² RUC County Inspectors report, 26 Sept. 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/290).

³ James Short statement (BMH, NA, WS 534).

⁴ Peter Carleton quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p. 307.

‘For a period of three months previous to our resuming the offensive, the enemy was running loose murdering and harassing our people and as the Army was not very active the people were gradually losing the respect they had for the IRA. This respect had been won not so much out of sympathy with our National aspirations... but more on account of the part the Army had played in defending the minority against organised attacks by... crown forces. When however, we commenced a campaign of destruction of enemy property which hit the authors and promoters of the Pogrom, and was having the effect of stopping the murder campaign, the sympathy and support of the people was slowly coming back to us... we kept our campaign of burning, and in a short time the enemy realised that they would require to change their tactics. They set about establishing a series of block- houses throughout our areas, and selected their men specially with a view to fraternising with the Catholic population. This policy has met with quiet success as the people, war- worn and long tired were glad of an opportunity of peace. Unfortunately however, the anti- Irish element of the population are taking advantage of the situation, and are giving all available scraps of information to the enemy. Several of our dumps have been captured within the last few weeks, and in practically every case the raiding party went direct to the house. In many of these raids Company and Battalion papers have

⁵ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

been found with the result that many officers and men are forced to go on the run necessarily in their own restricted areas. They find it difficult to get accommodation with the people now, and in a particular area seventeen of our best officers and men had to sleep in a Refugees home, where they were all captured.’⁶

One week later on 27 July Woods reported bleakly that ‘...practically all over the Division the Police Barracks are stormed with letters giving all available information against the IRA and their supporters. We have captured some such letters and in most cases suggestions are made to the Police as to how they could best cope with the situation. In most cases they regret they did not give this information two years ago.’⁷ Seamus McGovern, the Divisional Adjutant, echoed these views stating that the civilian population were ‘only too anxious to acquiesce’ with the authorities.⁸

Such opposition was inspired by a variety of motives. For most a desire for peace was paramount although others had less noble motivations. One such, calling himself Mr X, and communicating with the authorities through the personal column of the *Belfast Telegraph*, gave two reasons for his actions, the first was revenge: ‘...I have a lot against them (the IRA) which I want, I will, get my own back for’.⁹ The

⁶ Woods to Mulcahy, 20 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/77).

⁷ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/77).

⁸ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to GHQ, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/77).

⁹ ‘Offers of rewards for information leading to arrest and conviction of wanted persons’ (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/292).

second was more prosaic and familiar in the poverty-stricken enclaves of the city: 'I want money badly'.¹⁰ The hardships, financial and physical had finally proved too much to bear for many in the Catholic community. The desperation and personal risks taken by such individuals were apparent even to themselves and the informant concluded ominously: '...the IRA could find out where the blessed devil was, and what he was about, if he was not in hell when they called'.¹¹

Whilst the number of such covert betrayals rose dramatically in the early summer of 1922, worryingly for the IRA, opposition was also voiced more openly, demonstrating both the extent of Catholic anger and the IRA's diminishing coercive powers over its constituency. Woods described one such incident: 'Recently a number of men were rounded up and detained in custody. The mother of one of the boys when bringing him food shouted out in the presence of Crown Forces, the name of the local O/C, and made a tirade against him for misleading her boy into this movement.'¹² The Catholic Church also became more vocal in its condemnation and some priests refused to hear the confessions of Fianna boys or to give absolution to IRA members.¹³

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 'Report on situation in No.1 (Belfast) Brigade', 20 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77)

¹³ Woods to Mulcahy, 27 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

The situation was so bad that the IRA were forced to contemplate employing desperate measures to stem the flow of information and regain the acquiescence of the people. Seamus McGovern concluded that ‘...were operations started on a general scale throughout the six counties and a policy of war decided on at present, I’m afraid that we would be compelled to mete out Capital Punishment amongst the Catholic Civilian population’.¹⁴ Such an aggressive policy however was felt to be suicidal as Woods observed: ‘Without the civil population our position is hopeless.’¹⁵ Aside from coercion other solutions were suggested to win back Catholic support: ‘The only hope for anything like a big organisation is on something like sectarian lines. We could take advantage of that and work that in connection with the National movement.’¹⁶ Such an extreme idea involved the virtual instigation of a civil war in the North and if implemented would have led to an even greater loss of life than in the previous two years. The very fact that such a move was under consideration shows up how desperate many in the Northern IRA leadership were becoming although it is unlikely that even such extreme measures would have healed the deepening rift within Northern nationalist circles: ‘In the whole Division area there is a feeling to recognise the Northern Government. The National Spirit amongst the people is practically dead at the moment.’¹⁷

¹⁴ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to GHQ, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

¹⁵ Woods memo, 3 Aug. 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/79).

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

The families of some IRA men were abused or boycotted by their nationalist neighbours, angry at their role they had played in instigating the violence of the past two years. In one such case John Shields reported that the wife of one interned IRA member ‘...found that even the local Roman Catholic clergymen, who had once been so friendly with herself and her husband and family, had now cut adrift from her and treated her family as outcasts’.¹⁸ Similarly Charles McGleenan recalled a meeting he had with an RUC Sergeant while in gaol: ‘He showed me a bundle of papers he had with him which he said were all complaints levied against me by neighbours of mine who did not want me back near them.’ He did eventually return to his farm, which he found in a state of disrepair. Ironically the only people who would help him to fix it up were his unionist neighbours.¹⁹

With the collapse of IRA control many members of the Catholic community were also far more prepared to approach the Unionist authorities for protection. The RUC could report: ‘The nationalist Justices have in most cases resumed their places on the Bench, and their co-religionists have now no hesitation in making reports to the Police, and in coming forward to have their grievances dealt with in the Courts. Four months ago, such was not the case, Northern Courts being boycotted while S[in]n F[ein] courts were still secretly held.’²⁰ In Newry the police were pleased to report that large numbers of

¹⁸ John Shields statement (BMH, NA, WS 534).

¹⁹ Charles McGleenan statement (BMH, NA, WS 829).

²⁰ RUC County Inspectors reports, 28 Sept. 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/290).

Catholics had attended the police sports day which three months earlier was unthinkable.²¹ In Rostrevor, County Down the RUC stated that a Catholic woman reported a robbery to the IRA ‘...who referred her to the R.U.C. stating that the I.R.A. police organisation was broken up’.²² The RUC themselves also appeared happy to foster this new conciliation and were critical of extreme elements in the unionist community trying to upset the new peace: ‘Now that the I.R.A. have ceased operations and the people are disposed to settle down, it is deplorable that attempts are thus made to stir up sectarian strife. I am of the opinion this is being done in pursuance of a concerted scheme by persons in high quarters to serve their own selfish ends, and they use low class Unionists as their instruments.’²³

Inevitably with the loss of Catholic support the morale of the Northern IRA itself also began to plummet. As Woods confided to Mulcahy: ‘In No. 2 and No.3 Brigade Areas [i.e. Antrim and East Down] the position is if anything worse but with the difference that the loss of morale commenced not in the people but in our own troops.’²⁴ In Belfast itself the situation was little different: ‘The men are in a state of practical starvation and are continually making applications for transfer to Dublin to join the “Regular Army”... Under the present circumstances it would be impossible to keep our military

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ 3rd Northern Divisional Adjutant to GHQ, 7 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

Organisation alive and intact, as the morale of the men is going down day by day and the spirit of the people is practically dead.’²⁵

It was the Unionist authorities who would be the prime beneficiaries of the breakdown in IRA relations with the Catholic community. Internment without trial, the cornerstone of the Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act, enacted on 7 April 1922, was introduced in full after the assassination of Twaddell in late May and would prove extremely successful in quelling IRA activity. Unlike the similar experiment of the 1970s, the suspects arrested were, with few exceptions, all active IRA and Sinn Fein members. This success was due not only to the increased flow of information from within the nationalist community but also to the IRA’s rather woeful internal security, typified by the capture of huge numbers of documents in the raid on St. Mary’s Hall in March. The Northern government’s brutal and methodical use of internment goes a long way to explaining why the chaotic situation of May and June was so quickly brought to an end. As an RUC report made clear: ‘...in Belfast the spectacle of the floating internment palace before their vision acts as a warning to Sinn Feiners to curb their enthusiasm for their evil activities’.²⁶

Round-ups and mass sweeps of rural areas began only a matter of hours after the shooting of Twaddell on 22 May. Over three hundred were taken in the first two days, only twelve of who were Protestants.

²⁵ Woods to Mulcahy, 20 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/77).

In Tyrone Nicholas Smyth states that around half of all IRA members were arrested.²⁷ Three camps were set up to imprison the internees: Derry Gaol, Larne Workhouse and the *Argenta* prison ship. Internees began to arrive on the *Argenta* from 20 June, the last of them being released in January 1924, when the final 101 men were moved to Larne Internment camp. Ironically Seamus Woods himself was the last prisoner to leave the ship. The Larne camp itself was occupied from 20 September 1922 when 68 men were transferred there from the *Argenta*. It finally closed on 23 December 1924 when the last internee was released.²⁸

The conditions of the three camps were by all accounts dreadful. Father John Hassan gave a vivid account of the state of the prison ship: 'This floating house of filth and misery is called by the splendid name of the *Argenta*. Probably nothing so vile could be found, even in Turkey, at the present day. The unfortunate prisoners are huddled together in sections of forty like cattle in a pen. The food is execrable, and has to be eaten off the floor. The lavatory accommodations consist of a few buckets placed openly at the end of the apartment.'²⁹ An IRA circular from Conor Lacey, the Director of Medical Services in Dublin, stated that '...conditions in these [camps] are even worse than in other Irish prisons... men have been manacled in unsanitary cells...in some

²⁶ RIC Bi-monthly report, 30 June 1922 (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/152).

²⁷ Nicholas Smyth statement (BMH, NA, WS 721). For details of the arrests throughout the six countries see D. Kleinrichert, *Republican Internment and the Prison Ship Argenta, 1922* (Dublin, 2001) pp.24-40.

cases to the wall of the cell for days...[and] cruelly beaten and maltreated by their jailers'.³⁰ He went on to claim: 'Promiscuous firing into cells containing prisoners has been indulged in by jail guards. Many prisoners were wounded in this way, some fatally.'³¹ Patrick McCallen, an internee from Omagh, would later write to his wife: '...the Specials are a bad lot entirely and wouldn't ask better than doing some of us in'.³²

Despite the harsh conditions, for some IRA men internment proved to be something of a relief and an escape from years of extreme poverty and unemployment. The Governor of Derry Gaol reported: 'Candidly speaking, the food was really appreciated by the poorer class and I heard an internee remark on one occasion he didn't care how long he was kept in goal where food was good and plentiful and where one was always sure of a bed and the question of employment needn't be considered.'³³

For the majority of internees however vigorous resistance and escape were the only options. Under the energetic command of the O/C of the *Argenta* Internees, James Maynes, an IRA officer from Cookstown, numerous attempts were made to smuggle arms and escape materials

²⁸ 'Reports on internments during 1922-24' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/46). Between 22 May 1922 and 31 December 1924 a total of 728 people were interned in the various camps.

²⁹ Kenna, *Facts and Figures of the Belfast Pogrom* p.97.

³⁰ Captured IRA circular by Conor Lacey, Director of Medical Services, IRA HQ Dublin ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/120).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² 'Documents found on internee Patrick McCrossan' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/77)

³³ 'Reports on internments during 1922-24' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/46).

aboard the ship. Priests were used to pass messages to the outside and the Governor of the *Argenta* expressed constant fears that the ship was about to be attacked. Indeed evidence exists to suggest that such fears were justified and plans were being laid by the IRA to blow the *Argenta* out of the water. Internee Patrick McCrossan was found with a letter on 24 August calling for large quantities of war flour adding ‘...we are putting her in the air...it is very important and it is official... for christ’s sake don’t forget this is no joke...’.³⁴ Even after the internees were removed the Northern authorities still feared that the *Argenta* would be destroyed by the IRA in an act of symbolic revenge. Despite such resistance however the fact remains that no internees ever escaped from either Larne or the *Argenta* and no attack on the ship was ever seriously attempted.³⁵

Whilst escape proved impossible, and direct attacks unrealistic, the IRA resorted to its traditional method of resistance, the hunger strike. By October 1922, 229 men had joined the protest (123 in Belfast Prison, 69 in Larne Workhouse and 27 in Derry Gaol). However, less than two weeks later only one internee was still refusing food although he too gave up after seventeen days.³⁶ A second wave of strikes would not be attempted again until October 1923 when 131 men refused food on the *Argenta*, later being removed en masse to Belfast prison.

³⁴ ‘Documents found on internee Patrick McCrossan’ (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/77). See also *Belfast Newsletter*, 15 Sept. 1922.

³⁵ The numerous ingenious attempts to escape from the internment camps are dealt with in detail in D. Kleinrichert, *Republican Internment and the Prison Ship Argenta, 1922* pp. 162-7.

³⁶ ‘Reports on internments during 1922-24’ (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/46).

They were joined by sixty-five others in Larne although ominously for IRA solidarity over one hundred others refused to take part and the strike quickly fizzled out.³⁷

The failure of unified resistance and the deprivations of internment led many to look to their own personal salvation. In return for signing a declaration to recognise the Northern Irish government, and in some cases accepting movement restrictions and periodic reporting to the police, internees could secure immediate freedom. As with Republican prisoners in the South the taking of terms from the Northern government would be a constant cause of conflict. As early as 29 July the O/C of the internees wrote to Mulcahy: 'I personally together with a few of my officers would be glad if we could have from you some indication of the policy we are expected to adopt. I have reason to believe that the lead given by myself and my officers will be sufficient for the majority of the men and your suggestion will be treated absolutely in confidence and as unofficial... I would suggest you wire to M.O'Kane SS *Argenta*, Belfast Lough "Nora getting worse case hopeless" to indicate we are to recognise the authority of Craig & Co. or "Nora slightly better, wait for letter" will tell us to hold on as we are.'³⁸ Mulcahy's reply was immediate and uncompromising: 'Glad able to say Nora slightly better wait for letter.'³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ O/C Internees to Mulcahy, 29 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/78).

³⁹ Mulcahy to O/C Internees, 1 Aug. 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/78).

The IRA internees were allowed to take terms only if they had dependant families or health problems. Such releases were viewed as useful in 'keeping up the aims and traditions of Sinn Fein' in the six counties although few would ever engage in overt political activity again after release.⁴⁰ As a government report later made clear: 'The great majority of the released internees are living in Northern Ireland, and with hardly an exception are reported by the Police to be behaving peaceably and making no attempt to revive illegal organisations.'⁴¹

Those internees who contemplated defying the orders of their officers and the Dublin leadership by accepting terms were ostracised by their fellow prisoners. D.P. Moore, an IRA medical officer from Downpatrick, wrote in August 1922: 'If I ever have to give an understanding or take on oath, I will do so as a free man and not as the price of freedom. A few weaklings did appeal...What was their fate? It is now more than three weeks ago. Instead of being asked to give an undertaking they were put through a regular inquisition. They are still here. They remain in their cage all day as none of the other men will speak to them or have anything to do with them.'⁴²

However, in reality such hard-line declarations rang increasingly hollow. Indeed terms were not unpalatable to those IRA men who had gone on the run to avoid internment. A USC report stated: '...since the

⁴⁰ 'Reports on internments during 1922-24' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/46).

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² 'Documents found on internee Patrick McCrossan' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/77).

month of July 1922 I have had various visits from people who had relations on the run in the Free State, asking if they would be allowed to return and if they would be free from molestation.’⁴³ Even the Northern authorities themselves, not noted for their belief in the possibility of IRA redemption, believed that ‘...a great many of the internees would have agreed to the terms of release offered but were afraid of the hostile attitude of certain sections of the public, in agreeing to take terms from a Government hostile to Sinn Fein Policy’.⁴⁴ However, when the final internees gained their freedom in 1924 public acclaim was notable by its absence even to the Unionist authorities: ‘The release of internees has had very little effect on the people generally. The internees in some cases have been disappointed at the reception they received on release, and generally very little notice is being taken of the persons released.’⁴⁵ Seamus McGovern admitted on his return to Belfast: ‘There is no sympathy for anyone, only the cold shoulder.’⁴⁶ The cheering crowds who had greeted the internees released from Ballykinlar camp in December 1921 had gone and most often men would return to anonymity and the harsh realities of unemployment and constant police surveillance.

With the waning of the Northern IRA its leadership also appears to have begun to lose its authority and control over rank and file

⁴³ USC report, 9 Nov. 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/306).

⁴⁴ ‘Londonderry Prison Advisory Committee report’, 13 Feb. 1925 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/46).

⁴⁵ Wickham report, 24 Nov. 1924 (‘Secret Series’ files, HA/32/1/46).

⁴⁶ ‘File on James Heron’ (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/2167).

Volunteers. This was noted in Derry Gaol where it was reported that as the IRA leadership ‘...were not recognised by the prison authorities their influence gradually began to decline and eventually ceased altogether’.⁴⁷ Division between the internees would also emerge over the Treaty issue especially in the Larne camp. Peter Carleton, a Belfast Fianna member, recalled: ‘Before we were arrested we had been warned by our Battalion Commandant that there was trouble among the prisoners themselves. If we found ourselves there, not to take part in this trouble. We were very surprised to hear that there could be dissension among our own men, but there was...’.⁴⁸ John Shields, an internee on the *Argenta*, himself witnessed these violent divisions between the prisoners:

‘Many of the men had taken sides for or against the Treaty, and differences of opinion and disputes on this question caused bitter arguments. This bitterness was much increased and renewed by the arrival of these Civil War participants from both sides amongst us. These men, immediately on their arrival on the boat, started a bitter vendetta against each other. In fact, getting together on the boat afforded an opportunity for them for continuing their previous Civil War fight. To add fuel to this unfortunate position, these new elements attracted partisans to

⁴⁷ ‘Londonderry Prison Advisory Committee report’, 13 Feb. 1925 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/46)

⁴⁸ Peter Carleton quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.306.

their different sides and many miniature battles royal took place from time to time.’⁴⁹

Although the IRA threat had been dealt a fatal blow by internment the Northern government refused to relent in its offensive. They persisted in the belief that the IRA were not defeated but merely holding off in order to promote an illusory peace and secure the release of the internees after which widespread operations would start up again. Such attitudes go a long way to explaining why the internees were kept imprisoned long after any real threat had receded. Arthur Solly-Flood, the Military Adviser to the Northern government, was the most vocal prophet of impending doom continuously warning his colleagues of the dangers of relaxing their aggressive posture. He wrote in August 1922: ‘It would appear from int[elligence] sources that reorganisation of enemy units is now well in progress. The quiet situation is in a great measure due to an organised scheme to get the Northern Government of Ireland to release the internees, and a great amount of success is attending their efforts in this direction.’⁵⁰ The intelligence he spoke of was based on a misreading of captured letters written by Henry McGorm of Derrymacash, a member of the 4th Northern Division, who spoke of his unit’s good relations with both sides and their commitment to neutrality in the rapidly escalating Civil War.⁵¹

⁴⁹ John Shields statement (BMH, NA, WS 534).

⁵⁰ ‘Report from Military Adviser’, 16 Aug. 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/257).

⁵¹ Ibid.

Amongst Solly-Flood's wilder schemes was a plan to create institutions '...for boys and girls on the lines of the Borstal institutions in England'.⁵² Such an idea effectively meant the internment of suspect nationalist children. The Ministry of Home Affairs response to such ideas was dismissive and scathing: '...it can hardly be seriously proposed to send children to an institution of the nature indicated under internment orders'.⁵³ Despite such reasonable attitudes in unionist circles, the round-ups and arrests still continued in a manic and paranoid fashion with suspects being dragged in under the flimsiest of evidence. One such example was the arrest of Ancient Order of Hibernians member Thomas McGrory on 20 August after two Hibernian books were found in his home and mistaken as IRA records as they used the word 'Division' to describe the structure of the organisation.⁵⁴

Whilst such skewed perceptions drove the everyday activities of the security forces the Northern government showed greater insight when analysing the nature of the opposition they were facing. Despite the IRB's attempts to conceal the extent of Provisional Government control over the IRA in the North the authorities were well aware of the reality. A report from the Ministry of Home Affairs in August stated: 'The Free State army in Ulster is what we have most to fear...They are neither Republican nor Free Staters; they are awaiting their time to

⁵² Solly-Flood to Ministry of Home Affairs, 3 Aug. 1922 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/252).

⁵³ Secretary of Ministry of Home Affairs to Solly-Flood, 9 Aug. 1922 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/252).

attack...'.⁵⁵ One Belfast Volunteer even admitted under interrogation: 'Yes the 3rd Northern Division is controlled by GHQ Dublin.... We are under Michael Collins... We do not get any pay until we get our uniform.'⁵⁶ For the Northern IRA also it was their relationship with their Southern allies which was now of most concern.

The combination of the collapse in support from the Catholic community and the implementation of harsh security measures from the Northern government proved disastrous for the future of the Northern IRA. As one Volunteer commented: 'Northern men could no longer stay in the North...The IRA there never recovered.'⁵⁷ In such a desperate situation the beleaguered Northern IRA looked for support from its most ardent supporters in the South although ironically it was from there that its final defeat would be sealed.

Whilst the South had been instrumental in the creation of the Northern IRA in the spring of 1921 they would also prove to be the authors of its destruction. Sean McConville, a battalion O/C from Armagh, stated that the divisions over the Treaty '...accelerated a feeling of despair in the IRA in the Northern Counties. We looked to the South for help and assistance. On our own we were faced with

⁵⁴ 'Raids on Ancient Order of Hibernians premises' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/251).

⁵⁵ 'Report from Military Adviser on reorganisation of IRA units in Northern Ireland' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/257).

⁵⁶ Extract from interrogation of Patrick Kane, Aug. 1922 ('Secret series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/257).

⁵⁷ Tom McNally interview with Ernie O'Malley (O'Malley notebooks, UCAD, P17b/99).

overwhelming odds.’⁵⁸ For the Provisional Government in Dublin the start of the Civil War finally clarified their attitude to the North and gave practical grounds to those calling for an end to violent opposition to the Northern Irish government. Thomas Fox stated that after the Civil War broke out ‘...the Six-County problem was shelved and forgotten’.⁵⁹ Woods would later write scathingly to GHQ: ‘Owing to the position that has arisen in the rest of Ireland I take it the Government feel that they are not equal to the task of overriding the Treaty position with regard to Ulster.’⁶⁰ A committee of five was set up by the Provisional Government to consider its future strategy and a ‘peace policy’ was subsequently adopted officially in August. This however was merely the final act in what had been a steady period of Southern disengagement already underway many months before. As early as 3 June it was decided that a policy of ‘...peaceful obstruction should be adopted towards the Belfast Government and that no troops from the twenty-six counties, either those under official control or attached to the Executive, should be permitted to invade the six-county area’.⁶¹

Two weeks later on 16 June the South further repudiated its responsibility for the Northern minority by its adoption of a new hard-line policy on Southern aid to Northern refugees concluding that ‘...it is the desire of the Ministry to discourage by every means in their power anything approaching an exodus of the Catholic population in

⁵⁸ Sean McConville statement (BMH, NA, WS 495).

⁵⁹ Thomas Fox statement (BMH, NA, WS 365).

⁶⁰ Woods to Mulcahy, 29 Sept. 1922 (NA, S1801/A).

affected areas... it is essential that the Catholic and national position should not be weakened beyond the limit of absolute necessity by the terrorism... which Catholic residents in the affected areas are subjected. It is therefore, more desirable every point of view that any necessary relief should be provided in or near the homes of those who are being deprived of employment...'.⁶²

Help for the refugees from Belfast had been supplied since March by the Executive IRA leadership in the Four Courts who, under the influence of their new Chief of Staff Joe McKelvey had also renewed the Belfast Boycott. Ernie O'Malley later described how the IRA had commandeered the headquarters of the Orange Order in Dublin, amongst other buildings, as a temporary shelter for those fleeing the North. He later wrote of the Ulster refugees: '...they had to depend on charity; officially they had not been cared for. Some had a dazed, hopeless look in their eyes. They carried little bundles; their nerves had been shattered during the period of waiting, always expecting that their houses would be attacked by rifle fire and burned by the mob.'⁶³ John McCoy estimated that as many as 30,000 Northern Catholics had passed through his base at Dundalk on their way to Dublin during 1922.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Minutes of Provisional Government meeting, 3 June 1922 (NA, S1801/A).

⁶² Memo on Belfast Refugees, 16 June 1922 quoted in O' Halloran, *Partition and the Limits of Irish Nationalism* p. 132.

⁶³ E. O'Malley, *The Singing Flame* (Dublin, 1978) p.67.

⁶⁴ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

The Provisional Government was also less than keen to provide aid to the Northern internees. Seamus McGovern wrote to GHQ on 20 July: 'A number of internees on the ship have been offered their freedom if they give bail. Some of these are post office officials and their jobs are at stake. They have sent a message to get instructions from Mr Collins. They are not in the Army but want instructions from M.O'C [i.e. Collins] so that if they lose their jobs here they can look to him to fix them up in the Free State.'⁶⁵ No such assurances were ever provided and although a decision was taken to set aside £1,500 for interned Volunteers in the six counties the money was never made available.⁶⁶ The Southern leadership, whilst seemingly remaining committed on the level of dogma and rhetoric, was evasive on any practical help which they would provide.

On Sunday 9 July Seamus Woods met with Richard Mulcahy in Dublin to ascertain exactly where the IRA in the six counties stood in this rapidly changing political situation and to have their '...position as a unit of the IRA under GHQ defined'.⁶⁷ His constant visits to GHQ however led him to suspect that he and his men were being sidelined and his reception was anything but welcoming: '...for the past number of weeks I have noticed a marked change in the attitude of some members of the GHQ staff towards me, particularly the Adjutant General, the Quartermaster-General and the Director of

⁶⁵ Seamus McGovern to Adj. Gen., 20 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/1).

⁶⁶ Blythe 'Memo on north-east Ulster 1922-26' (Blythe papers, UCDDAD, P24/554).

⁶⁷ Woods to Mulcahy, 14 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

Organisation...It was only on Friday last the 15th that I got from Seamus McGovern...a bit of information which had reached him in some direct way to the effect that there is some suspicion among certain officers of GHQ that I am an irregular.’⁶⁸ Woods would later angrily state: ‘The army then...was seemingly a mob under Dick Mulcahy’s control...he certainly surrounds himself with “yes” men.’⁶⁹

Indeed Woods’ relationship with his fellow commanders was often a rocky one. When Dan Hogan captured Frank Aiken in Dundalk, he wrote to Mulcahy that ‘...it was an outrage...He should release Aiken at once for Dan Hogan is a mutineer’.⁷⁰ Woods and Hogan later met again in Dublin and discussed the Dundalk situation. Woods recalls the angry encounter: ‘“I wish you were there” said Hogan meaning that he wishes he had been able to take me prisoner...Hogan put his hand on his gun and drew it and I put my hand on mine.’⁷¹ Luckily Piaras Beaslai was there to break up the argument. Woods put Hogan’s hostility down to jealousy over his close relationship with O’Duffy.

In order to heal these growing rifts Mulcahy proposed that a joint meeting of senior Northern IRA officers and the Dublin leadership should be held to finally decide the fate of the Northern Volunteers. On 24 July Mulcahy wrote to Collins suggesting what the agenda of

⁶⁸ Woods to Mulcahy, 21 Sept. 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/287).

⁶⁹ Seamus Woods interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCDA, P17b/107).

⁷⁰ Ibid.

such a meeting should be arguing that ‘...the people [are] on for a Peace Policy, and for a recognition of the Northern Government...our officers seem to realise that there is no other policy for the North but a Peace Policy of some kind, but the situation for peace or war has gone beyond them, none of them feel that they are able to face the policy of one kind or the other’.⁷² His answer to this perceived helplessness was to provide the Northern IRA with a definite policy to follow although this was little more than a smokescreen for the severing of all ties between the IRA in the six counties and the rest of the organisation, involving as it did, ‘Organising our men in the North under a command co-terminus with the six-county area [and]...placing responsibility for the actual command on six-county men...’.⁷³ He also made it clear that the Northerners should be steered away from any perception that the meeting was a forum within which to air their grievances, fearful perhaps of an over-emphasis on the vagaries of Southern support. Considering the enormous responsibility the South had in shaping the Northern conflict his message to Collins was one of breathtaking audacity: ‘It is most important to keep the meetings to the discussion of definite constructive work and future policy, as there will be a definite tendency to bemoan their position and look for explanations, etc, as to how they got into it.’⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Mulcahy to C-in-C, 24 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/78).

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ ‘Memo on meeting of six-county officers’ (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

The meeting itself was held on 2 August at Portobello Barracks. GHQ was represented by a high-ranking delegation including the old IRB triumvirate of Collins, Mulcahy and O'Duffy. Also present were the Adjutant-General Geroid O'Sullivan, Quartermaster-General Sean MacMahon and Diarmuid O'Hegarty, the Director of Organisation. The Northern IRA representatives were Woods and Roger McCorley for the 3rd Northern Division, Thomas Morris and J. Mallin for the 2nd Northern and J. Casey the vice O/C of the Newry Brigade. The first decision taken, as outlined before the meeting, was to immediately cease all IRA operations in the six counties and for the Volunteers to '...avoid any conflict with Specials or the British Forces in the area... A Peace Policy essential...', although IRA activity in the North had already virtually ground to a halt by this time anyway.⁷⁵ A small number of officers were retained and kept in the six counties in order to organise what was left of the Northern IRA. They were to be paid out of Old Dail Funds although they achieved very little and many were quickly arrested by the Unionist authorities. The Belfast City Guard which Collins had set up in February was disbanded and its members paid only until 5 August.⁷⁶

The next item on the agenda was '...the re-organisation both of Divisions and Brigades to make the Northern area co-terminus with the six-county area'.⁷⁷ This new North-Eastern Command would

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

consist of only two Divisions: the 2nd Northern covering Tyrone, Londonderry and Derry City and an expanded and unwieldy 3rd Northern made up of Antrim, Belfast, Down, Armagh and Fermanagh. Who exactly was to lead this new command proved to be a matter of some debate. For the Northern officers there was only one choice: 'They want that O'Duffy would be the man who would be G.O.C North-Eastern Command. And in the matter of appointing a man to act temporarily in charge of the command, in an organising, or any other capacity, they would not suggest any man...'.⁷⁸ The Northern leadership obviously retained some faith in O'Duffy from his days as Ulster Liaison Officer during the Truce but were wary of any other candidate. The name of Frank Aiken appears not to have been mentioned at the meeting despite the fact that he commanded the only functioning IRA Division in the six counties and was still nominally in charge of both the Ulster Council and the joint-IRA offensive. Eventually the GHQ leadership decided on Thomas Morris, the O/C of the 2nd Northern Division, who had replaced Charlie Daly in March. The appointment of Morris was a shrewd move, as he would prove himself to be a GHQ loyalist ably demonstrated by his later activities in Donegal.

This decision to allow partition to define the command structure of the Northern IRA, although to some extent bowing to provincial realities, can only be interpreted as a total Southern disengagement from the

⁷⁸ Ibid.

North and the end to all but rhetorical attacks on the Northern Irish government. As Seamus Woods wrote in September: 'The breaking up of this Organisation is the first step to making Partition permanent.'⁷⁹ The later actions of the Dublin leadership would do little to convince Northern republicans that they had not indeed, in Cahir Healy's telling phrase, been '...abandoned to Craig's mercy'.⁸⁰

For those Northern IRA men not yet interned a decision was taken to accept 8-900 of them at the Curragh in order that they could be trained and readied for future action in the north-east. Despite such claims however the unit would never again operate in the six counties and it would rapidly become a source of official embarrassment to the Provisional Government. The men were to be drawn from all of the six counties except for Armagh and Fermanagh. They were placed under the command of the O/C of the Belfast Brigade Roger McCorley and were unavailable for drafting into the regular army unlike the thousands of recruits pouring into the Curragh from the rest of Ireland. Their numbers fell from a high of 628 in November 1922 to only 233 by January of the following year.⁸¹ The unit itself was ill-defined and as far as is known never given an official title, being called variously the 'Northern Volunteer Reserve', the 'Northern Division' or even more vaguely the '3rd Northern Unit'. Tantalising clues to other names for the Curragh unit also exist. One captured Volunteer John

⁷⁹ Woods to Mulcahy, 29 Sept. 1922 (NA, S1801/A).

⁸⁰ Cahir Healy, 30 Sept. 1922 quoted in Hopkinson, *Green against Green* p.88.

⁸¹ Details of Northern men in the 'Curragh reserve' (Mulcahy papers, UCDA, P7/B/50).

Duffy, an officer in the Belfast Brigade, was captured in the North after leaving the Curragh on 8 August and under interrogation claimed that he had recently been appointed as the O/C of a new unit called the '6th Northern Division'. Whether this referred to the Curragh men however is difficult to say.⁸²

The Northern Volunteers who arrived at the Curragh would receive little sympathy from the Provisional Government Army leadership. Diarmuid O'Hegarty for one found their presence intolerable, writing to Mulcahy that he was,

'...not prepared to recommend that they should be supplied with rifles, and I am strongly of the opinion that the Divisional Commander [i.e. Woods] should be compelled, in all matters relating to the Curragh, to deal through Commandant General McMahon. These people are sufficiently irregular already without allowing them to add to their irregularities by accepting communications direct from them in regard to the Curragh. I am awaiting a decision on Government Policy before suggesting to you that it will be definitely put to these gentlemen to either join the Army or go back to their homes.'⁸³

In a letter of 4 August the Chief of General Staff made it clear that the Northern men were becoming a nuisance: 'With reference to the

⁸² Letter from Vol. 'Cewsealey', 6th Northern Division, Free State Army, Curragh Camp to Patrick Deery, Falls road, Belfast, intercepted by RUC on 16 Aug. 1922 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/257).

question of the North- East men who are at present in the A.S.C barracks in the Curragh, this barracks is in the very centre of the camp, and it is most desirable that this state of affairs should not continue. C'mdt Gen. McMahon wants the North Eastern People put into the Hare Camp, which is on the extreme west side of the Curragh. This would undoubtedly be much better. In order to relieve Cmdt- Gen McMahon from the necessity of appearing to do something unpleasant in relation to these men I promised that we would send an order that Hare Camp was to be used for these particular men.' ⁸⁴ Hare Camp however was in a ramshackle condition and the huts required numerous repairs before they were habitable.

The men themselves were also in a sorry condition. Mulcahy wrote to O'Hegarty: 'Curragh men in awful state... I am given to understand that some of these men who are in the Curragh, are very badly off for clothing.... The D/Organisation will note that I told Comdt. McCorley today that Comdt. McMahon would receive instructions today that authority existed for providing them with underclothing.' ⁸⁵ The fact that the above letter was sent in July also raises new uncertainties about the Provisional Government Army leaderships' motives, as it clearly demonstrates that the policy decided on at the Portobello meeting weeks later was merely rubber-stamping decisions which had already been taken.

⁸³ D/Org. to Minister of Defence, 16 Sept. 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/287).

⁸⁴ Report on 'Hare Camp for North-Eastern Units', 4 Aug. 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/50).

⁸⁵ Mulcahy to D/Org, 26 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDAD, P7/B/78).

Such views of conspiracy had long been expressed. A 2nd Northern Division report stated that it became ‘...evident that the objective was to absorb all the units in the National Army and sever connection with the Organisation in the six counties. From this time on, a good many of the officers and quite a number of the men resented what they termed “this sale” and at once showed antagonism to the Government’.⁸⁶ The Curragh decision and attendant ‘peace policy’ had left the Division ‘badly split’.⁸⁷ James Mallon, the Divisional Intelligence Officer, was only allowed to join the Free State Army in March 1923, the reason being that he was ‘...left with the Division until it was disbanded for the purpose of advising the men and keeping them out of the Irregular ranks’.⁸⁸ It seems that one of the Provisional Government’s prime motives in bringing men to the Curragh was to stop them from siding with the anti-Treaty IRA. One Volunteer painted the situation as even more murky stating that his only reason for going to the South after the offensive was that his O/C ‘...made it appear that anyone who stayed at home would be shot’.⁸⁹

Such feelings of betrayal and anger amongst the Northern IRA were widespread and in many senses justified. Felim MacGill, an IRA officer from Antrim, returned to the North on a reconnaissance mission in the autumn of 1922: ‘We found the Republican population in a most

⁸⁶ ‘Subject-Position of 2nd Northern Division in 1922’ (Thomas Johnson papers, NLI, MS17143).

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

depressed mood. The feelings that the South had let the North down was widespread, and as the Civil War was raging in the South the prospect of having any further military operation in the North seemed madness.’ On 17 August GHQ ordered the O/C of the 2nd Northern Division to ‘...make arrangements for the transfer immediately to the command of Comdt. Sweeney, the posts that you now hold in his area... You will report at once the number of your men that are in those Posts, and arrangements will be made to have them brought forthwith to the Curragh.’⁹⁰ The Division’s weapons and ammunition were also to be handed over to Sweeney for ‘storage’.

After the Portobello meeting the divisional staff were ordered to leave the six counties and the remaining men were confined to barracks in Donegal. Soon after they were ordered to the Curragh, following an advance party of forty who had already left. In July a Catholic man, Dominick Wilson, was dragged from his home near Desertmartin and shot dead on a nearby railway line. The RUC originally believed that the attack was carried out by the ‘B’ Specials although the report added: ‘The crime...is surrounded with mystery and many people are now inclined to believe that Wilson was executed by the I.R.A. as a deserter because he went to England instead of the Free State when the Sinn Feiners were called up for training.’⁹¹ A 2nd Northern Division report later stated: ‘...our general impression of our

⁸⁹ Statement of Anthony O’Neill, 6 Dec. 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/307).

⁹⁰ ‘Subject-Position of 2nd Northern Division in 1922’ (Thomas Johnson papers, NLI, MS17143).

⁹¹ RUC County Inspectors report, 26 Sept, 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/290).

supporters in the North was, and is, that the Treaty created a serious thorny position for the six counties at first, but the misleading and uncalled for tactics of those in authority in the first year were responsible for the wholesale evacuation of the Nationalists...'.⁹²

The anti-Treaty IRA, in a response to a communication from a number of disgruntled Northern Volunteers after the Civil War, summed up such feelings of betrayal: 'I expect the reason they kept you in the Curragh was to keep you from taking part on the IRA side, and the campaign now over I suppose they will show you the door.'⁹³ This assertion proved correct in almost every respect. A number of men from the 4th Northern Division who had decided to join the Provisional Government Army after Hogan captured Dundalk were also sent to the Harepark camp for training. However they felt like many others that they had been duped. One of these men, Edward Fullerton, recalled: '...we staged a sort of mutiny and, as a result, we were all placed under arrest'.⁹⁴

Harepark camp itself would, tellingly for some, be used to intern Republican prisoners in the later stages of the Civil War. Ironically a number of Northern IRA men from both sides of the Treaty divide were present at Harepark at the same time. Charles McGleenan, a Republican internee, recalled a poignant conversation he had with a

⁹² 'Subject-Position of 2nd Northern Division in 1922' (Thomas Johnson papers, NLI, MS17143).

⁹³ IRA C/S to P.O'hUigin, Adj. Northern Volunteers, Curragh Camp, 30 Nov. 1923 (Twomey papers, UCDDAD, P69/35 [103]).

fellow Northerner who was acting as his guard in the camp. After being told by his captor that he had recently seen the Free State customs huts being put up along the border, McGleenan recalled:

'I said that erecting those huts was recognising the border as it was then. He said that the Boundary Commission would soon sit and define the border. I said that when they erected Customs huts they were recognising the border as it then was- that would be as far as it would ever go. He, however, maintained that when the Boundary Commission sits we will get in the counties of Tyrone, Fermanagh, South Armagh and South Down. I then said: "Will you resign from the army if "South Down doesn't get in seeing that you are a 'South Down Man' ?". His reply was that he would not have that to do and after some further discussion in which he got a bit heated, he walked away and left me, and afterwards he never bothered about me again.'⁹⁵

The situation was further clarified with the death of Michael Collins in August. The conspiratorial nature of Southern control over the IRA in the six counties meant that Northern Volunteers had little option but to appeal directly to Collins and his IRB clique for support. With his death their plans would receive little sympathy from those in the Provisional Government calling for a peace policy who were now very much in the ascendancy; as Seamus Woods later wrote to Mulcahy

⁹⁴ Edward Fullerton statement (BMH, NA, WS 890).

‘...the attitude of the present Government towards its followers in the Six Counties, is not that of the late General Collins’.⁹⁶ Roger McCorley confided many years later: ‘When Collins was killed the Northern element gave up all hope.’⁹⁷

The death of Collins was a bitter blow made worse by the manner in which his aggressive Northern policy had been carried out. Typically he acted virtually alone trusting only a few close colleagues and letting others know only as much as he felt they needed to know. Although this gave him huge scope in terms of the nature of his policy, with little dilution from democratic accountability, something that would have limited his typically fast-moving instinctive approach, it allowed little chance of a long-term Southern policy being forged. His isolation from reality meant that he reverted to his usual conspiratorial methods relying increasingly on a futile and costly military solution. The Northern IRA were a blunt weapon and ill suited to an increasingly sophisticated political situation. Despite Collins’ undoubted importance however it was also obvious that Southern policy was already changing long before his death. His sudden demise merely helped to accelerate the process and the Northern IRA lost the one sympathetic supporter they had in the Provisional Government.

⁹⁵ Charles McGleenan statement (BMH, NA, WS 829).

⁹⁶ Woods to Mulcahy, 29 Sept. 1922 (NA, S1801/A).

⁹⁷ Roger McCorley interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/98).

As one Volunteer later stated: ‘...if he were alive things would not have gone so far’.⁹⁸

Collins’ death and Southern withdrawal from the North to concentrate on the Civil War meant that the issue of recognising the Unionist authorities was back on the agenda and became a matter of enormous debate within nationalist circles. Elements in the Northern IRA found the policy impractical especially in terms of their approach to the Northern courts: ‘...I want your advice with regard to what attitude our men should adopt when placed upon trial. Many of these charges are false, and in some cases, a successful defence could be put forward thus leading to the release of useful men...’.⁹⁹ In October 1922 two meetings were held in Belfast to discuss the issue. At the first meeting on 1 October Northern nationalist representatives met with four Southern counterparts from Dublin. A report of the meeting shows up the wide gulf and hostility that now existed between nationalists on either side of the border. The angry attitude of the Northerners sums up starkly how many nationalists felt about the harsh realities of Southern involvement: ‘Strong language was used by various members, against the men that came from Dublin as to their action in flying from Belfast when the serious trouble arose, and are now comfortably situated there in business and jobs at the expense of their fellow creatures in Belfast, and were they coming again to cause

⁹⁸ Comments of IRB member ‘Watters’, 5 Dec. 1923 (Twomey papers, UCDDAD, P69/35 [120]).

⁹⁹ Vice O/C, 2nd Northern Division to O’Duffy, 29 July 1922 (Mulcahy papers, UCDDAD, P7/B/77).

disruption when a favourable opportunity arose...'.¹⁰⁰ The anti-Treaty IRA broke up a second meeting on the 4 October although '...the recognition party were fairly strong and with the assistance of the Nationalist Party...will be able to overcome the strength of the Anti-Treatyites with little trouble.'¹⁰¹

For the Northern IRA the compromise solution at the Curragh did not last very long especially after the death of Collins. Ernest Blythe later reported, 'After a few weeks in the Curragh it became clear that there was no likelihood of operations again starting up in the Six County Area and the group began to break up.'¹⁰² Joe Murray explained how the Curragh plan for the Northern IRA soon began to unravel: '...as time went on and Belfast remained peaceful, the numbers who left for the Curragh increased and by the time September came there was very few of us left in Belfast.' Murray had remained in Belfast and in October was ordered to close all IRA offices and dismantle the brigade headquarters in the city after arranging dumps for all the remaining arms and equipment.¹⁰³ Blythe himself was one of the prime architects of the 'peace policy' and Sean MacBride blamed both him and Cosgrave for undermining Collins' authority, later adding: 'I think Ernest Blythe was one of the real villains of that piece.'¹⁰⁴ Indeed Blythe had little seeming respect for the Northern IRA men at the

¹⁰⁰ Police reports on IRA and Nationalist meetings ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/295).

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Blythe, 'Memo on north-east Ulster 1922-26' (Blythe papers, UCDDAD, P24/554).

¹⁰³ Joe Murray statement (BMH, NA, WS 412).

¹⁰⁴ Sean MacBride quoted MacEoin, *Survivors* p.117.

Curragh referring to them scornfully as a ‘Special “Refugee” unit’.¹⁰⁵ Nearly three hundred of the men would join the Provisional Government Army and were posted to various commands around the country. The rest were allowed to remain in the Curragh until the end of the Civil War when in Blythe’s words ‘...they were told to either “join the Army” or “clear out”’.¹⁰⁶

Roger McCorley himself paints a similar if less harsh picture: ‘We stayed in the Curragh until after Collins was killed. They held a meeting there the Divisional O/C’s and staffs and we decided that any man was free to go where he wanted, either to go home or join the Free State Army.’¹⁰⁷ Some Volunteers however recall that it was coercion rather than choice which was the major policy of the leadership. Patrick Maguire, who had been sent south for the sole purpose of training for later activities back in Ulster as agreed at the Portobello meeting, recalled: ‘Pressure was put on the 2nd Northern IRA in the camp in co. Kildare to join the National Army...by Tom Morris. This effort failed generally as only a very small number joined the Army. The remainder were forced to leave the Curragh. Some to emigrate to Great Britain or USA. A small number- five or six-were arrested by the Free State Government and interned in prison camps. None of those men returned to their homes in Northern Ireland for

¹⁰⁵ Blythe, ‘Memo on north-east Ulster 1922-26’ (Blythe papers, UCDDAD, P24/554).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Roger McCorley interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCDDAD, P17b/98).

years. Some are there now working at home in the North on their little farms or in some cases as farm labourers or road workers.’¹⁰⁸

Those who decided to stay and join the Provisional Government Army were placed under McCorley’s command and sent to Kerry, ironically as far away from the North as it was possible to go in Ireland, in order to help quell Republican resistance. These Northern IRA men would be present in Kerry during the period when the worst atrocities of the Free State Army were being carried out although their implication in such events is far from clear. Tod Andrews, imprisoned on a trip to Munster in the spring of 1923, recalls that the atrocities in Kerry were carried out by ‘...“tough” men of the Dublin and Northern units who emulated the methods of Cromwell or the Yeos of 1798’.¹⁰⁹ The only thing Roger McCorley would say was that he was ‘...fed up. I came back to the Curragh. I wanted to get out of the army or get out of Kerry.’¹¹⁰ What was left of the unit was formed into the 17th Battalion and sent to the Workhouse in Tralee under the command of Joe Murray.¹¹¹

Many of the men decided to return to the North after the August ultimatum. After being unceremoniously dumped at Dundalk they were forced to walk back to their homes to face either internment or police interrogation which led in most cases to restrictions on their

¹⁰⁸ Patrick Maguire statement (BMH, NA, WS 693).

¹⁰⁹ Andrews, *Dublin Made Me* (Dublin, 1979) p.313.

¹¹⁰ Roger McCorley interview with Ernie O’Malley (O’Malley notebooks, UCADAD, P17b/98).

movements and regular reporting to the authorities.¹¹² One such Volunteer was Anthony O'Neill, a surface-man on the railways from Martinstown, County Antrim, who had joined the IRA during the Truce like so many other young men. O'Neill had taken part in an abortive attack on the local barracks in May after leaving his job to stay full-time with the column. The attack had proved to be a disaster and the men were forced to go immediately on the run: 'After the attack twenty of us were in the mountains for a fortnight and almost starved.'¹¹³

Eventually O'Neill came south with a few others and after meeting up with his brigade O/C in Dublin was sent to the Curragh where he waited, bored and inactive, for the next three months: 'I was sent to Pearse barracks, there were 28 of us there for two months, and I was then sent to A.S.C. barracks. There were a lot of Belfast men came and we drilled, we were then changed to Hare Park and were taken back to Pearse Barracks and kept there till I was discharged.'¹¹⁴ Bitter and disillusioned O'Neill decided to go back home along with what was left of his unit. He reported to the local police barracks where he and his friends admitted they had been foolish to ever join the IRA and would never again get involved in any political movement. His Battalion Commandant admitted 'I was fooled and led astray'

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² RUC District Inspector (Belfast) to Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs, 5 Feb. 1923 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/168). For further examples of the poor treatment of northern recruits in the Free State Army see file on 'Free State soldiers crossing the border in uniforms' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/168).

whilst another Volunteer Hugh Carey stated that he had only left home for fear of what his brigade commander would do to him if he didn't go to the South.¹¹⁵ O'Neill's mother also arrived to plead on her son's behalf. The local RUC Sergeant, Owen Gallagher, later reported that she was '...a sensible woman and told me how the people were led astray...I am confident with the exception of a few families the people are sound and will give me every assistance...The IRA is dead in this sub-district...I know the feeling of the people.'¹¹⁶ Many of these men would remain under suspicion and constant surveillance for decades after the conflict. Patrick Maguire had his home raided so often in the 1930s by the RUC and Specials that he decided to emigrate to Dublin in 1939 never to return.¹¹⁷

For many Northern IRA men however returning home meant inevitable arrest and internment. These hardened Volunteers also felt that joining the Provisional Government Army was a compromise too far. One Belfast Republican referred scathingly to his old comrades who had joined the pro-Treaty side arguing that '...their motivation seemed to be twenty-four shillings a week and a dyed khaki uniform.'¹¹⁸ Indeed poverty and unemployment were the main motivating factor for the thousands of men who went south to join the Provisional Government Army. Most of the recruits were recorded as 'out of

¹¹³ Statement of Anthony O'Neill, 6 Dec. 1922 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/307).

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ File on Hugh Carey (Ministry of Home Affairs files, PRONI, HA/5/1177).

¹¹⁶ Report from RUC Sergeant Owen Gallagher, 6 Dec. 1922 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/307).

workers' and large numbers rejected due to their poor physical condition.¹¹⁹ Between April 1922 and March 1923 over 3000 men made the journey to Dublin. Of the 1685 who left before December 1922 only 246 would ever return.¹²⁰ The Unionist government were on the whole pleased with this exodus to the South and decided not to interfere with the work of Provisional Government Army recruiting agents, believing that these men already had doubtful loyalty to the Northern Irish government.¹²¹

Those men who were accepted often received shoddy treatment at the hands of the Provisional Government agents who had offered them a new life in the South. One Volunteer wrote of his torrid experience in February 1923:

I was one of 236 that paid our own fares to Dublin and marched into the square, formed up again and marched back to the station and were put into trains for Dublin. We were kept in the station at Amiens Street under armed guard until 8-15a.m. the following morning, and the same train took us back to Dundalk. Arrived there, we went back to barracks, formed up on square, were kept fooling about the barracks all that day until 7-30pm, when we formed up again, were told nothing, marched out of barracks, and kept marching for about a mile,

¹¹⁷ Patrick Maguire statement (BMH, NA, WS 693).

¹¹⁸ Peter Carleton quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors* p.306.

¹¹⁹ 'Reports on Recruits leaving Northern Ireland to join Irish Free State Army' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/168).

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* See also *Irish News*, 31 Jan. 1923.

before we found out we had been fooled. Apparently the man in charge of us was told that when the last section of "fours" had passed out of the gate, he was to dodge back into barracks and let us march where we liked. Then we found out our position and it was too late for a train home, supposing anyone had his fare. A priest went for an officer to the jail. He wired to the barracks. A Crossley came down, and an officer jumped out. We were formed up and marched back to town. The A.O.H. Hall was commandeered and a private house also, and we were formed into two parties, put there for the night, and kept until Monday. In the meantime more men kept pouring in by every train. They were kept in the street. Some started tramping home, others wiring for their fares. We were mostly ex-Servicemen, and respectable. On Tuesday I left for home. The last news was that they did not want recruits, and we were left to go home as we liked.' ¹²²

Many Northern IRA men, either on the run from the Unionist authorities or disillusioned deserters from the Curragh, joined up with various Republican units in the South. Tom Heavy joined such a column under Neil Boyle (a.k.a. Plunkett) a Donegal IRA man operating in Wicklow, 'There were about twenty in the Column, which was a mixture of Northerners, a few from Dublin and a few Wicklow

¹²¹ 'Reports on Recruits leaving Northern Ireland to join Irish Free State Army' ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/168).

¹²² *Belfast Evening Telegraph*, 1 Feb. 1923.

fellows.’¹²³ The men got their arms from Belfast although it was ironically a Belfast officer, Felix McCorley, who would brutally pacify them. Shortly after the column was surrounded in a safe-house at Vallymount, Boyle went out to talk to McCorley. The events that followed were horrifying as Heavy later explained: ‘Suddenly McCorley raised his revolver and shot Plunkett in the eye, the bullet passing through his upraised hands. For good measure he shot him again in the head. He just shot him, I saw it all. It was cold blooded murder.’¹²⁴ The rest of the column were quickly captured and Heavy met McCorley again who ‘...went on with the usual bluster of having us all shot. As if I cared.’¹²⁵

In the six counties itself the anti-Treaty IRA continued to launch sporadic attacks against the security forces with shootings reported in Newtownstewart, Dungannon and Aughnacloy. These token attempts at offensive operations however were derided by the Unionist authorities as merely ‘...the work of a few half-hearted isolated irresponsibles’.¹²⁶ Indeed, apart from a number of men in Belfast, who had managed to escape internment, only Aiken’s 4th Northern Division in Armagh still retained any cohesion. Despite the collapse of the IRA in the North, Aiken remained resolutely opposed to both of the new governments in Ireland. He had pleaded with Northern IRA men to make a final last stand and ‘...not to join the Army of the Government,

¹²³ Tom Heavy quoted in MacEoin, *Survivors*, p.454.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

with that oath in the constitution, no matter what the pay may be, or that the alternatives to joining are starving or going back to Ulster to fight at a time that the disordered state of Southern Ireland ensures failure.’¹²⁷

Such idealistic appeals however were largely ignored by the Northern IRA who had suffered extreme hardships with no noticeable reward. John Hagan, the O/C of the 3rd Brigade in Armagh, received a letter from Aiken asking him to appeal for recruits in the county but as a police report on the incident stated: ‘Hagan went to all the “Irregulars” in Armagh for the purpose of persuading them to go. This appeal, however met with no response and it is stated that all those Hagan approached refused to go, or have anything to do with the “Irregulars” across the border. Some of them said that they would rather suffer burning or shooting in their own homes rather than go, as they were ‘fed up’ with the “Irregulars”. It is quite evident that Aiken must be hard pressed for men and must feel sorely disappointed when his appeal was turned down. The Police were informed that no one left Armagh to join the “Irregulars”.’¹²⁸ Hagan himself was later arrested which he was reported to be ‘very glad’ about as ‘...he was in a very difficult position owing to the fact that he was drawing pay from IRA funds and had nothing to show for his money.’¹²⁹

¹²⁶ RUC County Inspectors report (Tyrone) 26 Sept. 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/290).

¹²⁷ ‘Position of the 4th Northern Division from January 1922-17 July 1922’ (Thomas Johnson papers, NLI, MS17143).

¹²⁸ RUC report, 19 February 1923 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/281).

¹²⁹ Ibid.

After Aiken's escape from Dundalk, Tod Andrews was sent north by Ernie O'Malley to meet him in order to discover Aiken's future intentions. His account of the meeting, in a farm labourer's cottage, outside of Dundalk, shows graphically the feeling of despair which pervaded the leadership of the Northern IRA's only functioning Division after the outbreak of hostilities in the South:

'He was sitting on the bed and made no attempt to make me welcome. There was a chair in the room but I wasn't invited to sit down. He did not ask what I wanted. He looked at me in what he may have thought was a questioning manner but the muscles of his face did not appear to move. Finally a grunted "well?" indicated that discussion should get under way. I explained the purpose of my visit. He told me as laconically as possible to go back and tell O'Malley that he intended to attack and re-capture Dundalk. I asked- feeling, but I hope not showing, some scepticism- "When?" "In a few days" was the reply. The conversation was beginning to resemble a Red Indian pow-wow. I asked him if I might stay to take part in the operation. The reply was "Ah, no. You'd better go back to O'Malley". In a relatively lengthy speech, I shifted the tone of the conversation from a Red Indian to a Chinese dialogue...he relented to the extent that I was allowed to stay but only in his own immediate company. He said I could sleep with him head to toe and to this I agreed.

'The elderly woman of the house gave us tea with homemade bread and butter before we turned in. Aiken never uttered a word. We rose very early next morning and got more tea and bread and butter with boiled eggs for breakfast. Still no word came from Aiken. After a while he took up a knapsack into which he had put his shaving kit, socks and change of shirt. He indicated by signs that we were about to leave and I was surprised to find a small Ford car with a red headed driver waiting outside the cottage door. The driver- who was named Peter Boyle- turned out to be a kind of Man Friday to Aiken. But beyond a monosyllabic direction to him, Aiken did not speak.'

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Andrews proceeded with Aiken to take part in the attack on Dundalk that night leading to the release of hundreds of Republican prisoners and their replacement by a similar number of Provisional Government troops. The attack finally ended what little chance the 4th Northern Division had of maintaining a neutral position in the Civil War and with the death of McKenna in the fighting left Aiken as the principal focus of Republican discontent in the Division. He would not however embrace his new role and his participation in the Civil War would be half-hearted and as enigmatic as ever. His eyes were still fixed firmly on the North. Andrews would later write: 'Nobody on either side liked

¹³⁰ Andrews, *Dublin Made Me* pp.258-9

having to take part in the Civil War, but I never met anyone who was so totally horrified or saddened by it as Aiken.’¹³¹

Due to increasing hostility from Free State troops, especially after the reoccupation of Dundalk, Aiken could only make sporadic attacks in the North and many of these were the accidental result of his escaping the attentions of the Provisional Government Army. Kevin O’Higgins would later perceptively sum up the anomalous position of the 4th Northern Division during a speech in the Dail: ‘Mr Frank Aiken presumably is a Republican...I do not know whether he is a Republican for thirty-two or twenty-six counties, but what I do know is that he is very glad of the benevolent protection of the border and of the Government in North-East, which, presumably, he does not recognise.’¹³²

Aiken’s position was made even worse by growing co-operation between the Provisional Government and Northern Irish authorities both of which exchanged intelligence on his whereabouts and saw him as a menace to their future stability. Ironically Aiken now found it easier to launch attacks on the South from over the border in Armagh, a complete reversal of the tactics of the border campaign in the spring of 1922. Armed men were said to be roaming South Armagh and visiting houses where they demanded money and foodstuffs. It was reported: ‘Numbers of Irregulars...are taking advantage of the border

¹³¹ Ibid. p.261.

situation by attacking Free Staters in Southern Ireland, retreating into Ulster, dumping their arms and living as peaceable civilians till they “get their breath” so to speak. Their sojourns in Northern Ireland though, are sometimes utilised in attacks on Specials.’¹³³ As late as February 1923 it was reported of Aiken that ‘...he was recently in Armagh city disguised as an old beggar man’.¹³⁴ Aiken and his rapidly diminishing column would continue to roam the border searching for targets both north and south.

To his anti-Treaty colleagues it appeared strange that Aiken and his well-equipped Division had made few concerted attacks in the South since the attack on Dundalk. Their explanation was that he still maintained the Northern IRA’s belief that the real enemy lay in the North: ‘Aiken’s position is extra-ordinary. He has over 2000 men and must have 6 or 700 rifles and about 20 machine guns...it seems to me that Aiken’s eyes are on the Six Counties in which he has almost 1500 men and his is saving himself to attack the Special who are not doing us any harm at all.’¹³⁵

Indeed Aiken’s enigmatic role in the Civil War is largely explained by his wish to stay focused on the issue of overcoming partition much to the dismay of the Republican leadership. Many Northern IRA men shared such a view. One Volunteer Henry McGorm wrote to his

¹³² *Northern Whig*, 8 Feb. 1923.

¹³³ ‘IRA activities near Balls Mills, Co. Armagh’ (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/280).

¹³⁴ RUC report, 19 February 1923 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/280).

mother: ‘...I suppose you would rather I had joined up with the Free State Army. Well I couldn’t think of doing such a thing after the rough handling we go at their hands in Dundalk. Also I don’t think that we from the six-counties should go to Cork to shoot our own countrymen.’¹³⁶ Aiken’s appointment as head of the Northern command in November after the arrest of Ernie O’Malley did little to end his self-imposed isolation or to inspire him to communicate with the only remaining Volunteers in Belfast: ‘The 3rd Northern Division are not aware of the formation of the Northern Command and Aiken apparently has never paid any attention to Belfast except to ask for arms and ammunition of which he has plenty already.’¹³⁷ Liam Lynch wrote that he had communicated with Aiken in December concerning ‘...his neglect in attending to GHQ orders and on the position of the forces in the six-county area not being active in the present war...When I interviewed Aiken he promised to use resources at his disposal all over his Division particularly in the weaker Brigades. If he does this I will not press him to send resources outside the Northern command’¹³⁸.

For the men in Belfast the Civil War appeared a distant conflict and attempts to re-organise were continuously hampered by the activities of the Specials. Most of their activities were attempts to steal money and supplies. In September 1922 the RUC reported: ‘All Catholic

¹³⁵ D/org. to C/S, 22 Dec. 1922 (Twomey papers, UCDDAD, P69/13 [80]).

¹³⁶ Henry McGorm letter to his mother, 24 July 1922 (‘Secret Series’ files, PRONI, HA/32/1/257).

¹³⁷ D/Org to C/S, 22 Dec. 1922 (Twomey papers, UCDDAD, P69/13 [80]).

book-makers and Commission Agents in Ulster have been recently notified that in the near future they must be prepared to make substantial donations to IRA funds, to further operations against the pogrom government' ¹³⁹. The order however was a hollow threat from a toothless organisation and RUC enquiries found that none of the recipients of the letters had received any actual visits from the IRA. The Republican leadership advised against attacking the Unionist authorities not only due to the impossible odds the men were facing but also because of continuing conflict with the old pro-Treaty IRA in the city who were said to be informing on the Republicans. Such problems it was observed meant that 'The men in the Belfast Brigade are anxious to transfer to areas where they would be useful' and despite a nominal strength of over 200 men, a brigade O/C had still not been appointed by December 1922.¹⁴⁰ Only nine men were reported to be active in Antrim with a mere seven still working in East Down.¹⁴¹

Ironically in November 1923 those Northern IRA men still left in the Curragh after service in the Civil War sent a letter to the anti-Treaty IRA: 'We the remains of the Northern Divisions in the Curragh camp have organised a coy. of Volunteers for the purpose of taking part in

¹³⁸ Liam Lynch memo, 31 Dec. 1922 (Twomey papers, UCDAD, P69/13 [76]).

¹³⁹ RUC intelligence report ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/277).

¹⁴⁰ D/org to C/S, 22 Dec. 1922 (Twomey papers, UCDAD, P69/13 [80]).

¹⁴¹ Report on IRA strengths (Twomey papers, UCDAD, P69/13 [71]).

any hostilities in the 6 counties.’¹⁴² In Belfast a Volunteer reported his experience of meeting the disillusioned members of the Northern IRA who had returned to the city from the Curragh: ‘I have noticed the change. There are a lot of the “Bows” home. I noticed a lot at 10 o’clock mass yesterday...what surprised me was that they are all F S Army men and they were all “Diehards” now “hardy fellahs” as you might say.’¹⁴³ Their shoddy treatment at the hands of the Southern government had finally led them to belatedly throw in their lot with the Republicans. However, such initiatives were far too late to make any real difference. Well before the end of 1923, the combination of unionist aggression, a decline in support from the Catholic community and abandonment by their Southern allies had meant that to all intents and purposes the Northern IRA no longer existed.

¹⁴² P.O’hUigin Adj. Northern Volunteers, Curragh Camp to IRA C/S, 18 Nov. 1923 (Twomey papers, UCDDAD, P69/35).

¹⁴³ Hugh Hanna to Michael Watters, 4 Feb. 1924 (Ministry of Home Affairs, PRONI, HA/5/2022).

CONCLUSION

The violence and political upheaval that occurred in the North between 1920-22 was on a scale virtually unmatched in the rest of Ireland during the revolutionary period. Over 500 people had lost their lives with thousands of others wounded and millions of pounds worth of property destroyed. Despite this turmoil however the Northern IRA had collapsed in ignominious and total defeat with the partition settlement of 1920 emerging virtually unscathed. The defeat of the Northern IRA in the autumn of 1922 was indeed so complete that it would be another generation before militant republicanism had recovered sufficiently to once again challenge the Northern government.

In 1925 the Ministry of Home Affairs released the following assessment of the IRA threat in the province:

'The strength of this force in Northern Ireland at the beginning of 1922 was estimated at roughly 8,000 but the large number of arrests and exclusions and the migration of members to Southern Ireland and elsewhere has discouraged and disorganised them to such an extent that at the present time no actual military organisation can be said to have any real existence in Northern Ireland although doubtless such may exist on paper... it is doubtful whether at the present time 300 men could be mobilised.'¹

¹ Intelligence memorandum, October 1925 ('Secret Series' files, PRONI, HA/32/1/481).

Even such a conservative estimate however was optimistic. By October 1925 only one Sinn Fein club still existed in Belfast; named after Joe McKelvey, who had been executed in December 1922, its meetings drew only around twenty activists many of whom were released IRA internees such as Hugh Corvin, Patrick Thornbury and Art O'Donnell.² Outside of Belfast it was noted that despite '...strenuous efforts to organise them, no clubs are known to exist', with the remnants of the IRA tending, if at all, to join left-wing organisations such as the Independent Labour Party.³

By contrast the Northern Ireland government emerged from the period both victorious and surprisingly stable with Unionist domination of the province ensured for the next fifty years. Indeed the upheavals of the revolutionary era had been largely detrimental to the social and political aspirations of the Catholic minority. The traditional siege mentality of Unionism had been reinforced by the events of 1920-22 and did much to shape the ethos of the Northern government for decades after. The retention of the 'B' Specials, long after the threat from the IRA had receded, and the continued reign of the extremist Minister of Home Affairs, Richard Dawson Bates, who only stood down in 1943, is testament to the key role that fear and security played as the foundation stones of the Northern Ireland. The Local Government Bill of July 1922, ending the system of proportional representation enshrined in the Government of Ireland Act, was introduced largely to

² Ibid.

prevent majority Catholic representation in any area of the six counties. It was inspired by a need to avert the possibility of local authorities being used by nationalists to undermine partition as had occurred in early 1920 and been a key precursor of the Northern conflict.⁴

As such the violent events of 1920-22 played a vital role in bolstering the repressive tendencies of hard-line elements in the Unionist government and sidelining moderates and those with a belief in the importance of some kind of rapprochement with the Catholic minority. This short-term stability however was purchased at the price of long-term survival with the torrid birth of the province creating the enmities and hostility between both communities in the North which finally erupted into overt conflict in the late 1960s. It appears increasingly possible that the history of Northern Ireland could well be defined by two very similar periods of violent upheaval that will mark both its creation and its future collapse.

The story of the Northern IRA is a tragic one although in hindsight their failure appears almost inevitable. The dependence on unrealistic Southern schemes, themselves based on the deeply flawed dogma of Irish nationalism which held that unionists could be coerced into unity, was fatal, especially when the Dublin leadership was faced with a stark choice between furthering its own independence or

³ Ibid.

maintaining Irish unity at its expense. While the South wrestled with the irreconcilable nature of the 'Republic' and a united Ireland, unionists viewed the revolution as final proof of its own long held cultural identity as the front line against insidious Catholic expansionism.

For the Northern IRA, an organisation essentially built on the illusory possibility of political unity without compromise, it was inevitable that the shaky alliance on which it was constructed would quickly crumble at the first serious demonstration of the limitations of nationalist rhetoric in the Irish context. Indeed Southern nationalist rhetoric proved itself to be too weak to either accept the compromises which a real push for Irish unity meant and too strong to accept the inherent contradictions of its own ethos and accept the inevitable. John McCoy thoughtfully concluded many years later: 'The resort to force is a two-edged weapon which in the last analysis seldom achieves anything that could not be obtained by reason and peaceful means. The only people who have thrived on discord in the North are a select number of the trouble-making politicians who have climbed to office and are today engaged in the old device of creating the canard that men of a certain religious persuasion are ipso facto "disloyal".'⁵ When in the summer of 1922 both North and South finally retreated into their own safe dogmatic cocoons the Northern IRA became an immediate

⁴ M. Laffan, *The Partition of Ireland 1911-1925* (Dublin, 1983) pp. 106-110.

⁵ John McCoy statement (BMH, NA, WS 492).

anomaly and an embarrassing symbol to the South of its failure to either adapt to or confront the realities of partition.

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University College Dublin, Archives

Richard Mulcahy Papers:

Particularly useful material can be found in the following files:

- P7/A/17: Divisional reorganisation
- P7/A/18: Correspondence and reports on Northern Divisions
- P7/A/26: Northern Divisional reports
- P7/A/23: Material on North-East Ulster
- P7/B/77: Correspondence with Northern Divisions (1922)
- P7/B/78: Correspondence with internees, July-Sept. 1922

Ernie O'Malley Notebooks:

- P17b/98: Roger McCorley
- P17b/107: Seamus Woods
- P17b/95: Tom Ketterick
- P17b/97: Joe Sweeney
- P17b/98: Peadar O'Donnell
- P17b/108: Sean Culhane
- P17b/116: John McCoy
- P17b/99: Tom McNally

Ernie O'Malley Papers

Particularly useful material can be found in the following files:

- P17a/65: Reports from 1st and 2nd Northern Divisions, Sept.-Oct. 1922
- P17a/63: North-Eastern Command reports

Moss Twomey Papers

Desmond Fitzgerald Papers

Ernest Blythe Papers

- P24/554: Memo on the north

Frank Aiken Papers

National Library of Ireland

Florence O'Donoghue Papers

- MS 17143: Position of the 4th Northern Division from January 1922-17 July 1922
- MS31313-MS31421: Correspondence 1950-52.
- MS31424: Material on Divisional strengths.

Thomas Johnson Papers

- MS 17143: 2nd Northern Division report

Maurice Moore Papers

The National Archives

Department of Taoiseach General Files

Dail Eireann Cabinet Minutes

Provisional Government and Free State Cabinet Files

Particularly useful material can be found in the following files:

S1801/A-Q: Minutes of Provisional Government meetings, June-Aug. 1922

Bureau of Military History Witness Statements:

WS 853: Peadar Barry

WS 612: Patrick Beagan

WS 229: Frank Booth

WS 647: Edward Boyle

WS 1328: Philip Boyle

WS 1148: Patrick Casey

WS 598: John Connolly

WS 605: John Cosgrave

WS 746: Sean Culhane

WS9: Sean Cusack

WS 492: John McCoy

WS 389: Roger McCorley

WS 846: Dominick Doherty

WS 941: Frank Donnelly

WS 395: Thomas Fitzpatrick

WS 429: Thomas Flynn

WS 365: Thomas Fox

WS 890: Edward Fullerton

WS 658: John Grant

WS 941: Albert Tally

WS 893: William Kelly

WS 693: Patrick Maguire

WS 763): Seamus McCann

WS 911: Patrick McKenna

Bureau of Military History additional material

Belfast

Public Record Office of Northern Ireland

Ministry of Home Affairs Secret Series Files

Particularly useful material can be found in the following files:

HA/32/1/130: Documents found in St. Mary's Hall

HA/32/1/4: Reports on Truce Breaches

HA/32/1/11-12: Files on Clones incident

HA/32/1/290: Londonderry County Inspector's report

HA/32/1/46: Reports on internments 1922-24

HA/32/1/307: Police restrictions on IRA members in Antrim

HA/32/1/16-18: Boundary Commission reports

HA/32/1/29-38: Files on Civil Authorities (Special Powers) Act
HA/32/1/39: Lists of released internees
HA/32/1/54: Proposals of Military Adviser
HA/32/1/69-125: Reports on internment camps
HA/32/1/168: Reports on recruits for Free State Army
HA/32/1/207: Captured IRA intelligence report
HA/32/1/204-5: Compensation claims
HA/32/1/280: IRA activities during civil war
HA/32/1/396: Report on men returning from Free State Army

Ministry of Home Affairs Files

Particularly useful material can be found in the following files:

HA/5/2181: File on Patrick Barnes
HA/5/152: RIC Bi-monthly reports
HA/5/175: File on kidnappings in Tyrone and Fermanagh
HA/5/179: File on Pomeroy barracks attack
HA/5/196: File on Belcoo barracks attack
HA/5/179: File on Maghera barracks attack
HA/5/224: File on Twaddell shooting
HA/5/22: Report on violence in county Antrim
HA/5/220: Report on violence in county Londonderry
HA/5/154: Report on border violence
HA/5/219: File on casualties, Nov.1921-July 1922

Prime Minister's Department Files

Cabinet Conclusions (CAB/6)

Fred Crawford Papers

Cahir Healy Papers (D/2991)

Wilfred Spender Papers (D/1295)

Files on Internees on Argenta

London

Public Record Office

Colonial Office Papers

Cabinet Office Papers

Tallents Papers

Newspapers and Periodicals

The Armagh Guardian

Belfast Newsletter

Belfast Telegraph

Irish News
Irish Bulletin
The Times
Irish Independent
Northern Whig
Derry Journal
Freeman's Journal
Frontier Sentinel
Derry Standard