



The Hollow Hierarchy:

Problems of Command and Control in the Provisional IRA

by Antony Field



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Abstract

The Provisional IRA has often been characterized as a hierarchical terrorist group, particularly by proponents of the 'new' terrorist concept'. However, this does not adequately describe the reality of decision-making within the Provisional IRA. From the very beginning, important operational choices were made by PIRA volunteers at local level, without significant input from the senior leaders of the group. Despite a series of organizational reforms that were designed to reign in local volunteers, the leadership of the Provisional IRA was often unable to exercise effective command and control over rank-and-file members of the group.

While the Provisional IRA displayed many of the hallmarks of a hierarchical terrorist group, we need to be careful not to oversimplify its organizational behavior and conflate its formal structure with how it actually functioned. The Provisional IRA leadership tried to present the facade of an organized and disciplined guerilla army, but the internal workings of the group were much more complicated and chaotic. Despite the presence of hierarchical institutions, the leadership had constant problems controlling rank-and-file members. Indeed, many Provisional IRA operations were planned sporadically at a local level, without significant input from the hierarchical chain of command. Centralized command and control was frequently undermined by independent operational decision making and internal bargaining between different factions. In some ways, the leadership of the Provisional IRA presided over a hollow hierarchy.

This research has important implications for the 'new terrorism' debate. According to the 'new terrorism' school of thought, the terrorist groups that operated in the 1970s-1980s, such as the Provisional IRA, are substantively different from the terrorist groups of today.[1] More specifically, proponents of the new terrorism concept have argued the terrorist groups of the past were hierarchical entities, whereas contemporary terrorist groups operate as loose networks and leaderless resistance movements.[2] Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler observe that 'from an organizational perspective, the new terrorists have tended to rely less on hierarchical and more on horizontally articulated and network-based forms than those active in the 1960s and 1970s'.[3] Along the same lines, Albert J. Bergesen and Yi Han comment that 'newer terrorist organizations have moved away from the older model of professionally trained terrorists operating within hierarchical organizations with a central command chain toward a looser organization with a less clear structure'.[4] Mathew J. Morgan argues that 'terrorist groups have evolved from hierarchical, vertical organizational structures, to more horizontal, less command-driven groups'.[5]

In this context, the Provisional IRA has often been put forward as a leading example of a 'traditional' hierarchical terrorist group.[6] For example, Bruce Hoffman has described the Provisional IRA as a 'stereotype of the traditional terrorist group' characterized by 'pyramidal, hierarchical, organizational



structures'.[7] Similarly, Christopher Dishman characterizes the Provisional IRA as a 'typical hierarchical organization'.[8] In his analysis of 'old and new terrorism', Peter Neumann refers to the Provisional IRA as an example of 'old terrorism', because while decision making within the group was 'sometimes messy, the military hierarchy remained intact'.[9] Along the same lines, Thomas Copeland writes that 'old' terrorist groups 'had fairly well defined command and control structures' and that 'the PLO, IRA and ETA were typical of this type'.[10]

However, we should be cautious about putting the Provisional IRA into the category of a 'traditional' hierarchical terrorist group. As this article will show, the chain of command in the Provisional IRA was often notional rather than actual. Indeed, the ability of the leadership to exercise command and control over operations was frequently undermined by the rapid turnover of personnel, the disruptive effect of counterterrorism operations, disagreements between volunteers, and the parochialism of local commanders. Decision making within the Provisional IRA was much more complicated and fragmented than the organizational chart would suggest.

Building the Provisional IRA

The first time-period under analysis covers the formation and early years of the Provisional IRA (1969-1975) during which its initial organizational structure was laid down. From the very start, the Provisional IRA had a quasi-military structure that consisted of a central leadership committee which presided over subservient volunteers. However, the way the organization functioned in practice was much more complicated. During the early years of the Provisional IRA, the leadership struggled to manage a surge in recruitment and adapt to the disruptive effect of counterterrorism operations. As a result, the leadership's command and control was somewhat sporadic and they had considerable difficulty directing operations on the ground. In many cases, operational decisions were made at a local level with practically no input from the leadership. Despite its hierarchical appearance, the Provisional IRA was a disjointed and fragmented organization with inconsistent command and control mechanisms.

The Provisional Irish Republican Army was created in late 1969, following divisions between conservatives and reformists within the Irish Republican Army.[11] As the leaders of Provisional IRA were all veterans of the much older Irish Republican Army, it is perhaps unsurprising that they modelled the organization of the new group on the structure of its predecessor. At the top of the Provisional IRA hierarchy was a central leadership committee called the 'Army Council'. It was made up of eight positions: 'Chief of Staff', 'Deputy Chief of Staff', 'Quarter Master General', 'Adjutant General', 'Director of Organization', 'Director of Intelligence', 'Director of Engineering' and 'Secretary'. Collectively, the Army Council had overall responsibility for directing the armed struggle.[12] Most importantly, it had the authority to order operations and veto plans proposed by PIRA volunteers.[13]

Beneath the Army Council was a decision-making body called the General Headquarters Staff. This organization consisted of ten separate Departments: 'Quartermasters', 'Engineering', 'Training', 'Finance', 'Foreign Operations', 'Domestic Operations', 'Security', 'Intelligence', 'Publicity', and 'Education'.[14] The people from these different departments worked closely with the Army Council to plan and implement Provisional IRA operations.[15] One Provisional IRA volunteer described the General Headquarters as: 'the section of the IRA with operational control over all IRA activity, running the IRA on a daily basis'.[16] This enabled the Army Council to have 'operational and organization control over a number of levels within the movement'.[17] Notably, the General Headquarters played a key role in coordinating high-profile attacks –



sometimes referred to as 'spectaculars'. According to Christopher Drake, such operations were often 'planned by General Headquarters (GHQ) and executed by specially selected units'.^[18]

Further down the Provisional IRA chain of command, the rank-and-file volunteers were organized into geographical 'Brigades', 'Battalions' and 'Companies'.^[19] This mimicked the organizational system used by the Irish Republican Army in the 1920s.^[20] The four most active Brigades were in Belfast, Derry, East Tyrone and South Armagh. The largest was the Belfast Brigade, which consisted of three or four Battalions, divided into a number of smaller Companies.^[21] In addition, there were numerous 'local defense committees' and part-time members of the 'Auxiliary IRA' who would lend assistance as needed.^[22]

The quasi-military structure of the Provisional IRA was supposed to ensure that the leaders of the Provisional IRA had control over rank-and-file operations. However, in practice the situation was much more complicated. In the early 1970s, the command and control capabilities of the Provisional IRA leadership were severely stretched by a period of rapid expansion. Many of the new recruits were the product of sectarian violence between Protestants and Catholics.^[23] In 1968, the Irish Republican Army had few active volunteers and only consisted of only around 120 members across the whole of Northern Ireland.^[24] By the early 1970s, the Provisional IRA had over 1,000 members in Belfast alone.^[25] One Provisional IRA member recalls that: 'we had to turn people away' because 'they could not be vetted quick enough'.^[26]

The senior leadership's command and control over these new recruits was somewhat notional. Jacob Shapiro assesses that: 'at this early stage the PIRA's central leadership exercised little control over targeting choices'.^[27] Indeed, most of the attacks in Northern Ireland were opportunistic and planned on a local level.^[28] A Provisional IRA volunteer described this period as:

The chaotic years of the early seventies when IRA operations would be planned on the spur of the moment. IRA volunteers would just hijack a car, collect a couple of rifles, and take a few pot shots at the nearest army patrol. Planning, organization, and coordination were not familiar words in those days.^[29]

While the Provisional IRA leadership helped to coordinate big attacks, such as the 'Bloody Friday' bombings in Belfast, most operational decisions were taken at the Battalion, Company and Unit level with little reference up the chain of command.^[30] As Christopher Drake assesses: 'there was very little coordination between areas such as Belfast, Derry and South Armagh, or indeed within Belfast itself'.^[31] Some volunteers even circumvented GHQ and sought out their own sources of weapons so they could launch operations without help from the leadership.^[32] Martin Meehan, who was a volunteer in the Belfast Brigade, describes the overall situation:

People on the ground were to take action as they saw fit. I don't believe they were any orders sent or word from anybody in high rank. I think they were spontaneous gestures...I would say that the Volunteers on the ground would have been taking actions that were not authorized.^[33]

For the most part, communication between the Army Council and volunteers on the ground was intermittent.^[34] According to one volunteer from the General Headquarters Staff: 'the structure functioned only sporadically, depending on who was available to staff it, and existed mainly for the distribution of equipment and finance'.^[35] Even volunteers sent to England directly by the General Headquarters Staff had considerable discretion over operations and were only given very broad categories of targets.^[36] Despite the presence of a hierarchical chain of command, the leadership had trouble exercising operational control.

Problems of command and control within the Provisional IRA were aggravated by intensive counterterrorism



operations. The Provisional IRA had poor counter-intelligence methods and it was relatively easy for the security forces to track down Provisional IRA members. Between 1971 and 1974, thousands of PIRA suspects were arrested or subjected to internment, including many senior figures from the Army Council and General Headquarters Staff.[37] These detentions disrupted internal lines of communication within the Provisional IRA and eroded the chain of command.[38] According to a PIRA member who was active at the time:

This was a chaotic period, with arrests, particularly in the Belfast area, running at a furious rate, and the command structure of brigade, battalion and company staffs was under enormous pressure, with key positions continually having to be filled, in some cases by people who were patently not up to the job.[39]

The situation became even worse after the declaration of a ceasefire in 1975. The false sense of security created by the ceasefire led to a major lapse in security by PIRA volunteers – with many meeting in public and maintaining open contact with each other.[40] Careful surveillance of these gatherings enabled the security forces to identify many additional Provisional IRA members, who were subsequently detained when the ceasefire ended. According to a report by the Ministry of Defense, by the middle of the 1970s, most PIRA volunteers were known to the security forces.[41] In such an environment, it became very difficult for the Provisional IRA leadership to maintain a functioning system of hierarchical command and control.

During the early 1970s, the leadership of the Provisional IRA clearly struggled to control operations on the ground. Although in principle there was a clear formal hierarchy, the leadership was only able to be directly involved in a few high-profile operations. For the most part, the organizational structure could not cope with rapid expansion and aggressive counterterrorism measures. Consequently, most operations were planned at a local level with little input from the central leadership. This was especially the case in Belfast, where there was a massive influx of new recruits and young leaders who resented interference from the leadership south of the border. Overall, the Provisional IRA was far from a unified, hierarchical group with an effective chain of command. Instead, it was a highly-fragmented organization, with intermittent lines of communication, and competing centers of power.

Reforming the Provisional IRA

In response to the organizational problems of the early 1970s, there was a widespread reorganization of the Provisional IRA between 1976-1985. This was partly a response to pressure from counter-terrorism efforts, which forced the Provisional IRA to adapt to survive. However, organizational reforms were also undertaken to consolidate the position of the leadership and increase their influence over rank-and-file volunteers. There was an effort to create a more tightly focused organization with a smaller membership that could be more easily controlled by the Army Council. Overall, the leadership moved the Provisional IRA in the direction of a stronger hierarchical organization with stricter system of command and control. However, these reforms were only partially successful and the chain of command was undermined by power struggles, personal disputes and internal divisions among volunteers. In particular, there was significant resistance to leadership interference in operational matters. Some local commanders pushed back against central control and fought hard to maintain their operational autonomy. This meant that hierarchical command and control was inconsistent across the organization and the leadership was not always able to effectively exert its authority over volunteers on the ground.

During the late 1970s, the Provisional IRA went through an intensive period of organizational reform. One of the most important reforms was the creation of two coordinating committees – the ‘Northern Command’



and the 'Southern Command'.^[42] The Northern Command was a 'mini-Army Council with the authority to oversee all offensive operations in the North'.^[43] It was responsible for the 'war zone'—the six counties of Northern Ireland and the five Irish border counties of Louth, Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim and Donegal. ^[44] The introduction of the Northern Command signaled a move towards more centralized planning, operational coordination and joint training between the different Brigades in the North.^[45] It essentially shifted operational control away from the Army Council and GHQ and into the hands of Northern volunteers.^[46] After the 1976 reorganization, the 'Southerners' were left with responsibility for twenty-one counties of Ireland and their role was to provide logistical support for the 'war zone' in the North.^[47] This entailed fundraising, political campaigning, maintaining weapons stores, arranging safe houses and training volunteers.^[48] The overall effect was to strengthen a small cadre of leaders within the Army Council, the Northern Command and the northern Brigades.

The reform of leadership structures was accompanied by a reorganization of rank-and-file members. The Provisional IRA was streamlined and became a much smaller organization. During the 1980s, the Provisional IRA was scaled back to around 30 leaders and 200-350 active volunteers.^[49] J. Bowyer Bell observes that:

The days of the big IRA were passing. Along with sound Republicans and idealists, the Provos as a big force had, as does any army, attracted the marginal, criminals and psychotics, bullies and braggarts, informers and incompetents. Most, as with real armies, were discarded, dismissed, shot in the case of treason, and eased out when hopeless. Increasingly, the process of entry became more selective, fewer needed, fewer volunteering, fewer to be discarded as useless.^[50]

This downsizing was accompanied by the strengthening of hierarchical command and control at the Brigade level. Each Brigade had a designated 'Officer Commanding', who was assisted by a 'Brigade Council' of senior Provisional IRA volunteers, and a 'Command Staff' that had specific roles, such as 'Operations', 'Intelligence', 'Quarter-Master', 'Engineering', 'Finance' and 'Internal Security'.^[51] Collectively, these senior volunteers were expected to control Provisional IRA operations in their territorial area.^[52] Ultimately, the Brigade OC was accountable directly to Northern Command.^[53]

Beneath the Brigades, volunteers at the Battalion and Company level were reorganized into 'Active Service Units' (ASUs).^[54] The ASUs were supposed to be small units with specialized roles, such as sniping, bombing, robberies, internal security and intelligence work.^[55] According to M.L.R Smith, there was a:

Dissolution of the old system of battalions and companies to be replaced by a network of cells, or active service units (ASUs), which would operate independently from each other and receive information from an anonymous hierarchy.^[56]

The Active Service Units were designed to be more accountable and easier to control.^[57] They typically consisted of between four to ten members chosen by the Brigade staff.^[58] In charge of each ASU was an 'Officer Commanding' (OC) who would liaise directly with the Brigade Command Staff and receive orders when necessary.^[59]

To further enforce the chain of command, many weapons were taken out of the hands of volunteers and transferred to the Brigade leadership.^[60] Specially designated Brigade Quartermasters were charged with issuing Active Service Units with weapons before operations and ensuring they were returned afterwards. ^[61] Only the senior Brigade staff were supposed to know the location of major arms caches.^[62] One PIRA volunteer observed how this impacted rank-and-file volunteers: 'whenever they had an idea for an operation they had to apply for equipment, and then go through a vetting procedure to determine whether the guns



were going to be put to proper use'.[63] Ultimately, the Brigade Quartermasters were accountable to Northern Command, General Headquarters and ultimately the Army Council.[64]

Despite these significant organizational reforms, the Provisional IRA remained a deeply divided organization and there was a tendency for hardline volunteers to resist control from senior leaders. There was considerable factionalism within the IRA that often led to operational disputes and schisms.⁶⁵ As Page and Smith comment: 'splits, tensions and disputes more often than not rotate around one issue in particular: the question of political control over the means of violence'.[66] Many volunteers simply wanted to get on with the armed struggle without interference from the senior leadership.[67] According to J. Bowyer Bell:

The Army Council is largely a validating organization, seldom meeting more than once a month... it almost never votes formally, rather authorizing and recognizing the initiatives that arise from the independent units or from the staffs...control from the top is seldom exercised.[68]

Throughout its existence, the Provisional IRA leadership struggled with internal divisions, parochial decision making and a dysfunctional chain of command. In the view of Brendan O'Brien, the leadership had to accept with the reality of 'local commander prerogative' and this created a 'less tightly controlled Army, with more loose cannons'.[69]

The introduction of the new organizational structures did not curtail the operational independence of many Brigades. Kevin Toolis summarizes the arrangements:

Although the IRA purports to be a national army, its command structure is fragmented. The actual fighting in Northern Ireland is undertaken by individual units reporting to a brigade...the role of the Army Council is really just to supply those brigades with weapons, explosives and training facilities. [70]

In many instances, Brigade commanders questioned the authority of senior leaders and embarked on their own operations. According to J. Bowyer Bell, operational decisions 'were for the most part left to local units' and were 'shaped by the movement consensus as to what was proper and justified'.[71] When consensus broke down, the leadership's strategic control of violence faltered. For example, in the early 1980s, the Belfast Brigade became hostile to the leadership of Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness. Under the direction of Ivor Bell and Eddie Carmichael, the Belfast Brigade conducted attacks that were designed to embarrass the Provisional IRA leadership and undermine their electoral strategy.[72] Such tensions were not unusual. As Jacob Shapiro assesses, the leadership's 'control over violence remained elusive' and volunteers sometimes launched 'poorly thought out operations'.[73]

In particular, many of the rural Brigades resented interference from senior leaders and worked hard to safeguard their independence. Many of the volunteers in the rural Brigades were reluctant to subjugate themselves to external control from untrustworthy outsiders.[74] According to one volunteer: 'there were a few of these little fiefdoms across the North, which saw GHQ and the Army leadership generally as little more than an unquestioning source of arms, explosives and cash'.[75] The rural Brigades tended to be close-knit units with strong links to each other and weak connections to the rest of the Provisional IRA.[76] They typically consisted of people from the same local community who often had family ties to one another. [77] Recruitment and vetting of volunteers was handled at a local level with minimal input from General Headquarters.[78] Indeed, some of the most parochial units simply refused to work with volunteers they did not know personally.[79] According to Kevin Toolis:

IRA men grow up together in the same area, drink together and socialize with each other from



their teenage years, riot together, and intermarry with other republican families. They are a unique product of that particular community; other IRA men from different areas in Northern Ireland would be viewed with caution and treated with suspicion. There is no place for outsiders to be slotted into this complex web of social and extended family relationships.[80]

This created a situation where the rural Brigades were theoretically responsible to the PIRA leadership, but often planned and conducted operations independently.[81] Christopher Drake assesses that 'local commanders, especially in the borders areas, have a great deal of discretion in carrying out operations'. [82] For example, many of the ambushes against British armed forces in South Armagh were undertaken spontaneously at a local level.[83] As J. Bowyer Bell argues: 'no one was going to be able with any effect to tell the Republicans of South Armagh to restrain themselves'.[84]

Further down the chain of command, the implementation of Active Service Units was patchy. In many places the traditional structure of territorial Battalions and Companies was retained. These territorial units policed Republican neighborhoods on behalf of the PIRA, disciplined suspected collaborators and provided operational support to Active Service Units.[85] Particularly in the rural areas, the ASU structure was never embraced and they continued to use their traditional method of organization.[86] According to a Provisional IRA volunteer: 'some areas, such as Crossmaglen and Tyrone, still maintained the old Battalion/Company structure while paying lip-service to the reorganization'.[87] Similarly Ed Moloney observes that: 'the cell system was largely a Belfast phenomenon' and that 'some rural areas successfully fought to maintain their old structures and the operational spontaneity and local control that came with them'.[88] By maintaining these traditional structures, local commanders protected their position and prevented interference from senior leaders.

Even in places where Active Service Units were introduced, many volunteers continued to operate with little input from senior leaders. Mark Urban points out that 'ASU commanders expected to have considerable operational freedom'.[89] While in theory volunteers were locked into a hierarchical system of command and control, in practice operational decision making was often left to individual Active Service Units.[90] According to Taylor and Quayle:

The cell structure on which the organization is premised can act as a pressure towards local rather than national control. There is undoubtedly tension at times between the independence of operational local units, and the continuity and control of action within a broader organizational framework.[91]

Many of the ASUs conducted their own fundraising, procured their own transportation and organized their own safe houses.[92] Some even had their own weapons caches and launched their own operations.[93] In the opinion of Tom Baldy, there was a tendency for 'nearly autonomous cells...to operate independently of the Belfast central command'.[94] Many attacks, including the Enniskillen, Harrods and Shankill Road bombings, were conducted without a prior authorization from the Army Council or Northern Command. [95] In the aftermath of a reckless operation there was often 'dismay and disbelief among senior IRA figures that local commanders could have sanctioned such a mission'.[96]

That is not to say that PIRA volunteers were completely autonomous from the leadership of the organization. The hierarchical system of command and control did enable the leadership to exercise some influence over PIRA operations.[97] As one PIRA member makes clear:

Although all IRA units have a large degree of autonomy in choosing the operational who-what-when-and-where, they must always give precedence to orders from GHQ even if that means



abandoning other operations that are ready to go.[98]

It was generally understood that volunteers needed to consult the Army Council on major operations and that leaders should 'sanction any operation that was a departure from the norm'.^[99] Bradley and Feeney assess that the leadership wanted to control operations because 'local initiative, whether in Belfast or London, had the potential to derail political strategy'.^[100] However, command and control was more difficult than suggested by the maintenance of a quasi-military hierarchy. As J. Bowyer Bell comments, the Provisional IRA 'is an army with remarkably few orders...the IRA fits neatly on a chart...but the chart is not of the real world'.^[101] While individual Brigades and Active Service Units were ostensibly under the control of the Army Council, they often demonstrated a great deal of independence. In reality, the effectiveness of the chain of command varied immensely according to the profile of the target, the level of disruption by counter-terrorism forces, and the personalities of the volunteers involved in the operation. Indeed, as the Provisional IRA Greenbook makes clear: 'the I.R.A. volunteer, except when carrying out a specific army task, acts most of the time on his own initiative'.^[102]

Conclusion

This analysis of the Provisional IRA alerts us to the dangers of conflating formal organizational structure with actual organizational behavior. Even though the Provisional IRA had many of the bureaucratic trappings of a hierarchical command and control system, the members of the organization often functioned in a much more decentralized way. To think of the IRA as hierarchical in the traditional sense would be to ignore the existence and importance of informal centers of decision making within the organization. Operations were frequently planned without any input from the senior leadership of the organization and hierarchical command and control was often notional rather than actual. Indeed, there was a high degree of operational autonomy both before and after organizational reform in the late 1970s. This was due to the necessity of operating as a secret organization and because some units of the PIRA dared to act independently without express permission. Over the years, factional disputes and internal negotiations consistently complicated the leadership's attempts at hierarchical command and control. In many instances, the targets and tempo of operations were dictated by local commanders rather than national leaders. To the frustration of senior figures, the hierarchical command and control structures of the Provisional IRA often proved to be somewhat hollow.

More broadly, the organizational behavior of the Provisional IRA demonstrates the problem of placing terrorist groups into neat categories. As this research has shown, the organizational distinctions between 'traditional' and 'new' terrorists do not reflect how terrorist groups actually function. In truth, ostensibly hierarchical terrorists often display confusing and fragmented operational decision making processes, which more closely resemble informal networks of autonomous action than strict military chains of command. This brings into question the analytical usefulness of the 'new' terrorism concept. Simply put, the idea of the 'new terrorism' oversimplifies the organizational architecture of terrorist groups and over exaggerates the degree of change in organizational behavior. Instead of sharply differentiating between the terrorist groups of the past and present, we should view all terrorist groups as organizational hybrids that combine different approaches in dynamic ways. This is an important task, as only by recognizing the complexity of terrorist organizations, will we be adequately prepared to respond to contemporary terrorist threats and prevent future terrorist attacks.



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Notes

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