CHAPTER 4

THE PROCESS OF TERRORIST VIOLENCE IN IRELAND

Terrorist violence in Northern Ireland which has threatened the stability of economic and political institutions and has now become a part of Irish consciousness. The resort to terrorist violence in Ireland is a sequel to a complex amalgam of grievances, fears and beliefs. One of the most important features of the Irish experience of terrorism is in the nature of conflict, defined in ethnic, religious and class terms. The lack of proper facilities to Catholics is another factor that has helped in shaping the violent conflict.

The Catholic minority in Northern Ireland often conceive of themselves as a small cultural entity struggling for some form of self-determination. The Anglo-Irish war was an extreme manifestation of this objective in the Irish nationalist struggle.

During 1969 the British were traumatized by the spectacle of violence spread by the Irish Republican
Army. Since 1969, terrorist violence influenced virtually every aspect of Irish national existence. During 1969, when factionalism emerged in IRA and a militant IRA group called IRA (provisional) was found, internecine violence flared behind the lines of bloodily contending Northern Ireland's police and army. The situation deteriorated and a great threat to the entire political and social structure was mounted by the criminal and the disorderly provisional Irish Republic Army.

The terrorist violence in Ireland has revealed that in one form or another, much of the violence has represented major attempts of Irish Catholics to preserve their right place in the social, economic and political order. Similarly, the major episodes of terrorist violence in Northern Ireland reveal that during the last few decades or more there has hardly been even a sustained period of relative peace. Nonetheless, the period of Irish terrorist violence ever since the nineteenth century can be divided into three main categories.
The first was the period of Secret Organizations from eighteenth century onwards. It was a time when secret organizations and Brotherhoods of regional or of supra-regional dimensions were established in many countries. These organizations began to exert an influence on Irish politics. In the latter half of the eighteenth century there grew up a period of severe economic depression and social discrimination. This led to the foundation of secret agrarian organizations but gradually, supra-regional secret societies were formed which were predominantly politically motivated and had their base in cities.¹

Till the first half of the nineteenth century, the secret organizations of Ireland were dominated by

social conservatives who desired to launch a struggle for the removal of pressing economic and social grievances resulting from the existing agrarian structure.²

In the beginning the main aim of most of the secret societies was to protect tenants and farm labourers against the arbitrary acts of landowners and against the payment of dues. The countryside too, has been the domain of relentless violence growing out of the agrarian movement. The farmers and tenants organized violent strategies of self defence against the unjust conditions, which did not favour the interest of the minority Catholic groups.³

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, a sectarian secret society of Catholics was established with the purpose of defending Catholics from Protestant Orange Order (1795). Similarly, a number of Ribbon Societies were established. The main aim was to liberate Ireland from British and Protestant dominance.

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
This period also saw the rise of protest for revolutionary changes of political conditions in Ireland launched by the Irish Republican Brotherhood. In Northern Ireland the task of sectarian protection was not successful. In general, these secret societies did not have the Catholic mass support. Among the secret societies, the White Boys Organisation first appeared in the relatively prosperous County, Tipperary and subsequently spread all over the South-Western Countries under the same name. The White Boys called themselves, 'levellers'. But soon after the easing of economic conditions, another secret organisation called Right Boys emerged whose main aim was similar to that of the White Boys.

Similarly, Ribbonism was still seen in the Irish National Land League of the late 1870s. The secret

4. Ibid
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
societies were very rudimentary and were hardly even consolidated. This rendered the police's fight against secret societies more tedious. In 1829, the Ribbon Society was founded by combining the pre-existing loose unions of local 'ledges'. The Ribbon Society remained organizationally independent. The society coordinated its activities with the central authority only intermittently. The aim of the society was also to bring about reforms in the laws of land tenancy in Ireland.

Another important secret society was the society of United Irishmen, which was banned till 1794. The society of United Irishmen planned to be a constitutional association with the primarily political and

7. E.D.Steele, Irish Land and British Politics: Tenant - Right and Nationality 1865-1879 (Cambridge, 1974), pp.3-4

national aim of establishing an independent Irish Republic by removing British rule from Ireland. Belfast became the main base for this organisation. But gradually United Irishmen extended their organisation throughout the country, consequently almost six years later it was able to have some success.

On the other hand, the Irish Republican Brotherhood was found in Dublin in 1858 by Irish Americans on the pattern of the US based, the Fenian Brotherhood. The Irish Republican Brotherhood turned out to be the most powerful secret political society of nineteenth century Ireland.\(^9\) The Irish Republican Brotherhood had a well developed organisation throughout the country, modelled and based on the conventional model of agrarian societies and the hierarchical patterns of French and Italian secret societies.\(^{10}\)

\(^{9}\) Peter Alter, n.1, p.142.

\(^{10}\) Ibid.
The Irish Republican Brotherhood's basic organisation is based upon the military command structures headed by the Supreme Council. The Irish Republican Brotherhood gradually tried to form provisional governments during the insurrectionary movements of 1867 and 1916. 11

The main authority of Irish Republican Brotherhood was with the executive committee, which was elected among the eleven members of the Supreme Council. The British and Protestants were greatly concerned about the large contingent of the Irish Republican Brotherhood.

They knew that the Irish Republican Brotherhood organisation was aided by the Fenians with both arms and training. Over the course of time, the Irish Republican Brotherhood enjoyed the maximum support of

11. Ibid., p.143.
the masses and soon after a couple of years this organisation had begun extending its terrorist activities throughout Ireland with whatever possible means. Its leaders were suddenly faced with the need to make bold decisions. This was the period following the Fenian Rising of 1867 and the Dublin Easter Rising of 1916, which generated massive violence and created a state of extreme fear and anxiety.

The Enforcement Terror:

The Irish Republican Brotherhood did not only generate support from within Ireland but also mobilised the Irish immigrants in United States of America and Britain. The IRB got political as well as financial support from the Irish Americans. the IRB believed in using every kind of violence in order to gain its political objectives.

Second: Revolutionary Agrarian Societies:

The main feature of this type of societies has been that it included most of these organizations who were seeking to bring about major changes in Irish
agrarian conditions through collective efforts of farmers. The Revolutionary Agrarian Societies were open organizations and the political objectives of these societies were different from the old secret organizations like, White Boys organisation. Yet they established links with the secret agrarian organizations. The organisation of Revolutionary Agrarian Societies was also hierarchical, centralized and based on the organisation of Catholic church.12 They had central bodies at the base and almost all the local branches were made responsible to the central bodies. The Irish national Land League is one of the most influential Revolutionary Agrarian Societies, established during the last few decades of the nineteenth century. The local farmers and tenants of rural areas formed a very effective base.13 This organisation


tried its best to convert rented land into tenant's property that later resulted in political links with the Irish parliamentary party which demanded Home Rule in Ireland.

A number of scholars are of the view that the Irish rural organizations were politically illiterate.¹⁴ The murders, destruction of property and an almost all-round intimidation were related to economic fringe wherein many peasants subsisted.¹⁵ During the last few decades of the nineteenth century the socio-economic state declined in England and Ireland, fuelled by the continuing poverty of the rural masses.

Such endemic situation was exploited by radical politicians like Davitt and the members of the Land

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¹⁵. Ibid.
League during 1880s. William O'Brien commented that "violence is the only way of securing a hearing for moderation".16

The Ribbon Organisation had a shadowy national network but could not have sufficient political influence. On the other hand, the government passed a number of coercive legislations to combat the disorder created by the secret societies. Similarly, the Irish government also raised the strength of the centralized police force. For example, by 1945 there were more than 9,000 men in the Royal Irish Constabulary, and the Dublin Metropolitan Force raised its strength over one thousand.17

However, the violence spread by agrarian secret societies was not of a modern kind and it led to enormous political consequences. On the other hand,

17. Ibid.
the violence, which was caused by parliamentary elections was devoid of any significant political purpose and meaning. Ribbonsim was a transitional type organisation. The anti-Protestant character of Ribbonism made it the most powerful among most of the Irish secret societies. Ribbonism exercised considerable influence upon the development of Fenian movement. It's members also migrated to Britain and the US with Irish labourers. Michael Davitt says that Ribbonism was not a simple agrarian movement but it was the linear descendant of the mode of sectarian agrarian defence of the previous century.


Ribbonism was strongest in Dublin and the areas of eastern seaports and parts of Ulster. Though the Ribbon organization had almost all important democratic characteristics, its most important feature was its central complex hierarchy. It faced considerable factional strife. During 1820-22, Michael Keenan struggled to manage some Semblance of unity among the Dublin Ribbonism, when its activities were most intense. 21 While addressing one of the important meetings in January 1822 he said that the object of the meeting was to adopt some plan to put a stop to diversions in the city and suburbs of Dublin. He spoke for a long time on the consequences that might attend such

a division, quoted several passages from history to show that a few who were unanimous may overcome multitudes who are divided. He said that the present time required every friend to despise his own interests and only look for the public good. He then ordered that "the present differences should be settled by twelve men, six chosen from each side, and that any person refusing to abide by their decision should be excluded and proclaimed throughout the kingdom". 22

After a couple of years in 1830 a division took place among the members of the Ribbon organization on the question of calling the party as the "Northern Union" and another faction emerged which was known as the "Irish Sons of Freedom". 23 Consequently, this division led to a number of violent clashes between the "sidgeous" and the "Billy Wilters". 24 John Kelly, was

22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., p. 251.
24. Ibid
of the opinion that the Ribbon masters utilized religious elements in most ceremonies. By 1820, the Ribbonmen participated whole heartedly in the imminent national uprising. Michael Coffey commented that the main aim of Ribbonmen was to rebel and to separate themselves from the English government.25

The discriminated position of Ribbonmen under a Protestant regime as Roman Catholics and the memory of revolutionary republicanism of 1798, nurtured nationalist ideas among Ribbonmen. Michael Keenan, while describing the position commented that they would overcome every obstacle, that all the schemes of heretics in spite of Orangeism and all their demands would be useless, that their hour was come and they should fall. He then said that "all the Catholics of the

world were joined in one cause and that they could not fail to succeed". He reiterated his readiness to suffer for his country and concluded saying that he hoped the Catholics of Ireland with very few exceptions were of the same mind. 26

The interpretation of Michael Keenan concedes that the Ribbonmen were highly sectarian and they used religion as an important means to generate the nationalist feeling among the masses.

While describing the main goal of the Ribbon organization and expressing his own feeling about nationalism Richard Jones said "Our motto is the good of our country and to remove the brand of slavery from the foreheads of Irishmen.... This advice is given through a love for Ireland by men who are outlaws, a price set on liberty living in the midst of half a million people who have never betrayed the confidence placed in them, who have always put

themselves forward when anything was to be done for their creed or country, who despise all dangers and the many government rewards and every pretence that has been held out to them." 27

On the other hand, the burning resentment of social and economic injustice led to grim and relentless Fenian rhetoric at the outset. The Fenian organisation was a middle class organisation which created an acute disorder in Mayo during 1869-70. The main headquarters of Fenian activity was based in Balla, where social disparities were the greatest. The new recruits of this organization were from the poorer strata of Mayo society, for example, agricultural labourers, small farmers, artisans, etc. But the maximum membership was from the comparatively upper and elite class, like hotel, and shop owners and younger members of the grazier class, etc. 28

27. Ibid., p. 257.
The main area of Fenian operation was Central Mayo and peripheral regions of the country. During 1860s, the Fenian movement made tremendous impact on the countryside area.

Fenians declared that the peasant proprietorship should be made ideal, natural and inevitable. This issue was further raised in 1867 during the provisional government of Ireland.

The overall picture of the secret and revolutionary agrarian societies reveals that, the main activities of these organizations included, self-administered justice, myriad degrees of terrorism and intimidation of various segments of Irish society.

Third: The Small Military Organizations:

During the second decade of the twentieth century, a number of small military organizations were formed in Ireland. Though these organizations lacked a clear cut national programme, they were deeply patriotic. During the third Home Rule Bill, the Irish national movement organized and armed volunteer groups for example, the
organized and armed volunteer groups for example, the Irish National Volunteers. After the Irish Volunteers, the Irish Citizen's Army took the most important part in the Eastern Rising. 29

The Irish citizen's Army was founded in 1913. The main purpose of this organization was to defend the Dublin workers against police excesses. Hence, it was originally a nationalistic organization, though, gradually it supported the nationalist programme of the Irish labour movement. 30

On the other hand, the Ulster unionists decided to form a strong army of at least 100,000 dedicated volunteers which would resist the nationalist demand for Irish autonomy. Therefore, by the middle of 1913, the


30. M.R.Beams, n. 21, p. 146.
Ulster volunteer force was organized. 31 Hence, the period of 1913-1920 saw the rapid growth of paramilitary organizations, which were secretly involved in planning and executing terrorist and violent activities. Consequently, the increasing militarization led to the war like situation of 1916. 32

Soon after the Eastern Rising of 1916, the Irish volunteer organisation became underground and got busy in conducting guerrilla war against the police and British army in Ireland. 33 Later on in 1919, the Irish Republican Army grew out of the Irish volunteers and got totally involved in guerrilla warfare against the Protestants and the English Army.

During the period of agrarian struggle, i.e. enforcement terror, numerous woundings, killings, and


32. M.R. Beams, n. 21, p. 149

33. Ibid., p. 150.
demonstrative violence against animals and property were repeatedly carried out by the small oath-bound organizations to enforce their framework of social code. In this regard, Whiteboyism became the most successful secret organisation. But during this period, terrorism was not very agitational. It was more conservative in nature than reactionary. Although the major secret and revolutionary organizations had some links with the outside world, it was mainly with the US and England.

Agitational Terror:

The Irish Republican Army was a revolutionary organization which was committed to overthrowing the British army by force. The main aim of the Irish Republican army was to establish an equal and free state by transforming themselves into a secret organisation and by overthrowing the existing British government for complete separation from England. The Irish Republican Army took up an attitude of armed rebellion different from Sinn Fein. While the Sinn Fein was of the opinion that an armed revolution was not possible
in the existing state of Ireland, the Irish Republic
Army believed that the armed revolution had reasonable
prospects of success provided England gets involved in
a European War. 34

Gradually, the idea of an independent nation
ensuring true Republican freedom was proclaimed by the
Sinn Fein as its dominant political strategy. The
revival if the Irish cultural heritage also became an
important ambition of the Irish Republican Army. 35

Although the Irish Republican Army was basically
formed to overthrow the British from Ireland in 1916
subsequently, the Irish Republican Army opposed the
Treaty whereby the Partition took place and a separate
state i.e., Northern Ireland was formed in 1922. The
Treaty was rejected on the ground that the six Northern
countries would remain as part of the United Kingdom.

34. Robert Mitchell Henry,The Evolution of Sinn Fein,
35. Ibid.
Consequently, the Irish Republican Army started its rampage and murdered hundreds of Protestants in Dublin. Thereafter, the Irish Republican Army was declared illegal in Northern Ireland and all the three important political parties in Dublin (like, Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Labour) opposed any action by the Irish Republican Army, whereas Sinn Fein remained legal.\textsuperscript{36} However, the Irish republican Army was able to draw on the experiences of conventional agrarian terrorism.

Its major strength lies in its local roots than an revolutionary ideology.\textsuperscript{37} The IRA was basically the most powerful association which adopted an overtly political ideology and a very strong organizational super-structure. The Irish Republican Army extended its target attacks from simple assassinations to the


murdering of British police officials and Protestants. Hence, since 1921, numerous police personnel of Northern Ireland, have been massacred by the Irish Republican Army. Similarly, a series of systematic attacks by the Irish Republican Army on British military officers on Bloody Sunday shook the entire intelligence system. The main purpose behind these attacks was to eliminate the entire intelligence system which was causing hurdles for the IRA. 38

The assassination of Sir Henry Wilson in 1922 and Kevin O'Higgins in 1927 can be cited as the most important examples. Consequently, the government of Northern Ireland used ruthless counter terror to combat IRA's activities like, the shooting of four Irish republican men without any trial and the taking of hostages by the free state force.

The crisis reached at its pinnacle when a whole group of hostages was taken away by the Northern Ireland's military forces and later blown into pieces. 39

Although enforcement forces gave a severe blow to the strength of Irish Republican Army; through their counter measure, the IRA continued its operation of spreading violence and terrorism against the Northern Ireland government and British forces. From December 1956 onwards, the Irish Republican Army shifted its field of terrorist activities to border areas. But on 8 January, 1957, the Irish Republican Army suffered a severe blow by the security forces. The entire strategy of the Irish Republican Army failed and nearly two

hundred important Irish republicans were held and imprisoned without trial.40

From 1957 to 1962, the Irish Republican Army campaign could hardly make any prominent headway. Meanwhile, Sinn Fein, the political base of the Irish Republican Army declared itself as a Socialist Party. The shift to the left was visible from the election of Gerard Fit to Westminster as a "Socialist Republican" and open supporter of the principles of James Connolly.41 Consequently, in 1969, a major split took place among Irish Republican Army members which divided IRA into two factions: one official Irish Republican Army which was not in favour of using violence against the Protestants and the British. On the other hand, provisional Irish Republican Army was of the opinion that independence could be only achieved by massive use


41. Ibid., p. 476.
of violence and terror. Hence, the new form of violence spread by provisional IRA marked the beginning of an era of a new form of terrorism in Northern Ireland.

The growing terrorist violence compelled the British government to shift the overall emphasis of its policy to encompass a joint strategy with the northern Irish government to find some political solution. But the continuing Catholic, Protestant's communal strife and the emergence of paramilitary terrorist organizations on communal lines, particularly the growing popularity of Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), turned down every political initiative taken by the British government. Consequently, the real intensity of trouble arose from the conflict between terrorist paramilitary organizations and the government. Gradually, this was followed by the years of mounting violence in Northern Ireland.