



Partecipazione e Conflitto

<http://siba-ese.unisalento.it/index.php/paco>

ISSN: 1972-7623 (print version)

ISSN: 2035-6609 (electronic version)

PACO, Issue 15(1) 2022: 107-120

DOI: 10.1285/i20356609v15i1p107

Published 15 March 2022

Work licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non commercial-Share alike 3.0 Italian License

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Rules of Hijacking: Coercion and Legitimacy in the “Urban Statelets” of the IRA¹

Niall Ó Dochartaigh

National University of Ireland Galway

ABSTRACT:

Much of the political violence literature emphasizes the importance of coercive capacity in securing both local control and local support in times of conflict. But armed groups sometimes enjoy extensive support even in areas where the state has high penetrative capacity and high levels of control. To retain this support armed groups need to maintain a certain degree of local legitimacy. This paper examines the way in which the Provisional Irish Republican Army balanced coercion and legitimacy in its interactions with civilians in the Catholic urban neighbourhoods of Northern Ireland, the “urban statelets of Belfast and Derry” as one British civil servant referred to them in 1976. Drawing on memoirs by former IRA volunteers, on other published accounts of car hijackings and on state archives it argues that the need to maintain popular support, local legitimacy and an identification with the local community severely inhibited IRA actions, narrowing their strategic and tactical options, limiting their operational capacity and shaping their actions at the micro-level. It points to the delicacy of the balance between coercive power and legitimation in the securing of local control by armed insurgents.

KEYWORDS:

Territory, legitimacy, coercion, terror, Ireland, political violence

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR(S):

niall.odochartaigh@nuigalway.ie

¹ Sections of this paper draw on, and have been adapted from, an earlier publication (in German): Ó Dochartaigh, Niall, “ ‘Wir brauchen dein Auto, bitte‘. Zwang und Zustimmung in den Hochburgen der IRA ”, *Mittelweg* 36 (2/2018), p. 17-31.

1. Legitimacy, coercion and local control

All support lost to us is potential support for the enemy
IRA Training Manual 1977²

Political legitimacy has direct tangible benefits for rulers, reducing the need for expensive coercive measures by securing widespread acceptance of the structures of rule as justified and appropriate. The concept of legitimacy is accordingly central to social scientific analyses of state power (Beetham 2012). For a long time, however, legitimacy was of marginal concern in the study of non-state armed groups, partly because scholarship on armed groups was concentrated in subfields such as terrorism studies that were defined by their focus on violence. But coercion of a civilian population on which one relies for support, or at least acquiescence, presents challenges and dilemmas for armed groups just as it does for states and there has been a growing recognition in recent years that “armed groups are also practitioners of the politics of legitimacy” (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015, 413). The concept is vital to understanding the capacity of rebel groups to secure local control, sustain armed campaigns and advance their political goals.

Rhetorical claims to legitimacy are important, especially in the early stages of a campaign, but the behaviour of armed groups in their interactions with the wider public is also crucial to securing and maintaining public support or acquiescence. These “performance-centred” sources of legitimacy (Geis, Nullmeier and Daase 2012, cited in Schlichte and Schneckener 2015, 418) become increasingly important as time goes on and require continual adaptation by rebel groups (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015; Worrall 2017).

Everyday practices by non-state armed groups aimed at maintaining legitimacy are bound up with the maintenance of local territory or safe spaces in which rebels enjoy substantial support and which constitute an important resource for them (Bosi 2013). Struggles between insurgents and states to secure local territorial control have become an increasing focus of research on political violence in recent years (Arjona 2008; Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015; Kalyvas 2006; Kasfir 2015; Staniland 2012). The research demonstrates that local support is maintained in part by demonstrating coercive capacity. Kalyvas, for example, argues that if state forces secure control of an area where rebels enjoyed support, the very fact of control will stimulate collaboration with the state by the civilian population (Kalyvas 2006, 112-113). The ability to enforce order and punish dissent can outweigh ideological preferences or political sympathies. Territorial control is important then, not only as a strategic resource but because it generates increased collaboration and support among the civilian population for the group in control and erodes support for, and assistance to, opposing forces.

Kalyvas acknowledges that the political sympathies and identifications of local residents are important in allowing armed groups to secure control of an area in the early stages of a conflict and his argument about the importance of control “in no way implies that coercion is the only factor or that popular grievances are irrelevant” (Kalyvas 2006, 113). His argument points up rather that local territorial control is an important resource for stimulating and increasing popular support for those who exert control. And so loss of local control by a group also threatens to reduce their supportive constituency.

Local control by armed groups is based in part then on the political sympathies and loyalties of many residents but it is also sustained by their capacity to exert coercive control: legitimacy and coercion are “closely intertwined” (Malthaner 2015, 426). But coercion is a two-edged sword: public support can be undermined by

² Popularly known as the “Green Book”. Extracts reproduced in Coogan 1987, 679-712 and O’Brien 1999, Appendix 1.

the coercion of local people by armed groups. Malthaner (2015, 439), for example, found in his study of local support for an Islamist group in Cairo that confrontational “interactions between the militants and their (former) constituencies significantly contributed to the erosion of support” and the weakening of local control. And so, just as states often exercise restraint for fear of undermining their own legitimacy, non-state armed groups too set limits on the use of violence against civilians in districts or regions where they enjoy widespread support (Schlichte and Schneckener 2015).

Armed groups sometimes enjoy extensive support and partial territorial control even where the state has high penetrative capacity and a strong permanent presence. In such areas the need to maintain legitimacy is particularly important. This paper examines one such case, the Catholic working-class urban neighbourhoods of Belfast and Derry in Northern Ireland from which the Provisional Irish Republican Army recruited heavily and in which it enjoyed extensive popular support between its founding in 1970 and the end of its campaign in 1997—the “urban statelets of Belfast and Derry” as one British civil servant referred to them in 1976.³

Pointing out that “... territorial control is closely tied into patterns of coercion, legitimacy and support” Malthaner argues that “focusing on the micro-dynamics of relationships of support and control is crucial to understanding these patterns” (Malthaner 2015, 429). Central to these micro-dynamics are what Worrall (2017, 710) calls “negotiations over the written and unwritten rules which order everyday life”. Accounts of car hijackings provide a way to observe such negotiations. These interactions between armed militants and randomly chosen members of the public in supportive local areas play out in public spaces and have unpredictable outcomes. Although they frequently involve direct and sometimes intense coercion they also provide opportunities for rational argumentation and bargaining between armed militants and those whose cars they seek to commandeer. The micro-dynamics and the unwritten rules at play in these often fluid interactions demonstrates how the need to maintain legitimacy directly constrains the use of force by armed groups in their interactions with civilians in districts where they enjoy substantial support. It deepens our understanding of the way in which the need of armed groups to balance coercion and legitimacy penetrates every aspect of their actions.

Local spaces in which the IRA enjoyed significant support constituted an important resource for the organisation. In these areas they enjoyed greater freedom of movement and action. To retain those advantages the IRA needed to maintain significant popular support, local legitimacy and an identification with the local community. This was particularly important for the IRA because of the capacity of the British state and its security forces to penetrate these spaces and maintain contact with local residents. The need to maintain “performance-centred” legitimacy in these local spaces, to moderate their actions rather than their rhetoric and ideological positions, directly constrained their use of coercive power.

2. Methodology

Analysing car hijackings by the IRA presents distinctive methodological challenges. There are important limitations to documentary sources of information such as court cases and media reports of legal proceedings. It was in the interests of the IRA to ensure that civilians whose cars were hijacked in districts where the organisation enjoyed substantial support were not opened up to the danger of prosecution for aiding The IRA. And so, even where civilians were cooperative it was in the interests of both The IRA and those civilians that coercion was emphasised in accounts given to the security forces and in court. In addition court cases, concerned as they were to attribute legal responsibility, were concerned to simplify the ambiguity present in such encounters rather than explore it. As a consequence the reliability of one primary source of information

³ “Political Future of Northern Ireland”, 10 August 1976, CJ4/1427, UK National Archives.

about the balance between coercion and cooperation in such events, court proceedings and newspaper reports of such proceedings, is undermined.

This paper is based on sources that are also problematic and have to be approached with caution but which nonetheless offer insights unavailable elsewhere on the complexity of such interactions: memoirs written by former IRA Volunteers (Bradley & Feeney 2012; Collins and MacGovern 1997; Gilmour; O'Callaghan 1999) and other published accounts that offer the perspective of civilians who encountered the IRA in car hijackings or attempted car hijackings (Cobain 2020; Goan 2017; McKeown 1986). These accounts too have their limitations. One issue is that IRA memoirs might be expected to minimise the coercive dimension of hijackings but two factors reduce this problem. A disproportionate number of such memoirs are authored by informers who worked for the state and are strongly hostile to the IRA. They don't have the same motivation to minimise IRA coercion and yet they provide accounts that demonstrate the complexity and ambiguity of such encounters. The second factor is that the IRA campaign ended in a compromise in which The IRA yielded on core goals. Many former IRA members express regret at the cost of the violence and one consequence is that memoirs tend not to be marked by simplified glorification or triumphalism and have a certain self-critical tone.

The paper draws on British state archives for evidence of the extent of local territorial control by the IRA and on interviews by the author with fourteen former IRA members conducted in 2011 and 2012 in Belfast and Derry. Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours and was recorded with the permission of the interviewees. These recordings were later transcribed and the accounts anonymised. The semi-structured interviews dealt with local territory as one of several themes and provide background information on the relationship of IRA members to local spaces rather than accounts of specific incidents.

There is scope for a more extensive study of the topic in the future that would further illuminate dynamics of local control by critically analysing the court records and newspaper reports in which civilians and IRA volunteers described such hijackings—with due regard to their limitations—and on interviews with civilians. Such a study might also be extended to examine other forms of coercive interaction with local civilians such as forcing civilians to drive a car-bomb or taking over a house to carry out an ambush.

3. Territorial contexts Introduction

The armed conflict in Northern Ireland from 1969 to 1997 claimed more than 3,600 lives. The British Army's analysis of "Operation Banner", the official name for its campaign in Northern Ireland, gives some sense of the scale of the violence, especially in the early years. It calls the IRA "one of the most effective terrorist organisations in history" (Ministry of Defence 2006, 3) but it also characterises the first five years of the conflict as an insurgency:

[The period] from the summer of 1971 until the mid-1970s, is best described as a classic insurgency. Both the Official and Provisional wings of the Irish Republican Army (OIRA and PIRA) fought the security forces in more-or-less formed bodies. Both had a structure of companies, battalions and brigades, with a recognisable structure and headquarters staff. Protracted firefights were common. The Army responded with operations at up to brigade and even divisional level (Ministry of Defence 2006, 3).

Most residential space in the two main cities, Derry and Belfast, was sharply divided between Catholic Irish nationalist and Protestant unionist communities. The roots of this go back to the 17th century plantation of English and Scottish Protestants in the northern Irish province of Ulster to secure it for the British crown, giving it a slight Protestant majority. As Belfast and Derry expanded in the nineteenth century the divisions between Protestant and Catholic in rural areas were reproduced in segregated urban neighbourhoods. When

Ireland secured independence from the United Kingdom in 1921 Ulster unionists, who were identified exclusively with the Protestant community, succeeded in retaining six of Ulster's nine counties within the United Kingdom. This new "Northern Ireland" was given a parliament and government of its own controlled by unionists. The Catholic and nationalist minority of about one third of the population was excluded from power and influence and subject to discrimination in employment and public housing.

When violence broke out around civil rights marches in 1968 and 1969 nationalists, republicans and leftists barricaded urban working-class Catholic areas to keep out state forces (Ó Dochartaigh 2005). British troops were deployed in August 1969 to restore order. They initially stayed out of the barricaded areas to prevent escalation but there was strong pressure from Ulster unionists for the Army to take a more aggressive approach. Resisting unionist pressure in the summer of 1970 to deploy a "strong military force" to institute a "military occupation" of "Free Derry", the Bogside and Creggan neighbourhoods of the predominantly Catholic and nationalist city of Derry, senior police and military figures rejected the idea because of its likely effect on local opinion:

*The concept of an occupation is simple and militarily effective, but essentially short term...[it] would result in total alienation of the community, moderates included.*⁴

After internment without trial was introduced in August 1971 the IRA intensified its campaign, violence escalated and Free Derry and similar areas in Belfast were barricaded once again. Relations between the security forces and locals worsened as soldiers repeatedly killed unarmed civilians in disputed circumstances. One of the most senior British commanders commented of "Free Derry" in December 1971:

The security forces now face an entirely hostile Catholic community numbering 33,000 in these two areas alone... There are indications that the hate, fear and distrust felt by the Catholic community for the security forces is deeper now than at any time during the present campaign (Ford 1971).

British troops subsequently took over the barricaded areas in Derry in July 1972 and instituted the kind of "occupation" they had rejected two years previously. Troops treated these areas as hostile war zones and behaved accordingly. One British soldier serving in nationalist west Belfast in 1973 recalled:

It was a battleground, I don't care what anybody says, we were at war and against an enemy that was good...there was no nice people in that area. You know, people didn't understand how much they hated us (Taylor 2001, 140).

One councillor from the moderate SDLP party recalled later that the soldiers who constantly patrolled and searched houses in these areas 'treated the population like dirt' (Ó Dochartaigh 2005, 250). Despite the military occupation, and partly because of it, these areas remained clearly bounded territories identified with Irish nationalism and republicanism and constituted an important resource for the IRA (Ó Dochartaigh 2013). The report of the British government's Diplock commission, established to deal with the issue of paramilitary prisoners, presents a view of the situation in December 1972, several months after the areas had been reoccupied:

[In Belfast and Derry the IRA] operates from those areas which are Republican strongholds. Since July 1972, the army have been able, at the cost of casualties, to maintain

⁴ Policy for Londonderry: a joint paper by the Director of Operations and the Chief Constable, 24 August 1970, CJ5/3 UK National Archives

armed patrols in the streets, and to launch sporadic raids... But they are not in a position to ensure the personal safety of individual citizens who reside in these areas or who have to pass regularly through them or near by (Diplock Report 1972, 9).

The commission noted the implications of this territorial control for the operations of the justice system:

In the nature of things, it is the people who live in these areas who are most likely to have first-hand knowledge... Yet these are the people who would put their lives, ...at greatest risk if it were suspected ...that they had given information to the security authorities (Diplock Report 1972, 9).

This persistent level of territorial control by the IRA motivated the Diplock Commission to recommend the abolition of juries for trials of paramilitary defendants. The awareness that extensive IRA territorial control persisted despite the removal of the barricades and heavy levels of routine patrolling was still present in 1976 when one British civil servant wrote:

Large urban areas are already controlled, socially and economically as well as militarily, by the Provisionals...HMG's attitude to the urban statelets of Belfast and Derry cannot be struck in isolation from the longer-term political perspective. "Normal" policing and government in urban green areas is still a very long way off. It may be necessary to come to terms with the fact that these areas are ruled from within.⁵

The substantial public support the IRA enjoyed within these areas combined with their detailed local knowledge was of direct benefit for IRA operations. These areas were a military resource densely packed with safe spaces at the micro level, as illustrated by the recollection of one IRA volunteer:

If you're in a house on one street you know that you go to that house there and that they will leave their door open.. and you can go through, from this street through that house, through the alleyway, through another house and within minutes you would be maybe 4 streets away... Within our own community we could move fairly freely, certain that in an emergency we could knock on almost any door and shelter until an army or RUC patrol had gone... people would let us use their houses as refuges and then we would slip away when the danger was past (Interview with former IRA Volunteer J, Belfast, 23 March 2012).

By the late 1970s the British state had succeeded in curbing IRA attacks and greatly reducing the levels of violence but hostility to state forces remained strong in predominantly nationalist areas. The title of a poem by Colette Bryce who grew up in Derry in the 1970s and 80s, "Don't speak to the Brits, just pretend they don't exist", (Bryce 2014) captures the low-level, everyday, rejection of the British military presence. In the spirit of its title the poem doesn't mention the soldiers.

Within these supportive local spaces the IRA established a "civil administration" (Bradley & Feeney 2012; Hamill 2010; Kelly 1982; Rickard and Bakke 2021) that many local residents looked to when dealing with petty crime and anti-social behaviour. This informal local policing involved brutal punishments such as kneecapping, as well as banishment (O'Doherty 1998) but was strongly supported by a large proportion of locals who felt it was more effective than conventional policing (Sluka 1989, 119-120). As one UK civil servant told Silke in 1996 "What can the police do? What can the police do that is in any way as direct and

⁵ "Political Future of Northern Ireland", 10 August 1976, CJ4/1427, UK National Archives.

satisfying as what the IRA does?" (Silke 2007, 55). The IRA enjoyed a measure of popular support from many in these areas, was seen as a source of stability and order by others and was regarded ambiguously by many more. Even many of those who fiercely opposed the IRA were also hostile to the state and unwilling to assist state forces. The IRA recognised the vital importance of these strong local support bases. As an IRA spokesman put it in 1982:

Our biggest single asset is the nationalist people who by and large support us to varying degrees (IRIS 1982).

These areas were very much penetrated by the state however and the IRA was conscious of the implications. The same spokesman commented that

[We] are one of the few guerilla armies that lives and fights in the occupied area (IRIS 1982).

Civilians who wanted to assist the security forces had relatively easy access to them. High levels of state penetration made it particularly important for the IRA to maintain high levels of legitimacy and consent. The IRA faced a dilemma however. The organisation needed to regularly commandeer resources from civilians in supportive areas. This included taking over houses to launch attacks and, much more frequently, hijacking cars for use in attacks. Because these acts were carried out against strangers in public settings they frequently involved coercion. Hijackings were concentrated sites of tension at which the IRA sought to balance coercion and consent. Acutely aware of the IRA's need to retain local legitimacy many civilians felt able to push back against this coercion, sometimes with considerable success.

4. Accounts of Hijacking

The memoir of IRA informer Raymond Gilmour is full of accounts of the hijacking of cars from local residents in Catholic neighbourhoods of Derry city in the 1980s. It is important to preface the discussion with a few cautionary words. At the trial in which he testified against dozens of his former colleagues in the IRA as a "supergrass", the presiding judge, Lord Lowry, Lord Chief Justice of Northern Ireland, described him as:

A selfish and self-regarding man to whose lips a lie invariably comes more naturally than the truth (Gilmour 1998, 382).

Why then should we believe anything that Gilmour writes? He ascribes the highest of motives to his own actions while seeking to show how coercive and repressive the IRA was. His detailed accounts of individual hijackings provide strong evidence however of the inhibitions on the IRA's use of coercion. That these accounts undermine his central propagandist point about IRA coercion gives them a greater plausibility.

Descriptions of hijackings by Gilmour and others provide an outline of what we might call "The rules of hijacking", a set of shared understandings that was nested in the broader political context and that provided a certain amount of predictability for all involved. This sense of predictability is evident in Gilmour's description of an attempt to hijack a car parked outside an office:

We masked up and Ciaran pulled out the handgun as we burst into the office. An old man, short, bald and bespectacled, looked up. "Hello Boys," he said mildly. "What can I be doing for you?" (Gilmour 1998, 255).

The scene is one of relative calm; a sense that these things unfold more or less predictably and that risks are low. It is a routine that will follow a pattern. There is also here a strong sense that these masked men are not the other, not alien and not really to be feared. We get something of the same sense in another example from Gilmour's memoir. At the moment of hijacking there is fear and tension but within minutes the situation settles as the IRA volunteers drive the car away with the owner still in it:

As we were heading up William Street... he piped up from the back, "Can you drop me off at home on the way". We dropped him off up the Creggan, warning him not to contact the police for half an hour (Gilmour 1998, 256).

Often even where there was resistance there was no need for the open use of threats or force – instead there were arguments:

"Provisional IRA, we want your car" Pat said.

The driver wouldn't hand over the keys at first. "Boys, could you not get another car?"

"No, we're taking yours."

After a bit of argument, he eventually handed over the keys, without Pat even having to produce the gun (Gilmour 1998, 144).

But sometimes there was strong resistance, to which they responded with coercion and threats:

Pat yanked the door open. "Provisional IRA. We want your van, give us the keys."

The man shook his head. "No way are you getting my van".

Pat pulled out the revolver. We didn't have any ammunition for it but the man wasn't to know that. He was now showing every sign of co-operation (Gilmour 1998).

It is notable however that even when they threaten someone with a gun it is not loaded. It almost never is in the accounts Gilmour provides. This is partly because the IRA members can't shoot someone in these situations without the movement incurring severe political damage locally. The gun is a bluff. In this incident, a bargaining process took place that resulted in the IRA not taking the car. Immediately after the hijackers produced the gun a known local republican approached:

Boys, you can't take that van. There's a very sick man in that house. He's just come out of the hospital. I'm asking you boys, as a favour to me, go take a car somewhere else (Gilmour 1998, 226).

"Fair enough, we weren't to know" they reply, and the hijacking is off. This use of links to local republicans to fend off hijacking attempts is evident in a further case, in which personal problems are also invoked:

"Provisional IRA" I said. "We want the keys for your car."

"You're not getting them." old Mike told me. "I was promised by a man in the IRA that my car wouldn't be taken again."

His wife started in on me as well, yelling "What do you think you're doing in here? You're not getting my husband's car. Anyway, I've got a bad heart."

"That's funny, so has everyone we want to take a car off," Mary [one of the IRA members] said (Gilmour 1998, 309).

Gilmour provides the perspective of an IRA hijacker (albeit one who is also an informer working for the state) but there are also several accounts from the perspective of those being hijacked. McKeown's recollection of being stopped on the street by IRA volunteers in west Belfast provides an example of that same kind of bargaining from a different source, in this case a moderate nationalist, and from the other side of the interaction:

They wanted the car. The IRA required it. I demurred.

The lad with the machine-gun got agitated. He seemed to me to be trembling. The fellow with the hand gun was more reasonable

I pointed out that the car was not reliable... and I revved the engine in an uneven way to suggest that it was misfiring. He said it would do for their purpose.

(McKeown 1986)

When this particular line of argument went nowhere McKeown invoked his status as an endangered nationalist, the kind of person the IRA often claimed to be protecting. As Malthaner (2015) points out "claims to legitimacy make armed groups vulnerable to being held to the norms and values on which they based their claim" and McKeown now sought to leverage those claims. McKeown lived in an isolated nationalist neighbourhood surrounded by areas such as the Shankill where loyalist paramilitaries were strong:

I pointed out that without the car and with the buses off I would have to cross through the Shankill on foot and it would be putting my son and myself in considerable jeopardy. He examined my driving license to check my address. He said we could drive on... (McKeown 1986, 118).

This concession is reciprocated by McKeown. When he has the opportunity to have the two IRA members pursued he doesn't take it:

Just around the corner... we were stopped again, this time at a heavily manned British Army checkpoint... I didn't inform them of the earlier incident (McKeown 1986, 118).

A different kind of reciprocity is evident in Ian Cobain's account of the hijacking of a car used in the killing of an off-duty police officer in 1978 (Cobain 2020). Cobain's account is based in part on testimony at the subsequent trial. After the IRA took the keys to a civilian's car in West Belfast the civilian became "apprehensive then terrified". The two IRA members who had been tasked with holding him until the car was returned sought to reassure him and took him for a drink in a nearby bar, making no attempt to conceal their faces. In the bar they told him what he should say to the police when questioned: "He should say that his car was hijacked, he had been ordered into the back of a white van and a hood placed over his head; that he was ordered to lie down and a coat thrown over him". This account would demonstrate that he had been coerced and thus was not implicated in the use of his car and that he could not identify the IRA members involved. They then had a conversation that ranged across world politics and the books they were reading. When questioned initially by the police the civilian gave this cover story but when it emerged that his car had been

used in a killing he abandoned the story (Cobain 2020, 131-133). As in McKeown's account, the IRA hijackers sought to maintain an identification with the person whose car they had commandeered and this helped to sustain a certain limited reciprocity.

The extraordinary handwritten account of another Belfast civilian, in contrast, is full of fear and terror and coercion, but even here there is an awareness of the delicate balancing act in which the IRA is engaged. Séamus Goan from Ardoyne in north Belfast wrote it secretly after the incident in west Belfast in August 1974 because he feared the IRA might kill him and he wanted to record his own version of events (Goan 2017).⁶ It is all the more striking because Goan himself had been an IRA volunteer and internee in the 1940s:

I drew up in my van... to deliver some cakes. ...and immediately I was approached by two young men, late teens or early twenties, and asked for the keys of my van. I brushed them to one side telling them that they were not getting my keys and proceeded to bring the cakes into the shop. On returning to the van the two young men were still there and persisted in demanding the keys. I was adamant in my refusal and they then commenced to threaten me with dire consequences using the four-letter word quite liberally. The tone then changed to "Look Mister, we want your keys and we'll have to f...ing get them— please Mister give us your f...ing keys, we have a job to do and we're already late." I replied that I would not surrender my keys willingly to contribute to something that might result in loss of life. They then said that they had a gun and would be forced to use it. "We only want your van to shift something and you'll get it back in an hour." I could see they were nervous and excited and a few people had started to gather and so foolishly enough I handed over the keys (Goan 2017, 184).

Here we see that familiar pattern of resistance, argument, the reluctance of IRA members to use physical coercion and finally acquiescence. The commander of these young IRA volunteers then comes on the scene and is much more aggressive. "Big Shot" as Goan dubs him, forces him to drive a bomb into the city centre, putting a gun to his head. As he argues with "Big Shot" Goan invokes a shared nationalist identity and identification with IRA prisoners in Long Kesh [Internment camp]:

I was about to say I had had more than my share of RUC, Orange and British Army intimidation when "big shot" interjected jeeringly, "And you have a f...ing son in Long Kesh. I don't want to hear your f...ing sob stories." I replied with what I had wanted to say originally and added that if they had no respect for men whose sons were in Long Kesh then I could expect little better (Goan 2017, 186).

Despite this aggressive intimidation and the death threats he did not cooperate with state security forces either. Asked by the RUC to describe the IRA members, Goan writes:

I gave misleading descriptions... Was it through fear of reprisals? I don't think so... however much I detest this new low to which the IRA have sunk, I could never ever bring myself to putting anyone into the clutches of the RUC or British Army (Goan 2017).

In this case senior IRA member "Big Shot" had undermined the movement's legitimacy by using aggression and terror but even that was not sufficient to remove all of the benefits to the movement of the longstanding

⁶ His son, Cathal Goan, who subsequently became the Director General of RTÉ, the Irish state broadcaster in the Republic of Ireland, published it in 2017.

alienation of nationalists from state forces. The IRA had pushed its legitimacy to its furthest limits and something still remained.

One final incident recounted by Gilmour shows that even when weapons were produced during hijackings civilians sometimes successfully resisted direct coercion. In this case gender seems to have added an additional barrier to violence:

Ciaran yanked open the driver's door, pointed the gun at her and said, "Provisional IRA. We want your car. Get out."

Politely but firmly, she said, "I'm sorry, you're not getting this car."

We were soon both down on our hunkers, arguing with the woman, with Ciaran threatening to blow her head off if she did not get out and the woman calmly insisting that she was not going to do so (Gilmour 1998, 254).

The two IRA members became anxious that the police or army might come along and thought they spotted an unmarked police car. While they were distracted the woman in the car simply drove away. Her refusal indicates an awareness of the inhibitions on IRA action due to their need to maintain popular legitimacy, an understanding that they were highly unlikely to shoot her simply to take her car. She knew, we might say, the rules of hijacking.

5. The Rules of Hijacking

Given the high levels of hostility to the state and widespread support for the IRA within the neighbourhoods where these hijackings took place the use of coercion is striking. IRA members often threatened, intimidated, and wielded weapons to compel compliance. They did so even though they were sometimes dealing with people who were linked to the movement, including relatives of IRA prisoners and even former IRA members. To sustain its armed campaign the IRA commandeered resources from people living in supportive areas and were ready to use coercion to ensure compliance.

Nonetheless, this use of coercion was always in tension with, and balanced against, the need to maintain legitimacy and local support and those concerns shaped interactions at the micro-level. The importance of local support as a resource is evident in the level of compliance and acceptance by many of those who were hijacked. The fact that the IRA was operating in areas where they enjoyed support frequently ensured minimal resistance to hijacking. The calmness of so many in the face of armed hijackers is an indicator of the shared understandings that bound hijackers and hijacked. Apart from those who were actively sympathetic, there was an awareness among others that these interactions were bounded by certain shared norms and expectations, that they were predictable to a great degree, and that the level of danger or threat to the hijacked person was not high. This sense of being bound by certain shared norms and a shared identity was manifested in several ways. Many people resisted on the basis of their links with the Republican movement, including their links to imprisoned IRA members or Republican activists. Where people were not directly linked to the movement they invoked their membership of a wider nationalist community, with a shared experience of oppression by the state. People resisted hijacking from a position firmly located within the nationalist community and often within the republican milieu.

The graduated deployment of coercive threats in many of these hijackings is in marked contrast to the overwhelming and sudden force the IRA deployed when securing compliance from individuals in other contexts. The hijackers often began with a declaration commandeering a vehicle on behalf of the organisation, or even with a request. Even when they faced resistance they often avoided producing weapons in order to

avoid making it an open act of coercion and they frequently engaged in argument. When they brought weapons with them they were usually unloaded. There was little point carrying a loaded weapon if they couldn't actually shoot someone for refusing to comply. The damage to the organisation's local support and legitimacy caused by killing or seriously injuring a randomly selected civilian in a supportive neighbourhood would far outweigh the benefits of securing a car. The loud and angry threats to shoot people who refused to comply were prompted in part by the knowledge that they couldn't afford to carry out those threats. If someone resisted determinedly, especially a woman, as in the final example mentioned above, the inhibitions on the use of violence were so great that on this occasion an unarmed civilian was able to simply refuse to be hijacked by armed men.

It is striking too that in some of these cases people who were subjected to aggressive coercion by the IRA were not willing to cooperate subsequently with state security forces. The widespread hostility to state forces within such areas, accumulated over years of conflict, was a major factor in making these areas safe territories of a kind for the IRA. Many of those hostile to the IRA were also hostile to state forces. Political attitudes eroded state capacity in these areas despite the physical presence of state forces

The IRA was willing to use coercion in these hijackings but the need to maintain legitimacy was a major constraint on the level of coercion they could exert. These micro-level interactions were dependent on shared understandings of the local neighbourhood as a place of shared norms and expectations, a space of support. The use of force was profoundly shaped by the larger political struggle over legitimacy. Hijackers were resisted within a shared framework of legitimation, one in which people had an expectation of certain limits to the IRA's behaviour, and sometimes sought to hold them to certain standards of behaviour. Despite an intense ongoing security force presence these areas remained meaningful territories for the IRA primarily because of the political views of local people, stretching as they did from support for the IRA to a hostility to them that was moderated by hostility or ambiguity towards state forces. The occasional resistance of local people to direct coercion by the IRA reflected an awareness by hijacker and hijacked alike that these territories were sustained by a constantly negotiated relationship between the IRA and the wider community. This required the organisation to maintain a certain level of legitimacy and consent and limit the use of coercive power against local residents.

The unwritten rules surrounding these encounters were based in part on the IRA's formal procedures but also on existing social norms. In districts where armed groups enjoy a certain level of authority order "is constantly being negotiated and renegotiated, evolving and re-evolving", as Worrall (2017) puts it. As part of this local negotiated system of order, these "rules of hijacking" were subject to ongoing change and renegotiation.

The primary rule that underpinned all others was that the civilians whose cars they commandeered were not the targets of the IRA's actions and that, provided they did not resist, they would not be harmed and the IRA would seek to protect their interests and their property. Thus, the frequent assurances to civilians that they were not in danger and the promises that vehicles would be returned undamaged. Secondly, reasoned argument was acceptable. IRA members frequently gave a hearing to the arguments made by civilians as to why their cars should not be hijacked and answered with counter-arguments rather than immediately suppressing objections by force. On occasion they yielded to the force of argument.

This brings us to a third "rule": the priorities of civilians could in certain circumstances take precedence over the requirements and wishes of the IRA if, for example, IRA members could be convinced that taking a vehicle might endanger a civilian's life or health. But the cases outlined here also illuminate the limits to such accommodations. On occasion civilians argued that the IRA should seek out an alternative vehicle on the basis that their car had been hijacked on a previous occasion and that they had been promised it wouldn't happen again, or pointed out that a relative was imprisoned for IRA activities. The angry response of the IRA "Big Shot" to Goan's arguments—"And you have a f...ing son in Long Kesh. I don't want to hear your f...ing sob

stories”—indicates the limits of the IRA’s responsiveness to such appeals. But it also suggests this was an argument that IRA hijackers encountered frequently.

Fourthly, the power of existing social norms surrounding the use of interpersonal violence is evident. The woman who calmly refused to hand over her car even when threatened with a gun derived at least some protection from the strength of deeply-embedded social norms surrounding the use of violence against women. Finally, the pattern of graduated use of threats and coercive violence and an attempt to deploy violence proportionately can be characterised as a fifth “rule”. That hijackers were frequently unarmed and that if they were armed the gun was generally unloaded suggests a relatively firm “rule” that civilians should not be shot for resisting the hijacking of their car.

All of these rules served to constrain the use of violence in these encounters and to afford a certain limited leverage to those civilians who sought to argue against the taking of their car or even to resist. In doing so these civilians treated the IRA gunmen as rule-bound actors with whom rational appeals might succeed and who were constrained to some degree in the violence they were likely to use.

Regardless of the level of restraint the IRA exercised there were costs to this coercion, damaging relations with civilians. The direct damage done when an armed organisation openly coerces local people was articulated forcefully in a memoir by Gerry Bradley, one of the Belfast IRA’s most longstanding and dedicated volunteers:

I was told [the IRA in Ardoyne] had taken at least a dozen cars over a period of time to go and whack him [a prominent loyalist paramilitary]. I was annoyed. I said to the guy who told me, “That’s a dozen houses we’ve lost for nothing”. (Bradley and Feeney 2012)

Every time they coerced local civilians the IRA used up some of their political credit and eroded their local support. The need to maintain local legitimacy and an identification with the local community severely inhibited IRA actions, narrowing their strategic and tactical options, limiting their operational capacity and shaping their actions at the micro-level. The accounts of car hijackings discussed here indicate just how directly the need to maintain legitimacy constrained the use of coercion by an armed group. They illustrate the importance to armed groups of maintaining local legitimacy and help to outline the limits of the use of coercive power by non-state armed groups.

References

- Arjona, Ana (2008), “Local Orders in Warring Times: Armed Groups’ and Civilians’ Strategies in Civil Wars”, *Qualitative Methods: Newsletter of the American Political Science Association Organized Section for Qualitative and Multi-Method Research*.
- Arjona, A., Kasfir, N. and Mampilly, Z. (eds. 2015), *Rebel Governance in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Beetham, J. (2012), “Political Legitimacy” in Amenta, E. Nash, K. & Scott, A. (Eds.), *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology*. Chichester: Wiley.
- Bosi, L. (2013), “Safe Territories and Violent Political Organizations”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 19(1), 80-101.
- Bradley, G. & Feeney, B. (2012), *Insider: Gerry Bradley's life in the IRA*, Dublin: O'Brien.
- Bryce, C. (2014), *The Whole and Rain-domed Universe*, London: Picador.
- Cobain, I. (2020), *Anatomy of a Killing: Life and Death on a Divided Island*, London: Granta.
- Collins, E. & MacGovern, M. (1997), *Killing Rage*, London: Granta.
- Coogan, Tim Pat (1987), *The IRA*, Glasgow: Fontana.
- Diplock Report (1972), *Report of the Commission to Consider Legal Procedures to Deal with Terrorist Activities in Northern Ireland*, Cmnd. 5185. London: HMSO.
- Duyvesteyn, I. (2017), “Rebels & Legitimacy; An Introduction”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28(4-5), 669-685.

- English, R. (2003), *Armed Struggle : the History of the IRA*, London: Pan.
- Ford, Major General Robert (1971), “Future military policy for Londonderry. An appreciation of the situation by CLF”, 14 December, 1971. PIN 7141, attached to General Ford’s Statement to the Bloody Sunday Inquiry.
- Geis, A., Nullmeier, F., and Daase, C. (eds) (2012), *Der Aufstieg der Legitimitätspolitik. Rechtfertigung und Kritik politisch-ökonomischer Ordnung*. Baden-Baden: Nomos.
- Gilmour, R. (1998), *Dead Ground: Infiltrating the IRA*, London: Little, Brown.
- Goan, C. (2017), “Experiencing the Troubles”, in Smyth, J. (ed.) *Remembering the Troubles: Contesting the Recent Past in Northern Ireland*, Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame Press.
- Hamill, H. (2010), *The Hoods: Crime and Punishment in Belfast*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- IRIS: The Republican Magazine*, July/August 1982. Published by Sinn Féin.
- Kalyvas, S. (2006), *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kasfir, N. (2015), “Rebel Governance—Constructing a Field of Inquiry: Definitions, Scope, Patterns, Order, Causes”, in Arjona, A., Kasfir, N. and Mampilly, Z. (eds. 2015), *Rebel Governance in Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 21–46.
- Kelley, K. (1982), *The Longest War: Northern Ireland and the IRA*. London: Zed Books.
- Malthaner, S. (2015), “Violence, Legitimacy, and Control: The Microdynamics of Support Relationships between Militant Groups and their Social Environment”, *Civil Wars*, 17(4), 425-445.
- McKeown, M. (1986), *The Greening of a Nationalist*, Dublin: Murlough
- Moloney, Ed (2002), *A Secret History of the IRA*, London: Penguin.
- Moloney, E. (2010), *Voices from the Grave: Two Men’s War in Ireland*. London: Faber and Faber.
- O’Brien, B. (1999), *The Long War: The IRA and Sinn Féin*, Dublin: O’Brien.
- O’Callaghan, S. (1999), *The Informer*, London: Corgi.
- Ó Dochartaigh, N. (2005), *From Civil Rights to Armalites: Derry and the Birth of Irish Troubles*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.
- Ó Dochartaigh, N. (2013), “Bounded by Violence: Institutionalizing Local Territories in the North of Ireland”, *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, 19 (1) 119-139.
- O’Doherty, M. (1998), *The Trouble with Guns: Republican Strategy and the Provisional IRA*, Belfast: Blackstaff.
- O’Leary, B. (2005), “Mission Accomplished? Looking Back at the IRA”, *Field Day Review* 1, 216–246.
- Ministry of Defence (2006) *Operation Banner. An Analysis of Military Operations in Northern Ireland*. https://www.vilaweb.cat/media/attach/vwedts/docs/op_banner_analysis_released.pdf
- Rickard, K., & Bakke, K. M. (2021), “Legacies of Wartime Order: Punishment Attacks and Social Control in Northern Ireland”, *Security Studies*, 30 (4) 603-636.
- Schlichte, K., & Schneckener, U. (2015), “Armed Groups and the politics of legitimacy”, *Civil Wars*, 17(4), 409-424.
- Silke, A. (2007), “Rebel’s Dilemma: The Changing Relationship Between the IRA, Sinn Féin and Paramilitary Vigilantism in Northern Ireland”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 11(1), 55-93.
- Sluka, J (1989), *Hearts and Minds, Water and Fish: Support for the IRA and INLA in a Northern Irish Ghetto*. London: Jai Press.
- Staniland, P. (2012), “States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders”, *Perspectives on Politics*, 10(02): 243-64.
- Taylor, Peter (1997), *Provos: the IRA and Sinn Féin*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Taylor, Peter (2001), *Brits : the war against the IRA*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Worrall, J. (2017), “(Re-) Emergent Orders: Understanding the Negotiation (s) of Rebel Governance”, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 28(4-5), 709-733.

Author’s Information:

Niall Ó Dochartaigh is Personal Professor of Political Science and Sociology at the National University of Ireland Galway. He has published extensively on the Northern Ireland conflict, on peace negotiations and on

Niall Ó Dochartaigh, *The Rules of Hijacking: Coercion and Legitimacy in the "Urban Statelets" of the IRA*

political violence. His most recent book is *Deniable Contact: Back-channel Negotiation in the Northern Ireland Conflict* (Oxford University Press 2021).