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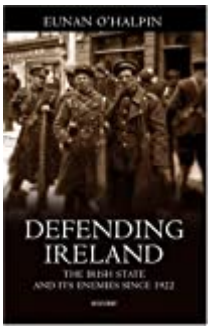


**Eunan O'Halpin.** *Defending Ireland: The Irish State and its Enemies since 1922.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. xvi + 382 pp. Â£25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-820426-8.

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Sinn Fein's strategy to achieve independence between 1918 and 1921-2 was multi-layered, but essentially relied upon diplomacy. Mass agitation, the republican para-government, and the IRA's military actions were woven into a seamless propaganda that was whole and assiduously touted around the world, and particularly within the United States–where Eamonn de Valera, President of the underground Republic, spent much of the period. Formidable success was achieved. A pariah amongst allied states in 1916 for its dalliance with Germany, Irish republicanism by 1921 enjoyed widespread sympathy. The maintenance of forms of civil and military administration despite British imposed illegality seemed to demonstrate the Irish capacity for self-government. Acute awareness that the conflict in Ireland was seriously tarnishing their international reputation for democracy and liberalism helped drive Lloyd George and the British to the negotiating table.

Republican success, thus, was far from simply reliant on the martial prowess of the IRA. The IRA's two achievements had been to shatter the illusion of Britain's governing with consensus and to pose as a fairly creditable national army despite British efforts to denigrate them as murder-gangs. Thus they served their role as part of the overall propaganda offensive. With the Treaty, however, it became clear that the IRA's actions were not popularly seen in such an instrumental light. Volunteers were lauded as heroes, the British were depicted as having been forced to talk by the efforts of this rag-bag outfit alone. Clearly, in nationalist consciousness, militarism served a psychological function far greater than its practical value. If Home Rule had been tainted by its humiliating dependence on the Liberal alliance, productive of petitioning and a wheedling political culture, armed violence hurled defiance at Britain and gave the illusion of an unaided assertion of Irish rights. Fighting for Irish freedom accorded with nationalist pride rather better than having it handed over by an indulgent Britain. In sober moments many may have reflected that Home Rule, as negotiated with the Liberals, may perhaps have almost as easily led to independence as *de facto* Dominion status conceded in 1922. But few regretted the War of Independence. In an age of militarism heroic sacrifice sanctified the mundanities of self-government.

Quite possibly Britain's intransigence on the question of the Free State's relation to the Crown, whilst obviously motivated by imperial considerations, was designed also to split the Irish revolutionary alliance. The IRA were, as one might expect, disproportionately attached to the irreducible ideal of the Republic. By denying them this psychological satisfaction, Britain ensured their shearing off from the Free State and the construc-

tion of a new, thermidorian army in its stead. What a blow it must have been to republicans of all hues (and after all those who accepted the Treaty with Britain did so under sufferance without repudiating the republican ideal) to lose, at the very outset of the new state, the endorsement of those soldiers who, myth rapidly asserted, had won the War of Independence. And what a burden for the rapidly created National Army. Not only had they no hand in the recent revolutionary war, but they were now turned against these heroes of the struggle. From the outset the legitimate monopolisation of armed force, a prerequisite for any modern democratic state, was denied Independent Ireland.

This is the conundrum discussed by Professor O'Halpin in his exhaustively researched an impressively wide-ranging examination of the military, intelligence and (to a lesser extent due to the relative inaccessibility or sources) police defences of the state. Irredentist republicanism proved to be the most persistent threat to the security, and it seems that the armed capacity of the state was kept a level no more than sufficient to deal with this. More formidable possibilities existed, however. British re-occupation was perhaps the most likely catastrophe. Nazi invasion was a genuine threat, subversion even more so. Ireland presumably featured little in Soviet war plans, but it paid some little attention to subversion here as elsewhere and no doubt would have grabbed it as an after thought had Britain fallen. From the outset the new state tacitly accepted that Britain would defend the archipelago and that independent Ireland would never allow its territory to be used by any belligerent as a base of operations against Britain. All republicans, pro or anti Treaty, agreed that the new state would "stay out of other people's wars." The Free State laboured under stigma of duties of political suppression.

O'Halpin paints a grim picture of the state's suppression of Irregular republican militarism in the Civil War of 1922-3. Though generally accepting that the Free State had little choice but to suppress armed absolutist republicanism, for fear, if nothing else, that it would provoke a new and much fiercer war with Britain. The post-Treaty civil war marked the state'ss security apparatus from the outset, and the persistent, if usually latent rather than active, internal security threat from irredentist nationalists stymied an evolution towards normality. Despite the existence of a notoriously ruthless Criminal Investigation Department based upon Michael Collins' counter-intelligence assassination squad from the War of Independence, the new Garda Siochana (Civil Guard) police force was markedly non-repressive from the outset. Most notably, despite civil war conditions, it was planned and soon established as an unarmed service. Under the energetic leadership of the wayward Chief Commissioner, General O'Duffy, it soon won widespread acceptance and rarely found itself a target for persecution by republican irregulars.

Britain lavishly armed the Free State National Army and even provided sea transport for amphibious operations. This reserve allowed the National Army to expand its size and overcome the strategic advantages and fighting superiority initially enjoyed by Irregular forces. In June 1922 the Free State had 10,000 men under arms Â in eleven months of war this increased five-fold. In many respects the Free State Army was the armed wing of British imperialism, enforcing a deeply unpopular settlement against a militantly recalcitrant minority. Though to a substantial degree, the Free Staters were an apolitical, even mercenary army, its cadre were firm republicans determined to use a long spoon when supping with the English devil. Their insistence on pushing towards the ultimate goal Â using the Treaty as a stepping stone to greater freedom as Collins had counselled Â helped provoke a half-hearted and unsuccessful army mutiny during post-civil war demobilisation.

If an army serves as a symbol of national unity and valour, then the National Army was a poor buttress to the nation. Effectively it had played no role in the War of Independence. Though effective against the Irregulars in the Civil War its cruelty and recourse to atrocity shocked even those who supported a sanguine ruthlessness against enemies of the state. With the extremely rapid demobilisation of the Army from the mid 1920s, until it was little more than nominal, O'Halpin's book takes on a tone of regret and admonition. But the National Army, frankly, was an embarrassment. A story to be drawn from this book is the struggle to manufacture a National Army mystique. But it is a story much underplayed by the author who floods the reader with a highly detailed institutional history at the cost of an examination of the army's role in public symbolism. The army'ss meek acceptance of an attenuated defence role, and failure to assert itself in the domain of politics, surely had as much to do with a basic awareness of their own unpopularity as a tender concern for the democratic process.

De Valera was in a double bind with his advent to power in 1932. Not only did he formally excoriate the National Army Â his deadly enemies of only a decade previously Â but also he indulged the pretensions of legitimacy paraded, often literally, by the IRA. His adroit

solution included incorporating much of the old IRA in an Army reserve, militarily next to useless but sublimating their militarism whilst injecting much needed national credibility into the defence forces. His striking of medals for service in the War of Independence, conveniently blanking the divisive Civil War, was similarly well-judged.

The Emergency Â Ireland's posture of barely armed neutrality during the Second World War Â mobilised substantial if ill-equipped reserves and popularised the defence forces. That some of this sheen was lost as post-war Ireland realised the moral dimensions of the anti-fascist crusade goes far to explain the reactive fetishising of neutrality as a strategic, even spiritual stance during the Cold War. For a small, determinedly anti-Communist state to remain outside hegemonic "Natopolis," however, surely had more positive, if minor, significance that O'Halpin suggests. Even in geo-politics and collective security, pluralism has its uses.

A striking legitimisation of the Defence Forces stems from their involvement from 1957 in UN peacekeeping operations. Even heavy losses in the Congo Â nine Irish soldiers were martyred in 1960 Â failed to stem popular enthusiasm for "our boys." Long years of attrition and ineffective warfare by the longer standing "boys," the IRA, had worn at their claim to be the real national army of the republic, but even yet very many were prepared to see them as primary custodians of IrelandÂ¹s national valour. Republican control of the "National Graves Association" was firm and uncontested (they even provided a guard of honour for the reinterment of Roger Casement'ss remains in 1966). Perhaps just in time, however, the glamour of overseas service on the part of the established army eclipsed that of IRA training camps in the wilds of Donegal and occasional forays against the northern state. Nevertheless, Ireland felt the strain when republican insurgency exploded in the north from about 1970. Its not mentioned here, but the army command feared desertions from the reserve to the combative IRA, and significantly the state moved to suppress the wearing of military uniform by non-state formations. The success with which the army endured challenges to its authority during the Troubles is indicated by admittedly surreptitious co-operation with British armed forces. By dint of playacting and service on the world stage, the army slowly evolved from being a burden on the state's legitimacy, to a symbol of Celtic moral authority in the world. Its co-operation with Britain in stemming anarchy in the north was a signal indication of successful implantation.

The process is very far from complete, however. The Irish Defence Forces face a very real challenge to its residual military capability as a consequence of yet more government cuts. This cavalier attitude to the army is facilitated by widespread public disgust at the slew of suits for compensation brought by ex-soldiers suffering, to varying degrees, from deafness incurred through years of cheese-pared weapons training. It is apparent that the defence forces, even now, are very far from the focal centre of pride in the Irish state. Neutrality has been as much a recognition of this as a money saving wheeze. O'Halpin's meticulous and fond reflection on the Irish army tradition is unlikely to change this.



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