



# How British policy made

The deaths of Terence MacSwiney and Kevin Barry fuelled the republican cause at a time when Crown forces treated the public as the enemy, writes **Conor Mulvagh**

**T**he War of Independence witnessed some of its darkest days in the last months of 1920. Between the sack of Balbriggan on September 20 and the burning of Cork on December 11 were packed many of the set pieces that are synonymous with the War of Independence, including Bloody Sunday and the Kilmichael Ambush. From the dozens of republicans who died in these months, two new martyrs would be added to the Irish republican pantheon: the 41-year-old Terence MacSwiney, who died on hunger strike on October 25 and, a week later, the 18-year-old medical student Kevin Barry: the first Irish republican to be executed since Roger Casement in 1916.

During these months, the tempo, tide and tenor of the conflict changed. As events intensified domestically, so too did the international battle over information and the news narrative. The British government's policy of official reprisals handed republican propagandists ready-made coups. The excesses of an empire and its army, at a time when Britain was still shaping the peace in Europe, did untold damage to Britain's profile on the world stage. In particular, the power of the Irish diaspora in the US was brought to bear in shaming Britain among her Versailles allies and jeopardising the Anglo-American relationship.

Throughout these tumultuous months, the British government agonised over the wisdom of declaring martial law in Ireland. In August, the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act was passed. It gave Crown forces the additional powers they had been clamouring for, but stopped short of a declaration of martial law and the resulting necessity of suspending Ireland's civilian government. August also saw the entry of the Auxiliary Division of the Royal Irish Constabulary into the fray. The Auxiliaries embarked enthusiastically on their campaign of counterterrorism. The Crown forces' morale was bolstered by the growing numbers of convictions under the new legislation, averaging 50-60 a week. This was a tangible metric and one of the few, from a command perspective, that was going in the right direction. However, contrary to the conviction statistics, the IRA was actually growing both in men and munitions. The campaign of counterterror only served to swell its ranks.

Individual British officers pursued a policy of ruthlessness. The significance of 'hearts and minds' in counterinsurgency operations was not yet appreciated by an army staffed by veterans of the more clear-cut engagements of 1914-18. The future Field Marshall, then Brigade Major, Bernard Montgomery was posted to Cork in December 1920. His attitude sums up the difficulties that officers faced in asymmetric warfare. Of his time in Ireland, Montgomery, himself of Anglo-Irish stock, recollected: "Personally, my whole attention was given to defeating the rebels but it never bothered me a bit how many houses were burnt. I think I regarded all civilians as 'Shinners' and I never had any dealings with any of them."

The British reprisals policy meant that the civilian populace faced indiscriminate violence and intimidation. The reasons to support the republican government grew and the disincentives for aiding, abetting or joining the IRA began rapidly to evaporate in a climate where, especially in the rebellious south, the public at large was being treated by the Crown forces as the enemy.

In the midst of this guerrilla war marked by atrocity, ambush and reprisal, propaganda

assumed an immense significance. The historian WH Kautt notes that "although the struggle between the IRA, the British army and the RIC was frighteningly violent, the true battleground lay in the realm of information: a war of perception". British forces in Ireland, the British government and British justice came off badly from high-profile deaths such as those of MacSwiney and Barry. The fragile morale of Crown forces in Ireland, especially that of the Royal Irish Constabulary, meant that the British government could not afford to be magnanimous with their captives for fear of further alienating their beleaguered ground forces.

## Raids and ambushes

Meanwhile, the Crown was failing to suppress the insurgency. Asymmetric warfare did not suit an army that had learned its fighting in the trenches. For four years in Europe and further afield, the British army had put all its effort into a front line behind which was a sprawling logistics network stretching back to the factories and farms of the British Isles and the trade routes of the empire. The IRA exploited the soft underbelly of that logistics train with raids and ambushes rather than taking on a numerically and technically superior enemy head-on.

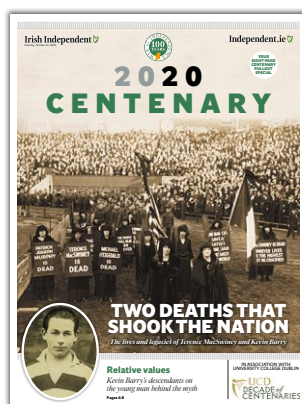
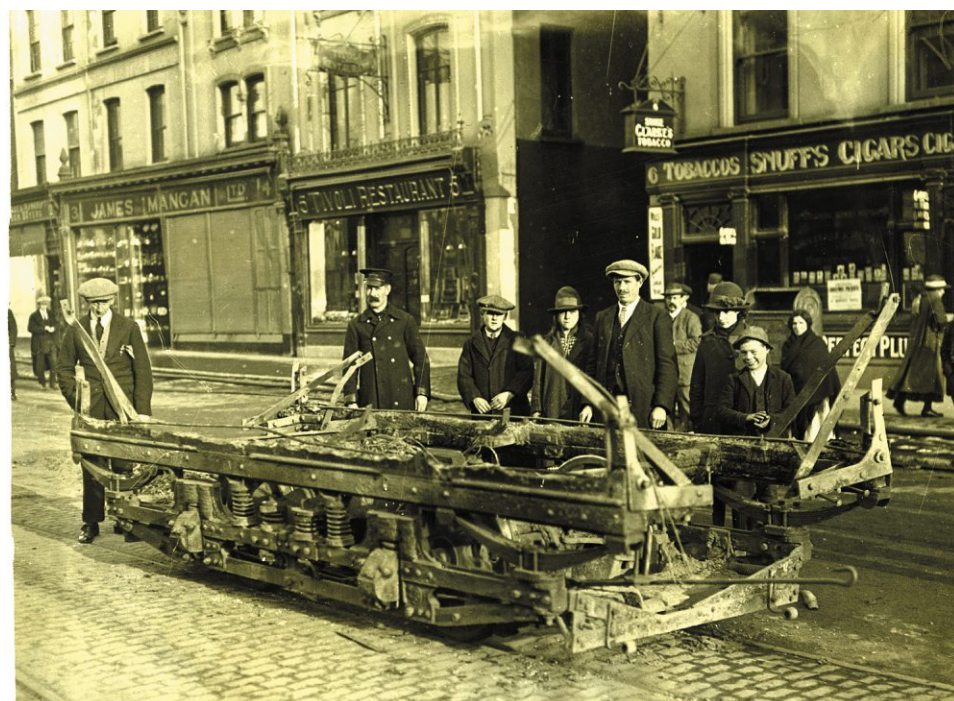
Pádraig Yeates argues one of the unsung triumphs of the wider republican campaign was the denial of the railways to the British forces through to the power of Irish trade unions. Strike action and the refusal to move armaments on the railways, Yeates argues, forced British troops "on to Ireland's inadequate road network, where they were more vulnerable to attack". The IRA were, however, guilty of underestimating their enemy on occasion. The arms raid in which Kevin Barry was captured was of this type. His unit targeted a routine British army bread collection. However, both the size of the escort and the response time of nearby units in a densely populated urban area were miscalculated. Several of Barry's comrades were lucky to escape. The three British soldiers who lost their lives in the ambush were less lucky in the unforgiving urban warfare environment.

The deaths of MacSwiney and Barry raise the



**Civilians look at the remains of a burned-out tram on Patrick Street, Cork, after fighting between the Auxiliaries and the Black and Tans on December 11, 1920**

PHOTO: UCD ARCHIVES/UCD DIGITAL LIBRARY



### On the cover:

A group of women in New York mourn the death of Terence MacSwiney on October 31, 1920

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# martyrs out of republicans



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

A photo taken on December 13, 1920 following the Burning of Cork (left); crowds gather outside Mountjoy Prison in Dublin during the execution of Kevin Barry (above); extracts from Éamon de Valera's speech at the Polo Grounds in New York on Sunday, October 31, 1920 were released in advance (below). They included: "England has killed another son for Ireland to mourn", and "She has robbed another woman of the joy of her life"



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question of ownership of the dead: both ownership of memory and ownership of physical bodies. Families ceded control over their loved one's memories to the nation. The Irish Republic and its political leaders did not waste a valuable and timely opportunity to transform these men into martyrs. For its part, the British government attempted to assert ownership over the bodies, perhaps mindful of Pearse's caveat that "while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace".

### Counterproductive hope

The British state had already taken control of MacSwiney's body by moving him from Cork to Brixton in the counterproductive hope that it would decrease his visibility and allow the Crown to more effectively control the narrative. As MacSwiney died from starvation rather than execution, the state was forced to hand his remains over to his family. In London, his body lay in state on October 28 at Southwark Cathedral. Art O'Brien and other leading Irish Republicans in Britain mobilised the Irish diaspora, which showed out in force for the procession of the body, manifesting the Irish nation within the heart of the empire. British authorities denied MacSwiney's body passage by sea

*My whole attention was given to defeating the rebels. It never bothered me a bit how many houses were burnt*

to Dublin. Instead, his remains were shipped to Co Cork under heavy armed guard by the same forces that had killed his predecessor as lord mayor of that city.

In Dublin, a funeral procession with a corpse was held on October 29. Finally, in Cork, a massive republican funeral took place on October 31. In the end, the plan to minimise the publicity of MacSwiney's burial by moving the prisoner to England resulted in three funerary rites across three cities, a propaganda coup for the Irish Republic. In a war where the insurgency was forced to operate in the shadows, this claiming of public space had incalculable propaganda value on the psyche of the citizenry, the republican movement and their enemy, who was forced to stand aside and observe. Even in New York, MacSwiney's death provoked mass public gatherings. Some 40,000 people crowded into the Polo Grounds, a colossal baseball stadium in Upper Manhattan, to pay tribute to MacSwiney in an event presided over by Éamon de Valera.

The following day in Dublin, a very different spectacle played out. As a capital prisoner sentenced to execution, Kevin Barry's body would be retained by the state. Unlike the rebels, and emphasising the British government's desire to



Seán MacSwiney at his brother's funeral procession in London on October 28, 1920.

PHOTO REPRODUCED COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

treat him as a criminal rather than a political prisoner, Barry was hanged rather than shot — a stipulation of his sentence to which he objected. In Dublin, the focal point was an emotional tactic of civil disobedience and propaganda that had been perfected outside Brixton prison during MacSwiney's slow death: mass recitation of the rosary at the prison walls. UCD students were prominent in these.

Within the walls, Barry's body was interred and it would remain there until he and nine other republicans were exhumed from Mountjoy for reburial at the republican plot at Glasnevin Cemetery in 2001. The reburial of the 'forgotten ten' was carefully choreographed by the Irish state and drew crowds from different shades of green within the Irish republican tradition who saw Barry and his comrades as fitting into their own distinct political lineages. The passage of eight decades did not diminish the two central themes that had dominated the burials of men like MacSwiney and Barry: the power of martyrdom was enduring and the ownership of their bodies was contested.

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