

Intelligence in Public Media

Agents of Influence: Britain's Secret Intelligence War against the IRA

Aaron Edwards (Merrion Press, 2021), 291 pages, photographs, endnotes, bibliography, index.

Reviewed by Joseph W. Gartin

In Liam O'Flaherty's 1925 novel *The Informer*, set in the aftermath of Ireland's civil war, Gypo Nolan has a terrible, not well-kept secret: he has sold out his friend—a fellow revolutionary and wanted man—to the police for £20. It is fair to say that Gypo's security practices are poor, and he quickly falls under suspicion after flashing his money in Dublin's poorer quarters. Every outlawed organization fears one thing the most: the informer who can bring the movement to ruin. The commandant vows to hunt him down. "Good God! An informer is the great danger. Every man's hand is against me. It's only fear that protects me. I must make an example of this fellow."^a So he does. Gypo is betrayed by his own Judas and is shot dead outside the flophouse where he had taken refuge.

Fifty years on, such scenes of betrayal, suspicion, and retribution would play out repeatedly during the Troubles, the grimly understated name for the period (roughly 1968–98) that began with a civil rights movement and devolved into a bitter political and sectarian divide that killed more than 3,500 people in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland, England, and continental Europe. More than two decades after most of the violence ended in 1998, scholars, combatants, and survivors are still trying to make sense of a conflict that was fought in the streets and in the shadows.

Aaron Edwards, a professor of history at the British military academy and an expert on the Troubles, aims to cast some light into the corners of the shadow war: "*Agents of Influence* is chiefly concerned with learning the lessons of our secret past in Northern Ireland." (xix) Edwards draws out the differing perspectives of the

three groups charged with defeating the Provincial Irish Republican Army (PIRA, or commonly the IRA).^b One prevalent view among the British military and ruling elite had Northern Ireland as an extension of the lessons learned in the unraveling of Britain's colonial empire in places like Malaya, Kenya, Cyprus, and Yemen. Others, especially from the intelligence services, saw Northern Ireland as akin to the clash between Western democracies and Soviet communism to be combated through steady influence and careful espionage. And a third group, mostly comprising the Royal Ulster Constabulary and its Special Branch, viewed the IRA as a problem to be solved through aggressive policing, much like fighting organized crime. The challenges London faced well into the 1990s in coordinating and deconflicting these efforts, despite having a common goal and bureaucratic structures in place since at least 1980, (xvi) will resonate with US intelligence practitioners still grappling with Intelligence Community integration 20 years after 9/11.

In *Agents of Influence*, Edwards has two fundamental theses: British intelligence was engaged in a secret intelligence war against the IRA, and that war succeeded in defeating the IRA and other Republican terrorist groups.^c The former is true mostly by degree, and a *Studies* reader might be forgiven for asking if "Secret" in the title was an editor's idea. Protecting specific operations, sources, and methods was vital contemporaneously and in some cases even today, especially concealing the identity of the modern-day Gypo Nolans who were informing on IRA plans. But like the US response to 9/11, much of Britain's "secret" war against the IRA (and its belated effort against loyalist terrorists) (204) played out in the open: high-level

a. Liam O'Flaherty, *The Informer* (Wolfhound Press reprint, 2001), 97.

b. For most of the Troubles, British officials tended to regard loyalist terrorism as simply reactive and generally overlooked, and sometimes covered up, connections between the members of the army, police, and loyalist terrorist groups. See Anne Cadwallader, *Lethal Allies: British Collusion in Ireland* (Mercier Press, 2013).

c. Edwards sidesteps what could have been his first question: Whether better intelligence and more adroit leadership by London in the mid-to-late 1960s to end the Northern state's systemic and often violent discrimination against its Catholic population might have forestalled the Troubles altogether. London's poor intelligence picture of Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s is readily clear in now-declassified Joint Intelligence Committee deliberations. See inter alia Robert Dover and Michael S. Goodman, *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Georgetown University Press, 2011), which Edwards also cites in his bibliography.

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appointments of counterterrorism coordinators, strategy announcements, memoirs, press conferences and speeches, public bureaucratic squabbles, the vast and visible surveillance infrastructure, and most of all the terrible toll playing out in the streets, homes, and pubs.

Edwards's contention that the sustained intelligence pressure on the IRA—driven by technical collection, informers and agents of influence, covert action, and judicial judo—defeated Republican terrorism is much less contestable. He draws on government records, prior scholarship, and interviews to detail how by the early-to-mid-1990s, after some two decades of on-and-off conflict, the IRA and its offshoots were still lethal but constrained by intelligence-driven counterterrorism efforts that disrupted attacks and stemmed the flow of recruits, funding, and weapons. Senior IRA leaders knew they had a problem, but often no one was watching the watchers. Edwards quotes former IRA internal security chief Brendan Hughes: “The Army, the IRA, always had a problem with informers; there were always informers around—low-level informants, high-level informants—but by that stage, by the late 1980s, there was an awful sense of mistrust.” (189)

Edwards carefully sifts the documentary evidence, much of it recently declassified, and interviews, many self-serving, to begin teasing apart some of the most tangled mysteries of the Troubles. High-level informers within the IRA often gave London the ability to disrupt attacks, uncover bombmaking materials and weapons caches, and capture or kill IRA volunteers. One of these

sources, Freddie Scappaticci (codenamed Stakeknife by his military intelligence handlers) was himself a mole hunter in the IRA; it was as if the KGB had recruited CIA spy hunter James Angleton.^a “The more the IRA tried to enforce some counterintelligence tradecraft, the more they were disrupted,” notes another recent account of Scappaticci's efforts to play both sides.^b

Edwards treads with admirable caution around claims and counterclaims involving British intelligence's long and complicated relationship with senior Republican leaders, including senior IRA commander Martin McGuinness (who died in 2017) and former Sinn Fein president Gerry Adams. Intelligence officers know that two contradictory things can be true at once: counterterrorism agencies wanted them dead and needed them alive. British intelligence services played a key role in facilitating the numerous secret contacts between IRA and Sinn Fein leaders, British and Irish officials, and intermediaries like Brendan Duddy (209) that started almost as soon as the Troubles began. The importance of these back channels grew steadily through the early 1990s despite countless setbacks as emissaries probed for opportunities amid the carnage. They would be instrumental in achieving the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent power-sharing agreement ratified in 2007.

Agents of Influence is an important contribution to understanding Britain's secret and not-so-secret war against the IRA. Intelligence was not the only factor that helped end the Troubles, but Edwards makes clear it was a significant one.



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a. Scappaticci, who is in hiding, denies the allegation.

b. James Harkin, “Unmasking Stakeknife: the most notorious double agent in British history,” *GQ* (United Kingdom edition), November 1, 2020