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RICOCHETS OF HISTORY

At the end of a year in which IRA decommissioning has been met with widespread euphoria, **Phil Mac Giolla Bháin** takes a step back from the facts and concludes that the celebration party may be a little premature.

The IRA's guns have been a central theme of my life. I grew up listening to how they were acquired and why they had to be used. My Westmeath grandfather was apprenticed out to Westport to a man who would teach him tailoring. There he met my grandmother, a Derrig.

The Derrigs were 'out' in 1916 and ran the IRA in West Mayo after they came back from Frongoch. By that time my grandfather had inherited his father's job as a guard on the

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IRA DECOMMISSIONING

train from Westport to Dublin. Passing through martial law areas freely, he took dispatches encrypted by his young wife all the way to the general headquarters of the IRA, to 'Mick'. Back in the west, he ran an entire underground communications system. In 1935, the Bureau of Military History asked him how many volunteers he lost. His disdainful reply to the Free State clerk was, "Lost men? We never lost a dispatch." He also had a gun, and he never lost that either. Guns, he deemed, were the necessary tools with which to accomplish an important national task. Mayo's guns went up to the border the year before I was born. I sat as a boy in his widow's front room in James Street, Westport, listening to the events of August 1971. I knew what the man on the radio was on about, as my mother and I had just taken a coach through Belfast on Monday 9 August 1971. She had thought that Monday would be quieter.

The Dublin boat had been taken off. Our

itself. Where ordinary people feel the need to acquire the sinews of war, then whatever else the society is, it isn't normal and it won't be stable. It is 40 years since the IRA's last campaign was ended in a 'Dump Arms' order.

The border campaign, or 'Operation Harvest' as it was known inside the IRA at the time, was an attempt to bring Tom Barry's West Cork war of 1920 to Fermanagh and Tyrone. It was pure republican militarism — and not very good militarism at that. Like most military failures, it failed to look at the technological improvements the enemy had acquired since the last engagement. Attempts to take the Tan War to Tyrone failed.

To adapt Lenin's dictum, a guerrilla army in the wake of military failure is ripe for revisionism. The debate within the republican movement from the order to dump arms in 1962 to the walk-out at the Intercontinental Hotel, Ballsbridge, during the 1970 Sinn Fein Ard Fheis could be

Adams/McGuinness leadership has embarked upon since the hunger strikes of 1981, up until the recent supervised destruction of IRA weaponry, has been the latest episode in the unresolved party/army debate.

It is unresolved for republicans because it has been set by outside events. The tidy ideological arguments of the Dublin-based leadership of the IRA under Cathal Goulding were not adhered to by Gusty Spence and the B-Specials. The pogrom of northern nationalists made the unfashionable militarists come out of retirement. At the time, even the government of the Republic — or at least a section of it — saw the need for guns. Specifically, guns in the hands of a threatened Irish citizenry. The objective of getting 500 Hungarian 9mm pistols and the appropriate amount of ammo into the North arose for the same reason that the British government parachuted "shorts" (handguns) into occupied France in World War II. The British



From left: Cathal Goulding, Sean Garland, British Army patrols in Belfast, General John De Chastelain, Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness.

usual route was not available, so the two of us travelled through Larne to Belfast.

We approached Belfast mid-morning. I had never seen a grown man terrified before. The coach driver was shaking. I was 13, a boy. We did make it to Dublin, where we took the train to Westport.

A man came to the house to reassure my grandmother. Her question was simple: "John Joe, do they have the guns?" "Aah they do, Julia; they have plenty," he soothed her.

Guns were important in this seriously respectable middle-class Mayo household. There is a basic question in relation to stability and social justice that can be asked of any society; do ordinary decent people want to band together and arm themselves against the forces of the state? In Sweden or France they do not, but in Chechnya and Colombia they do.

A reasonably encapsulating social history of the Irish people could be written covering the last 200 years focusing solely on the native population's desire to arm

reduced to a one-word question: "Guns?" Differing republican attitudes to the guns reflected whether they believed that the party or the army should have primacy. In the early years after independence, attitudes to IRA guns reflected attitudes to Free State guns.

German sociologist Max Weber concluded that, at its core, a state was "the sole claimant to the wielding of legitimate force within a given territory". If you have two claimants, then there will be civil war. The existence of IRA guns since the civil war has signalled that the partition settlement copper-fastened by borrowed English artillery was not accepted by everyone. The need for IRA guns in Belfast in 1969 meant that Collins's fears for Northern Ireland had become a deadly reality. The pogrom against the people of the Clonard came at a time when the IRA had obligingly put its weapons verifiably beyond use. They had given them to the Free Wales Army.

The transformation process that the

even made a simple one-shot .45 Saturday-night special for the purpose.

Complete with simple instructions in French, it was hoped that patriotic French terrorists would find it and use it to eliminate a German soldier or, perhaps even better, a member of the Vichy administration. Vichy France was not a normal or stable society — hence the guns in the hands of the citizenry.

It would be bizarre to parachute handy murder kits to civilians today. Context, historical context, is everything.

The Arms Trial should have been about the inability of Free State arms to protect Irish citizens on the island of Ireland. Instead, it focused on a tangible symptom of a cause no one wanted to address. The conspiracy by elements within the Dublin government to equip northern nationalists with the means with which to defend themselves was not the problem. The fact that a movement that emerged from the burning ghettos of '69 now has the means to arm an infantry battalion is not the

problem. The problem is the situation that led shopkeepers to become quartermasters and grammar school girls to become active service unit commanders.

It was this issue that brought me to meet with all of the main players in 'The Split' as research for part of a politics degree back in 1982. I interviewed Mac Stíofáin, Daithí O Connail, Sean Garland and Cathal Goulding. I concluded at the end of my thesis that the realities of a loyalist pogrom on Catholics meant that Official Sinn Féin's vision of an Ireland polarised along socio-economic lines — through a Marxist rather than a tribal viewfinder — was dangerous nonsense for the people of the Short Strand.

With the exception of Adams, all the current republican leadership are children of 69. The B-Specials made the Provos as surely as the Cold War and Gulf War made bin Laden.

The split in '69 was essentially about guns. Goulding moved them out of Belfast

pany, then at no time in its history has it had a CEO of the quality of Gerry Adams. Moreover, the quality he can call in from his vice president, Martin McGuinness, and the rest of the boardroom is peerless on either of what we term 'these islands'. They are easily a more formidable negotiating team than the plenipotentiaries sent by de Valera to barter with Lloyd George. They have negotiated from a far weaker position, against greater odds than the Collins team had to contend with. They have done so with great skill and endurance.

They have been forced to capitulate on the weapons issue in a way that is the obverse of what Nelson Mandela told de Klerk when asked about the ANC's 'illegal' weapons. Mandela simply told him they would be handed in "when we are the government collecting them". At that point, of course, the need for ANC weapons would be over. The cause of the conflict — apartheid — would also be removed.

had been met with state violence — the genteel rules of passive resistance were not understood by the grim-faced burghers who ran Stormont.

Thirdly, there was the national question of the partition of the country. In 1969, despite being defeated in a campaign seven years earlier, the IRA hadn't gone away.

Finally, there was the socialist republic. The fact is that the IRA has been forced to destroy its weapons while the causes of the conflict remain virulently in place. The four chief reasons why the current leadership became youthful activists in 1969 remain largely unresolved. The physical threat is nightly there in the form of pipe-bomb attacks. The equality agenda is still far from achieved.

The border, of course, remains and looks more permanent now than at any time since 1922. Talk of socialism in the republican movement died out some years ago. The event that de Chastelain witnessed



to stop a shooting war. The Provos split to get guns into Belfast so that they could take part in exactly that.

For Goulding, 'IRA' did mean 'I Ran Away'. Goulding and his class-conscious comrades did indeed run away from the sectarian realities of the Belfast proletariat. The battle of the Short Strand saw the Provos buy the franchise of armed republicanism in the North and, subsequently, the whole island. The deal between armed republicanism and the nationalist population was rewritten for a new generation.

The glacial pace of the Adams agenda to constitutionalise the Provos has been a keen understanding of that contractual arrangement. Holding the franchise is a temporary arrangement.

The title deeds are not for sale. Currently there is no viable bidder and that may hold for some time — just as there was no credible bid in the marketplace in 1962.

If the Republican Movement was a com-

In the hierarchy of needs, we can identify four distinct factors dictating why the northern nationalist population has required some of its members to bear arms.

Firstly, there was the physical survival of an unarmed people who were being attacked by the nearest thing these islands have seen in the 20th century to Bosnian Serbs. How close the people of Clonard, Ardoyne or Short Strand came to a Sabra or Shateela is a moot point. But the very fact that agents of the state were "virtually indistinguishable from the loyalist mob" (Cameron Report on the then RUC and B-Specials), meant that ordinary people would acquire whatever means they could to defend themselves, their families and their neighbours. Thus, republicans acquired the franchise of defending the nationalist areas from pogrom.

Secondly, there was the clear inability of the northern state to provide any parity of esteem for all those it governed. Reasonably polite requests for civil rights

was a case of putting the symptom before the cause. The need for ordinary people to form an organisation, an army, and equip for military operations, was a clear sign that something in the state of Northern Ireland was rotten. The people with the power in this situation, primarily the British government, have only ever been concerned with eradicating the symptom. This conflict started with a loyalist mob attacking Catholics, an unarmed IRA and a Labour government that promised much and delivered little different from what British administrators had ever delivered in Ireland.

Some commentators saw the peace process as a British gambit to neuter and neutralise the IRA by splits and disarmament. Their point was simply that Britain cannot address the root causes of the conflict because Britain itself is the root cause.

For instance; only within British governance can loyalist violence be explained or sustained. Since Belfast was formed by industrialisation and the Famine, the

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nationalist ghettos have always approached the matter of their own survival in one of two ways — fight back or leave. North Belfast, in this sense, made a fool of Cathal Goulding's best laid plans for proletarian revolution.

One of the key tasks facing the IRA officers who 'green-booked' new recruits into the army was to make sure they had the psychological strength necessary to withstand the trauma of killing at close range. In order to do this, IRA volunteers had to be 100 per cent sure that they were 100 per cent justified in using the gun. There had to be complete moral certitude.

The recent decommissioning "event" has caused a certain creeping moral ambiguity to seep into the belief system of IRA volunteers. This is no small matter.

The Garda Special Branch approached social scientists in Maynooth in the 1980s with the simple question: "How do we beat the IRA?" The answer was simple: "Destroy their belief system." One of the main casualties for the Republican Movement in entering this process was the belief system that equipped volunteers to sustain their operational effectiveness as much as did the guns.

Bobby Sands was imprisoned because he was in possession of a firearm. The core question was the legitimacy and legality of what he was doing with that automatic pistol. To the British administrators of the northern state he was a criminal. To his comrades, he was a legitimate soldier doing his national duty at

time of national emergency.

The 'event' now opens the door guarding that moral certitude slightly. Doubt may creep into those who spent their youth preoccupied with the guns and their deadly use. This is new terrain for republicans, especially those who remember the 70s and 80s.

Cries of 'sell-out' in the direction of the current leadership are arrant nonsense, given the situation they find themselves in. Perhaps accusations of acquiescing in a compulsory purchase order would be more apt.

Had there truly been a pan-nationalist front, the Sinn Fein leadership would never have found itself in a situation of having to approach the IRA to ask them to destroy weaponry under the gaze of a British proxy. The present departure is, partly, a leap of faith by the republican leadership in the goodwill of Blair and the British government. Partly, too, it has occurred because this was the only tactical option open to republican leaders in a situation that had been constructed to corner them.

The narrow-minded streets of Glenbryn may yet remove the veneer of a settlement. In some ways it is already business as usual in the Alabama of the North, with pipe bombs and burnings on a weekly (and sometimes nightly) basis. If history tells us anything, it tells us that the nice new mission-statemented Police Service of Northern Ireland will look and act remarkably like the bad old RUC.

What has happened over the past couple of years is that the leadership of the republican movement, cut adrift by the Dublin government, had no choice but to consent to unionist demands.

No amount of "strategic thinking" by the republican base will get away from that central reality.

The same Belfast dynamics which tore up Goulding's blueprint for proletarian revolution might well yet undo the best laid plans of conflict resolution dating back to Hume/Adams. The key concept, that nationalists can sit anywhere on the equality bus and that they have a right to express their will to steer the bus in the direction of a 32-county state, still gets the lynch mobs out in Belfast and Portadown.

The pipe-bombing pogrom in the narrow-minded streets around Glenbryn is driven by this belief system. They are the rough trade of this worldview, but the ideas exist also in more genteel quarters. Having a leader of unionism who thinks that Sinn Fein ministers need "house training" shows that the colonialist mindset is alive and well on the Stormont veranda. Put all together; the pipe bombings; the melting possibility of a united Ireland; the massive leap of faith which may or may not pay off; the ingrained culture of carrying arms. It is still time to tread carefully. ■