Michael Collins: Founder of modern guerrilla warfare tactics

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Abstract
This paper examines the foundations of contemporary guerrilla warfare tactics and associates these with the actions and operations of General Michael Collins and the Irish Volunteers throughout the War of Independence (1919–21). Through the critical analysis of archival documents from the War of Independence provided by the Irish Military Archives, the paper analyses the success and nature of these tactics in relation to the fundamental characteristics that are observed within guerrilla warfare. The paper draws comparisons with Vietnam (1955–75), Iraq (2003–11), and Afghanistan (2001–21), in the context of war against a strong hegemonic power.

Introduction
Over the last 250 years, the nature of war and conflict has experienced significant adaptations. From the time of 1815 and the Napoleonic battle of Waterloo to the Somme and to the deserts of Iraq and Afghanistan, the strategy of fighting has changed. The requirement for greater numerical strength is less significant, while there is more focus on the strategic deployment of forces and battlefield tactics used. In 1918, the many bloody battles such as Passchendaele and the Somme campaign of the First World War ended with the Treaty of Versailles. Having seen the weakness of large and often bloody battles, as well as the failing of the Easter Rising, the Irish Volunteers (IV) under Michael Collins (Director of Intelligence) and with the support of Richard Mulcahy (Chief of Staff) reorganized and retrained to fight for independence with tactics that increased their prospects of success. The development and success of these tactics were instrumental in the development of asymmetric warfare and they demonstrated the ability to fight a superior force with a numerically weaker, but well trained, disciplined, and equipped force.

Although these tactics were seen to be similar to those used by Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*, Michael Collins modified them into a modern battlefield scenario, which has been emulated within many contemporary conflicts. The aim of this paper is to examine to what extent Michael Collins can be considered the founder of modern guerrilla warfare tactics. In order to achieve this, the following will be considered: the tactics of Sun Tzu and their use, the Irish War of Independence and the tactics used by Michael Collins and the Irish Volunteers (both within armed resistance and intelligence), and comparisons with contemporary conflicts to explore the extent to which the attribution of founding contemporary guerrilla warfare can be afforded to Michael Collins. The argument will draw from military history to identify examples of successful execution of the tactics, to demonstrate the changing nature of warfare. The question of Irish terrorism will be at the heart of this discussion, as the term will be queried and the warfare reset and redefined within a context of a resistance to and a fight against a powerful empire.

Guerrilla warfare

“The history of irregular warfare from the end of the eighteenth century until the first world war (1914–18) is filled with considerable political, social, economic and military change” (Kiras,
The term guerrilla (“Little war” in Spanish) was first used by the British forces when fighting against Napoleon in the Peninsula War, to describe the Spanish Irregulars/Partisans that fought alongside them. It can be argued that this term was used to provide recognition to the efforts of locals who took up arms to fight a powerful state, often with little to no training. It has also been acknowledged and heavily documented that, within the modern battlespace, organizations such as Al-Qaeda, Daesh, and groups like the Viet Cong have used these tactics against far numerically and technologically superior enemy forces.

This approach recognizes the need of “the people to free themselves by means of guerrilla warfare from a government that oppresses them” (Guevara, 1969: 13). This argument by Che Guevara, on the use of these tactics during the Cuban Revolution, reveals the nature of such armed struggles: to remove a powerful and superior (in terms of numbers and resources) enemy. As Guevara argues, guerrilla warfare is often used as a form of unpeaceful protest, yet the use of these tactics is often branded as “terrorist” by governments. Furthermore, Mao Tse-Tung (1937: 11) argued that “Only when Lenin came on the scene did guerrilla warfare receive the potent political injection that was to alter its character radically.” Lenin and the Russian Bolshevik revolution of November 1917 show a recognition of guerrilla tactics as a viable way of fighting a numerically superior and better equipped enemy force.

Guerrilla Warfare relies on some key elements. One of these key elements is public support. This is demonstrated by Guevara (1969: 3) when he writes “Guerrilla warfare is used by the side which is supported by a majority.” This is seen as key, because many guerrilla fighters survive detection by hiding within the general population. This has been observed in many contemporary conflicts, such as the one in Afghanistan. An Amnesty International report (2015) states that “reports from local residents indicate that Taliban fighters have hidden in people’s houses to blend in with the civilian population.” The Taliban have enjoyed such support, as members of the civilian population protected them knowing that the coalition forces were not allowed to engage unarmed civilians (as decreed by the Geneva Convention). However, those rules have always been broken. This was observed in the Vietnam War, in the American Search and Destroy missions. A famous Search and Destroy mission was the My Lai Massacre, in March 1968, one of the most horrific incidents of violence committed by soldiers against unarmed civilians, when nearly 400 men, women, and children were raped, mutilated, and murdered. Search and Destroy missions were used by the American forces to “Seek out and destroy major Viet Cong units, bases and other facilities” (Guenther, 1980: 51). Frequently, due to the poor level of American intelligence, these operations were unsuccessful and caused deaths and significant damage to civilian property and morale. As a direct result of these operations, the majority of the population were supportive of the Viet Cong efforts against the Americans. This public support was beneficial to the Viet Cong because it allowed its fighters to move around within the population undetected, as well as be supported with intelligence and safe haven for their fighters engaged in battling the American forces.

Another essential element for operating a successful guerrilla warfare campaign is intelligence. According to Major Deborah Elek’s report for the United States Marine Corps, “Guerrillas are experts in the area of collection and exploitation of human intelligence (HUMINT)” (Elek, 1994: 17). Human intelligence often comes from different sources within the community and provides the guerrilla leaders with a better understanding of their enemy. This has been beneficial to guerrillas, because it has allowed for a greater impact on the enemy soldiers’ morale, due to the setting of ambushes and traps when and where they are not expected. The critical nature of having good intelligence is identified by Mao Tse-Tung, when he states, “Intelligence is the decisive factor in planning guerrilla operations” (Tse-Tung, 1937: 22). Intelligence is critical, because it can mean the difference between success and failure within an operation. This can be seen in the battle of Mogadishu, Somalia,
in 1993 (depicted in the movie, *Black Hawk Down*). This mission shows the importance of intelligence within warfare, because one of the key failures was timing. The operation was a daytime raid, which meant that “instead of the militia being asleep or disbanded, they would be high on khat, a hyperactive Somali drug that made them even more combat effective” (Dotson, 2016: 184). This failure of intelligence around the timing of the operation can explain why the operation failed. As the enemy was alert, the attacking force lost the element of surprise, meaning that the enemy was ready to repulse the attack. By retaining the element of surprise and knowing where to strike the enemy at its weakest point, a guerrilla force can carry out a successful operation. This is supported by Sun Tzu who writes that “You can be sure of succeeding in your attacks if you only attack places which are undefended” (SunTzuonline.com).

A further key element of guerrilla warfare is maneuverability of small operationally independent units. This is presented as being essential for the success of guerrilla warfare operations because of the tactics that are used. Many rural guerrilla warfare operations focus on ambushes on soldiers in the field and skirmish raids on supply depots and outposts. This has been demonstrated to be an efficient method of conducting warfare, as it is at the unit’s discretion, in order to achieve the greatest strategic advantage. This can be observed within many Special Air Service (SAS, the UK’s special forces) operations within the 1942 North African campaign against Rommel. “The arrowhead was designed to move between two rows of planes, with the guns of the three leading jeeps firing ahead at the defences and all the other guns firing outwards at the planes” (Cowles, 2016: 200). That was the outlined plan of a raid led by Colonel David Stirling (the founder of the SAS) to attack a significant German airfield in Egypt (approximately 60 miles behind the German lines). The operation patrol demonstrated the importance of maneuverability within guerrilla warfare: the speed and the agility of the patrol meant that the German defenders would have found it more difficult to identify and target the SAS patrol. This is beneficial to guerrilla operations, because it can allow for the attacking force to maintain the initiative, whilst maintaining confusion and a high intensity of firepower. The SAS operation was successful.

The final key element of guerrilla warfare is the ability to adapt to surroundings. This is imperative for success, because it provides the guerrillas and their units the ability to mobilize and use the environment to their greatest strategic benefit. The importance of this is demonstrated by the Russian invasion of Afghanistan (1979–82). During this conflict, the Mujahideen used the mountainous nature of Afghanistan to their advantage, locating themselves rurally or on hillsides, which restricted the effectiveness of the Russian Army’s tanks and armor in engaging with them. Sun Tzu writes, “It is a military axiom not to advance uphill against the enemy, nor to oppose him when he comes downhill” (https://www.suntzuonline.com/). Attacking uphill is ill-advised and once an army occupies the high ground it should maintain that position. During the Russian-Afghanistan War, this teaching was followed when the Mujahideen occupied the high mountainous ground where the Russian tanks could not operate. As a result, the Mujahideen were able to defeat the Russian invasion since their strategic use of positioning allowed them to adapt the war to their strengths. The Russian Army was very reliant on their ground forces and tanks for their victories. This adaptive ability by the Mujahideen has shown that conducting guerrilla campaigns can be a successful way of waging warfare against superior armed forces, if used effectively to control the battlefield.

The Irish War of Independence

Often forgotten outside of Ireland, the Irish War of Independence was an instrumental conflict in the pursuit of Irish freedom. Nationalists and republicans believed that they could use the social and economic impact of the First World War to strike for independence. This built the foundations of the IRA and IV and the conflict drawn from the “failure of British
administration in Ireland owed much to structural and institutional weaknesses” (Hopkinson, 2002: 4). These failures that Hopkinson identifies were fundamental causes of the Easter Rising of 1916, which took place in Dublin and Meath. During this time, members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (the forerunner to the IRA), Irish Citizens Army, Irish Volunteers (forerunner to Óglaigh na hÉireann/the Irish Defence Forces), and Cumann na nBan (The Women’s Council in Irish) took key buildings in Dublin and proclaimed an Irish Republic. The rising lasted for six days until Padraig Pearse and the other leaders surrendered. This had such significance for Michael Collins (a captain who fought during the rising in the Irish Volunteers) that he wrote “It appeared at the time of the surrender to have failed, but that valiant effort and the martyrdoms which followed it finally awoke the sleeping spirit of Ireland” (Collins, 1922: 22). This is also supported by Townshend, who writes, “the British response to Easter week reinforced, at several levels, the Irish demand for self-determination. Most importantly, it validated the insurrectionists’ attitude to physical force” (Townshend, 1983: 312). The Easter Rising and the social and nationalist effects of the British retaliation are observed to have been significant causes of the Irish War of Independence and the formation of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) from the Irish Republican Brotherhood, which later merged with the IV to fight the War of Independence. Within these writings, both General Michael Collins and Charles Townshend acknowledge that the Rising and the outcome of the Rising would result in a change in attitudes, strengthening the call for Irish Independence.

After the rejection by Westminster of Dáil Éireann (the Irish Assembly), which had been set up to call for Irish Independence by Sinn Féin (Irish for “we ourselves”), it was acknowledged that, using only political means, independence was not achievable and the need for armed resistance became clear. However, the British Army heavily outnumbered Collins and his forces, as well as being better equipped and better trained. To counter the overwhelming advantages that the British Army had, Collins, in his role as Director of Intelligence of the newly formed IRA, decided to use different tactics than had been used in the First World War or the Easter Rising 1916. It was reported of Collins that “he never missed an opportunity to learn from experience” (RTE, 2010). When reviewing how the Easter Rising of 1916 was fought, as Tim Pat Coogan states in an RTE documentary, “you could come along and take a building like the GPO, they just encircle you and blast you out of it with heavy weaponry” (RTE, 2007). Collins knew that, if he were to be successful, it would be imperative to deviate from the traditional ways of warfare, since Britain had a greater number of soldiers, superior weapons, and equipment. This can be seen to be following Sun Tzu’s the Art of War. In chapter 1, Sun Tzu writes “If he is in superior strength, evade him” (SunTzuonline.com).

As a result of taking this opportunity, Collins devised a new method of war that would allow the IRA to fight according to their own rules. These tactics were based on small local units that operated within their own area, laying ambushes, attacking supply depots, and gathering intelligence on the British soldiers and the Royal Irish Constabulary (who together were supported by the Black and Tans after their introduction in early 1920). It can be argued that Collins thought that the local units with local command was the most effective method, so he ordered for local areas and brigades to set up their own command structures. This is observed within reports detailing the names of the “2nd Northern Division. Divisional Staff and Attached Officers” (Intelligence Officer, 1921: 3) and local units within the divisions such as the “Companies. A Dungannon. B Galbally. C. Donaghmore” (Intelligence Officer, 1921: 5). By having local command structures within each Division across the country, Collins made sure that his forces were able to have an extended reach so no area was safe for the Royal Irish Constabulary and the British Army to operate within, due to the fear of ambushes and unannounced attacks.

Collins referred to these small units within the companies as either an Active Service Unit or Intelligence Service Unit (depending on their role). Whilst the intelligence service
unit gathered intelligence, the active service unit was constructed of multiple flying columns. It is noted that “the duties of the flying columns would comprise of two distinct types of action, auxiliary action and independent. For auxiliary action the Brigade commandants would assign the flying column as an invaluable extra force for a local attack in his area. Independent action would comprise attacks on hostile patrols and raids on postal deliveries and enemy stores” (Collins, 2019: 141). This variety in the role of flying columns can be seen to have benefitted the IRA, because there could be brigade level control for different operations, whilst still allowing for an active presence for the column to continue its activities at its commander’s discretion, often attacking British Army and police patrols. This was seen to be highly effective because the unpredictability and low level of mechanization of the columns meant that they could be highly mobile and able to operate flexibly, whilst still remaining effective. Some of the evidence that supports the effectiveness of the flying columns is presented in a report of an ambush in Dromore (Co. Down, Northern Ireland) where it is stated that the commanding officer “divided the party into two sections and placed both on the same side of road. The sections were separated by a fence” (Óglaigh na hÉireann, n.d.: 76). Then later “the 2 sections opened fire together on the enemy and the firing continued for about 2 minutes. At the end of that time, he gave the order to retire as he feared reinforcements coming to assistance of the Enemy” (Óglaigh na hÉireann, n.d.: 76). These methods were seen as being successful since it allowed the IRA to attack without warning and then retreat and disappear during the chaos and confusion of the firefight and before the British military and RIC police forces could identify their positions and return fire. The deployment of these tactics within this context is supported by General Tom Barry (Commanding Officer, 3rd West Cork Brigade, during the War of Independence), who argues that “this was the only fighting that suited people facing one of the greatest empires in the world” (Barry, 2020).

Another essential part of Collins’s strategy was intelligence. This was predominantly based in Dublin since this was where the British ran their intelligence network, and where their headquarters (Dublin Castle) was located. However, each battalion and division had their own intelligence officers/staff. Collins knew that force alone would not be successful, as Britain was globally observed to be “a master of intelligence and Collins knew that he couldn’t get them out of Ireland if he couldn’t beat them at the intelligence game” (RTE, 2010). This meant that they could have discovered his operations before he had undertaken them. As a response to this need to ensure that the IRA could compete in the intelligence aspect, “Collins identified the need to attack that elite, to take out the intelligence gathering operations of the police force in Dublin” (RTE, 2007). Within this objective, Collins focused on undermining the G Division (the political detective division) of the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) through “the shooting policy of Collins and his intelligence unit implemented by the Squad” (Hopkinson, 2002: 26). Led by Michael (Mick) McDonnell and later Patrick (Paddy) O’Daly, the squad was a secret active service unit of selected volunteers that identified, conducted surveillance on, and, on Collins’ orders, assassinated the British intelligence agents and other important police and military targets that Collins believed were a threat to him. In this way, using information collected by the intelligence unit (based at no. 3 Crow Street), Collins was able to effectively spread fear within the British administration and their intelligence network, due to the unpredictable nature of their operations. He also used the squad as a method to “coordinate the political and military campaigns for maximum propaganda effect by, for instance, arranging a Squad assassination to occur during a political crisis or at a time of heightened popular emotion” (Foy, 2006: 48). It can be argued that this helped Collins advance the republican movement, wearing down the morale of the British intelligence and the “G” Division of the DMP.

Collins used intelligence by setting up an elaborate network with many agents and spies. One of these agents was David Neligan. Neligan was one of four of Collins’s agents within “G” division at Dublin Castle (later recruited to MI5 in 1921). The use of these agents
meant that Collins, Tobin and the intelligence department at Crow Street were able to develop an insight into different operations and upcoming raids by the police, military, and the auxiliaries (commonly known as the Black and Tans due to their mixture of black police and green army uniforms). This enabled Collins (as Director of Intelligence) and Richard Mulcahy (as Chief of Staff) to plan different operations within the Volunteers. The “work of GHQ was thus divided between military activities of the volunteers and intelligence. Mulcahy was in charge of the former and Collins, the latter” (Valiulis, 1992: 47). This highlights the importance of Crow Street and the intelligence network of agents, since the majority of intelligence came from these agents, which meant that the military activities of the volunteers relied on the validity and accuracy of the intelligence. An example of such intelligence was received from the brigade intelligence officer in Dublin. It warned, “My pal ‘O’ reports that all guards are doubled at Beggars Bush Barracks since last night. They have received orders to stand too to-day at dinner time” (Intelligence Officer, 1921: 28). Based on the orders sent out by Mulcahy to the Brigade commandants, the volunteers knew which targets and areas to avoid and which targets were more suitable for attack, allowing Collins and Mulcahy to coordinate the Volunteers and improve the effectiveness of their operations in achieving their different military objectives.

Collins’s legacy in guerrilla warfare

Michael Collins developed an experimental strategy for warfare that was based on autonomous local units but centered on extensive intelligence gathering. Collins’s use of mobility meant that he was able to revolutionize warfare. This is demonstrated throughout the change from the First World War which was fought with tactics that meant in a battle, “in the first 30 minutes alone, the British experienced 30,000 casualties” (Cavaleri, 2007). Collins noted this and changed to a more suitable form of fighting where units were split into local-based active service units for localized operations and controlled with a decentralized command structure. The formation of different companies within the brigades ensured that local units covered the whole of the country thus maximizing effectiveness. Replication of this structure was seen within the Viet Cong, where the structure had different levels of command from “LA Hq” down to “Cho Gao District Hq” and the “Hamlet Unit Leader” (Anderson et al., 1967: 7). The command structure echoed Collins’s methods, because this decentralized structure allowed for greater autonomy within specific operations. The decentralized command structure replicated Collins’s tactics of splitting different areas into their own battalions and divisions and under their own appointed officers. In this way, the Viet Cong could ensure its militia units were “developed, modified, and equipped according to the situation in each region and with the ordnance supply capabilities” (Anderson et al., 1967: 15). Michael Collins and the Irish Volunteers/IRA had developed a similar structure from GHQ (in Dublin) to local divisions, companies, and active service units (which usually came as flying columns). Numerically and technologically inferior forces will often resort to this method of warfare. Colonized nations fought such wars against colonial/imperial powers throughout the 20th century.

An underlying base for Michael Collins’s success within guerrilla warfare was public support. This key element of insurgency can make the difference between success and failure, as can be seen in contemporary military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. Regarding the early stages of Operation Herrick (The British operation as part of ISAF), a report states “By 2006, humiliated in southern Iraq and confronting fierce fighting in southern Afghanistan, the British Army began to realize the need to revisit its background in counterinsurgency” (Strachan, 2019: 6). The local population did not support the ISAF forces and were more likely to support and engage with the Taliban. This was partly due to reports of abuse, killings, torture, deadly air attacks, and other violations of human rights by the coalition. Collins had identified the importance of espionage and intelligence gathering. It is recorded that
“Female clerical workers in government offices were also important informants” (Coleman, 2014: 88). This was very extensive since the operation was supported by “postal employees who passed confidential information and stolen RIC cyphers to help the IRA decode enemy correspondence” (Foy, 2006: 50–1). Without support from the public, those engaged within guerrilla warfare are unable to operate effectively, as their communications and movements become less clandestine and more easily discoverable.

Michael Collins used quick raiding and hit-and-run tactics against the British Army, the Black and Tans, and the Royal Irish Constabulary. This was critical for his success, because the Irish Volunteers were often outnumbered by the British, who were also better equipped. This meant that his forces were able to use the element of surprise within their operations to be successful: “the column had the crucial advantage of surprise: the IRA was able to choose the time and place of attacks and had the additional advantages of a detailed familiarity with the terrain” (Hopkinson, 2002: 73). This allowed for effective ambushing and use of the element of surprise to degrade the enemy’s morale, since it often left them in constant fear of attack, which would have affected their ability to fight and operate within the longevity of the conflict. “The British constantly complained that they could not identify the enemy and that the column men did not wear uniforms and merged imperceptibly back into the local community” (Hopkinson, 2002: 73).

The effective use of surprise attacks, followed by merging back into the local population, was replicated heavily in Vietnam. This is supported by the US report that the Viet Cong would “Attack unexpectedly with a superior number of troops, forcing enemy reinforcements into a battle under your own control. (b) Such tactics as encirclement, ambush, and surprise attack from a distance can be used in combination” (Chung, 1969: 3). This effectiveness of hit and run tactics left the American forces disoriented. A consequence of this disorientation was that the conscripted American soldier lost morale and was in constant fear of being ambushed or attacked. Similar to the British forces in Ireland during the War of Independence, many American soldiers were unable to identify the shooters, because of their ability to disappear before they could be located. These hit and run raiding tactics were successful, as they allowed the Viet Cong and the Irish Volunteers to engage in psychological warfare against the Americans and British respectively, whilst maintaining their numbers and morale.

Finally, the formation and operations of the active service units (known as flying columns) developed by Michael Collins and the IRA brigade commanders can be seen in later guerrilla warfare. The flying columns were involved in the majority of the raiding (e.g., the failed Custom House Raid), ambushing (e.g. The Kilmichael Ambush), and fighting against the British Army, the Royal Irish Constabulary, the auxiliaries, and the Black and Tans and were spread across all areas in each county. One of the most successful and effective flying columns was commanded by General Tom Barry. During the War of Independence, “In total, the British Army stationed over 12,500 troops in County Cork during the conflict, while Barry’s men numbered no more than 310. Eventually, Barry’s tactics made West Cork ungovernable for the British authorities” (Irish Volunteers Commemorative Organisation, 2012). The role of the flying columns was to engage British troops and make the area ungovernable for the British authorities, thus loosening their level of control and influence upon the local population. This was later demonstrated in other theaters of warfare within different conflicts, such as within the Afghan Mujahideen, whose tactics included “Hit operations, military ambushes, bombings, secret kidnappings” (Nojumi, 2002: 26). This development within guerrilla warfare tactics can be attributed to Michael Collins and the formation of active service units, as many types of operations undertaken during the Irish War of Independence were later echoed in Afghanistan, as identified by Nojumi.

The main aim of this paper was to consider the extent that Michael Collins could be seen as the founder of modern guerrilla warfare tactics. By drawing comparisons from tactics used by the Irish War of Independence (1919–21) and tactics from more recent
warfare, such as Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, this research identified and provided evidence an association between Michael Collins and the foundations of contemporary guerrilla warfare. Based on critical analysis of archival material from the War of Independence, it can be argued that the fundamental aspects of contemporary guerrilla warfare are attributable to Michael Collins: good intelligence, public support, and high maneuverability.

This is very applicable to contemporary warfare, because since the end of the Vietnam War (1975), the nature and layout of the battlefield has changed to a new asymmetrical battlefield, where an enemy force is not as discernible from the general population. This was very present within Afghanistan where Taliban fighters did not wear distinctive uniforms that allowed ISAF to differentiate between them and the local innocent population. In the earlier years of the conflict, ISAF soldiers were unable to make much success because the Taliban had the overwhelming support of the general population. In Iraq too, after the 2003 invasion and occupation by the US-UK coalition, the insurgency that arose in cities like Baghdad and Fallujah, both Sunni and Shia, enjoyed great public support and protection. Local resentment was evident from the day US forces arrived on 23 April 2003, which formed the support base for the irregular warfare that followed. The recent history of Fallujah is one of resistance through insurgency. Guerrilla tactics were conducted to achieve operational and strategic goals, to weaken the resolve of political adversaries, and to cause the withdrawal of competing occupying forces. Hamourtziadou writes:

Groups looking to challenge the US and its allies know their ability to dominate militarily almost every operational environment: land, sea, air, even near-Earth space. One response to superior conventional military power is to challenge superior established militaries using irregular forces, such as insurgents, and other paramilitary forces that can disperse, choose where, when and how to attack, then blend into the population. (Hamourtziadou, 2016)

Within the media and press releases, it is not uncommon to see the dehumanization of those who use these tactics. This would normally be done to distort the truth. A prime example from the War of Independence was how British newspapers would report that Dublin Castle and the police had “the murder-machine by the throat” (Barry, 2019). Dehumanization and demonization are common tactics used by states against non-state actors. As in the War on Terror, battles are defined as being between “good” and “evil” forces, between those that want to bring “law and order” and those who want to “destabilise and terrorise” (Hamourtziadou, 2021). In Ireland, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq, dehumanization and demonization led to stronger local support for the guerrilla fighters, but also to a stronger resolve to defeat the more powerful enemy. In the Irish case, although it gained some support for the police and army in England, the resolve of the Irish population was further strengthened in support of Michael Collins and the Volunteers, because the police and army’s actions and behavior were indiscriminate and not properly reported (except in the Irish Bulletin, which the UK government banned).

Within international relations and strategic studies, the use of guerrilla warfare is seen when fighting an injustice or against a numerically and technologically superior enemy. Irregular warfare has at its core a cause based on grievances. Grievances can include ethnic or religious persecution, foreign occupation or domination, economic disparity, or other perceived injustices. The type of insurgency we saw in Ireland has been repeated over the years in other states where a strong colonial/imperial hegemonic power has tried to exert influence and control: Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The pejorative term “terrorism” has (without exception) been given to these insurrections by the colonial/imperial hegemonic power, in order to contrast one side’s legitimate killing to another side’s illegitimate killing, and to show the need for further tightening of control and the mobilization of people and resources.
Conclusion

Why is it important to recognize this legacy of Michael Collins, as the founder of modern guerrilla warfare tactics? It is because this was rebellion against British rule, not terrorism. It was a war of liberation, not revolt by groups of murderous villains. The Ireland that Michael Collins was born in was a land that had “suffered centuries of outrage, enforced poverty and bitter misery,” as stated in the Proclamation of the Irish Republic of 1867. The Proclamation continues:

Our rights and liberties have been trampled on by an alien aristocracy, who treating us as foes, usurped our lands, and drew away from our unfortunate country all material riches. The real owners of the soil were removed to make room for cattle, and driven across the ocean to seek the means of living, and the political rights denied to them at home, while our men of thought and action were condemned to loss of life and liberty. . . . Today, having no honourable alternative left, we again appeal to force as our last resource. We accept the conditions of appeal, manfully deeming it better to die in the struggle for freedom than to continue an existence of utter servitude. All men are born with equal rights, and in associating to protect one another and share public burdens, justice demands that such associations should rest upon a basis which maintains equality instead of destroying it. We therefore declare that, unable longer to endure the curse of Monarchical Government, we aim at founding a Republic based on universal suffrage, which shall secure to all the intrinsic value of their labour. The soil of Ireland, at present in the possession of an oligarchy, belongs to us, the Irish people, and to us it must be restored.

The Irish insurgency, like many modern-day insurgencies around the world, was primarily anti-elite, anti-colonial, and against the “enforced progress” imperial powers try to achieve through brutal wars. Collins and his guerrilla fighters used asymmetric warfare and demonstrated the ability to fight a superior force with a weaker, but well trained, disciplined, and equipped force. Similar battles have been fought globally since, using Collins’s tactics with various degrees of success, but with the same determination in the struggle for freedom, justice, and equal rights.

Note

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References


