

 **Article REVIEW**

Jonathan W. Gantt. 'Irish-American Terrorism and Anglo-American Relations, 1881-1885.'
Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era 5:4 (October 2006): 325-357.

Reviewed by **Andrew Baker**, University of Oxford
Published by *H-Diplo* on 4 April 2007

In 1876, the Italian anarchists Malatesta and Cafiero declared that 'the insurrectional fact destined to affirm socialist Federation by deeds is the most effective means of propaganda;' soon after, the French physician Paul Brousse coined the term, 'propaganda by deed,' that is, propaganda by dagger, bomb, and rifle.¹ Within five years, Alexander II of Russia had been assassinated. Nationalists around the world rejoiced: in India, B.G. Tilak proclaimed that Russian discontent had 'at last grown so high that it has shattered the highest head there is in Russia.'² The intelligentsia was pioneering new ideas and new methodologies; dissidents, nationalists, and labour organisers took note.

Or did they? One of the intriguing suggestions of Jonathan Gantt's research is that, in the Irish context, the emergence of a philosophy of terror and the development of terrorist methodology was essentially linked to the struggle with Britain, and had very little to do with a few Continental idealists. The campaign was launched in 1881; other campaigns drew inspiration, and some used similar methods; it reached a crescendo in 1884-85; suddenly, it ceased. Why? The campaign was damaging the goals of Irish nationalists, and British counter-terrorism had become more effective. In short, the real philosophy of the bomb was strategic: the campaign was dominated by operational pragmatism, not revolutionary idealism.

The tale which Gantt relates is already well known, and there is, besides, a depressing familiarity about the pattern of events. Following the Rising of March 1867, Fenian exiles, including John Devoy and Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, gathered in New York City in 1871. The Irish vote was important politically: O'Donovan Rossa and Devoy, among others, were given an audience with President Ulysses S. Grant. The Irish exiles formed Clan-na-Gael, or the United Brotherhood. By the mid-1870's, the organisation boasted more than 10,000 members (including at least one British spy). However, there was a parting of ways: while moderates like Devoy remained committed to revolutionary republicanism, O'Donovan Rossa, using the weekly *United Irishmen* as his forum, advocated an unconventional war against the English, organised his supporters into small cells, and established the 'Skirmishing Fund' to finance his activities. Initially, the fund was small; successful attacks, however, stimulated the fund, and attracted new converts to O'Donovan Rossa's brand of unconventional violence.

Between January 1881, and January 1885, O'Donovan Rossa's dynamiters conducted a string of bombings, culminating in a coordinated attack (during visiting hours) on the Tower of London and Westminster. The dynamiters influenced other extremists. Two prominent Americans,

¹ Walter Laqueur, *The Age of Terrorism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987), 48.

² *Mahratta: A Journal of Politics, Literature and Society*, 20 March 1881, 1.

Alexander Sullivan and Patrick Egan, formed a secret wing of Clan-na-Gael, known as ‘the Triangle.’ In contrast to O’Donovan Rossa’s fundraising, Egan simply embezzled \$100,000 of Clan-na-Gael money to fund the Triangle. The Triangle’s attacks shook the British public much more deeply than O’Donovan Rossa: on 30 October 1883, two bombs were detonated in the London Underground, one at Paddington Station, the other between Charing Cross and Westminster. Another group, the ‘Irish Invincibles,’ assassinated Frederick Cavendish and Thomas Burke in May 1882, an event known as the Phoenix Park murders. By 1884-85, it appeared as though the English were under siege.

The terrorists were not successful. The British reorganised their counter-terrorist efforts, and formed the Special Branch of the Criminal Investigation Division; the British thwarted numerous attacks, including two on Mansion House, captured, tried, and convicted numerous bombers, and even employed a private firm, Pinkerton’s Detective Agency, to infiltrate Clan-na-Gael in America. In the end, the bombing campaign simply fizzled out. O’Donovan Rossa had written that, ‘if dynamite is necessary to the redemption of Ireland, then dynamite is a blessed agent... I do not know how dynamite could be put to better use than in blowing up the British Empire (331).’ The fact was, dynamite did not blow up the British Empire: with increasing numbers of dynamiters in British prisons and American opinion turning sour, Irish nationalists altered their methods—at any rate, until the Easter Uprising.

What Gantt contributes to this story is an understanding of how this campaign, which was planned, financed, and supplied from America, affected Anglo-American relations at the end of the nineteenth century. His treatment of Anglo-American relations in the context of terrorism may be treated under three rough sections: the emergence of a shared ideological aversion to terrorism; the growth of a more tolerant American attitude towards British repression of terrorists, even those who claimed American citizenship; and the development of legal and institutional links to combat international terrorism.

Gantt provides the strongest case for his ideological argument, to wit, that the experience of international terror, and the consequent revulsion of such methods, was an important element of the emerging trans-Atlantic liberal consensus. Between 1881 and 1882, that is, at the beginning of the dynamite campaign, the American Congress practically applauded the acts of the dynamiters, who were valiantly resisting ‘denationalization’ at the hands of a ‘British tyranny,’ guilty of ‘wanton brutality (337).’ By 1885, America’s new Secretary of State, Thomas Bayard, railed against the influence of the ‘Dynamite Irish vote’ in American politics (353), and Grover Cleveland’s first State of the Union Address advised revoking the citizenship of naturalised citizens who engaged in terrorist violence against their original governments (356).

What changed? Irish terrorism reached such a pitch in 1884 that the American position on the issue ceased to be dominated by a single interest group, i.e. the Irish vote, and became a matter of general alarm. The *New York Times* of January 1885, was headlined ‘London’s Great Terror,’ and, the presidential election behind them, Congress (particularly, Senate Republicans) decided that Irish terrorism could be debated (348). A consensus emerged in 1885 that, in view of the attacks in London, terrorists must be regarded as *hostis humani generis*, culminating in the Bayard Resolution, which declared that America regarded such acts with ‘horror and detestation (349).’

What action was taken? In a negative sense, Congress and the United States State Department simply became more tolerant of Britain's suppression of Irish terrorists, even those who claimed American citizenship. Between 1881 and 1882, public and Congressional pressure forced the State Department to intervene vigorously in a dozen cases where Britain had imprisoned Irish Americans, and to advocate the early release of prisoners. State Department officials acknowledged that naturalised Irish-Americans were among the most violent and incorrigible offenders in British custody; nevertheless, they pressed their cases forcefully (336). In 1885, America's Minister to Britain, E.J. Phelps, concluded that the proceedings against Irish-American terrorists were 'eminently just and fair,' and the life sentences received by the Westminster and Tower of London bombers, 'fully justified (352).'

In a positive sense, the answer is hazy. Gantt describes a half decade during which the British Government produced or published conclusive evidence linking bombers, bombs, explosives, shipments, finance, public relations and propaganda to Irish activists in America, while the American Government dithered and, ultimately, did nothing. It was beyond the American Government, even to control the supply or transport of explosives: a prosecution against an American firm which supplied dynamite to the bombers was dropped; and, while it was illegal to transport *undeclared* dynamite on passenger vessels, there was no effort to anticipate whether *declared* dynamite was intended for use in legitimate or illegitimate activities. Similarly, while negotiations on a new Anglo-American extradition treaty began in 1885, the Irish vote killed every effort to include a 'dynamite clause,' so that the Blaine-Pauncefote Extradition Treaty, ratified in 1890, did more to satisfy the American desire to extradite embezzlers from Canada, than it did the British desire to extradite terrorists from America. Congress did not enact laws addressing the shipment of explosives for terrorist purposes until 1909; and it did not ratify an extradition agreement which included destruction of property and malicious injury to persons until 1931.

The only complaint which may be levelled at Gantt, is the conclusion he draws from this woeful tale of Congressional inaction, to wit, that this marked the beginning of a new era in which 'the two Atlantic powers worked closely together to strengthen their counter-terrorism policies (357).'

Undoubtedly, the two countries have forged a very close relationship; but they have done so *in spite* of Irish-American terrorism. It is only very recently, in the context of the War on Terror and the opposition of the Irish themselves to terrorism, that a truly unified Anglo-American counter-terrorism policy has emerged.

Even then, progress has been rocky. The U.S.-U.K. Extradition Treaty 2003, for instance, was held up for some years in the U.S. Senate as a result of the Irish lobby, and was only ratified by the Senate at the end of 2006, thanks, in part, to the personal diplomacy of Baroness Scotland. At the same time, in an echo of the Blaine-Pauncefote Treaty, the U.S. Justice Department took advantage of the fact that Britain had ratified the treaty in 2003, in order to extradite three Britons wanted in connection with the Enron financial scandal. When it comes to an Anglo-American response to Irish-American terrorism, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the future is the past. One British statesman has recently written: 'nothing changed. The collecting tins continued to be passed around; the weapons were purchased, and Irish Republican leaders

who had killed and maimed were regularly welcomed to the White House.’³ The cinematic exploits of Harrison Ford notwithstanding, would it not be more accurate to conclude that 1885 marked the beginning of a long policy of communicative inaction, or cooperative disagreement?

The question which remains is, why? It is obvious, from Gantt’s article, that terrorism was much more important, as a trans-Atlantic issue, than historians have appreciated hitherto. It was also an issue which was relegated to the furthest corner of Anglo-American relations. It has sometimes been carted into the light, and protests and prayers said over it; but ever has it been banished to the corner whence it came. How and why did Washington and London agree to banish this spectre? How did Anglo-Irish relations become a hostage to Anglo-American relations? These questions are important historically and politically: it is not often that states put aside important, even vital, interests, in order to pursue another set of objectives in their foreign policy. From a very early stage, there was something special about the Anglo-American relationship.

Obviously, these are broader question than Gantt set out to address, but his article suggests a number of important points which cannot be ignored. First, the Anglo-Irish-American triangle really dates to 1881-85, to the experience of trans-Atlantic terrorism, the emergence of an Anglo-American consensus, and the efforts of Britain to preserve and extend this consensus, and to base policy upon it. Second, British efforts to cooperate with America, and to ‘socialise’ America into the society of great states, ran much deeper, and involved greater sacrifices, than a few concessions on South American boundaries and Canadian fisheries. If Britain was never able to set the pace of American policy towards Ireland or the Irish, Gantt’s article does indicate that, even at the height of the ‘*pax Britannica*,’ British officials played a long and careful game to ensure that, in future, it would be the British, and not the Irish, who set the pace of American policy towards Britain. In this respect, the Bayard Amendment, and President Cleveland’s first State of the Union Address, though they generated little policy, did represent an important turning point in Anglo-American relations.

Copyright © 2007 by H-Diplo, all rights reserved. H-Diplo and H-Net permit the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu.

Commissioned for H-Diplo by Diane Labrosse

H-Diplo Article Reviews website: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/reviews/>

H-Diplo Article Reviews RSS feed: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/rss/articlereviews.xml>

³ Chris Patten, *Not Quite the Diplomat: Home Truths about World Affairs* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), 13.