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# The intelligence war against the IRA

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**Thomas Leahy, *The Intelligence War Against the IRA*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2020, pp. xii+344, appendices, paperback, £18.99. ISBN: 978-1-108-72040-3.**

One of the areas that has attracted most curiosity in the post-1969 ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland is the role of intelligence in the security forces’ struggle against Republican terrorism. As ever, intelligence in the histories of the Northern Ireland represents the perennial ‘missing dimension’. There has been a wealth of popular or semi-scholarly works on British intelligence operations in Northern Ireland,<sup>1</sup> but full-blown academic studies are much rarer.<sup>2</sup>

Leahy’s methodical approach sees *The Intelligence War Against the IRA* divided into three parts, each of which is devoted to the period before the ceasefires of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (hereafter IRA) in 1972, 1975 and the 1990s, respectively. Indeed, the most remarkable feature of this book is that it identifies the contribution made by intelligence in relation to other factors that explain these three ceasefires. Such a comparison is not often achieved in literature on intelligence or on the ‘Troubles’ and it is arguable that this impressive achievement is understated in the book.

The chapters in each part of Leahy’s book initially address ‘British military, political and intelligence strategy against the IRA’, followed by ‘the effectiveness of the intelligence campaign against regional IRA units’, ending with ‘whether or not the IRA called prolonged ceasefires because of the intelligence war’ (p. 6). The chapters on strategy in particular cover a large amount of material succinctly, and succeed in addressing not only the strategies adopted but how and why these strategies developed the way that they did. These chapters are therefore particularly useful for students of intelligence, of counter-terrorism and of counter-insurgency.

Short- and long-term contributions made by intelligence are weighed against other factors that explain the IRA ceasefires. These factors include political developments in Westminster and Stormont, the role of particular political parties such as Sinn Féin (the political wing of the IRA) and the more moderate constitutionalists in the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), the role of individuals such as UK Prime Ministers, and the part played by the IRA. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on one of these complex aspects of the ‘Troubles’. By weighing factors against one another Leahy achieves a convincing assessment of the role of intelligence relative to the other factors that collectively explain the ceasefires. He finds that neither informers ‘nor other aspects of the intelligence war influenced republican armed or political strategy to any great extent during the conflict’ (p. 236). This does not detract from the arguments made in other sources that intelligence did have an impact at a tactical level, most notably by preventing some terrorist attacks.

Another strength in the book’s approach to its analysis is that it distinguishes between geographical areas within Northern Ireland. Between 1972 and 1975, for instance, the IRA units operating in rural areas are found to have experienced less disruption than was the case in urban areas for reasons including that British forces focused more on cities in this period (p. 98) and that such secretive, autonomous groups were difficult to infiltrate (p. 100). This might be said to be part of a growing trend of worthwhile research into regional differences during the ‘Troubles’.<sup>3</sup>

The case is also made that informers and agents were the ‘key component of the British intelligence war against the IRA’ (p. 8). Although this is likely to be true, the reader might be forgiven for feeling that a more thorough weighing up of informers against other sources of intelligence than was attempted here would have made for a stronger case. That informers were

cheaper than surveillance (p. 90) may also be true but could have been established more firmly. Although surveillance is particularly manpower intensive, considerable hours are also required to recruit informers, to travel to meetings with informers and write-up these meetings, and cash payments were also handed over. Surveillance may still be more expensive, but to what extent this was the case is yet to be adequately established in the literature.

Successful efforts have been made to cross reference material gleaned from a range of sources, including original interviews, memoirs, archives in the UK and Republic of Ireland, and inquiry reports. Due weight is placed on corroborating reports and questioning information that is found in only one source. Conflicting views in the source material are not glossed over or hidden: instead, they are acknowledged and assessed, and, where possible, a view is put forward on which is more convincing. This openness about the source material lends more weight to the arguments.

Overall this is a well-informed, competent, accessible and engaging assessment of the role of intelligence in the periods before the IRA ceasefires. It will be useful for scholars not just of the 'Troubles' but of the role that terrorist groups and their leadership, state political actors, the security forces and intelligence can play in progress towards peace.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Davies, N. *Ten-Thirty-Three*. Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1999; Ingram, M., and Harkin, G. *Stakeknife: Britain's Secret Agents in Ireland*. Dublin: O'Brien, 2004; McGartland, M. *Fifty Dead Men Walking: The Heroic True Story of a British Secret Agent Inside the IRA*. London: Blake, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Bamford, B.W.C. "The role and effectiveness of intelligence in Northern Ireland", *Intelligence and National Security* 20, no. 4 (2005): 581-607. doi: 10.1080/02684520500425273; Edwards, A. *Agents of Influence: Britain's Secret Intelligence War Against the IRA*. Newbridge: Merrion Press, forthcoming; Newbery, S. *Interrogation, Intelligence and Security: Controversial British Techniques*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> A prominent example is Burke, E. "Loyalist mobilization and cross-border violence in rural Ulster, 1972-1974", *Terrorism and Political Violence*, published online April 2020, 1-19. doi: 10.1080/09546553.2020.1745777.