



Fake news, propaganda and

Crown forces staged the 'Battle of Tralee' but it all happened in Dalkey, as exposed by the *Irish Independent*. Truth was often a casualty in the conflict, writes **Kim Bielenberg**

In the week of Bloody Sunday, the *Irish Independent* exposed one of the most flagrant examples of fake news during the War of Independence.

Both sides in the conflict used propaganda to further their cause, and the British even went so far as to stage at least one fictitious battle for the cameras.

On November 26 and on the following day, the British press carried harrowing details of the "Battle of Tralee".

Reports purported to show the "grim reality" of the struggle, with photographs of the aftermath of the battle, where a group of RIC fought off the IRA after an ambush.

Bodies of IRA men lay on the road while the RIC held up other volunteers in the Kerry town — or so readers were led to believe.

It was a harrowing scene, filling the front page of the *London Illustrated News*. In a story below the photo, the paper remarked that "the condition of affairs in Ireland has grown worse and worse" and suggested it was "typical of the state of things in the country".

The "Battle of Tralee" was also filmed for a Pathé newsreel, which was to be screened in cinemas. The film would show Crown forces getting the upper hand in an encounter with the "Sinn Féiners".

But it did not take long before the *Irish Independent* noticed something fishy in the dramatic photo that was circulated widely to the press.

Perhaps it was an eagle-eyed reader or a reporter who noticed that the road in the photo was not in fact in or around Tralee at all.

The battle had actually been staged 200 miles away. The actual location, recognisable by a distinctive lamp-post, was Vico Road, close to where Bono now lives between Dalkey and Killiney on the south Dublin coastline.

As the *Irish Independent* wryly put it, "the Battle of Tralee ended for the convenience of the photographer in Co Dublin."

To prove its point, the newspaper also printed a photo of the same spot in Dalkey with the same lamp-post but without the battle scene — and the shadowy propagandists of the Crown forces were rumbled.

Ian Kenneally, a historian who has examined the media during conflict for his book *The Paper Wall*, says some of the clumsy efforts of the authorities at deception amounted to "slapstick propaganda" rather than "black propaganda".

Many of the propaganda stunts at this time were masterminded by a former intelligence officer Hugh Pollard, whose official title was press officer of the Information Section of the Police Authority. He was assisted by an officer, whose name is reminiscent of the comedy *Blackadder*: Captain William Darling.

According to Kenneally's account, Pollard seemed to have a low opinion of the Irish. He said the typical Irish person had "two fundamental abnormalities, namely moral insensibility and want of foresight".

In Pollard's obituary, a friend suggested he "had a habit of letting off revolvers in any office he happened to be visiting".

Pollard produced the *Weekly Summary*, a notoriously inaccurate and occasionally eccentric police account of events in Ireland. Another press secretary in the Dublin Castle administration, Norman Loughnane, complained that the "police reports from the country are on the face of them false in the main".

The official account of the deaths on the night of Bloody Sunday of two IRA men, Dick McKee and Peadar Clancy, as well as the civilian Conor Clune, was widely circulated and reported. But immediately there were doubts about its credibility.

McKee had been closely involved in the preparations for the shooting of British intelligence officers, which took place on the morning of Bloody Sunday. The three were arrested and held in Dublin Castle.

The official British report stated that they were shot dead while trying to escape. The public was led to believe that they had somehow discovered grenades under a bed in the guard room where they were being held captive, and made their bid for freedom.

Elaborate reconstructions of this supposed incident were photographed and printed in the British media, including one on the front page of the *Daily Graphic* newspaper.

An implausible scene showing McKee grabbing the bars of a window had a caption reporting that the guards took cover behind their beds "when the prisoners threw Mills bombs [grenades] and fired a rifle, which one seized".

Official story

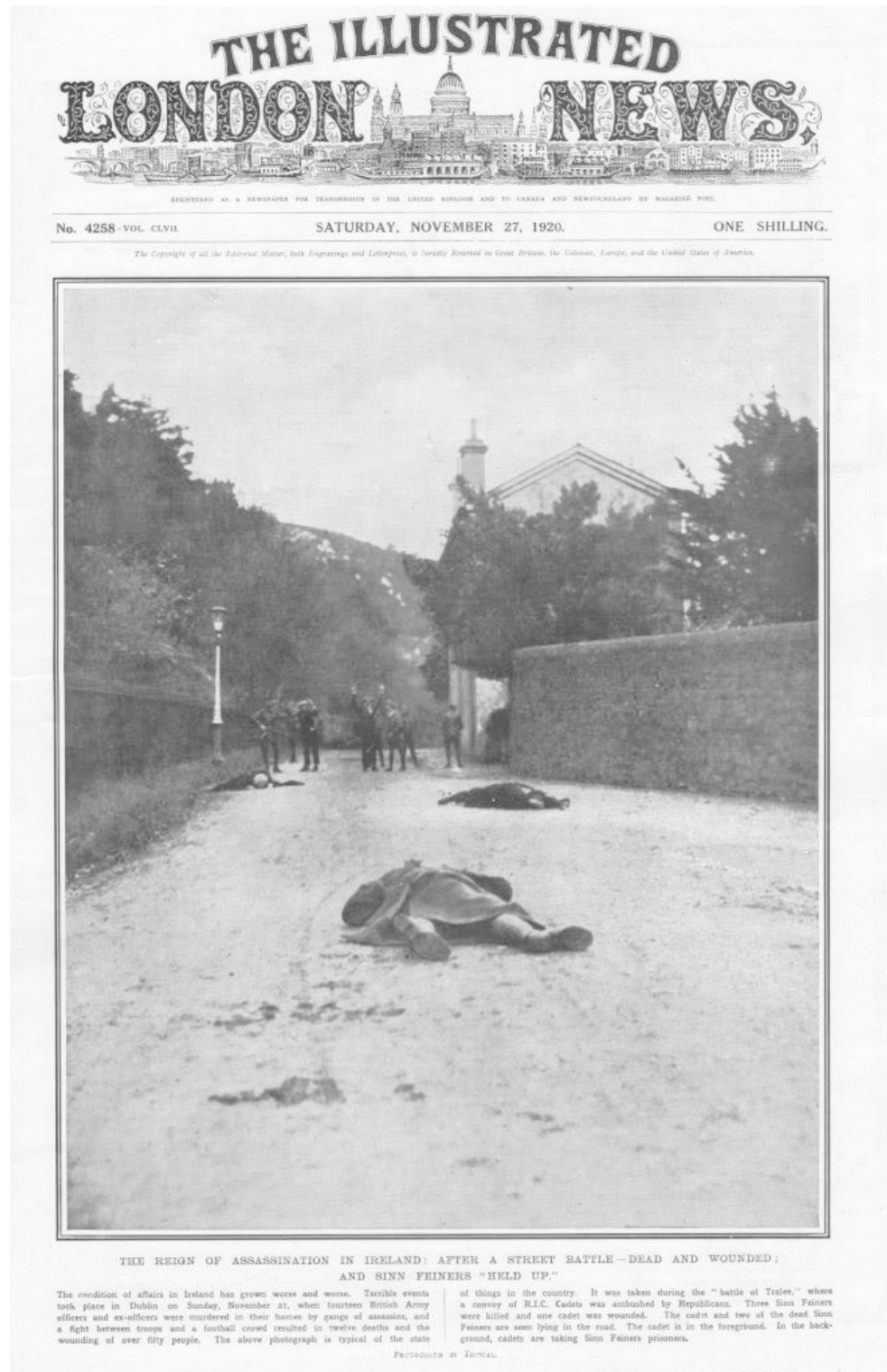
According to the official story, the would-be fugitives had not realised that the grenades were not primed.

These accounts were considered wildly implausible. A medical examination found the men had been shot many times and according to some accounts there were other injuries showing that they had been tortured.

Historians have pointed out that both Clancy and McKee were knowledgeable about weaponry, would have known that the grenades were not primed, and would not have taken the risk of using them in a confined space. Also, the chances of prisoners finding unguarded weapons seemed remote.

Despite these discrepancies, reports of the failed escape bid were widely reported.

Other reports coming from the police authorities were commonly regarded as fake news by many Irish and British news-



papers, and often they were not published as a result.

In his book, Kenneally details some of the more fanciful propaganda reports from the British authorities.

An article from November 1920 was intended to turn public opinion against the IRA after the execution of the teenage volunteer Kevin Barry.

It claimed to contain the sworn testimony of a spirit medium, Mrs JA Holloway.

Making tea in her kitchen one night soon after Kevin Barry's death, she reportedly heard a "voice call out from the Heavens". It was a call from Kevin Barry himself.

The executed rebel informed her that heaven had "melted his wicked heart" and

urged her to send a message to the people of Ireland. She told him that his friends needed "to stop their wicked deeds".

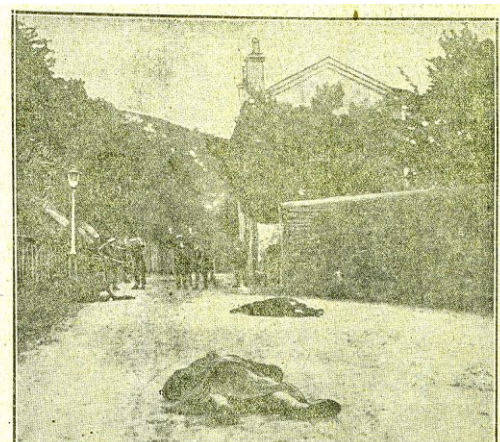
There were similar attempts to suggest that curses had been placed on IRA men, causing their families to fall ill and die one by one. This crude approach was seen as an attempt to play on Irish superstitions, but it does not seem to have succeeded.

Dublin Castle propagandists

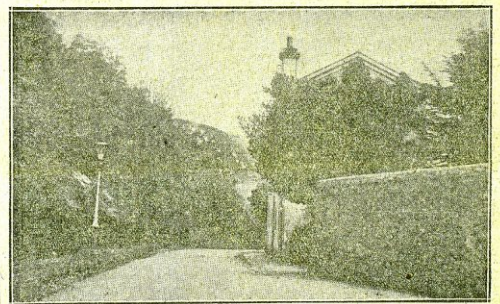
In 1921, the Dublin Castle propagandists claimed to have uncovered a secret fake Sinn Féin oath, with the seal of the Irish Republic.

The anti-Protestant oath ended with questions and answers:

the war for hearts and minds



This photograph has appeared in most of the leading English newspapers and magazines. One paper stated that the GYM TRAPPEY of the struggle in Ireland was brought home by this picture from the Kerry front, and that it depicted the scene after the Battle of Tralee, in which a convoy of R.I.C. auxiliaries was ambushed. It depicts a wounded quiet (in foreground), two dead raiders lying in the roadway, and prisoners held up. Another London paper, in publishing the photograph, described again as taken during the Battle of Tralee, remarked that it "is typical of the state of things in the country." Now see the following picture.



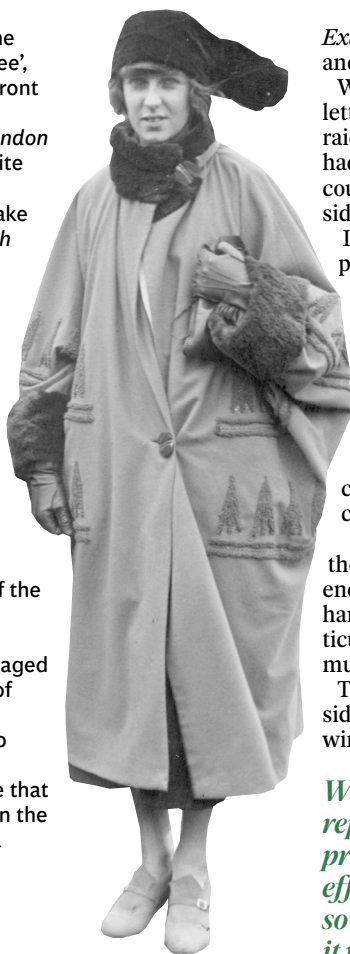
The above photograph, taken at the junction of Vico and Victoria Roads, Dalkey, near the entrance to Victoria Park, would go to show that the Battle of Tralee ended for the convenience of the photographer in Co. Dublin.

Rumbled: 'The Battle of Tralee', seen on the front page of *The Illustrated London News* (opposite page) was exposed as fake when the *Irish Independent* printed a photo of the same spot in Dalkey (left)

COURTESY: NATIONAL LIBRARY OF IRELAND

Right: Kathleen MacKenna oversaw the production of the *Irish Bulletin*

Below: the staged photograph of Dick McKee attempting to escape from Dublin Castle that was printed in the British media



Examiner faced the threat of suppression, and suffered raids from Crown forces.

When the *Irish Independent* printed a letter from Michael Collins, the paper was raided by RIC auxiliaries, and a sub-editor had a revolver held to his head. Papers could also be attacked by the republican side if the IRA disapproved of coverage.

It was not just the British who used propaganda. The republican side had its own Dail Department of Propaganda set up by Desmond FitzGerald, father of Garret, and Erskine Childers.

The University College Cork historian Donal Ó Drisceoil has emphasised that the battle for hearts and minds — in Ireland, Britain and beyond — was in many ways as significant as the military engagements of the conflict.

The plight of Ireland, fighting against the might of the British empire, was likened to "little Belgium" suffering at the hands of the Germans in World War I, particularly when Crown forces burned down much of Cork towards the end of 1920.

The approach to propaganda by the Irish side seems to have been more effective in winning over sympathy. The republicans

With Irish republican propaganda efforts proving so successful, it was hardly surprising that the authorities were keen to stop production of the 'Irish Bulletin'

produced the *Irish Bulletin*, a typed newsheet that was circulated mainly to the international media and influential public figures.

Kathleen MacKenna, who started as a Sinn Féin typist, oversaw the production of the publication, which had to move its base several times to dodge the authorities.

As well as typing and duplicating the pages, she also travelled around on her bicycle collecting information. The *Irish Bulletin* concentrated on highlighting British atrocities and reprisals against the population and trying to claim legitimacy for the IRA.

Heavily biased

While the accounts were obviously heavily biased and many of the reports of violence were graphic and explicit, the bulletin also had a reputation for reasonable accuracy, unlike the *Weekly Summary* produced by the police.

According to Kenneally, this led to the publication being quoted in foreign newspapers as well as the Irish press.

In 1920, Ireland was big news in many countries, and there was extensive coverage of events such as the Sack of Balbriggan in September and the Burning of Cork.

According to an article by Oliver O'Hanlon in the *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, the human interest story that attracted the most attention was the hunger strike of the Mayor of Cork, Terence MacSwiney.

In August, the Italian publication *Il Popolo d'Italia* carried the front page headline: "MacSwiney agonizza... Viva la repubblica Irlandese!" The article was signed by the paper's editor, the fascist

leader Benito Mussolini, who published a number of sympathetic pieces about the nationalist cause.

With Irish republican propaganda efforts proving so successful, it was hardly surprising that the authorities were keen to stop production of the *Irish Bulletin*. In March 1921, they found the offices, and captured the equipment and the mailing list.

The Crown propagandists again resorted to fake news by producing bogus editions of the *Irish Bulletin*, in an attempt to sow confusion in republican ranks and paint them in an unfavourable light.

In one of the fake reports, the paper says: "The destruction of no less than 35 ricks, stacks and outlying farm buildings by Sinn Féin in one day is indeed no mean achievement. All this seems to have been achieved without loss of human life, but there is no occasion for despondency."

Crude forgeries

The forgeries were usually crude, and the genuine *Irish Bulletin* quickly resumed publication, but even Éamon de Valera was taken in by one of the stories in the fake version.

Basing its story on a forged edition of the *Irish Bulletin*, the *Daily News* reported that the Dáil had "had convened a committee for negotiations with enemy countries". De Valera was irate and wrote to the genuine bulletin, saying the story should be retracted.

Some may have been duped initially, but according to Kenneally's account, in the longer term the forgeries again undermined the credibility of the Dublin Castle authorities.

While the IRA tended to steer clear of fake news, they had other effective propaganda techniques including showpiece funerals of republican martyrs with tricolour-draped coffins, marching volunteers and huge crowds.

They also pandered to the sense of adventure of reporters through cloak-and-dagger interviews with republican figures such as Michael Collins and Ernie O'Malley.

The republican side was effective at mounting spectacular publicity stunts such as the unmasking of an "English spy" Frank Hardy in front of a large group of journalists.

Hardy was a British intelligence officer, who was apparently given the job of trying to ensnare Michael Collins and capture him. The IRA got wind of his activities and lured him to a meeting of Sinn Féin leaders, and he was told he was meeting senior officers of the IRA's Dublin Brigade (but the invited guests were actually journalists).

After Hardy offered his services as a double agent for the IRA, Arthur Griffith told the assembled reporters that this man was a convicted criminal and fraudster, and warned him to leave the country immediately.

In a detailed report of the incident in the *Irish Independent* of September 17 1920, Arthur Griffith was quoted as saying there were "many of this man's type employed in the country as agents provocateurs. They tried to incite young men to acts of violence..."

It was another propaganda coup for Sinn Féin, gleefully reported in the press.

Question: What do you think of the times; will they be good?

Answer: I think they will.

Question: At what time?

Answer: When we have a general shower of Protestant and heretic blood.

The oath was quickly uncovered as a fake. Kenneally, who is the historian in residence at Westmeath County Council, says many of the newspapers at the time in Britain and Ireland — including the *Manchester Guardian* and *The Times* — quickly learned to treat official government reports with scepticism.

Kenneally says: "A lot of the journalists had covered World War I and there was a

sense that they had been caught up with the propaganda of the war and wanted to reclaim their profession."

As a result, journalists could be wary of government reports. The more scrupulous outlets tried to cover events on the ground themselves, sometimes at great personal risk.

The *Daily News* journalist Hugh Martin had to operate under an assumed name as he travelled around the country, reporting incidents in detail. In Tralee, Black and Tans told him that they would kill "that bastard Martin" if they ever came across him.

Newspapers such as the *Irish Independent*, the *Freeman's Journal*, and the *Cork*

