



Squad members: Mick McDonald, Tom Keogh, Vinny Byrne, Paddy Daly and Jim Slattery
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Records of a spymaster

Bloody Sunday and the Michael Collins Papers

Documents give vital insight into the intense intelligence war that underpinned the bloodshed, writes **Conor Mulvagh**

Michael Collins was the chief strategist behind the guerrilla tactics used against the British forces during the War of Independence.

By November 1920, he headed Britain's list of most wanted men and had a price of £10,000 on his head.

In the Michael Collins papers — housed in the Military Archives and recently digitised, Frank Thornton, his deputy assistant director of intelligence, gives an important and detailed account of the origins of IRA intelligence and the infamous 'Squad'. As Thornton recounts it:

'In July 1919, when I was in Longford, Mick Collins had made up his mind to start an Intelligence Organisation within our own ranks and, although he was still Director of Organisation, he got around him one or two people to form the nucleus of this organisation. His first selection was Liam Tobin, whom he appointed as Deputy D[irector]. [of] I[n]telligence'. Tom Cullen, who was Assistant Quartermaster General, was also acting in a dual capacity, and Tommy Gay, who was a librarian in Capel St, was one of his agents. Shortly after that, about the same month, the nucleus of the Squad was formed...'

On the morning of Sunday, November 21, 1920, the assassination of 14 British spy targets (later dubbed the Cairo Gang) by members of the Squad would unleash a retaliation at Croke Park, where British forces opened fire at a Gaelic football match between Dublin and Tipperary, killing 14 people including one player, and wounding 68 others.

Behind the identification and targeting of the British intelligence agents was a web of eavesdropping and spying, informing and counter-informing throughout the cafés and hotels of Dublin that has been brought to light through the papers in the Military Archives.

The papers themselves can be just as cryptic as their provenance. As is the case with intelligence documents from the other side of the conflict, codenames, initials, appointments and even agent numbers are used throughout the documents.

Frank Thornton, for example, was Agent 100. Information from one of his Bureau of Military History statements, given in 1951, helps to unlock some of the code in the papers.

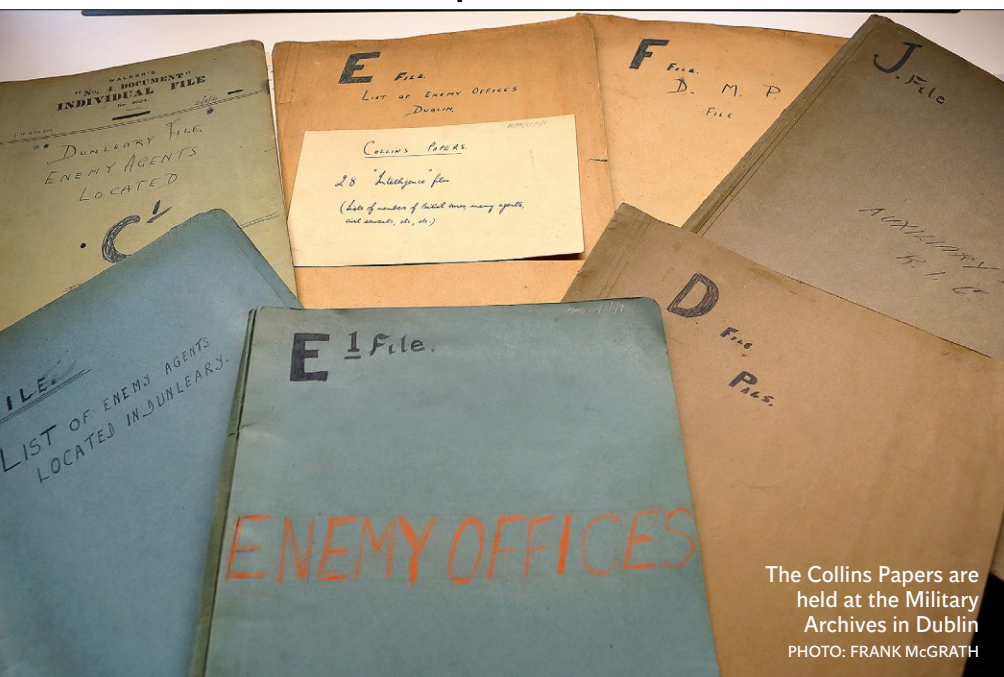
An intelligence file of 'Pals' lists coded IRA informants across Dublin city and beyond. 'MPs' were [Dublin] Metropolitan Police. A Truce-era list dated November 26, 1921 details at least 16 such constables and sergeants alongside their stations and the code numbers of the IRA agents who were handling these assets.

Thornton later explained how, at Donnybrook DMP station, now the site of Donnybrook Garda Station, the IRA had managed to turn four policemen: Constables Patrick Mannix, Maurice Ahern, Mick O'Dea and Paddy McEvoy. At a time of mass police resignations, some of these men had been convinced to stay on by Collins' agents because of their usefulness to the IRA. Constable Mannix would ultimately provide the names of several of the men who would be targeted on Bloody Sunday.

Café Cairo

The Café Cairo on Grafton Street and similar establishments played a prominent role





The Collins Papers are held at the Military Archives in Dublin
PHOTO: FRANK McGRATH

in the intelligence war in Dublin, as Collins's papers at Military Archives show.

The café had been a haunt for nationalists long before the outbreak of World War I. Kevin O'Sheil, then a judge of the Sinn Féin Courts, gives a vivid description of the recreational landscape of Dublin's republicans in 1920:

At that time, Dublin was a city of cafés, of which there were at least half-a-dozen in Grafton Street alone. One of those was the Café Cairo. There, at a corner table in the long room on the second floor, a literary group would gather at certain hours of the day and, over their cups of coffee, discuss the Olympians of Irish and contemporary literature... Across from the Cairo in Duke Street was the famous Bailey Tavern. This had been the favourite resort of the great Chief, Charles Stewart Parnell himself; and ... [Arthur] Griffith made the Bailey his own particular haunt...

Staff at the Café Cairo appear to have been working for both sides. IRA Agent 104 kept tabs on the café through a 'Miss Russ', according to Collins's 'Pals' intelligence file.

Meanwhile, after Bloody Sunday, Collins's Agent 104, possibly through 'Miss Russ', came to suspect that there was also a British informant at the café.

The café's orchestra was conducted by the son of the conductor of the Royal Irish Constabulary band stationed at the Depot in the Phoenix Park. The son, AP Rafter, was seen going to Dublin Castle on June 14, 1921 and was suspected of passing information. The IRA believed he had previously given information that resulted in a raid on the café but, on that occasion, Rafter had got the wrong man.

The IRA tracked Rafter's movements for a time and determined his home address. In the end, he appears not to have been hassled. When curfews lifted after the Truce, newspaper adverts show that his band had transitioned from the early evening sessions where the IRA had clocked him to a late-night dance set that began at 10.30pm, with carriages at 4am.

Collins' Squad used the Café Cairo as part of their own intelligence work. Squad member Vinny Byrne recounted how they had set up a meeting with a Sergeant Molloy of the British Army in March 1920 at the café to identify him to his would-be assassins. Byrne claimed Molloy was trying to infiltrate IRA general headquarters. Having identified their target at the Cairo the next night, March 23, the Squad followed Molloy down Wicklow Street and shot him dead on the corner of South William Street.

The Collins papers document a network of friendly informants in at least 34 hotels,

cafés and bars across Dublin. These informants were in the Café Cairo, the Gresham (where two British officers were executed on Bloody Sunday), the Central Hotel, and Jammet's and Kidd's Buffet on Nassau Street/Adam Court (Jammet's is now the Porterhouse, which backs on to Lost Lane nightclub, formerly Lillie's Bordello, and before that Kidd's). Kidd's and Jammet's appear to have been especially popular with suspected British agents in Dublin.

The IRA's informants at Jammet's were 'E Col' and 'M Bar' and at Kidd's was agent 117's 'pal', 'M Mar'. Thornton recalled:

At that time most of the British Secret Service Agents and British Intelligence Offices and Auxiliary Intelligence Officers met at a place which was well known in Dublin as Kidds Buffet, Kidds Back it was known in Grafton Street, and presently Jammets Back. Now here is where a lot of our information was picked up, and again it had to be picked up by taking a very big risk. Tom Cullen, Frank Saurin and myself were deputed to



Dr Conor Mulvagh at the Kevin Barry window in UCD. PHOTO: GERRY MOONEY

act with our two Secret Service friends who then frequented Kidds Buffet with the Secret Service. We were introduced in the ordinary way as touts and eventually became great friends of men like Major Bennett, Colonel Aimes [sic] and a number of other prominent Secret Service Officers. Naturally Collins and all his staff and the whole activities of the organisation were discussed there daily.

On one day, one of these officers turned suddenly to Tom Cullen and said, "Surely you fellows know these men Liam Tobin, Tom Cullen and Frank Thornton, these are Collins' three officers and if you can get these fellows we would locate Collins himself"

Needless to remark, if the ground opened and swallowed us we could not have been more surprised, and for the moment we felt that we had walked into a trap, but that wasn't so at all. It was a genuine query to the three Irishmen, whom they believed should know all about the particular fellows they mentioned. The fact remains that although they knew of the existence of the three of us and they knew of the existence of Collins, they actually had no photograph of any of us, and had a very poor description of either Collins or the three of us.

Neither Ames nor Bennett would ever realise how close they had come to their targets. Having previously sat opposite these two men eating fish and chips, Frank Saurin raided Ames and Bennett's lodgings at 38 Upper Mount Street on Bloody Sunday in his capacity as the party's intelligence officer. Having identified the men, Saurin was rifling through papers in Ames's room when the pair were executed down the hallway. Bennett was shot 10 times and Ames seven. Vinny Byrne was one of their assassins.

Thus from the cafés of Dublin city centre to the boarding houses in its leafy suburbs, the war of intelligence, infiltration and assassination became a defining element of the War of Independence in Dublin. While other operations were planned, nothing would surpass the violence and bloodshed of November 21, 1920. Its second act would play out in Croke Park. Reprisals had become commonplace, but Croke Park would occupy a poignant place both in military terms and national memory.

Bloody Sunday cannot be fully understood without understanding the intelligence work which underpinned it. Thanks to the Collins papers, we can delve into the networks and geography of the cryptic and ultimately bloody intelligence war that would define Dublin's War of Independence.

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What's in a name: the mysterious origins of the 'Cairo Gang'

Amateurs and historians alike should approach the history of intelligence and counterintelligence with caution.

One of the least understood aspects of the killings on Bloody Sunday revolves around the idea that the targets that day were known to their assassins as the 'Cairo Gang'. The historian David Grant has painstakingly tracked the use of this term and notes that it cannot be found before 1958.

The earliest use of the term in an Irish newspaper appears to be an article from the *Sunday Independent* on July 8, 1962 where PT Hughes, citing an unnamed source, asserted that "the British Cabinet... recruited top men from its secret service offices throughout the world and called them to a meeting in Cairo. There they spent weeks poring over maps of Dublin, studying photographs of the leaders of the IRA and listening to lectures on the tactics used by [Michael] Collins and his men to break down the Crown writ throughout Ireland."

The second apocryphal origin story for this 'Cairo Gang' comes from the existence of a prominent Dublin café of that name at 59 Grafton Street. The historian Charles Townshend explains how "the term... was later used to suggest that they were an organised group — while some took this to mean that they had formed in Cairo, a centre of British wartime intelligence, others said they frequented the Café Cairo, a well-known place on Grafton Street, one of Dublin's busiest (which would seem odd for secret agents)".

The fact remains that there is no reference to a 'Cairo Gang' anywhere in the vast Bureau of Military History collection at Military Archives nor in contemporary documents, including Michael Collins' intelligence files.

An unparalleled resource for the history of Ireland's revolutionary decade

The Military Archives of Ireland is the country's leading digitiser of records. The physical archive is housed in a new, purpose-built centre in Cathal Brugha Barracks in the Dublin suburb of Rathmines.

Online, militaryarchives.ie has become an unparalleled resource for the military history of Ireland's revolutionary decade and beyond. The Bureau of Military History series went online in 2012 and the Military Service Pensions Collection launched online in January 2014.

A more recent and less-explored collection is Michael Collins's papers. These chart his role as IRA director of operations, adjutant general and ultimately director of intelligence while he was Dáil minister for finance. The collection was opened to researchers for consultation at Military Archives in May 2016 and went online in September last year.

It gives unrivalled insight into the work of Michael Collins and his intelligence operatives throughout the War of Independence.

The collection's survival is remarkable in itself. Military Archives note how the papers had been buried for a time and some had "suffered considerably from damp and rot". Then they were retained by "a lady in Dublin", according to Dan Bryan, later director of Irish Army Intelligence (G2). This woman's identity is unknown, or at least is not listed in the collection. A possibility is Collins' typist throughout the period, Sinéad 'Jenny' Mason, who later married Thomas Derrig, the Fianna Fáil minister for education.