



The Rise and Fall of the 'B' Specials

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In the last edition of *Journal of the Police History Society, Volume 22*, Jim McDonald provided an interesting and in-depth account of the 'Irish Revenue Police' (McDonald, 2007). Ireland is a rich grain of history in respect of policing, of which pages are still being written. The latest, 18th November 2008 (www.northernireland.gov.uk/news), sees final agreement in respect of the devolution of policing and justice, between all political parties connected with the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Good Friday Agreement. This prompted a statement by both the First and Deputy First Ministers endorsing the new arrangements and finally signals the direction of policing within the Province to be broadly in line with the recommendations of the 1999 *Patten Report*. However, it has been a long and often tragic journey from partition to peace.

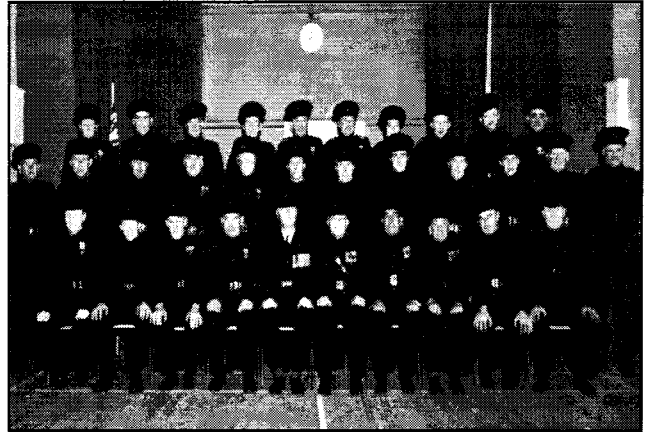
Given that context and following on from the last edition, it seems too good an opportunity to pass over and examine both historically and critically, perhaps in an outline format, one of the most controversial organisations and chapters in Northern Irish policing; the 'B' Specials.

The watershed that signalled the establishment of the 'B' Specials was the proposed partition of Ireland and the creation of the political and administrative area known as Ulster, which consisted of six counties in the north-east of Ireland. Ulster was overwhelmingly Protestant.

Around the time of the Treaty in 1920, there were two major pressing law and order issues in the North; attacks by the IRA disaffected by the Treaty, and sectarian attacks, mainly targeted at Catholics (Hillyard in Darby, 1983, p32). The Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) in the North was clearly struggling to meet this demand and in turn the British Government was unable to supply troops, still fully committed elsewhere in Ireland (Ibid). In reality, the British were in a state of flux and in the midst of a civil war. The proclamation of the Irish Republic occurred in January, 1919, however the Irish Treaty remained unsigned until December, 1921 (Canning, 1985, p4).

The overall security situation was deteriorating and debates raged within Government as to

how this might be reconciled. However, Winston Churchill, Colonial Secretary in a Coalition Government (Ibid, p12), in the context of the ever-worsening security situation, favoured enhanced repression and raised the question of the Protestants in



(Aghadowey 'B' Specials, circa, 1965, source 'Wikipedia')

the six counties being given weapons charged with maintaining law and order, in addition to policing. He suggested 30,000 men, allowing regular battalions and the regular RIC to be released for more-pressing matters in the South (Farrell, 1983, p31/2). Not surprisingly, and entirely conducive with the modern politics of Ireland, unanimity was impossible on such a controversial proposal, however it did receive a sympathetic ear in certain powerful quarters.

As a consequence and despite some intense opposition, in July 1920, the Irish sub-committee of the Cabinet, unanimously agreed, under the portentous heading 'Use of Ulster Volunteers' to be established on a Special Constabulary footing (Ibid, p35). But the justification remains the interesting point:- *'In view of the urgent need of concentrating all available troops, advantage ought to be taken of the willingness of the North to protect themselves and steps taken to enlist Volunteers of a Special Constabulary basis; this force should not be used outside Ulster'* (Ibid)

As a consequence the Cabinet Minute effectively became the *raison d'être* and as a contemporary parallel the 'Statement of Common Purpose' for what shortly was to become, the Ulster Special Constabulary (USC). Contentiously, it also became the straightjacket which ultimately would strangle the life from the USC.

However, further central Government procrasti-



nation led to initiatives on a local level, especially following the shooting in Lisburn, Co. Antrim of a D/Inspector Oswald Ross Swanzy, RIC (Ibid), believed to have been killed by the IRA and on the orders of Michael Collins himself, in August 1920, as he left a morning church service (www.lisburn.com). Swanzy had previously served in the Cork area and had been named at an Inquest as one of the perpetrators in the murder of the Lord Mayor of Cork; as a consequence he was posted well away from the area to Ulster (Farrell, 1980, p30). Hence, the fatal decree by Michael Collins.

The Unionist local authority formed its own special constabulary, led by a recently retired RIC Inspector, the legal precedent being an unused and antiquated statute. About 800 'loyal ex-servicemen were enlisted and overtly at least, restricted to patrolling unarmed, with the RIC and the Army (Farrell, 1983, p35). In the aftermath of the Swanzy shooting, riots occurred in Belfast and the Mayor together with the military commander, General Bainbridge authorised recruitment of a local force, although heated debate surrounded the implementation as to whether it should be armed or not (Ibid). Notwithstanding the proposed function, considerable pressure was growing for the Unionists' rationale for an armed special constabulary (Ibid). The fortuitous advantage they had was that in 1912 the Unionists formulated their own private army, via the Orange Order. 400,000 signed a declaration to resist Home Rule and in 1913 a retired General assumed command of what was to become the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) (Farrell, 1980, p19) and it had reorganised early in 1920 (Hillyard, op. cit, p33).

Following the Swanzy killing rioting and looting broke out in Belfast; the London-based *Daily News* commented that there were some 180 fires in a six-day period. On the 30th August, the military imposed a curfew from 10.30pm to 5.00am for Belfast, which remained in place until 1924 (Farrell, 1980, p31). As a consequence of this civil disorder and as a result of increasing political pressure, on the 6th September, 1920 the Cabinet authorised the RIC to recruit for the USC (Farrell, 1983, p39) and recruitment began on the 1st November, (Ibid, p47).

The USC was made up of three classes:-
Class 'A' – Full-time force, engaged for six

months at a time and would receive the same weekly pay as the RIC, plus a bounty on discharge

Class 'B' – Part-time force; their compulsory one night a week duty was unpaid, although they did receive annual expenses. For extra operational duties they were to be paid 2s 6d per night and the envisaged duties involved, manning road-blocks, routine patrolling and guarding key installations at night. They were available primarily for an emergency, available for mobilisation

Class 'C' – Reserve force with no regular duties apart from routine drill and training sessions – purely recruited as an emergency resource. (Ibid, p44).

Rather than being a 'Constabulary' for the whole community, it was clear from the outset that the USC was there to protect the interests of the State and its loyal supporters, and not surprisingly, the leadership of the UVF actively encouraged their members to enlist in the newly-formed USC (Ibid, p46). In fact, enrolment forms were forwarded in bulk to individual battalion headquarters of the UVF (Ibid). This certainly appeared to have the desired effect, especially when the appointment of USC senior officers was announced. Four of the County Commandants held commissions in the UVF (Ibid), who eventually, were being replaced in terms of their duties, by the USC (Ibid, p48). In terms of recruitment, by July, 1921 over 15,000 'B' Specials had been enrolled from an authorised establishment of 19,000 (Ibid, p54). In terms of the religious background of the new recruits, the USC was effectively and not surprisingly, a Protestant force (Ibid, p50). Very few Catholics applied to join; in fact there is substantial evidence to indicate that one County Commandant, Colonel McClintock in Tyrone, refused to enrol Catholics (Ibid). The British Government were keen to resource the USC, by supplying over 26,000 rifles and providing WW1 uniforms, dyed black for the newly-formulated, and armed, force (Farrell, 1980, op. cit. p47).

The long-awaited political settlement, or perhaps compromise, what is also known as the partition, in time began to have the desired effect and as both countries began to settle down and live together almost as unfriendly neighbours, as the Irish Free State and Ulster or Northern Ireland. The security situation



slowly abated and became less acute and the RIC became the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). Accordingly, the 'A' and 'C' Classes of the USC were disbanded at the end of 1925; but the 'B' Specials were ominously retained (Farrell, 1983, p279) and paid for by the British until 1926 (Ibid, p287).

The major function of the 'B' Specials, and perhaps congruently with the original Cabinet Minute, was to ensure the IRA never again became a problem and in order to achieve that objective, the Government had passed the Special Powers Act (SPA), which empowered police with wide-ranging and sweeping powers, targeted at the IRA and the Catholic community in general (Taylor, 1997, p19). So, in order to summarise the overall situation surrounding the 'B' Specials in the immediate years post-partition, it looked something like this. Operating in a part-time function supporting the RUC, an almost exclusively Protestant armed and uniformed force, enjoying full police powers and able to call upon statutes like the SPA. In terms of accountability, or more poignantly, lack of it, they were operating in a policing environment without a Police Authority or Complaints procedure. Those latter elements were almost fifty years away.

The 'interests of the State' have been directly referred to and it would be prudent to actually examine what they actually were. It is irrefutable that the British interests mirrored those of the Protestant majority in Northern Ireland. They emanated from the economy, not surprisingly. The remaining twenty-six counties of Ireland at this stage were predominately rural and agricultural in total contrast to industrial Belfast, with heavy industries such as ship-building. In that context Belfast formed an industrial triangle with Glasgow and Merseyside which gave Ulster access to the Empire in terms of trade. An axiom of this economic scenario was that Belfast workers in heavy industry and the shipyards were almost exclusively Protestant (Farrell, 1980, p19).

Protestants also retained the exclusivity in respect of policing, which was completely sectarian. By 1961, only 12 per cent of the RUC was Catholic and the 'B' Specials completely so (Darby, 1983, op. cit, p21). However, sporadic IRA campaigns, 1938/9 and 1956/62, since the disbandment of the 'A' and 'C' Classes of the USC had justified their retention (Hillyard,

op. cit, p34). Of course later on in that decade, the first civil disturbances which ultimately led to what we now know as 'The Troubles' were witnessed. Among the complaints of the Nationalist community, which included, discrimination against Catholics in employment, housing, gerrymandering of boundaries was the sectarian nature of policing. If the RUC were feeling the effects of the storm of complaints from Catholics over their methods, the 'B' Specials were in the eye of it. There is also evidence to support allegations that off-duty 'B' Specials were involved in an organised ambush on the People's Democracy march from Belfast to Londonderry (Boyle, Hadden and Hillyard, 1975, p29). Further evidence regarding common purpose between the RUC, 'B' Specials and Protestant militants was apparent following incidents in August, 1969, a watershed that led directly to the involvement of the British military (Ibid).

The proliferation of vociferous complaints regarding grievances from the Nationalist community, civil disorder and the inability of the RUC to maintain order coalesced and on the 26th August, 1969, the Government order an Enquiry into policing – which was to prove the death knell for the 'B' Specials.

The Hunt Report recommended *inter alia*, that a Police Authority be established for Northern Ireland, that the RUC become more akin to a police force in Great Britain and as a consequence the title of the Chief Officer was re-named 'Chief Constable' from 'Inspector-General' – a legacy of the RIC. Also, two new separate forces to be established in order to assist the below-strength RUC (Hunt, 1969). They in turn became the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR) and the RUC Reserve. Accordingly, the 'B' Specials were disbanded; they had existed for almost fifty years, but their role/function was a complete legacy to the turbulent and indeterminate period that pertained at that time and times had changed in relation to civil rights.

Consequently, the November 2008 announcement in relation to policing should be the final element in modernisation and could witness the end of sectarian policing in Northern Ireland. It has been a long, tragic and often bloody road, from partition to peace.

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