

What role did publishing and propaganda play in the Anglo-Irish War?

Alanna Maxwell

Abstract

The role of propaganda in the Anglo-Irish struggle has a long and varied history. It reached the pinnacle of its importance, however, during the period 1919–21. The newspaper publishing industry was heavily involved in a war that featured few battles in the traditional sense. The Anglo-Irish propaganda war was frantic, vicious, and at times downright underhand. Publishing and propaganda played a vital role in the Anglo-Irish War, and would be one of the most important factors in determining its eventual outcome.

Key Words

Propaganda, Ireland, Newspaper Publishing

Introduction

War by words was an evident feature of the Anglo-Irish hostilities during the years 1919–1921. In a conflict, which over time resulted in a situation of military stalemate, both sides sought to influence public opinion, both at home and abroad, to their respective causes. According to Boyce, it is “a difficult problem” to assess the impact of propaganda on public opinion, as there is no completely reliable method of discovering when public opinion was influenced by propaganda (Boyce 1972, 89). However, due to the fact that the Anglo-Irish war was as much a psychological as it was a military struggle, an assessment of the role of the publication propaganda in the eventual outcome of the war is of the utmost importance.

As an IRA-led guerilla warfare victory over the might of the British Empire seemed unlikely, the Republicans recognized that the shaping of public opinion, both at home and abroad, was of the utmost importance. They sought to portray the conflict as one involving a small nation seeking merely to secure its democratic national rights against the world’s leading imperial power. For Great Britain, the power of public opinion was equally important. In the world at large, particularly within the United States and the Commonwealth Nations, Britain’s propagandist efforts sought to portray its “policing” of the Irish situation as a matter of protecting its own direct and extended interests from the threat posed by what it sought to characterize as a fanatical minority linked to subversive ideologies (Costello 1989, 5). Despite the many hundreds of individual incidents and the loss of life on both sides, the Anglo-Irish War featured few traditional pitched battles. Thus there was a significant degree of psychological warfare in addition to physical encounters. The use of propaganda by both sides played a central role in the protracted armed conflict involving the Irish Republican guerilla forces and the substantial British armed presence during the years 1919–1921.

According to General Neville Macready, the British Commanding Officer for the majority of the conflict, by May 1921 the British forces in Ireland numbered some 60,000 men. Meanwhile, at its strongest, the IRA was unlikely to have had more than 3,000 men actually under arms at any one time (Costello 1989, 6). This uneven military match would have to be compensated for with more subtle modes of conflict. How did the Republicans, operating with a much smaller budget and far fewer resources, compete with the British government in terms of propaganda? How did they manage to get their message across on the world stage? How important was the use of propaganda, at regional, local, national, and international level, in shaping the eventual outcome of the conflict? This article will examine what role propaganda played in the Anglo-Irish War, concentrating mainly on the newspaper publishing industry and will determine to what extent it was a factor in the eventual outcome.

Irish propaganda during the Anglo-Irish War had its roots in the nationalist propaganda activity which had taken place during the First World War. Three methods of propaganda dissemination were used by nationalist groups: newspapers, mass mailings, and handbills or posters. By August 1914, over 35 weekly papers involved in propagandist activities were in circulation (Novick 1997, 42). After the Easter Rising 1916, as the Anglo-Irish War entered a new phase, the role of propaganda was to take on an even greater significance.

The Sinn Féin Press Bureau was established in April 1918. The work of the bureau was to supply a weekly column of Sinn Féin news and notes to provincial Irish newspapers and to prepare pamphlets setting out the Sinn Féin case. The bureau continued to function after the Dáil met in January 1919, but propaganda directed outside the country was entrusted to a new Department of Publicity which would remain in place throughout the period of the Anglo-Irish war. The most prominent director of publicity was Erskine Childers, who took up the position in February 1921. One reason for the effectiveness of Irish propaganda in Britain may be attributed to the fact that Childers had "the ear of a big section of the English people" (Boyce, 1972, 84).

Frank Gallagher, one of the most skillful propagandists of the period, acted as Childers' right-hand man. An indication of just how skilled he was is that he was later dubbed "the Irish Doctor Goebbels" by the US Minister in Ireland (Walker 1992, 150). According to Walker, Gallagher played a crucial role in the success of Republican propaganda during the period. He worked alongside Childers and Bob Brennan, the Sinn Féin Director of Publicity, and was instrumental in the success of the *Irish Bulletin*, the most important weapon of Irish propaganda of the time.

The *Irish Bulletin* has "retained a fabled place in Irish nationalist folk memory". It was an underground paper produced in Dublin, often in circumstances of extreme danger. It started as a fortnightly publication in the spring/summer of 1919, but by November that year production had drastically increased as it published reports on British "acts of aggression", contradicted statements by British ministers, and maintained a huge archive of every casualty and combat. It was sent to the offices of British newspapers and the Labour press bureau, and by 1921, "over 2,000 copies went out daily to the British, Irish, and foreign Press, to heads of State and leading politicians in England and America, to writers everywhere who showed any sympathy at all with freedom, and to heads of Churches" (Boyce 1972, 82).

Although Boyce outlines the way in which Sinn Féin propaganda could be described as "gratuitous", as news of British actions in Ireland would have reached the press anyway, he overlooks the skillful ways in which it was masterfully manipulated to achieve maximum impact. Without the careful exploitation of this propaganda fodder, reports of this nature may have gone largely unnoticed, if not in Ireland, then in Britain and the rest of the world.

Indeed, The *Bulletin's* effectiveness as a propaganda weapon was widely acknowledged, described as “one of the most important weapons of the Republican movement. It was worth several flying columns”. Thus it is clear how during the Anglo-Irish War, propaganda was an equally important weapon as guns and rifles.

The importance of public opinion, even at regional level, was clear to Sinn Féin. At the height of the Republican's physical effort, General Headquarters issued a directive to all Brigade Commanders with the objective of creating a framework for assessing the political sympathies of the reporters within their region. Each newspaper was to be classified on a scale of “friendly or friendly by intimidation, neutral, or hostile”. They were also to answer questions such as “Is circulation of paper large or influential? Is paper doing good or harm?” (Costello 1989, 19). This shows just how significant the Republicans realized the newspaper publishing industry was to their cause.

The British government was more than capable of waging a propaganda war of its own. The Irish question, after the Great War, excited almost continuous public interest in Great Britain. It had unlimited financial resources at its disposal, and, from a publishing and general communications standpoint, an enormous range of platforms throughout the English-speaking world. In the aftermath of World War I, the ability of the British to focus these resources on the Irish situation was greatly enhanced. As the military stalemate continued, the British government began to recognize the critical importance of this war of words. In a memorandum dated April 21, 1921, Lloyd George emphasized the need for a heightened propaganda effort, as a means to sharpen the British focus on the Irish situation in the aftermath of the Great War.

The British propaganda machine was focused on counteracting the success of Sinn Féin at home and particularly in America. While the *Irish Bulletin* distributed its reports around the world on a daily basis, so too did the British Press Officer, Basil Clarke, who brought “at least thirty journalists” to Dublin Castle each day, to provide them with the official British accounts of Irish matters (Boyce, 1972, 85). Dublin Castle achieved a propaganda coup in April 1921, when they managed to write, print and distribute a bogus issue of the *Bulletin*, after the seizure of documents from their *Bulletin* headquarters. The issue was “skillfully edited in the style of the original”, but designed in a manner to damage British sympathy with Sinn Féin (Boyce 1972, 87). The forgery was distributed to its usual recipients thanks to the capture of the address list during the raid, and was a temporary blow for the Republicans.

British propaganda sought to portray the Republican movement as being aided and funded by foreign governments and ideologies, ranging from German Imperialism to the Russian Bolshevism. According to Street, Sinn Fein was “working through sedition, outrage, and alliance with the enemies of the Empire towards and impossible ideal—an Irish Republic”

(Street 1921, 69). White Paper published the *Documents Relative to the Sinn Féin Movement* to back up these spurious claims and to capitalize on British fear of the Communist “Red Menace”. It appears that any attempt to discredit them would suffice, no matter how tenuous the link.

These wild attempts to connect Sinn Féin and the IRA to any subversive movement at all were “clumsy failures”, in that they convinced no one who was not already convinced (Boyce 1972, 90). The *Documents Relative to the Sinn Féin Movement* was unconvincing and uninspired. The forged *Irish Bulletins* constituted a good effort but in the end did not have the desired impact. The effect of the forgeries upon public opinion was short-lived, and their authenticity was even called into question by the British press. The *Manchester Guardian* published its doubts on their veracity, and then printed the real *Bulletin’s* repudiation of the forgeries.

The escalation of the IRA’s guerilla campaign resulted in more and more draconian measures being taken by the British government, such as the implementation of martial law, and an official policy of coercion and reprisals. The Publicity Department was able to exploit this for all it was worth, at home and abroad. The harsher the reprisal, the greater the resulting publicity value. While Sinn Féin were able to exploit every brutal reprisal and act of aggression as a source for propaganda, it is equally true that the activities of the Republican forces provide ample material for British counter-propaganda (Boyce 1972,89). Although they had the material, it seems that their failure to exploit it to its fullest potential is a key reason behind the eventual outcome. According to the *Spectator*, the government’s failure to enlist the support of British public opinion was a failure to use its propaganda resources to their full extent (Ibid, 90). Doherty remarks that from the British point of view, “the Anglo-Irish propaganda war was probably unwinnable” (Doherty, 2000).

Sinn Fein’s skilful exploitation of British brutality for propaganda purposes just could not be countered by the Crown’s propagandists. The case of the execution of Kevin Barry is an excellent example of the power and far-reach of Republican propaganda. A Jesuit-educated medical student, Barry participated in one of the first IRA attacks since the 1916 Rising and was the first of ten Irishmen to be hanged under the emergency measures of the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act before the 1921 truce. His case is significant in what Doherty refers to as the “Anglo-Irish propaganda war”, as it attracted considerable press attention, both in Ireland and abroad. Refusal of a reprieve for Barry, the Republicans threatened, would bring down the contempt of Ireland and the world upon British heads for the execution of a mere boy.

On the republican side, the case was “skilfully manipulated” in propaganda, to portray the noble ideal of heroism and self-sacrifice in the sacred cause. A statement from Barry was obtained, detailing his arrest and torture at the hands of his captors, who wished him to turn informant. Surprisingly, these reports were published in many national British

papers, which also carried an account of Arthur Griffith's "message to the civilized world". This "message" was a propaganda ploy intended to draw national and international attention to the Barry case, describing the situation as an "outrage" (Doherty, 2000).

The same day as this message was published in the *Manchester Guardian*; the *Westminster Gazette* carried a letter from Erskine Childers, who wrote:

To hang him for murder is an insulting outrage, and it is more, it is an abuse of power, an unworthy act of vengeance, contrasting ill with the forbearance and humanity invariably shown by the Irish Volunteers towards the prisoners captured by them. (Doherty, 2000)

Meanwhile, the nationalist presses in Ireland were devoting more and more space to the story, hoping to stir up popular feelings against the government and its Irish policy. On November 1st, the *Freeman's Journal* published an emotionally charged editorial called "The River of Blood", featuring the lines "The blood of Kevin Barry is on the hands of Mr Lloyd George". Following Barry's execution, his photograph appeared under the headline "The School-Boy Who Died", with captions such as "The Heroic Sacrifice" and "A Brave Boy's Fortitude". It also carried Barry's last words, "Fight on! Live for the ideal for which I am about to die". Kevin Barry had become "a symbol and a slogan; a hymn of freedom and of unconquerable youth". This is an excellent example of the power of the Republican propaganda machine; in the Barry case, British propaganda was an uncharacteristic "failure" (Doherty, 2000).

General Macready was indeed concerned that the British press was undermining popular support for the government's actions in Ireland and thus encouraging the rebels in their efforts. He even remarked once that "this propaganda business is the strongest weapon Sinn Féin has", and wished to increase efforts in putting forward the government's case in the British and Irish press (Doherty, 2000). Despite the best efforts of the British Government to the contrary, such leading British publications as *The Manchester Guardian*, *The London Daily Herald*, and *The New Statesman* continued to strongly criticise British policy in Ireland, and according to Costello, it can be stated that "the propaganda war yielded only limited results from the British standpoint." (Costello 1989, 20)

How do we account for this ultimate failure of British propaganda on home soil? The British public had thus proven to be hostile to the government's Irish policy, and ministers were inclined to attribute this to the skillful nature of Sinn Féin propaganda. According to Lloyd George, "almost every Irishman is a natural propagandist for his country", and Sir Hamar Greenwood described the "highly organised Propaganda Department connected with the Irish Republican movement". According to Boyce, Sinn Féin propaganda in Great Britain was "well organized, thoughtfully prepared and diligently distributed" (Boyce 1972, 84). Lord

Birkenhead's statement of March 1921 is an illuminating description of the success of Irish propaganda. In his view, Sinn Féin were:

So successful in their methods of carrying on this propaganda that they not only induced persons all over the world who were evilly affected towards the British Empire to receive and even to credit the charges which they made, but they actually induced large numbers of English people to take the view...that the balance of censure inclined in the direction of the forces of the Crown (Ibid, 84).

Lord Birkenhead's statement is certainly correct in that it describes accurately the success of Irish propaganda in America. The most important organization driving this propaganda was called "Friends of the Irish Republic" (FOIF) founded in New York in March 1916 by another older Irish-American organisation, Clan na Gael. Irish-American opinion was outraged by the executions that followed the 1916 Rising, and during the subsequent Anglo-Irish War, as lurid news of the Black and Tans' atrocities reached Irish-America, membership of the organisation soared. By the summer of 1920, it numbered 100,000 regular members and an additional 175,000 associate members. They then formed their own propaganda outlets, opening an Irish National Bureau in Washington, which distributed a *Newsletter* and countless pamphlets and leaflets to thousands of prominent Americans and opinion-formers (Doorley, 2008).

On the British side, they also sought to discredit the Irish cause in America. At Street's time of writing, Germany had been vanquished in Europe. As such it became necessary to develop a new technique for denigrating the Irish cause in the United States. He sought to question the loyalty of the Irish activists operating in the US. He explained away the interest of American politicians in the Irish cause by stating that they were merely after the votes of all those with Irish ancestry. FOIF was a major target for Street, who stated that "the chief weapon of the Irish Republicans in America is propaganda, and the most important of the propaganda societies is the Friends of Irish Freedom" (Street 1921, 80).

The American propaganda war was ultimately won by Ireland. FOIF and the respected American magazine, *The Nation*, succeeded in their propaganda efforts by keeping the Irish nationalist viewpoint before the American public during the period of the struggle. In 1920, the American Committee on Conditions in Ireland met to discuss the Irish situation and published a report, which was a damning indictment of British policy in Ireland. The report also highlights the ways in which Britain's own press disagreed with their government's policy, by praising the efforts of a number of British newspapers for "the courageous stand they have taken in exposing and denouncing to the British people, the murder done in their name." (Doorley, 2008)

It seems that Britain eventually came to accept that they could not win this war of words. The reversal of policy taken by the British in June 1921, when they entered into talks

with Sinn Fein to negotiate the eventual Anglo-Irish Treaty, suggests that they realized that the propaganda war was in fact “unwinnable”. After the Crown’s propagandists spent the better part of three years seeking to label them as terrorists and subversives, the British Government were forced to recognize the legitimacy and indeed power of the organisation.

In the end, although the British government had considerably more money and resources at their disposal, when it came to influencing and stirring up public opinion, the republicans were far more effective in their use of propaganda. The Irish Republicans, although with less resources and manpower, better understood how to use propaganda to influence public opinion to their advantage. British attempts to link the Irish Republican effort with murky subversive forces were tenuous at best, and failed as a propaganda effort. This may have been partly due to the fact that during the Anglo-Irish War, Sinn Fein subscribed largely to a doctrine grounded in conservative nationalism. While technically classed as radical rebels, their actual policies were far from radical. This desperate attempt by the British propaganda machine to discredit the Republicans thus had no legs to stand on. The mad scramble for any material at all to use as propaganda, no matter how unconvincing, eventually led to their downfall.

Another reason for the success of Republican propaganda is the variety of emotive sources upon which it could draw. The thematic richness of Irish propaganda allowed it to appeal to people across an intellectual and economic spectrum. It appealed to the interpreted history of the Irish people. The support of the Roman Catholic clergy, especially in rural areas, greatly aided the effect of this propaganda. The methods and quantity of distribution played a large role in its success as well. Newspapers were distributed all around Ireland, and were widely read. When these were shut down, a virtually constant stream of handbills, fliers, and posters appeared in the post and on the walls of towns around Ireland.

On the British side, bureaucratic snarls and an unclear sense of purpose hampered the control of propaganda and propagandists. The British managed to be “ineffective and unproductive” (Novick 1997, 57). Finally, the counterpropaganda efforts of the British appear to have been especially out of touch with reality.

Novick describes how at its heart, propaganda is simply advertising, the study of what appeals to a group. While the propaganda of nationalists used images from history that resonated, the British were left with meaningless symbols of mythology and hazy memories (Ibid, 57).

It can be said that without the strength of Irish public opinion behind the rebels, the outcome of the war might have been very different. Because the number of republican forces was so small in contrast to the might of the British army, they needed the general support of the public, including those who had no wish to bear arms. Thus the role of the Irish newspaper publishing industry, it can be said, had a huge role to play in the war and its

eventual outcome. In a very non-traditional war, more subtle means of combat were of the utmost important, and the “war of words” that took place was epic.

Bibliography

Boyce, D.G. 1972. *Englishmen and Irish Troubles: British Opinion & The Making of Irish Policy 1918-22*. London: Jonathan Cape

Costello, Francis J. 1989. “The Role of Propaganda in the Anglo-Irish War 1919-1921.” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol. 14, No. 2: 5-24.

Costello, Francis J. 1991. “Labour, Irish Republicanism, and the Social Order during the Anglo-Irish War.” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* Vol. 17, No. 2: 1-22.

Doherty, M.A. 2000. “Kevin Barry and the Anglo-Irish Propaganda War.” *Irish Historical Studies* Vol. 32, No. 126: 217-231.

Doorley, Michael. 2008. “The Friends of Irish Freedom: A Case-Study in Irish-American Nationalism, 1916-21.” *History Ireland* Vol. 16, No. 2: 22-27.

Lee, Stephen J. *Aspects of British Political History 1914-1995*. London: Routledge, 1996.

Novick, Benjamin Z. 1997. “DORA, Suppression, and Nationalist Propaganda in Ireland, 1914-1915.” *New Hibernia Review* Vol. 1, No. 4: 41-57.

O’Connor Lysaght, D.R. 2013. “Seeking the Real Irish Revolution.” *History Ireland* Vol. 21, No. 2: 10- 11.

Street, C.J. *The Administration of Ireland, 1920*. London: Philip Allan & Co, 1921.

Walker, Graham. 1992. “The Irish Dr Goebbels’: Frank Gallagher and Irish Republican Propaganda.” *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 27, No. 1: 149-165.