

From the Fenian Movement to the Troubles: Armed Republicanism as a Response to Repressive Policy against Irish Catholics

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Abstract. Irish republican nationalism represents a continuous tradition of armed resistance to British colonial domination, with roots dating back to the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) of the second half of the nineteenth century and continuing through to the “Provisional” IRA of the late twentieth century. This article analyzes the continuity of the republican movement by focusing on two critical periods: the activities of the Fenians (1858–1867) and the Ulster crisis (1968–1972), demonstrating how systematic violence by the British Crown generated radical forms of responsive resistance.

The IRB can be characterized as a classic example of a nineteenth-century national liberation movement ideologically grounded in Franco-American concepts of republicanism. The rejection of parliamentary methods in favour of armed struggle and an anti-constitutional stance determined the strategy of Fenian revolutionaries. Despite its limited period of activity (1858–1867), the IRB’s work acted as a catalyst for legislative reforms in the metropolis and shaped the ideological foundation for subsequent generations of republicans.

The struggle of Irish republicans in the early twentieth century did not result in full independence, leaving the status of the six counties unresolved in the north of the island that became part of the United Kingdom. Turning to the second half of the twentieth century, the author analyses the system of institutionalized restrictions imposed by the unionist government in the labor, electoral and social spheres that affected the Catholic population of Ulster. The intensification of repressive policies by the Northern Irish government contributed to the emergence of a protest movement of Irish Catholics for civil rights, supported by the armed wing of the IRA. The regime’s punitive measures – extrajudicial internment and the violent suppression of demonstrations resulting in civilian casualties – led to the radicalization of the armed resistance of the “Provisional” IRA over the subsequent 25 years, marking the beginning of the period known as the Troubles.

Keywords: Ireland, the Irish Question, the Fenian movement, Irish Republican Brotherhood, Irish nationalism, national liberation movement, emigration, unionist policy, Ulster, struggle for independence

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От фенианского движения к Troubles: вооруженный республиканизм как ответ на репрессивную политику в отношении ирландских католиков

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Аннотация. Ирландский республиканский национализм представляет собой непрерывную традицию вооруженного сопротивления британскому колониальному господству, корни которой прослеживаются от Ирландского республиканского братства (ИРБ) второй половины XIX в. до Временной ИРА (Ирландская республиканская армия) конца XX столетия. В статье анализируется преемственность республиканского движения через призму двух критических периодов: 1858—1867 гг. (деятельность фениев) и 1968—1972 гг. (Ольстерский кризис), демонстрируется, как систематическое насилие британской короны порождало радикальные формы ответного сопротивления.

Автор характеризует ИРБ как классический образец национально-освободительного движения XIX столетия, идеологически базировавшегося на концепциях франко-американского республиканизма. Отказ от парламентских методов в пользу вооруженной борьбы и антиконституционная позиция определили стратегию фенианских революционеров. Несмотря на ограниченный период активности (1858—1867), деятельность ИРБ выступила катализатором законодательных реформ метрополии и сформировала идеологический фундамент для последующих поколений республиканцев.

Борьба ирландских республиканцев начала XX в. не завершилась достижением полной независимости, оставив неразрешенным статус шести графств на севере острова, вошедших в состав Великобритании. Обращаясь ко второй половине XX в., автор анализирует систему институционализированных ограничений юнионистского правительства в трудовой, экономической и социальной сферах, затронувших католическое население Ольстера. Эскалация репрессивной политики североирландского режима способствовала формированию протестного движения ирландских католиков за гражданские права, поддержанного вооруженным крылом ИРА. Карательные меры режима — внесудебное интернирование и силовое подавление демонстраций с жертвами среди гражданского населения — обусловили радикализацию вооруженного сопротивления Временной ИРА на протяжении последующих 25 лет, положив начало периоду Смуты.

Ключевые слова: Ирландия, ирландский вопрос, Фенианское движение, Ирландское республиканское братство, ирландский национализм, национально-освободительное движение, эмиграция, юнионистская политика, Ольстер, борьба за независимость

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Mass transatlantic emigration of Irish Catholics in the mid-nineteenth century was a direct consequence of Britain's colonial policy and formed a transnational base of support for Irish nationalism. The growing Irish diaspora in North America and its subsequent involvement in financing and organizing the republican movement established conditions for a transition to more radical forms of struggle for independence. [1]

Analysis of the Irish republican movement is relevant for comparative studies of anti-colonial struggles and national liberation movements. The Irish experience reveals the interconnection between systematic policies of oppression and the emergence of stable traditions of armed resistance, which retains analytical value for understanding the dynamics of contemporary ethno-political conflicts.

The rise of Fenianism in the late 1850s and early 1860s was not unprecedented in Ireland. The Fenians were successors to a revolutionary tradition going back to such figures as Thomas Davis (1848), Robert Emmet (1803) and Wolfe Tone (1798).

The veterans of the failed uprising of 1848 were forced to emigrate to Paris, which at that time served as a refuge for Europe's national liberation movements. The political climate of republican France contributed to the formation of the future leaders of the Fenian Brotherhood. The concept of Fenianism drew heavily on the experience of various continental societies based in Paris at the time, such as La Société des Saisons, Mazzini's "Young Italy" and "Young Poland". [2, p. 47—48] These organisations attached great importance to conspiracy and secrecy in revolutionary activity, which underpinned the creation of the IRB's closed, hierarchical, quasi-militarist structure. The organization was built according to a scheme of central leadership with subsequent subordination of lower-level units. Despite the well-established structure of the IRB, maintaining secrecy proved an impossible task. The infiltration of informers and spies into its ranks was commonplace. The leader of the Fenian Brotherhood, James Stephens, borrowed both political ideas and organisational methods from the secret insurgent societies that abounded on the continent in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Fenian movement differed from all previous revolutionary movements in that it enjoyed support both among the Irish at home and among many Irish emigrants who had settled abroad. The Great Famine (1845–1849), which engulfed the Emerald Isle, triggered one of the largest transatlantic migrations of the Irish people. This tragedy fostered enduring resentment among Irish emigrants toward British imperial authority. Political exiles fleeing imprisonment capitalized on anti-British sentiment in the New World and continued their agitation in exile. In other words, the Irish nationalist movement after the Great Famine was largely shaped by the moods of political refugees, among whom was the prominent Irish revolutionary John O'Mahony, the founder of the IRB's American branch.

As the historian Brown notes, the Fenian Brotherhood in the United States exerted a significant influence on the formation of a new Irish nation, along democratic lines, on the other side of the Atlantic, biding its time to strike at the heart of the empire. [3, p. 358] Although the American Civil War, which began in April 1861, postponed any plans for an uprising in Ireland, it mobilized masses of Irish settlers who later formed the Fenian military contingent ready to fight for Ireland's independence.

Thus, democratic ideals, the successful examples of the American Revolution of 1776 and the French Revolution of 1789, as well as participation in the United States' War of Independence, fired the imagination of many Irish revolutionary fighters with dreams of an independent Irish republic offering equal rights to Catholics and Protestants. The synthesis of Franco-American republican ideas pushed the IRB towards the articulation of a secularization policy. As recalled by Gustave Cluseret, a member of the Paris Commune who worked closely with the Fenians, one of the key principles underpinning the Fenian programme was "a free church in a free state". [4, p. 91] For the Fenians, the solution to the religious question lay in separating the church and its clergy from politics. Charles Kickham, the Fenians' specialist on religious issues, drew attention to the fact that priests most often adopted conciliatory positions towards the metropolis, betraying Ireland's national interests. [5, p. 85] Despite the clearly expressed anticlericalism in Fenian discourse, the Irish People resolutely rejected accusations of irreligion, stressing that the IRB had nothing against priests as ministers of worship, adding, however, that in politics "they are the worst possible advisers". It is important to note that the conflict between the Fenians and the Catholic Church is regarded as one of the most significant and innovative aspects of the Irish revolutionary tradition, since it challenged the authority of the Holy See. [6, p. 180]

While maintaining national liberation as their primary objective, the Fenians recognized armed struggle as the only way to achieve it. The preference for a policy of "physical force" over "moral force" was dictated by the unsuccessful constitutional experience of the Repeal movement, which advocated non-violent resistance. The revolutionaries' rejection of the legitimacy of British state authority was expressed in their stance of anti-constitutionalism. The Fenian movement rejected parliamentary activity and advocated exclusively violent methods to overthrow the power of the English Crown.

For Fenian theorists such as O'Leary, Kickham and Luby, the idea of anti-landlordism was central. It envisaged the expropriation of property from landlords and its transfer to tenant farmers. However, the Fenians did not work out a detailed plan for resolving the agrarian question. The ideologues of Fenianism intended to return to its elaboration after the victory of the revolution, fearing the loss of the political agenda's primacy over economic issues. [5, p. 83]

All Fenian attempts at uprising ended in crushing failure. The reasons for their defeat lay in the preventive actions of the English police forces, followed by the arrest of IRB leaders. However, as a stage in the development of Irish nationalism, the Fenians' failure to carry out a revolution proved of central importance. The abortive seizure of arms at Chester Castle in February 1867, the desperate rescue of imprisoned Fenians in Manchester in September 1867, and the subsequent execution of the "Manchester martyrs" did not have as great a public resonance as the devastating explosion of 13 December outside the walls of Clerkenwell prison.

According to English politician and economist J.S. Mill, the Fenians' 'indiscriminate terror' on the mainland prompted a significant political re-evaluation of the Irish Question. [2, p. 36—37] This indisputable fact was most clearly confirmed in the words of W.E. Gladstone, the British Prime Minister, who outlined a number of Irish reforms in 1868: "Fenian-

ism opened my eyes to the depth of Irish disaffection. It taught me the passion and sincerity with which a people may love freedom and their country, and how such love, under misgovernment, may be turned to wrath". [7, p. 271]

Indeed, Liberal MPs began to speak more loudly of the need for radical land reform in Ireland. As early as 1869, Gladstone secured the passage of the Irish Church Act and the Irish Land Act of 1870, which, whether rightly or wrongly, were perceived in Ireland as a result of Fenian activity. [8, p. 252]

In other words, the Fenians' policy of terror proved effective in practice, as evidenced by subsequent political transformations in Ireland. Although British statesmen publicly opposed violent methods of struggle, the political history of the nineteenth century undoubtedly confirmed the validity of the Fenians' chosen methods. Charles Parnell, leader of the Land League, stated early in his political career that "no amount of eloquence could have achieved what was achieved by the fear of an impending uprising". [8, p. 107]

However, the surge of violence that plunged the Irish public into panic in the late 1860s compelled political leaders to abandon, indefinitely, the tactic of uprisings in favor of constitutional methods of struggle. This process heralded the policy of Home Rule, whose primary objective was to resolve the land question.

Thus, despite its failure to liberate Ireland, the Fenian movement played one of the decisive roles in the country's history. Through its call for armed insurrection, Fenianism reaffirmed for its generation the harsh old truth that freedom must be fought for, thereby immortalising the cult of heroic self-sacrifice in the name of the homeland. The idea of martyrdom embedded by the Fenians would later find expression in the 1916 Easter Rising and in the terrorist actions of IRA fighters who struggled against the colonial administration in occupied Ulster.

After two years of the bitter Irish War of Independence, the Anglo-Irish Treaty was signed in 1922, formalizing the partition of Ireland. The separation of the six most economically developed north-eastern counties from the rest of the island undermined the republican project of its independence and unity. In November 1921, the Workers' Republic newspaper noted: "An independent Ireland will be economically viable only together with Ulster. <...> Hypocritically exploiting the national factor, the English want to tear Ulster away from the rest of Ireland and create their own parliament there. Naturally, an autonomous Ulster will remain in the closest relations with England".¹ History confirmed the validity of this statement.

Over the subsequent decades, the policy of the Northern Irish government can be characterized as anti-democratic and discriminatory in various spheres with regard to the Catholic population. Catholics' rights to hold public office were curtailed. They accounted for only 10 per cent of jobs in the civil service, and virtually none of these posts were positions of status. [9, p. 12] Segregation in employment led to unemployment levels among the Catholic population that were several times higher than among Protestants. Ulster had the lowest GDP per capita and the highest

¹ Workers' Republic. 1921. 26 Nov.

unemployment rate in the entire United Kingdom. [10, p. 11] The situation of the population was further aggravated by the difficult economic conditions after the Second World War.

Against this dramatic backdrop, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) was founded at a meeting in Belfast in January 1967. It brought together a broad range of political forces: trade unions, national-democrats, republicans and also British Labour representatives. The association's members stood in defence of civil rights, specifically calling for the removal of restrictions on voting rights, an end to discrimination in housing and employment, and freedom of political activity for the entire population.

5 October 1968 may rightly be regarded as the second most important date in Ireland's twentieth-century history, second only to the Easter Rising. The protest held on that day marked the beginning of the escalation of civil unrest in Northern Ireland. Three months later, the civil rights march from Belfast to Derry became the culmination of the protest movement, exerting a major impact on "the spirit of '68 as a whole". These two demonstrations did more to influence the political situation in Northern Ireland than anything that had occurred since partition, forcing the British government to abandon its policy of non-intervention. [11, p. 260]

It is worth noting the active role of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during this period. The leadership decided to broaden the movement's focus and shift sharply to the left, opting for a constitutional method of struggle. However, not all republicans were satisfied with this chosen direction of political activity, which ultimately led to a split in the IRA in 1969 into the "Official" and the "Provisional" wings. As a result, the Provisionals positioned themselves as defenders of the Catholic community and as fighters for civil rights in clashes with the British army and armed Orangemen.

In August 1971, Northern Ireland was to experience yet another wave of violence, affecting the Catholic civilian population primarily. The Stormont government sanctioned Operation Demetrius, aimed at the mass arrests and internment of nationalists engaged in terrorist acts (the "Provisional" IRA). Suspects were held in special camps, one of which was located on the former Royal Air Force base at Long Kesh, near Lisburn. On the first day of the operation, 350 people were taken into custody. The policy of internment continued until December 1975. Over this period, the British authorities interned 1,981 people, 1,874 of whom were Catholics. [12, p. 202] Also in 1971, a ban was introduced in Ulster on marches and rallies. However, this restriction proved largely ineffective, as peaceful demonstrations filled the streets of Belfast and Derry. One of them became a turning point in the history of Northern Ireland. The day of 30 January 1972, better known as "Bloody Sunday", saw the British army shooting and killing 13 unarmed Catholic demonstrators. From that moment on, and for the next 25 years, the "Provisional" IRA systematically adhered to a strategy of terror.

In summary, unionist policy toward Catholics during the Ulster crisis of 1968–1972 was characterized by overt violence. It was distinguished by anti-democratic practices, institutional stigmatization, and the suppression of the national identity of the Catholic population. The gradual in-

tensification of policy is demonstrated by repressive measures against Catholics, including internment without trial, the existence of detention camps, and the suppression of protest movements, resulting in numerous civilian casualties. These processes contributed to the further radicalization of the 'Provisional' IRA, which adopted strategies of armed resistance in pursuit of its republican objectives.

Thus, the study identifies a consistent pattern within the Irish republican movement: armed resistance emerged as a structural response to systematic colonial and post-colonial oppression. Analysis of the two historical periods highlights the continuity of key ideological tenets and methods of political mobilization that sustained republican strategy under varying politico-institutional conditions. Repressive policies enacted by British and unionist governments consistently served as catalysts for the radicalization of the national liberation movement, supporting the thesis regarding the functional role of political violence under institutionalized discrimination and resistance to reform. Armed struggle proved effective as a means of compelling the dominant side to engage in political dialogue and enact legislative concessions.

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