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The British Joint Intelligence Committee and Ireland,  
1965-1972

Eunan O'Halpin  
Centre for Contemporary Irish History  
Trinity College Dublin



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**The British Joint Intelligence Committee and Ireland, 1965-1972**

**Eunan O'Halpin**  
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This paper discusses the performance of the British Joint Intelligence Committee (JIC) in anticipating and assessing the dangers posed to British interests by instability in Ireland between 1965 and 1972, and in setting the parameters within which intelligence operations to counter terrorism were mounted. It concentrates on the performance of the central intelligence assessment machinery of British government, not on the politics of Anglo-Irish relations.<sup>1</sup> It explores the performance of the JIC, at least as revealed by the redacted material available in the public archives, in terms of intelligence organization and intelligence failure.

This may seem a minor technical exercise in the wider political context of the Northern Ireland crisis. Most academic writing on the Troubles remains highly Ulstercentric, if not downright provincial: there has been surprisingly little detailed exploration of the work of the Whitehall machinery of government and the impact which this had on political and security policy and operations.<sup>2</sup> This largely contrasts with broadly comparable crises in the 1950s and 1960s in countries such as Kenya, Malaya, Rhodesia and Aden, where scholarly study has mainly focused on British official records disclosing London's deliberations, responses and plans. While a great deal has been written about intelligence and counter terrorism in Northern Ireland, London's and specifically the JIC's role seldom gets any serious consideration.<sup>3</sup> This leaves a gap in understanding of the evolution of British policy

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<sup>1</sup> Eunan O'Halpin, 'Intelligence and Anglo-Irish relations, 1922-1973', in Eunan O'Halpin, Jane Ohlmeyer and Robert Armstrong (eds.), *Intelligence, statecraft and international power: historical studies xxxv* (Dublin, 2006), pp 132-50.

<sup>2</sup> A key exception to this generalization is Paul Arthur's *Special Relationships: Britain, Ireland and the Northern Ireland problem* (Belfast, 2000), but this focuses on the high politics of crisis management and peace seeking.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Bradley W.C. Bamford, 'The role and effectiveness of intelligence in Northern Ireland', *Intelligence and National Security* Vol. 20, No. 4, December 2005, 581-607, discusses neither London's nor Dublin's roles in intelligence activities at all, makes no mention of the weaknesses and strengths of Anglo-Irish security cooperation, and focuses entirely on operational intelligence within Northern Ireland. Such an approach, while it addresses the tactical fixations of the military mind, completely ignores the political dimensions of terrorism and the imperative to acquire political as well as operational intelligence.

on Northern Ireland. Furthermore, it obscures the point that Northern Ireland merits inclusion in the litany of British intelligence failures which have obsessed Whitehall and entertained the wider British public over the decades. In the 1950s and early 1960s, there was the treachery of Burgess, Maclean, and Philby, followed by that of Vassall and George Blake, and the drama of the Profumo affair with its security subtext. There were other shocks which never came to public view: the unexpected Sino-Soviet split of 1965 so rattled Whitehall that even the legendary secret intelligence service (MI6) spymaster Maurice Oldfield, said to be the inspiration for Le Carré's George Smiley, was initially inclined to view the development as a massive deception.<sup>4</sup> In 1968 the Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia occurred just after the JIC had dismissed the possibility of such action as remote. This embarrassment led to an overhaul of the central assessment machinery which served the JIC. In 1982 came the humiliation of the invasion of the Falklands Islands by Argentina, an event which the JIC had failed to anticipate, which led to a major inquiry under Lord Franks and a further shakeup of the JIC and of its assessment process. A year later the Thatcher government was surprised and embarrassed by the American invasion of Grenada, a member state of the British Commonwealth. The greatest disaster to befall the British intelligence system was a more recent one: the JIC's erroneous and ill-founded conclusion in 2002 that Iraq did possess some weapons of mass destruction and was in the process of building up its capacity in defiance of UN resolutions and in spite of the work done by UN weapons inspectors in the 1990s. The process by which the JIC was used to make the case for war against Iraq has been the subject of two powerful inquiries – headed respectively by Lord Hutton and Lord Butler – and of considerable scholarly analysis.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Information from the late Nigel Clive, who served in MI6 from 1941 to 1973, Cambridge, 1990. When Clive queried a paper which Oldfield had prepared supporting the deception theory, Oldfield eventually replied "Fuck off" but did not circulate the document. In his obituary of Nigel Clive in *The Independent*, 9 May 2001, Lord Annan indicated that Oldfield resented Clive's intervention and later took revenge.

<sup>5</sup> *Falklands Islands Review: Report of a committee of Privy Counsellors* [the Franks report] (London, 1983); Alex Danchev, 'The reckoning: official inquiries and the Iraq war', *Intelligence and National Security* vol. 19, no. 3, Autumn 2004, 436-66; Eunan O'Halpin, 'British intelligence and the case for confronting Iraq: evidence from the Butler and Hutton reports', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* vol. 16 (2005),

The apparent manipulation of the JIC in 2002 has been denounced not only by the *Guardian* and other organs of liberal and left wing opinion, but by former Whitehall insiders who rail against the politicization and corruption of the intelligence assessment process.<sup>6</sup> Sir Michael Quinlan, a former head of the Ministry of Defence, repeatedly used the term ‘criminal’ in a BBC interview to describe the decision to go to war.<sup>7</sup> His criticisms arose not only from the substantive decision, but from what he saw as the damaging way in which it was reached. The JIC had been lured away from dispassionate, cerebral analysis and turned into a pliant lapdog, telling the government – and, uniquely, in 2002 also briefing the British public through a published assessment – what the war party within the cabinet wanted to hear rather than what the available intelligence supported.

It would be difficult to overstress the centrality of intelligence assessment in the British policy system in the decades since the Second World War. The JIC sits at the apex of the British intelligence system; equally significantly, it is located within the Cabinet Office. By the 1960s it had acquired a quasi-judicial status in Whitehall: it was taken to be dispassionate, cerebral, and non-partisan, favouring the interests or arguments of no individual agency or department, fearlessly putting forward independent assessments of threats to and opportunities for Britain based on all available intelligence from whatever source. It was precisely the JIC’s high standing in Whitehall and Westminster which led the Blair government to pressure it to produce an assessment on Iraq for public consumption in 2002. The intention was to convey to informed opinion makers and observers the reality of the threat from Iraq’s weapons and ambitions. The JIC model of collective independent assessment has been followed in some other states – one former secretary humorously termed it one of Britain’s most successful postwar exports – and it certainly has foreign admirers: Admiral Pierre Lacoste, who headed the French foreign intelligence service DGSE in the early 1980s, publicly contrasted the integrated character of British intelligence

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89-102; Yee-Kuang Heng, ‘The Iraq crisis: intelligence driven or risk driven?’, in O’Halpin, Ohlmeyer and Armstrong (eds.), *Intelligence, statecraft and international affairs*, pp. 222-34 .

<sup>6</sup> Carne Ross, ‘War stories’, *The Financial Times*, 29 Jan. 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Speaking on BBC World’s *Hardtalk*, 29 August 2006.

assessment with the chaotic and anarchic world of French intelligence gathering and analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Academic commentary on intelligence and counter-terrorism relating to the Northern Ireland crisis has focused largely on operational aspects. Such an approach is flawed in that it takes no account of the involvement of the machinery of intelligence assessment in the Cabinet Office. Since the JIC was ultimately responsible for integrated, dispassionate intelligence assessments provided to ministers and departments throughout Whitehall, then it follows that its role in the evolution of British policy on Northern Ireland, beset by dismal failures and a succession of ghastly surprises between 1968 and the introduction of direct rule in March 1972, merits study. Yet most writing on the Northern Ireland crisis and British policy making, most recently Gary McGladdery's interesting study of the IRA bombing campaigns in Britain, make no mention at all of how such activity was analysed and interpreted in Whitehall, or by whom.<sup>9</sup> It was precisely the task of the JIC, and the Cabinet Office's assessment staff who serviced it, to pull together all the different strands of intelligence available from all the different agencies. Consequently the JIC's role requires consideration.

The JIC of the 1960s was largely but not exclusively focused on the threat from the Soviet Union and its allies. It had a powerful champion in Sir Burke Trend, the cabinet secretary from 1962 to 1973, who supported the expansion of its remit. In April 1968 the JIC was split into two committees, one (A) focusing as hitherto on defence and security matters, and the other (B) on economic affairs. This reflected an expectation in Whitehall that the intelligence agencies could play a leading role across the gamut of policy (for example, the Bank of England was represented on JIC (B)). In point of fact the experiment was not a great success and was discontinued in 1974 – a JIC insider of the period described it as essentially an exercise in 'window dressing'. The assessments staff which serviced the current intelligence groups reporting to the JIC was also strengthened, with all its officials being attached to the Cabinet Office. Trend also secured the creation of a post of Coordinator of

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<sup>8</sup> Both observations were offered at meetings of the British Study Group on Intelligence in London in 1996.

<sup>9</sup> Gary McGladdery, *The Provisional IRA in England: the bombing campaign 1973-1997* (Dublin, 2006).



Intelligence in the Cabinet Office.<sup>10</sup> The first occupant was Sir Dick White, who had been head successively of the security service MI5 (1953-6) and the secret intelligence service MI6 or SIS (1956-68). White, whose school pupil Trend had been in the 1930s, was trusted implicitly across most of Whitehall (Sir Denis Greenhill, permanent under secretary at the Foreign Office from 1969 to 1973, was also a lifelong friend with considerable knowledge of intelligence matters – he declined the headship of MI6 in 1968). In reality, White was less an intelligence overlord than appointment as coordinator suggested: he was rather worn out, he lived about two hours train journey from London, and he held the job on more or less a part-time basis. His appointment coincided with a beefing up of the central intelligence assessment machinery at Trend's behest. Successive JIC secretaries between 1968 and 1974 recall how interested Trend was in their work, and how whenever possible he would invite them for an evening drink.<sup>11</sup>

A good deal of JIC material is now available covering the years from 1965, when Ireland briefly popped up on Whitehall's radar because of the impending 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1916 Rising, to 1975. Included in such material are the minutes of the weekly JIC meetings, although these are subject to some redactions. A lot of material relating to Northern Ireland is still withheld, most significantly the records of working groups and current intelligence groups reporting to the full JIC. Former JIC secretaries have been seen sitting forlornly in the reading room at the National Archives in Kew, bemused that as members of the public they could not get access to papers which they had once controlled. CAB190, which contains an eclectic collection of working group papers, is now partly open – anyone interested can study 'West Malaysia: gaps in our intelligence', at CAB190/6 - but almost all material with an Irish dimension remains closed. The overall position as regards access to JIC records in the autumn of 2006 is as follows (official records are now released on a rolling basis, instead of holding back all material for the start of the year, so it is important frequently to check the National Archives catalogue):

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<sup>10</sup> John W. Young, 'The Wilson government's reform of intelligence coordination, 1967-68', *Intelligence and National Security* vol. 16 (Summer 2001), 133-51.

<sup>11</sup> One of these, Michael Herman, has written a commanding reflective account of the higher organization of modern British intelligence, *Intelligence power in peace and war* (Cambridge, 1996).

**Availability of Joint Intelligence Committee records in the National Archives of  
England and Wales in December 2006**

<b>Series</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Open/Closed</b>
CAB159	JIC minutes, 1946-69	Open, with redactions
CAB185	JIC (A) minutes, 1969-75	Open, with redactions
CAB186	JIC memoranda, 1969-76	Open unless stated
CAB187	JIC secretariat minutes, 1969-74	Closed
CAB188	JIC (B) minutes, 1968-74	Open, with redactions
CAB189	Special assessments, 1966-74	Closed
CAB190	Minutes of working groups, 1969-75	Open unless stated

*The JIC and Ireland, 1965-69*

Anglo-Irish cooperation on intelligence and security issues long predated the outbreak of the Northern troubles, but it was always contingent on circumstances, was highly secret, and was left to a few police, military and security officials in Dublin, in Belfast and in London. In the immediate post war years, British officials fretted that the very close understanding developed with the Irish military intelligence service G2 on problems of espionage might not survive should partition again become an issue in Anglo-Irish relations. When Ireland left the Commonwealth in 1949, the War Office Director of Military Intelligence suggested that the JIC should ‘endeavour to obtain a ministerial ruling that Ireland should be treated as an intelligence target’, a suggestion which one MI5 officer dismissed as ‘exceptionally silly’.<sup>12</sup> An RUC officer who had dealt with the Garda since 1940 reported that he still had ‘an effective unofficial liaison on police matters’, although a year later he expressed feared that this would not survive his retirement because his Garda contact ‘had no real confidence’ in his designated successor.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the fate of the RUC/Garda link, liaison with G2, which would ‘in war time’ be ‘of paramount importance’, remained good ‘even in matters affecting the IRA’.<sup>14</sup> After a couple of IRA crossborder raids in 1955, the British ambassador in Dublin was instructed to bring up the question of increased and systematic intelligence cooperation between the Irish and British security forces in order to thwart IRA cross-

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<sup>12</sup> Confidential annex to JIC minutes, 17 June 1950, and minute by Haldane Porter, 16 June 1950, TNA, KV4/281.

<sup>13</sup> Minute by Sherr (MI5), 21 Apr. 1949, TNA, KV4/281.

<sup>14</sup> Minute by Guy Liddell (deputy head of MI5), 24 Mar. 1952, TNA, KV4/281.

border activities. He was politely rebuffed by Frederick Boland, the secretary of the Department of External Affairs and a veteran of Anglo-Irish security cooperation during the Second World War, who responded that 'this liaison would continue to be of the personal and informal character that he thought at present existed between individuals in the two Police forces and that the more informal it was and the less that was known about it the better'.<sup>15</sup>

The JIC's anxieties about the fiftieth anniversary of the 1916 Rising have been discussed in some detail elsewhere.<sup>16</sup> After a warning from the prime minister of Northern Ireland to the home secretary in December 1965 that the IRA were running a large number of training camps throughout Ireland in advance of operations planned to coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Rising, elaborate arrangements to deal with possible trouble in the United Kingdom were personally overseen by Sir Burke Trend, a reflection of the apprehension felt in London. The JIC discussed Ireland on no less than nine occasions in the months leading up to Easter Sunday, noting, appropriately enough on St Patrick's Day, that 'little of value' had emerged from a meeting in Dublin between the RUC 'and the republican Guard'. As the anniversary date drew near, the RUC stated that the IRA planned assassinations rather than attacks on buildings or other symbolic gestures: 'if the threat materialized, intelligence relating to specific targets for attack could only be obtained at short notice owing to the IRA practice of making last minute decisions', an indication that the police had well placed informers within the northern IRA.<sup>17</sup> As far as the JIC was concerned, once the Rising commemorations and the Orange marching season had concluded relatively peacefully, there was no further need to take any interest in Northern Ireland. Both MI5 and the RUC were complimented for the careful preparations which they had made to prevent any serious outbreak of violence: the JIC believed that heightened security had been the reason why the anniversary passed peacefully in the province, whereas the Irish Department of Justice had earlier said that the IRA had no plans for sustained activity in Northern Ireland beyond commemorative parades, an assessment which was borne out by events (the main gap in

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Chris Reeves, "Let us stand by our friends": British policy towards Ireland, 1949-59', *Irish Studies in International Affairs* vol. 11 (2000), 101; Eunan O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: the Irish state and its enemies since 1922* (Oxford, 1999), p. 244.

<sup>16</sup> O'Halpin, 'Intelligence and Anglo-Irish relations', pp. 138-9.

<sup>17</sup> JIC minutes, 17 and 3 Mar. 1966, TNA, CAB159/45.

Garda intelligence on the IRA was not on the deliberations and decisions of its higher echelons, but on the activities of splinter groups such as that which blew up Nelson's Pillar in Dublin's O'Connell Street in March 1966).<sup>18</sup> Although the mid-1960s saw the first stirrings of what became the civil rights movement in Northern Ireland, the JIC did not concern itself with political and social conditions within Northern Ireland which might conduce to civil unrest in the future. It heard nothing, or at any rate took no heed of anything it did hear, about any emerging Protestant militant threat to the peace and relative prosperity of Northern Ireland, and Irish affairs disappeared from its agenda. Margaret O'Callaghan and Catherine O'Donnell have recently argued that the emergence of 'the Paisleyite movement' in 1966 was a key moment in the growth of instability of the Northern Ireland state, because it indicated 'a growing level of resistance and unease at O'Neill's [reformist] policies, which were perceived as liberal and in many senses as threatening to Protestantism and to Northern Ireland in general'.<sup>19</sup> That is arguably an overstatement, but the key point here is that Stormont evidently kept its worries about loyalist paramilitarism to itself.

In 1967 a JIC working group on 'intelligence priorities', chaired by Christopher Ewart Biggs, himself destined for murder in 1976 just weeks after he arrived in Dublin as British ambassador, recommended that, while the Soviet Union and its satellites remained the number one target, increased attention should be paid to China and to Western Europe. The latter reflected a growing interest in securing economic and political intelligence from Britain's friends as well as from her enemies.<sup>20</sup> There was no mention of Irish matters. Amongst issues solemnly considered by the JIC during the first half of the succeeding year was the potential threat from the 'Black Power' movement if it spread from the United States; of the more relevant problems of orange or green power there was nothing.<sup>21</sup>

Events in Derry in October 1968 did catch the eye of the JIC. As the political turmoil in Northern Ireland increased, centring largely around civil rights agitation and loyalist reaction

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<sup>18</sup> O'Halpin, 'Intelligence and Anglo-Irish relations', p. 138.

<sup>19</sup> Margaret O'Callaghan and Catherine O'Donnell, 'The Northern Ireland government, the "Paisleyite Movement" and Ulster unionism in 1966', *Irish Political Studies* vol. 21, no. 2, June 2006, 203-23.

<sup>20</sup> JIC (67) 27, 29 June 1967, TNA, CAB159/47.

<sup>21</sup> JIC minutes, 16 Feb. 1968, TNA, CAB159/48.

to it, the JIC for the first time established an 'Ulster Working Group', a recognition that there was a serious and probably ongoing crisis in Northern Ireland which might well oblige London to intervene directly. On a JIC initiative, and in the face of MI5 disapproval, the head of RUC Special Branch was coopted to this body. On 5 June 1969, MI5 told the JIC that the Ulster Working Group reported that 'further incidents need not be expected until the Civil Rights Association's ultimatum .. expired on 28<sup>th</sup> June', but that information had since been received that attempts might be made to block an Orange march 'from crossing a bridge near Londonderry. Since neither the marchers nor the Civil Rights demonstrators were expected to be very numerous, it was assessed' that the RUC would be well capable of dealing with any disorder.<sup>22</sup> A month later the JIC heard of ongoing efforts aimed at 'improving intelligence assessments and providing intelligence coverage of the Ulster situation'.<sup>23</sup> A draft report on these matters was approved for presentation to the home secretary a month later, evidence that Northern Ireland had finally registered as an ongoing issue.<sup>24</sup> Northern Ireland got a further mention in the course of a lengthy assessment of the threat to the United Kingdom in the event of a major confrontation with the Soviet Union. After listing a myriad of subversive threats including that from Welsh and Scots nationalists and various Trotskyite and other fringe groups, Northern Ireland was discussed:

The potential for dis-order in Northern Ireland comes from three distinct groups: the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Civil Rights Movement, and the Paisleyites. IRA strength in Northern Ireland is currently estimated at 500 and no figure is available for the strength in Eire. Morale is believed to be good, finance is weak, and arms and ammunition are in short supply. Since 1966 the IRA, largely under Communist influence, have adopted a programme of semi-constitutional activity designed to create a political situation favourable to a military takeover. More recently this has been extended to include the penetration of the Civil Rights Movement in the North which is also subject to increasing Trotskyite influence ..

Peace in Northern Ireland at present largely depends on the ability of the IRA leadership to maintain its present policy of peaceful penetration and on this issue it is

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<sup>22</sup> Annex to JIC minutes, 5 June 1969, TNA, CAB 185/1.

<sup>23</sup> Annex to JIC minutes, 10 July 1969, TNA, CAB185/1.

<sup>24</sup> JIC minutes, 17 July 1969, TNA, CAB185/1.

assailed from several directions. On the one hand it is under pressure from militant elements .. who find it hard to abandon the gun as a means of political argument and on the other it sees the potentially violent reaction of the ultra Protestants in the shape of the Paisleyites. To this it finds it difficult not to respond in kind. In the circumstances now envisaged it is possible that these pressures would increase since for ideological reasons the Communist element in the IRA might be tempted to encourage it to resume its traditionally violent role for disruptive purposes.<sup>25</sup>

This was not too wide of the mark, although like the JIC the IRA was rather slow to realize the extent of the emerging crisis in Northern Ireland. As the first signs of serious trouble became visible in the summer of 1968, the IRA leadership in Dublin was still contemplating armed action against symbols of imperialism in support of the Vietnamese people. This internationalist dimension of armed struggle was soon to be put aside (other than for purposes of securing weapons, training and other support from Cuba and from Eastern bloc states), as the republican movement concentrated its energies on the question of how to exploit civil unrest and sectarian tension in Northern Ireland for traditional anti-partitionist ends.

By the summer of 1969, Northern Ireland featured fairly regularly in JIC business. In May the chief of the army general staff complained that the RUC 'is jealous of its independence .. the Minister for Home Affairs .. is being told only what the Inspector General deems it fit that he should hear', a judgement duly reported to prime minister Harold Wilson.<sup>26</sup> It was plain that London needed to know more about what was happening and what was likely to happen. In July the Home Office circulated a report to the JIC on 'on the progress made in improving intelligence assessments and providing intelligence coverage of the Ulster situation'. The JIC also reflected on emerging difficulties and friction between the RUC, anxious lest any other government agency collect and forward intelligence to London independently of it, and MI5 and the army –<sup>27</sup> For the next six months this became a rolling theme in JIC business, and on 18 September the committee met with the British ambassador

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<sup>25</sup> JIC memorandum, 16 June 1969, TNA, CAB 186/3.

<sup>26</sup> Report by chief of the general staff on his visit to Northern Ireland, and Healy (defence secretary) to Wilson, both 19 May 1969, TNA, CJ3/55.

<sup>27</sup> Annexes to JIC meetings, 10 and 17 July, and memorandum for Sir Philip Allen (Home Office), 31 July 1969, TNA, CAB185/1 and CJ3/55.

in Dublin, Sir Andrew Gilchrist.<sup>28</sup> Gilchrist, a man with considerable experience of political turmoil acquired in the Far East as a soldier and diplomat, portrayed Irish policy towards the IRA and other republican groups as one of deliberate laxity, arising in part from the impossibility of securing convictions for offences through the ordinary court system. While the Irish government was contemplating the reintroduction of internment,

any steps which they might have taken had been pre-empted by the growth of anti-British feeling over Northern Ireland, which had increased sympathy for the IRA cause within the Republic and would have made any drastic Government action against the IRA politically unacceptable. The Irish Government might feel able to take effective action .. in the future only after a period of calm in the North, in which the situation was acceptable to Catholic leaders there and to opinion in the South; and provided that the Government of the Irish Republic were in a position to exert some influence over affairs in the North – they did not, however, take any responsibility for Northern Ireland affairs.

The JIC was not convinced by Gilchrist's analysis. It rejected his linkage of Dublin's reluctance to take drastic measures against the republican movement, to public feeling about the treatment of the nationalist minority in Northern Ireland. In 1969, this elementary conjuncture was too radical for the JIC to swallow; by 1971 its assessment staff had reached much the same conclusion, i.e. that the structural defects of the Northern Ireland state, and the inability of the Northern government to introduce and see through meaningful reform without the most intense pressure from London, were major contributory factors to the growth of instability and political violence. In thanking Gilchrist, the JIC agreed that in future he should receive copies of assessments on Northern Ireland. It was also suggested that 'journalist sources' should be tapped for information, and, in an aside worthy of Myles na gCopaleen, that 'there was much information available in public houses where a great deal of unguarded conversation took place'.<sup>29</sup> A fortnight later it was agreed that 'the provision of a weekly assessment' from the newly appointed director of intelligence in Northern Ireland

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<sup>28</sup> JIC minutes, 11 Sept. 1969, TNA, CAB185/2.

<sup>29</sup> Annex to JIC minutes, 18 Sept. 1969, TNA, CAB185/2. For a flavour of the musings of Myles na gCopaleen (Flann O'Brien, pseudonym of Brian O'Nolan) see Flann O'Brien, *The Best of Myles* (1<sup>st</sup> ed., New York, 1968).

‘was an essential contribution to the JIC machinery’, and steps were also taken to investigate the installation of ‘secure speech lines’ between Belfast and London, although ‘it was still too early to assess the need for the costly, long term installation’ of such equipment. Northern Ireland might yet quieten down. A week afterwards, the Ulster Working Group was succeeded by an Ulster Current Intelligence Group, and it was agreed that the assessment staff should take over responsibility for producing regular assessments instead of relying on sporadic and belated bulletins from Belfast. These developments represented recognition that Northern Ireland was liable to be a long term problem. Additional measures in the autumn saw the further embedding of Northern Ireland in the regular business of the JIC.<sup>30</sup> Throughout 1970 it was a standard item on the JIC’s agenda, although redactions in the records generally make it impossible to say what was discussed, or to chart the development of the committee’s thinking. From other records, it also is clear that the Dublin embassy, the Foreign Office and the cabinet secretariat were becoming increasingly concerned with the wider political and diplomatic ramifications of the growing crisis.<sup>31</sup> The limited amount of JIC material now available suggests that the committee still focused largely on the particulars of security organization and operations, rather than attempting to assess the wider political and diplomatic landscape. In April the committee found the ‘relatively high proportion of Catholic Volunteers’ for the newly formed UDR (Ulster Defence Regiment) ‘a good omen’, and expressed surprise that ‘it was the Catholics rather than the Protestants’ who had been the instigators of riots at Easter, an indication that London still saw the nationalist minority primarily as the victims of political violence.<sup>32</sup> The Provisional IRA were soon to change that perception. In May the concern of the chief of the general staff about delays in the beefing up of the RUC Special Branch was duly noted for action, and towards the end of June the JIC observed that Britain was faced with ‘a complex but unsatisfactory situation’.<sup>33</sup> References to Northern Ireland in the JIC records for the latter half of 1970 have been more heavily redacted, but one very significant document has survived: on 31 December the committee discussed the production of ‘a longer term assessment to cover the period up to

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<sup>30</sup> JIC minutes, 2, 9, 16 and 30 Oct., 6 and 13 Nov. , TNA, CAB185/9. The Director of Intelligence seems to have been an army post.

<sup>31</sup> O’Halpin, ‘Intelligence and Anglo-Irish relations’, pp 140-6.

<sup>32</sup> JIC meeting, 3 Apr. 1970, TNA, CAB185/3.

<sup>33</sup> JIC minutes, 7 and 14 May and 25 June 1970, TNA, CAB185/3.



the end of 1972' for a ministerial working group. Members felt the timescale was appropriate, as

a look any further ahead would founder on the political imponderables arising out of the need for elections in Northern Ireland before February 1974 .. The main point made in the discussion was that the long-term assessment would require important political judgements and would need to be drafted in London.<sup>34</sup>

This was the first occasion on which the JIC identified the need to take a longer term view of the future in Northern Ireland embracing political factors. A paper on these lines had almost reached completion, after much agonized drafting and redrafting over the course of a full year, when Bloody Sunday definitively altered the political landscape.<sup>35</sup> On 25 February 1971 the committee considered a paper, unfortunately still classified, on 'the situation in Northern Ireland and the Republic', the first reference traced to a JIC assessment touching on independent Ireland.<sup>36</sup> In March Dick White reported on a visit to Northern Ireland. He spoke positively of developments in the RUC Special Branch, whose 'digestive capacity' had been increased: 'there was not an intelligence crisis', and 'it was important to build up the confidence of the Branch and to move ahead through persuasion rather than coercion'.<sup>37</sup> In June there were calls for more systematic reportage of arms seizures, and in July the first reference to Anglo-Irish security cooperation: MI5's director general said that recently 'the Irish prime minister [Jack Lynch] had given instructions that the IRA were to be harassed and kept on the run'. The introduction of joint Irish army/Garda patrols along the border had elicited a good deal of local information, but 'investigation had not so far produced any results; also, in the very few cases that it has been possible to supply the [Irish] Army with intelligence leads, their investigation had been similarly unsuccessful'. The chairman thought it 'most useful to have this view on the Irish Army view on intelligence collaboration and of Irish Army activities in the Border area'. The committee also fretted about the assertion of Air Marshall Sir Harold Maguire, himself an Irishman and a graduate of Trinity College Dublin, that TV crews were 'inciting incidents .. for the purpose of providing newsworthy

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<sup>34</sup> JIC minutes, 31 Dec. 1970, TNA, CAB185/4.

<sup>35</sup> JIC minutes, 14 Jan. 1971, TNA, CAB185/45.

<sup>36</sup> JIC minutes, 25 Feb. 1971, TNA, CAB185/5.

<sup>37</sup> JIC minutes, 25 Mar. 1971, TNA, CAB185/5.

pictorial coverage'. The media again featured as villains a month later for their 'frequently sensational and misleading nature on events in Northern Ireland', and in mid-August the committee discussed an assessment to the end of the year: this could not include anything on the economic outlook, but should consider 'the future effectiveness of the security forces, and .. the sort of political reforms that the Protestants might accept' (this reflection came just a week after the introduction of internment in Northern Ireland, a development on which the available JIC records are silent but which must have been the subject of considerable deliberation).<sup>38</sup>

The JIC's role was not merely to produce judicious assessments, but also to set parameters for intelligence operations. The available records cast little light on such matters, but there is one issue on which evidence is available of the JIC's role. In 1965, partly in response to negative publicity and to investigations by international human rights organizations, the JIC had wrestled with the question of what were and what were not legitimate interrogation techniques for detained terrorist suspects. After much deliberation, it ratified guidelines which were followed by British forces during the nationalist disturbances in Aden. These emphasized that interrogation of suspects required 'a psychological attack .. torture and physical cruelty of all kinds are professionally unrewarding since a suspect so treated may be persuaded to talk, but not to tell the truth'. What was required was a restrained, calibrated approach: 'any detainee therefore must be properly handled and treated from the moment of his arrest'. It endorsed a range of techniques designed to break a detainee's will to resist interrogation which in Whitehall's view fell short of physical abuse. In 1966 Harold Maguire, angered at criticism of the use of these methods in Aden, had complained of

the successful campaign conducted by the Swedish Section of Amnesty International to blacken the reputation of our interrogation organization in Aden. The matter reflected on the Ministry of Defence as the Army was providing a large proportion of the interrogators .. It was for consideration what could be done to refute more strongly the calumnies currently being put about.

The Amnesty campaign had 'resulted in a stiffening of attitude amongst those under interrogation in Aden', and it was for consideration whether it was time to 'expose the connection' between the Amnesty rapporteur and an insurgent group, as 'even friendly Arab

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<sup>38</sup> JIC minutes, 10 June, 15 July, 12 and 19 Aug. 1971, TNA, CAB185/6.

countries were getting the wrong impression'. In fact, Maguire argued, all interrogations had been carried out in line with those 'laid down in JIC(65) 16'. The regulations were nevertheless tightened up in 1967 to ensure medical oversight after review by a senior barrister.<sup>39</sup> The techniques were used on fourteen selected detainees in Northern Ireland in the weeks after the introduction of internment in August 1971, when it 'was operationally necessary' to obtain information 'as rapidly as possible in the interest of saving lives, while at the same time providing the internees with the necessary security for their own persons and identities'. Used on citizens of the United Kingdom detained just three hundred miles from Whitehall rather than nameless locals in the remote fastnesses of a dissolving empire, the techniques provoked a firestorm of criticism which led to the establishment of an inquiry headed by Sir Edmund Compton. The episode proved an acute embarrassment to Britain internationally, culminating in a judgment of the European Court of Human Rights that some of them constituted 'inhuman and degrading treatment' (although not outright torture). The JIC, taken by surprise by the controversy, saw things rather differently: Dick White recommended continuation of the use of 'hooding', 'white noise' and 'wall standing .. solely for the following specific purposes': to 'protect the secrecy of the location of the special interrogation centre; to protect the identities of those selected for protracted interrogation', a surprising humane twist, and to protect guards and interrogators from the prisoners; 'white noise' remained necessary 'to protect absolute secrecy over the questioning of particular suspects and to prevent intercommunication between detainees'; and 'wall standing' to a maximum of two hours, and subject to medical advice, could be continued.<sup>40</sup> The 'controversial techniques' were nevertheless set aside in their entirety after the publication of the conclusions of the Compton inquiry. Dismissed by nationalists as a whitewash, prime minister Heath damned it for the opposite reason as 'one of the most unbalanced, ill-judged reports I have ever read. It is astonishing that men of such experience should have got themselves so lost in the trees, or indeed the undergrowth, that they are

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<sup>39</sup> JIC meeting, 20 Oct. 1966, TNA, CAB159/46. Sir Harold Maguire (1912-2000) was from County Clare. JIC (65) 15, 17 Feb. 1965, note by JIC secretary, 10 Feb. 1967, and note of prime minister's talk with opposition leaders, 18 Oct. 1971, TNA, PREM15/485; Georgina Sinclair, *At the end of the line: Colonial policing and the imperial endgame 1945-80* (Manchester, 2006), p. 130.

<sup>40</sup> Undated [late Oct. 1971] memorandum by White, TNA, PREM15/485.

proved quite incapable of seeing the wood'.<sup>41</sup> The same words might equally have been applied to the JIC and particularly Sir Dick White, a decent and intelligent man but one out of touch with contemporary opinion about acceptable treatment of unconvicted suspects.

In January 1970 the director general of MI5 visited Northern Ireland to discuss future security and intelligence arrangements, a clear signal that London was now taking the Northern Ireland problem seriously.<sup>42</sup> The available JIC records do not say much about the detailed outcome of those discussions, although intelligence arrangements remained problematic due to the reluctance of the RUC and the British army to share material systematically and comprehensively: two years later the departing JIC secretary reported that 'since all action has to be achieved by persuasion rather than by direct intervention, the rate of progress remains regrettably slow in some fields'.<sup>43</sup> The saga of inadequate police army cooperation in Northern Ireland was to continue for at least another decade.

The available JIC records give no indication of what the committee made of the sporadic loyalist campaign of cross-border bombings, which began in 1970. On 17 May 1974 attacks in Monaghan and Dublin killed thirty three people, the highest number of fatalities in a single day arising from the Northern Ireland troubles. The possibility of security force collusion clearly arose in some of these cases. Did the JIC analyse such loyalist attacks across the Irish border, and discuss the efforts and achievements of the security forces in thwarting these? What were its ruminations on the likelihood of collusion between the security forces, particularly the UDR, and loyalist paramilitaries (by September 1975 the army's view was that 'the UDR were heavily infiltrated by extremist Protestants')?<sup>44</sup> What were the policy parameters within which the army's intelligence cadres in Northern Ireland were charged to contribute to the defeat of terrorism, for example in terms of penetration of republican and loyalist paramilitary groups, and cross-border surveillance operations against the IRA (at the time the British army operated surveillance teams in East Germany, and it defies belief that

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<sup>41</sup> Gainsborough (Ministry of Defence) to Sir Dick White (Intelligence Coordinator, Cabinet Office), 25 Oct. 1971; minute by JIC secretary, 10 Feb. 1967, noting adoption of a QC's recommendations re prisoners' access to medical attention; Heath to Trend, 8 Nov. 1971, TNA, PREM15/485.

<sup>42</sup> JIC minutes, 8 Jan. 1970, TNA, CAB185/3.

<sup>43</sup> Report by [redacted], 12 Jan., with Trend to Gregson (private secretary to the prime minister), 21 Jan. 1972, TNA, PREM15/998

<sup>44</sup> Wright (Prime Minister's Office) to Jordan (Northern Ireland Office), 11 Sept. 1975, Margaret Thatcher Foundation, <http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/29D303F6511D439598762543AD6E880E.pdf>

they would not have crossed the open Irish border in order to collect intelligence, something which the arrest of two groups of armed British SAS soldiers in plain clothes in Louth in 1976 seems to bear out)?<sup>45</sup> Anecdotal evidence also suggests that the concept of a surgical strike to remove the supposed crossborder king pins of the IRA found some currency in military thinking in the early years of the Troubles, as did tactics adopted in other conflicts such as boobytrapping of terrorist arms caches.<sup>46</sup> It is clear that by the mid-1970s the techniques and parameters of intelligence collection and counter-terrorist operations were not determined at the local, tactical level, but by reference to policy laid down from on high. It is clear too that from late 1969 the JIC paid increased attention to current and possible future developments in Northern Ireland. Until more of its records are released we can only make guesses about its role in the overall direction of the intelligence effort in the conflict.

A parallel question arises: at what point, if ever, did the JIC endorse intelligence operations against the Irish state, weighing up the possible benefits and costs of spying on an administration which the British government was attempting to coax into a far firmer line against the IRA? Did any of the intelligence agencies seek approval, as the War Office had proposed in 1949, to treat Ireland as an intelligence target? In 1972 a sergeant in the Garda security section was arrested while passing information to a man who claimed he was working for the British Ministry of Defence. This discovery, which caused acute embarrassment to the Irish government because it bore out allegations that Britain was spying in Ireland, apparently arose from a meeting at which Edward Heath had passed the taoiseach Jack Lynch a dossier on IRA suspects believed to be operating in border areas. As the Irish foreign minister Patrick Hillery explained in terms of measured fury to the British ambassador, information provided by London had hitherto

frequently been of low quality, but had suddenly shown such a marked improvement that it could only have come from one source and this had put their security service on the trail .. Dr Hillery added that politically Mr Lynch was now out on a limb. The

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<sup>45</sup> Garret FitzGerald, *All in a Life: an Autobiography* (Dublin, 1991), 281.

<sup>46</sup> In other terrorist campaigns with a cross-border dimension this was a successful tactic. See the recent recollection of a Malayan police officer, Leon Comber, in 'The Malaysian Special Branch on the Malayan-Thai Frontier during the Malayan Emergency (1948-60)', *Intelligence and National Security* vol. 21, no. 1, February 2006, 77-99.

IRA, who were practically broken, would now take on a new lease of life and quote we are right back to square one unquote.<sup>47</sup>

In January 1972 the outgoing secretary of the JIC, in Burke Trend's words 'one of the sharpest critics of intelligence arrangements .. in the past', paid a valedictory visit to Northern Ireland. He found the organization of intelligence much improved from a year earlier, although there were still problems arising from the RUC's unwillingness to put CID intelligence into a joint collation process, from a shortage of skilled interrogators, and from the fact that, while police army relations were much improved, progress remained slow. There was evidence that the IRA were running short of weapons, and their growing use of homemade explosives represented a degradation in capabilities and increased hazards for bomb makers. While 'the festering Londonderry situation' still defied solution, in Belfast there was clear evidence that the IRA were feeling the heat. 'Although it is well recognized that the "numbers game" is not an infallible guide to the state of the campaign .. attrition rates, recovery of weapons and the numbers of incidents provide a useful clarification of the background against which the Northern Ireland security forces assess progress'. Burke Trend thought this report sufficiently important to be put up to Heath, who responded: 'Thank you. Pl[ease] ensure the points are followed up'. A week later came the disaster of Bloody Sunday, and all hope of stabilization vanished. Intelligence organization may have improved in 1972, but it did not keep pace with the growth in political violence and death: almost five hundred people died in what was to be the bloodiest year of the Northern Ireland troubles.<sup>48</sup>

### *Conclusion*

In January 1971, the British military attaché in Dublin reported in downbeat though not unsympathetic terms on the higher organization of the Irish defence forces:

They have no staff organization to speak of, except for day-to-day administration, and there is no equivalent of our defence planning staff; there is no assessments apparatus like the JIC and no continuing liaison with other departments such as the

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<sup>47</sup> British ambassador, Dublin, to London, 21 Dec. 1972, quoted in O'Halpin, 'Intelligence and Anglo-Irish relations', p. 145.

<sup>48</sup> Trend to Gregson (private secretary to the prime minister), 21 Jan., enclosing report by [redacted: Brian Stewart], and Heath's marginal comment, 25 Jan. 1972, TNA, PREM15/998.

DEA [Department of External Affairs]. There is no continuous planning or grading of priorities.<sup>49</sup>

The contrast with the British system was stark but true. Ireland had no comparable mechanism for integrating intelligence with wider security and foreign policy considerations, while the army spoke only when spoken to and then softly and deferentially. Furthermore, the Irish army had been severely compromised in the 1970 arms crisis.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, Dublin's lack of a formal integrating process bringing together security, political and diplomatic perspectives does not seem to have rendered Irish analysis of affairs in Northern Ireland any less prescient than that produced through the elaborate assessment machinery of Whitehall.

The material cited in this paper bears out the conclusion that where Ireland was concerned the JIC system failed on three counts. Firstly, it provided no advance warning of the likely deterioration in public order in Northern Ireland, and no serious appraisal of the concerns and warnings particularly from the Irish government and the Dublin embassy about the drift of affairs in the north, the need for reform and the imperative of protecting the Catholic minority from loyalist attack; secondly, until 1970 at the earliest it gave no consideration to the political conditions within Northern Ireland which exacerbated political unrest, or to the internal weaknesses of the Northern Ireland government. Thirdly, while gaps in the records mean that we can only assume that the JIC approved the intelligence case for internment in 1971, it is certain that the committee enjoined a framework for the interrogation of internees which was completely out of touch with western European norms about how states should treat their citizens, which damaged Britain's standing internationally, and which produced little or nothing of operational value.

It may be argued that in the greater scheme of things, Northern Ireland was small beer for an organization bent on anticipating the outbreak of war with the Soviet Union. But the remarkable feature of the JIC's record in the years leading up to the outbreak of the Troubles is not how few but how many red herrings it pursued: there was far more consideration, for example, of the perils posed by efforts by former members of the intelligence services to publish memoirs than there were of the gradual deterioration of the authority of the Northern Ireland state from the summer of 1968. With the benefit of

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<sup>49</sup> Brigadier McMullan to Ministry of Defence, 6 Jan. 1971, TNA, FO 33/1616

<sup>50</sup> On this see Justin O'Brien, *The Arms Trial* (Dublin, 2000).

hindsight, if Northern Ireland still lies behind Iraq in the list of intelligence failures, in actual consequences for Britain it surely ranks ahead of the Sino-Soviet split, and the invasion of Czechoslovakia, neither of which unpleasant shocks had any practical consequences for British interests. This argument, of course, is predicated on a very doubtful premise: that the JIC of the mid and late 1960s had the capacity, if it so wished, to produce a holistic analysis of the problems of Northern Ireland rather than typescasting them entirely as security issues to be dealt with by counterterrorist measures. By January 1972, the JIC's draft paper on the implications of the imposition of direct rule, 'a poor thing but our own', explicitly acknowledged that the existing structure and practice of government in Northern Ireland were part of the problem.<sup>51</sup> Such a holistic assessment of the crisis would scarcely have found favour in Whitehall in earlier years, even if the assessment staff had been asked to grasp the nettle.

Exploration of the JIC's role in advising British government on the unfolding Northern Ireland crisis after 1968 raises one further issue. If the JIC system was so sophisticated a means of integrating intelligence analysis and setting intelligence priorities by the late 1960s, it follows that it carried ultimate responsibility for the operational as well as the analytical practices of intelligence agencies and departments, in the muddy fields of South Armagh as much as in the committee rooms of Whitehall. Consequently it behoves researchers to continue to probe the question of what the JIC knew, and what it may have chosen not to know, about problems such as security force collusion with loyalist paramilitaries, as well as all other aspects of intelligence and counter-terrorism policy and operations relating to the Northern Irish troubles.

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<sup>51</sup> Trevelyan (Home Office) to Woodfield (Home Office), 30 Nov. 1971, TNA, CJ4/280.

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**Institute for International Integration Studies**

The Sutherland Centre, Trinity College Dublin, Dublin 2, Ireland

