

Revisionist historian praises book that rubbishes his research on Irish War of Independence in Cork

Peter Hart's review of Borgonovo obscures criticism



Peter Hart
 Peter Hart's latest effort to defend his thesis on the Irish War of Independence took the form of a review of John Borgonovo's book *'Spies, informers and the 'Anti-Sinn Féin Society': the intelligence war in Cork City 1920-1921'* in *History Ireland*, March-April 2007.

In case readers need reminding Hart's thesis is that "... the Dail had no legal standing and was never recognised by any foreign government. Nor did the IRA, as a guerrilla force acting without uniforms and depending on their civilian status for secrecy, meet the requirements of international law. The British government was therefore within its rights to give courts-martial the power to order executions." (Irish Times, 23 June 1998). And furthermore "Nor were members of the IRA protected by the Hague Convention, the basis for the law of war on land. The British government and its forces were not at war in this sense. To be recognised as belligerent soldiers, the guerrillas would have had to be fighting for a responsible established state, wear a recognisable uniform or emblem, carry their arms openly, and not disguise themselves as civilians. None of these conditions applied. It is of course true that international law favours established states, but if any group can claim belligerent status when using political violence, then so can the INLA or the LVF. The Oklahoma bombers would also conceivably have a right to POW status." (Irish Times, 22 July 1998).

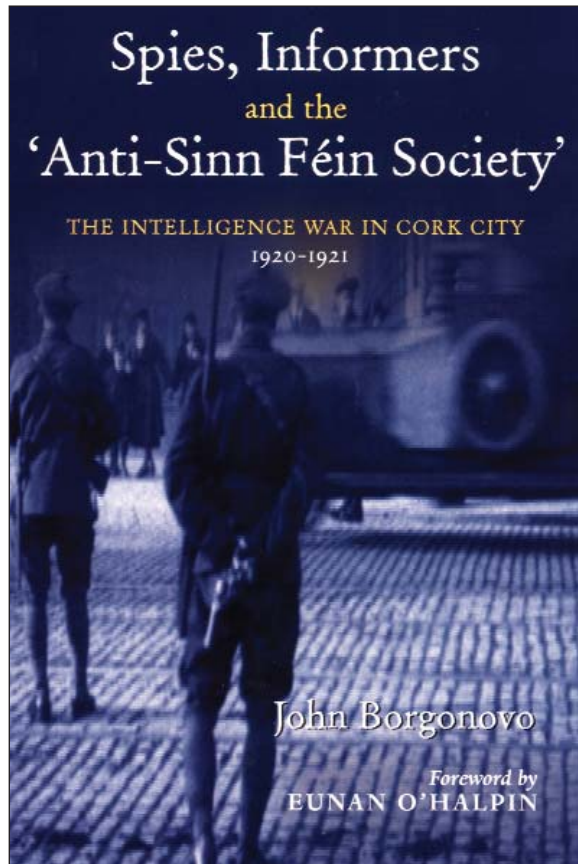
1918 Election

Essentially the whole episode was therefore a wanton criminal act with no legitimacy and everything done by the IRA was done by it for all sorts of ulterior motives under the guise of fighting for self-determination. All their actions are to be condemned and denigrated. Hart's logic has a perfect internal consistency.

Of course, he ignores the clear result of the 1918 Election which established the legal, electoral basis for an Irish independent state. He also ignores the wholesale promulgation at the time of the right of all nations to self-determination.

Imperial Powers

It was the issue of the day. Britain convinced millions that the war it started in August 1914 was for the freedom of small nations and up to 50,000



Hart praises John Borgonovo book that undermines Hart's credibility and calls Hart's methods "irresponsible"

Irishmen died for it in that war and millions elsewhere. The Russian Revolution of 1917 ended Russia's participation in the war and developed an effective programme that encouraged and supported the colonial world to rise up and establish their national rights against all the Imperial powers. Then the USA joined the war and Woodrow Wilson's '14 Points' justified it essentially on the basis of nations' right to self-determination. The world was thereby saturated with talk and actions insisting on the rights of nations to self-determination. It was the spirit of the age and millions in all continents were set in political motion on the basis of it. Some peoples began to think in nationality terms for the first time in their history.

But for Mr Hart none of this was meant to apply to Ireland although it had a national movement for generations – it was to be the great exception to what was happening all over the world. How strange.

It means that Hart's case flies in the face of obvious realities and therefore he has to rely on all

sorts of spurious arguments, distortions and lies to make his case. If one has to defy the reality of a situation how else could one operate? What a strange career choice to have made?

Detailed Study

There could hardly be a greater contrast in John Borgonovo. About 10 years ago he came across some of Hart's initial work and immediately detected flaws in his arguments. On the basis of what he had then researched he could not accept that the war was some sort of tit for tat with the IRA picking on certain groups such as Protestants, ex soldiers and others through sheer prejudice of one sort or another.

He made a detailed study of the intelligence war in Cork city during its most intense phase to see if Hart's arguments made sense. They did not. He said so. He took, head on, the toughest, nastiest subject of all – the execution of civilians for spying and informing. If prejudice and ulterior motives were given an opportunity to express themselves it would be obvious and clear-cut here.

He came to the conclusion on the basis of all the available evidence that spies were executed because they were spies

and for no other reason. And that is usually accepted as a good enough reason in the middle of a war. Borgonovo's methodology is to painstakingly gather and present as much of the unvarnished facts as can now be located. No speculation that the facts don't back up and no innuendo and wild assertions and no questions going a begging.

Hart tries to claim that because there were a majority of ex-soldiers executed, it proves his point that groups such as those were picked on.

In the middle of a war the only intelligence that matters is immediate military intelligence. Who is likely to be a good source of this? Surely, it is people with military experience who have fought for one side and who are likely therefore to have an instinct for what is useful intelligence to that side in these circumstances. And who also have the means of discovering such information because of their local knowledge - and who need the reward. Is this a surprise? If there are thousands of them in the war theatre is it picking on

them to note such activities? Is it a surprise that some of them, a small minority, turn out to be good at spying, while many, many others supported the Republic. Only a fool would think otherwise and Mr Hart is not a fool.

Florence O'Donoghue

Another of Hart's lines of defence is to question Borgonovo's faith in the trustworthiness of the head of the IRA's intelligence operations in Cork city, Florry O'Donoghue: "but the author is inclined to take Florence O'Donoghue at his word." If he could not be trusted then Borgonovo's thesis could indeed be challenged. But what evidence does Hart have to support his suggestion, or rather his insinuation, about O'Donoghue? None whatever. On the other hand Borgonovo has done a detailed study of O'Donoghue, his character, his ability and has published a fascinating book on him as a person and as an intelligence operator. It makes a most compelling case for O'Donoghue's trustworthiness. So we have to choose with an insidious unproven assertion by Hart and a hard detailed study made by Borgonovo. Take your choice.

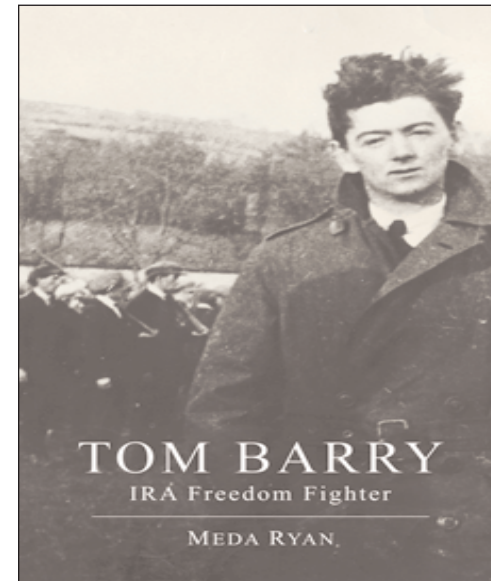
Contradicted

He then says that British claims of that the majority of those executed were innocent "presumably is as believable as the IRA claim to the contrary."

Britain had to defend the indefensible in 1919-21



Brian Murphy's 2006 study exposed Peter Hart's reliance on British propaganda sources



Meda Ryan's 2003 Tom Barry biography exposed Hart's use of forged documents

in Ireland. Brian Murphy has established how they sought to do this. The truth was a problem for them and when lies would not suffice verisimilitude (the appearance of truth) took its place, quite deliberately and consciously. By the same token, the facts and the truth were of vital importance to the republicans – it was a vital weapon. They had a vested interest in proving their case to world opinion. How then could one side be considered as truthful or as untruthful as the other? Hart is defying common sense by suggesting this.

But what is believable and unbelievable is an arbitrary and optional matter for Hart. Facts are easily created or dispensed with to make his case. In his 'classic work' on the War in Cork there is the infamous treatment of what he said was "the most trustworthy" source, the official "Record of the Rebellion" from British Army intelligence. Hart quoted half a sentence, which appeared to support his case and excised the second half that flatly contradicted his thesis; he also used a document that was a proven forgery. When all else failed, he interviewed a dead man. It is rather rich to see this type of person advising on what is and is not believable. In legal jargon he is a

discredited witness and his case would be thrown out of court years ago. He would never be called as an expert witness on the truth.

Hart seeks to damn Borgonovo with faint praise: "good material for class room discussion"; his "aim of advancing the debate is admirable".

He criticises Borgonovo for not dealing with periods and conflicts outside the period of his book. And what is his own assessment of the period in Cork city? Rather than Borgonovo's hard headed, factually based analysis he sees only "mayhem in the streets of Cork at that time" and "What emerges instead is a picture of predators hunting and killing opportunistically right up to the final bell".

Is this really the best our Professor can do? It is a pathetic effort at analysis and an admission that he has lost the plot and cannot make sense of it. He resorts to the best tabloid tradition of lurid conclusions entirely unencumbered by evidence. Is this his idea of "advancing the debate"?

Jack Lane *Irish Political Review*

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Last Kilmichael ambush survivor, Ned Young, who died Nov 13 1989. According to Hart he 'interviewed' an ambush participant on Nov 19 1989! See Meda Ryan book