



## When Intelligence Made a Difference

— EARLY 20TH CENTURY —

### Revolutionary Spymaster

#### How Michael Collins Won the Anglo-Irish Intelligence War

by Michael J. Ard PhD

In Dublin on November 21, 1920, Irish Republican Army (IRA) leader Michael Collins ordered his gunmen to kill nearly two dozen intelligence officers of the British crown. The IRA believed these agents, whom they dubbed “the Cairo Gang,” sought to murder the IRA’s leaders, including Collins, and members the *Dail Eireann*, the underground Irish parliament. Entering the officers’ lodgings, the gunmen coldly shot dead 13 of their targets and wounded several others. The British secret service had suffered a stunning blow.

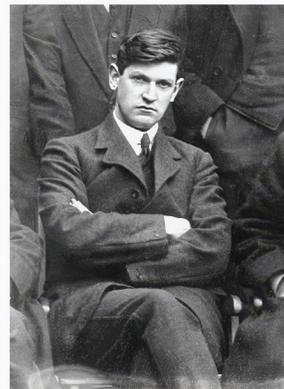
The assassins’ strike on “Bloody Sunday” was the most dramatic event of the Irish Insurrection of 1919-1921 to win independence from Great Britain. Several factors brought the British government and the Irish rebels to the peace table in 1921, which led to the creation of the Irish Free State. The surprising success of the IRA’s intelligence war with Great Britain probably was a decisive factor. The Irish invented modern revolutionary warfare, with their use of the mass political party Sinn Fein, (“ourselves alone”), sophisticated propaganda, and urban guerilla tactics.<sup>1</sup> But an effective intelligence operation formed by Collins, a former bank clerk with no military or police training, kept British operations off-base and enabled the rebel movement to strike back and survive.

1. Peter Hart. *The I.R.A. at War 1916-1923*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 3.

## THE POLITICAL SCENE

Great Britain ruled Ireland directly since 1801, but the Crown never achieved full authority over the 26 majority-Catholic counties in the south of the island. “Home rule” for Ireland was sometimes promised by London, but never delivered. Irish patriots were divided between home rule and an independent republic. After British parliamentary elections in 1910, home rule again became an active proposition, but it alarmed the six predominantly Protestant counties of Ulster.<sup>2</sup> Armed Ulster Volunteers pledged to prevent the north from being governed by the majority-Catholic south. In response, Irish Catholics formed their own Volunteers, which Michael Collins, a member of the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), joined.<sup>3</sup>

Michael Collins  
Mícheál Ó Coileáin



Collins in 1919

World War I further radicalized Irish politics.<sup>4</sup> Widespread concern that Ireland would fall under Britain’s conscription act raised the temperature, even though 200,000 Irishmen already had fought for the British Empire. In 1916, an Easter uprising in Dublin by the IRB, including Collins, failed badly; the people did not rise up

as expected. But Irish opinion changed when 1,800 rebels were transported to Wales for imprisonment without trial.<sup>5</sup> Among those sent to the Frongoch prison for several months was Michael Collins. The prison became a “Republican university” for its internees. Here Collins’ career as an intelligence operative began, forging hundreds of key contacts within the rebel movement.<sup>6</sup>

2. Paul Johnson. *Ireland: A Concise History from the Twelve Century to the Present Day*, Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1980, pp. 153-159.

3. The Irish Republican Brotherhood was founded as a secret fraternal organization in 1858 dedicated to establishing Ireland as a democratic republic. Its counterpart in the United States was the Fenian Brotherhood.

4. R.E. Forster. *Modern Ireland: 1600-1972*, New York: Penguin Books, 1988, p. 433.

5. Johnson, pp. 180-181.

6. Tim Pat Coogan. *The Man Who Made Ireland: The Life and Death of Michael Collins*, Niwot, Colorado: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1992, p. 47.

In late 1918, the Sinn Fein won a by-election for the British parliament and, instead of taking its seats, it established its own underground government. By early 1919, it had its own elected parliament (*Dail Eireann*), president and cabinet, and with an intelligence arm under the Ministry of Defense. Irish aspirations for self-determination were ignored at the Versailles peace talks. Spontaneous attacks on British authorities by Volunteer units, now calling themselves the Irish Republican Army, became more frequent. On its own authority, the *Dail* declared Ireland's independence from Britain. Slow to act, the British parliament's passage of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act in August 1920 finally put Ireland and Britain in a state of war, leading to hundreds of rebel prosecutions.<sup>7</sup>

But, after World War I ended, the British secret intelligence service suffered significant budget cuts, which hindered its ability to cope with the rebellion.<sup>8</sup> It was up to Britain's government in Ireland, "Dublin Castle," to counter the rebel threat. The Castle controlled the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP), with its intelligence network, and the island's Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). It often was aided by London's Scotland Yard and Sir Basil Thomson's Directorate of Intelligence.<sup>9</sup> Military units had their own intelligence, which sometimes were recruited from demobilized army intelligence officers. Collins later would remark how disunited were the forces against him.<sup>10</sup>

By 1920, Irish rebels began a revenge campaign against British authority, retaliating against their British captors from the Easter rebellion roundup.<sup>11</sup> To make up for a lack of police, Winston Churchill, as secretary of state for war, hired thousands of Army veteran contractors, dubbed the "Black and Tans" and the Auxiliaries, to augment the police.<sup>12</sup> More reinforcements came when Colonel Ormonde Winter was appointed intelligence head of the Castle. Winter began assembling hard-charging ex-Army secret service agents to combat the rebel underground. But the

heavy-handed tactics of these police and intelligence units turned the Irish public against British rule.

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## COLLINS' RISE TO PROMINENCE

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Collins assumed more leadership roles among the rebels after his release from Frongoch. After a fiery speech at a hunger striker's funeral, Collins was invited to join the IRB Supreme Council. By early 1917, the G-division of DMP, responsible for intelligence collection against political subversion, placed Collins on its watch list. In early 1919, at age 29, Collins became the IRA's head of intelligence, reporting to its chief of staff Cathal Brugha. The DMP soon would become the principal target for Collins' new intelligence apparatus.

Well-read in Irish history, Collins understood that prior Irish rebellions had always failed because British authorities ran effective networks of informers against them. In the verdict of Collins biographer Frank O'Connor, "It was typical of the romantic haze in which the Irish patriots moved that no one had realized this before."<sup>13</sup> Collins aimed to break up these informant networks by forging an intelligence unit to neutralize the intelligence forces of the DMP and the Special Branch of the RIC.<sup>14</sup> He sought to make British governance of Ireland impossible.<sup>15</sup>

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## BUILDING AN INTELLIGENCE ORGANIZATION

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Collins took over the IRA's intelligence organization, setting up in a print shop near Dublin Castle. His responsibilities were tremendous, also involving funding operations and gunrunning. He quickly grew his staff and developed contacts in hotels, the post office, and the telephone exchange to collect on British military and intelligence movements and communications. Other key contacts were jail warders, restaurant employees, and reporters; even the humblest worker could be one of Collins' agents.<sup>16</sup> To avoid intercepted communications, he relied on loyal couriers to deliver messages.<sup>17</sup>

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7. T. Bowden. "Bloody Sunday—A Reappraisal," *European Studies Review* (Volume 2, Issue 1, January 1972), p. 28.

8. Christopher Andrew. *Defend the Realm: The Authorized History of MI5*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009, p. 117.

9. Sir Basil Thomson was the UK Director of Intelligence overseeing both Scotland Yard and the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). <http://www.bloodysunday.co.uk/castle-intelligence/thomson/scotland-yard-spies.html>.

10. James Gleeson. *Bloody Sunday: How Michael Collins's Agents Assassinated Britain Secret Service in Dublin on November 21, 1920*, Guilford, CT: The Lyons Press, 2004, p. 116.

11. Michael T. Foy. *Michael Collins's Intelligence War*, London: Sutton Publishing LTD, 2006, pp. 3-4.

12. T. Ryle Dwyer. *"The Squad" and the Intelligence Operations of Michael Collins*, Cork: Mercier Press, 2005, p. 107.

13. Frank O'Connor. *The Big Fellow: Michael Collins and the Irish Revolution*, Cork: Mercier Press, 2018, p. 96.

14. Bowden, p. 29.

15. Gleeson, p. 38.

16. Dwyer, pp. 14-7.

17. Foy, p. 12.

Collins took advantage of a significant vulnerability in both the DMP and RIC organizations—Catholics, though employed as police, could expect no promotions, making them ripe candidates to betray the Castle.<sup>18</sup> One such informer was Eamonn Broy, a DMP officer who provided a steady stream of intelligence on the Castle to the Collins' unit.<sup>19</sup> Another was David Neligan, a double agent in the DMP and later the British secret service, who produced an insightful memoir on these events. Women also played important roles: Lily Mernin, the secretary for the local military commander in the Castle, was a core member of Collins' organization.<sup>20</sup>

Collins kept his intelligence service nimble, relying on a few close lieutenants as collectors, analysts, and, in the case of his deputy Liam Tobin, even enforcers. Its purpose was to collect, analyze, and employ intelligence covert action.<sup>21</sup> He streamlined and sped up the slow reporting cycle. Despite running the organization, he acted as his own "case officer," sometimes building personal bonds with his contacts.<sup>22</sup> Employing charisma and personal charm, he was an excellent recruiter.<sup>23</sup> To avoid compromises and leaks, Collins often withheld contact information from his deputies.

To create a highly disciplined force, Collins tested each recruit himself and weeded out poor performers. According to one historian, his volunteers—and many were unpaid—refrained from alcohol and boycotted social and familial contact with the RIC.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Collins' people used Dublin's many pubs themselves as a secret meeting places and safe houses.<sup>25</sup>

Ruthless in execution, Collins maintained an ethical basis to his actions, which could be characterized as "discriminate violence." One biographer deemed Collins "a rationalist," who stressed the minimum use of force and intervened to prevent indiscriminate killings. He disapproved of sacrificing lives needlessly, as he blamed the rebel leadership for the failed Easter rebellion.<sup>26</sup> Collins avoided direct operations and rarely met with gunmen himself.<sup>27</sup> When Collins'

gunmen killed an Irish informant, he sometimes ordered payments to the victim's widow.<sup>28</sup>

Luck, an essential quality for an intelligence operative, seemed to favor Collins, as he had several charmed escapes.<sup>29</sup> His biographer Tim Pat Coogan relates how Collins followed the advice of the anarchist in G.K. Chesterton's *The Man Who Was Thursday*—"if you don't seem to be hiding, nobody hunts you out."<sup>30</sup> Whatever the inspiration, Collins often operated in the open, riding a bicycle through Dublin in a grey business suit and hat—hardly the look of a revolutionary. The British never had a clear photo of Collins and had only a vague idea of what he looked like.<sup>31</sup>

Collins realized in his perilous work that risks were unavoidable and mishaps would happen. Despite his successes, Collins' operations were hardly mistake-free. The offensive-minded Collins was sometimes naïve about the potential of new contacts. Some operations were poorly conceived, such as an assassination attempt on the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Viscount French.<sup>32</sup> In his memoir Neligan acknowledged "blind spots" in the Collins intelligence apparatus, especially in failing to protect safe houses and some embedded spies.<sup>33</sup> Collins sometimes courted fate: Neligan warned him not to hold a Christmas party at a British-frequented hotel.<sup>34</sup> It became another lucky near-miss, as an Auxiliary patrol failed to recognize the IRA intelligence chief.<sup>35</sup>

Good intelligence work was insufficient without a covert action arm for his underground war. Collins recruited "the Squad" from the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which became his bodyguard and an effective hit team. The Squad initiated the war against the DMP, with an eye to taking the fight to the authorities and creating disorder.<sup>36</sup> Detectives were warned first before being shot. His men killed a policeman once a month, taking G-division out of the fight. Most of the DMP's political intelligence officers were ordinary police doing a job too challenging for them. Collins' men also surveilled the bars frequented by British officers, sometimes conversing with them on a friendly basis.<sup>37</sup> They killed two agent provocateurs of the British secret service who tried to join the

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18. Dwyer, p. 19.

19. Foy, pp. 10-11.

20. Coogan, p. 133.

21. Foy, p. 43.

22. Peter Hart. *Mick: The Real Michael Collins*, New York: Viking, 2005, p. 208.

23. J.B.E. Hittle. *Michael Collins and the Anglo-Irish War*. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2011, p. 150.

24. Bowden, pp. 29-30.

25. Coogan, p. 134.

26. Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins* pp. 200-201.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

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28. Coogan, p. 134.

29. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 33.

31. Photo of Collins on first page of this article is from Wikipedia.

32. Hittle, pp. 92 and 159.

33. Neligan, p. 103.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 133.

35. Interpretation of photos was poor at the time.

36. Hart, *Mick: The Real Michael Collins* pp. 213-216.

37. Coogan, p. 132.

movement and betray Collins. The IRA's counterintelligence succeeded in preventing the British service from placing moles in its operation.

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## THE BLOODY SUNDAY COUNTERATTACK

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Despite setbacks and operational disorder, the British had some success against the rebels. Through 1920, they mounted pressure on the IRA, and important documents were captured.<sup>38</sup> A raid on the movement's propaganda office seized *Dail Eireann* letterhead, which the British used to threaten IRA leaders, some of whom were then murdered. Meanwhile, to compensate for the loss of intelligence resources by the Castle, numerous British intelligence officers arrived in Dublin.<sup>39</sup> By November, Prime Minister Lloyd George bragged his forces in Ireland had "murder by the throats. We struck the terrorists, and now the terrorists are complaining of terror."<sup>40</sup> According to one historian, some 60 trained intelligence professionals sought to destroy IRA intelligence and, if possible, eliminate Collins himself.<sup>41</sup>

The IRA called the British intelligence officers the "Cairo Gang," probably due to their association with the Cairo Café, a local hangout. Captured British army papers tipped off the IRA that the British were planning to eliminate its leadership.<sup>42</sup> Beside the execution of IRA members, the rebels were further motivated for revenge by the judicial hanging of school boy Kevin Barry on November 1, All Saints' Day, in the Catholic calendar.<sup>43</sup>

To counter the British assassination plans, Collins' deputies began collecting information on British intelligence officers, some of whom they met in local pubs.<sup>44</sup> Using raids on mail deliveries and their double agent, Lily Mernin, his team identified the names and addresses of their targets.<sup>45</sup> Maids, who shared the contents of waste paper baskets with Collins' men, determined when they would be at home. Collins confirmed this intelligence through his own informant in the British Army, who recommended the attack date of November 21.<sup>46</sup>

The counterstrike date coincided with a Gaelic Athletic League football match in Dublin's Croke Park. Collins designed the raid for 9 am on a quiet Sunday morning to have significant psychological impact. Eight teams of Squad gunmen augmented by Volunteers (one, Sean Lemass, was even a future Republic of Ireland president) would raid eight Dublin houses or hotels, targeting 22 men. Chief of Staff Brugha ordered Collins to strike several names from a list of 35 potential targets who couldn't be verified as intelligence officers.

Time was of the essence. Before the November 21st attacks the Auxiliaries almost captured the Squad's hit list. The attack was almost aborted when two of Collins' planners were arrested the night before. Although under torture, they resisted betraying the operation.<sup>47</sup>

That morning Collins' hit squads, entering rooms with copied keys or sledgehammers, killed 13 British officers and wounded six others. In the verdict of one historian, 13 victims worked in intelligence, two were Auxiliary policemen, and two more were courts martial officers administering military justice to Irish rebels.<sup>48</sup> Later that Sunday afternoon, an Auxiliary raid in Croke Park to round up IRA suspects resulted in an unpremeditated massacre of numerous spectators. One historian concluded the shooting at Croke Park was not in retaliation, but an act of reckless indiscipline by the Auxiliaries.<sup>49</sup>

Despite some mistakes and missed targets, the counterattack in the rebels' eyes succeeded brilliantly. Neligan said the Castle panicked after "Bloody Sunday."<sup>50</sup> It cowed the remaining intelligence officers working for the Castle, and their informers, who probably assumed Collins and his organization would soon track them down.<sup>51</sup> It gave the IRA a significant psychological boost. But the British secret services, though seriously weakened, survived the attack.<sup>52</sup>

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## LESSONS OF THE SPYMASTER

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By early 1921, Collins believed the IRA, although still active, could do little more. Britain threatened

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38. Hittle, p. 160.

39. Ibid, p. 162.

40. Hart, Mick: *The Real Michael Collins* p. 267.

41. Bowden, p. 31.

42. Coogan, p. 123.

43. Dwyer, p. 155

44. Ibid, p. 163.

45. Dominic Price *We Bled Together: Michael Collins, The Squad, and the Dublin Brigade*, Cork: The Collins Press, 2017, p. 161.

46. Gleeson, p.124.

47. Dwyer, pp. 170, 192-193.

48. Bowden, p. 36.

49. Charles Townshend *The British Campaign in Ireland 1919-1921*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975, pp. 130-131.

50. Neligan, p. 123.

51. Margery Forester. *Michael Collins: The Lost Leader*, Gill & Macmillan, Kindle edition, 2006, p. 209.

52. Hittle, p. 177.

overwhelming force, and many rebels were arrested and arms caches captured.<sup>53</sup> According to Hart, most of the casualties suffered by both sides that year were reprisals against civilians.<sup>54</sup> Both sides sensed the war was growing out of control.

Although a small war, with only some 2,300 deaths, it was a brutal and dehumanizing struggle of torture, death squads, and extrajudicial killings. The British effort could boast of many tactical successes despite its strategic failure. The IRA's intelligence operations made a difference; in one historian's verdict, throughout the conflict while Britain's intelligence services remained "out of touch."<sup>55</sup> Both sides sought a truce by July 1921.

Collins, the former firebrand turned pragmatist, favored a peace agreement while the IRA had enough resources in the field, and joined the Irish negotiating team. For his part, Lloyd George never believed he had the political backing to unleash the British Army on the rebels. With Crown casualties rising, the cost of a military victory was considered too high.<sup>56</sup> Lloyd George was sensitive to public opinion, and particularly that in the United States.<sup>57</sup>

Ultimately, Collins fell victim to the violent forces he helped unleash. In December 1921, after signing the Articles of Agreement granting the 26 counties "Free State" status under the Crown, Collins prophesized this compromise for peace and self-rule would be his death warrant.<sup>58</sup> In August 1922, in Collins' home county of Cork, an ambush by anti-treaty IRA gunmen cut down Ireland's greatest spymaster.

Collins achieved legendary status after his death, when his achievements for Irish independence were better appreciated. He had operated with a cold-hearted though realistic strategy and never lost sight of it. No single intelligence operation can win a war, and "Bloody Sunday" was no different. But it helped even the odds. It demonstrated Collins' facility in using the resources and people he had available. He took advantage of the weaknesses of his opponents, who were easy to penetrate, often operated with poor discipline, and lacked centralized authority. Facing a superior opponent, Collins, like many revolutionaries, ultimately prevailed by doing just well enough.

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53. Townshend, pp. 195.

54. Hart, *The I.R.A. at War*, p. 19.

55. Townshend, p. 179.

56. *Ibid*, pp. 173-174

57. Hart, p. 15.

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58. Johnson, p. 199.



Michael Collins's grave, at Glasnevin Cemetery, Dublin, Ireland