

# H-Net Reviews

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Peter Hart. *The I.R.A. at War, 1916-1923*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. xvi + 274 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-925258-9.

Reviewed by William Kautt (U.S. Army Command and General Staff College)  
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## Revisiting the Irish Revolution

For almost seven years, between 1916 and 1923, Ireland endured major changes in its political and social fabric. These changes were brought about primarily through violence and, to a certain extent, are still felt today. This upheaval wrenched most of Ireland from the United Kingdom and inexorably changed its political landscape. In the last thirty-five years, there has been a re-examination of this conflict with a view toward ridding the field of politically flavored accounts. Most recently, a new generation of historians has taken the lead in this re-evaluation. Foremost among them is Peter Hart, who burst onto the scene with his masterful work, *The I.R.A. and its Enemies* (1998), on the social makeup of the I.R.A. conflict in County Cork. Since the publication of his first text, Hart has become the standard-bearer for the empirical study of the conflict and has made major contributions in the field.

Almost anticlimactically, Hart's latest book is an anthology of his previously published articles, albeit with critical updates and additions. The major strength of this compilation is that it brings together his best ideas, mostly using statistical methodology, on the war. He does this in the hopes of sparking a new debate about the nature of the conflict. Indeed, in the title of his introductory chapter he calls this "A New Revolutionary History." Here, Hart explains that Ireland's fight for independence is important in a wider context because, in a very real way, the I.R.A. "invented modern revolutionary warfare" (p. 3). He continues, arguing further that its relevance is firmly rooted in the fact that it was one of the best-documented wars of its kind in history.

However, before proceeding, it is important to note that this work is not military, but rather, social history. In some respects, this hurts his analysis when he delves into more military topics. In fact, Hart, in questioning the usefulness of guerrilla theory, appeals to a social scientific approach. Importantly, he says, "if nationalist explanations for the course of events fail to meet empirical and logical tests, they should be discarded" (p. 5). Yet what he does not recognize is that by divorcing theory—partly the explanation of actions—from guerrilla warfare, one loses the meaning and intent of sometimes obscure or seemingly indefensible actions by the insurgents. Still more importantly, the symbolic nature of actions is lost. With this slightly narrow-minded view, Hart then proceeds to describe his vision of revolution, which actually differs little from commonly accepted definitions.

Despite this shortcoming, Hart's introduction rightly points out that the war has no proper name—it is variously known as the "Anglo-Irish War" (which is unacceptable because it implies that it was a war solely against the English); the "War of Independence" (objectionable because it implies that the republicans won the war); and the "Tan War" (which is too specific, being the name of only one group of combatants) (p. 4). Such confusion and contradiction in terms perfectly and appropriately captures the perplexing and often controversial nature of the conflict. Hart makes the case for using "Irish Revolution" because of the tremendous change in Irish society and politics resulting from the conflict. Perhaps it is reasonable to use this general term because there were multiple phases of the conflict—specifically the 1916 Easter

Rising, the 1919-1921 "Tan War," and the Irish Civil War (1922-23) to name a few.

One of Hart's greatest contributions to Irish historiography has been his judicious use of statistical analysis. The second chapter, "Geography of Revolution," is a revision and expansion of his May 1998 *Past and Present* article of the same name. The original article was hailed as groundbreaking in its use of statistics to track and map violence in Ireland during the war. It confirmed what was popularly known from the time of the war, that violence and its manifestations were quite varied by location throughout Ireland in terms of number and frequency. There was, however, a flaw in the original statistical methodology; Hart chose his sample of locations for deliberate, and therefore biased, reasons. By doing this, rather than selecting randomly or examining the entire population, he introduced sample selection bias into his results. In his newly revised chapter 2, Hart corrects this deficiency by examining all thirty-two counties in Ireland. In the process, he confirms his earlier findings.

Unfortunately, Hart's methodology is still not completely sound, because he only examines 1917 to 1923, thus ignoring the critical 1916 Easter Rising, despite acknowledging the Rising as the beginning of the revolution. Hart also errs by using problematic sources such as the monthly police reports from 1917 to 1921 (they ceased in 1922); the *Irish Times*, the *Cork Examiner*, and the *Times*, all from 1917 to 1923; and the *Freeman's Journal* for 1921-23. These sources not only cover different times, but also are disparately biased. For example, using only one regional newspaper (the *Cork Examiner*), which covered only some of the six counties of the province of Munster cannot possibly capture what Hart purports to be measuring. He should either have eliminated that source or found its equivalent in the three other provinces. Thus, his data are not a representative sample and, as a result, he reintroduces sample selection bias into the study. From this also stems concerns about content validity. Clearly, his claim of 90 percent accuracy is impossible to substantiate empirically or otherwise.

That said, this does not mean that Hart's conclusions are wrong. Based on the available qualitative evidence (of which there is a great quantity, hence the need for statistical means to examine it), his original article and his new evidence are likely correct. Therefore, one cannot, nor should one attempt, to dismiss the study. Rather, Hart deserves great credit for introducing statistical methods into recent Irish historiography.

Hart's general weakness in military history resur-

faces in chapter 3 with a flaw that touches on a question about when the middle conflict (generally 1919-1921) actually began. Hart states that by measuring levels of violence, one could argue that the war really began only in January 1920, rather than January 1919. Here he makes the error of equating a low level of violence with an absence of war. Simply put, causing a stone bridge to collapse by removing the keystone is not directly violent, but if it blocks an avenue of approach and secures the I.R.A.'s flank in an arms raid on a police barracks, it is no less offensive than blowing it up; or indeed leaving a blocking force to attack a relief party. Hart misses the concept of preemptive or preventative action in guerrilla war, which is a critical omission because much in this type of warfare is preparatory or symbolic. His later description of guerrilla war as "mass homicide" (p. 89)—referring to the numerous assassinations and executions—only serves to amplify this point. Obviously, one need *not* be a military historian to write about war, but clearly one should demonstrate a sound knowledge and understanding of it when addressing a military topic.

Although Hart's misunderstanding of the nature of military strategy in general and guerrilla warfare specifically is present throughout his work, it only hampers analysis in specific cases. For instance, by questioning the war's starting date, one would have to accept that the British Cabinet, in late 1919, radically altered long-standing policy by reinforcing the greatly beleaguered Royal Irish Constabulary (R.I.C.) with non-Irishmen without a sufficient reason. Yet even these reinforcements, arriving in early spring 1920, were insufficient to stem the tide of the on-going R.I.C. general withdrawal (they themselves sometimes referred to it as a "retreat") from the countryside and smaller towns to cities, which began in January 1920. Thus, his claim defies logic, for why would the police retreat unless they were already losing forces in the war? It is highly unlikely that the R.I.C., experiencing less than a month at war (going by a January 1920 start date) were so demoralized as to require a general withdrawal. Further, the Inspector-General of the R.I.C., Brigadier-General Byrne, was so depressed by the conflict that he was relieved in March 1920 after having held the position for four years. These are, perhaps, minor points, but are indicative and are actually made more apparent by Hart's outstanding prose and otherwise flawless logic.

A less problematic issue, which is also reflective of this general weakness in Hart's work, is that he only counts those wounded or killed by bombs and firearms

as casualties of the conflict. Yet there were several well-documented instances of I.R.A. members and police being burned when the latter used arson against R.I.C. barracks during raids. Were these injuries not wounds received in action? There are many ways to wound or kill, but Hart's justification that gunshot wounds and bombings are almost always reported is well taken, if not entirely correct. It is important not to overstate the case, but methodology is still important.

Another statistically based chapter on I.R.A. violence follows and compliments the previous geographical one. Likewise, Hart's chapter 5 on Irish republicans and their activities in Britain is a very good survey of the subject, but adds little to his earlier article of the same name ("Operations Abroad," *English Historical Review*, 115 (2000): pp. 71-102).

However, one chapter that stands out is his demographic survey of the IRA rank and file. By charting their social background, including economic activities and employment, familial connections, and religion, Hart gives the reader an excellent view of these men. Indeed, a general work on this topic is much needed. He goes into greater detail than his original and excellent exposition in his *I.R.A. and its Enemies*, which contained a great deal of such information, but was limited to County Cork.

At first, chapter 8, on the long-standing question of whether Michael Collins ordered the murder of Northern Irish loyalist Field Marshal Sir Henry Wilson in 1922 seems out of place because it reads more like "true crime" than history. But his excellently written discussion, almost in the form of a crime report, takes the reader through the competing theories, and in so doing, bridges the gap between the end of the I.R.A. war against British rule and the beginning of the Irish Civil War in 1922.

This chapter on the murder of this champion of the loyalist north leads naturally to his last two chapters on the experience of Protestants, who were mostly loyalist, in the heavily republican south. In detailing this, he brings the ugly past of republican-initiated violence to the fore. Although not officially sanctioned by the provisional government, this is a topic that most researchers

have avoided. Hart addresses it head-on and brings his impressive statistical skills soundly to bear once again, demonstrating the magnitude of the situation and juxtaposing it briefly with the plight of Catholics in the north.

In the final chapter, Hart examines these northern Catholics and their response to violence, privation, and harassment. He places both the southern Protestant and the northern Catholic persecutions into context by comparing them. His treatment of these two related topics is impressive and completely objective—a rare quality on such a sensitive issue. This is, no doubt, due to his statistical basis for the evidence.

Hart's book suffers somewhat from the disjointedness of seemingly disparate topics that, in reality, should be joined together by the common thread of the Irish Revolution. Several chapters are repetitive, an issue that would not be present if written or edited in a more complementary fashion. Adding to this problem is the complete lack of a concluding chapter, which causes an untimely end that squanders the opportunity to unite the various factors.

Hart wanted to start a new discussion of the era of the revolution as a whole. Instead, he simply brings some of his best work together into one volume. Whether his work will spark debate depends largely on how his results are received. I cannot fault his demographic work, nor his discussion and treatment of the southern Protestants and northern Catholics. Also, I accept his explanation of the geography of violence with the provisos already stated. Nor can I find fault with his chapter on the "operations abroad," except to say that much remains to be done in that area, but his introduction of the topic is very good. Finally, I agree with his argument in choosing "Irish Revolution" as the appropriate name for the conflict. In the end, I see little to debate because Hart has basically gotten it right.

Aside from the issues about the nature of guerrilla war and the sampling methodology, this is an excellent work. And although not a military history, nor really meant to be, it is absolutely essential for any serious student of the war or of the era in Ireland.

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