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ARTICLE

Active Service and Environmental Damage in Revolutionary Ireland

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The Irish Revolution inflicted significant damage to built-up and natural landscapes between 1916 and 1923. Destruction transcended national and ideological divisions and remained a fixture within Irish urban and rural landscapes years after independence, presenting an Ireland politically transformed yet physically disfigured. An environmental reading of this transformative period calls into question many of its established lessons and interpretative boundaries, including the agency and considerations of those who participated in and witnessed it. This article examines the extent and impacts of environmental destruction experienced on communal levels throughout the revolution, and how a war that was waged on higher ideological grounds very often disrupted and alienated the everyday lives of communities and individuals.

The Irish Revolution was a guerrilla conflict of varying scales and intensities that broadly comprised a symbolic if unsuccessful urban rebellion in Dublin in 1916, followed by a period of sabotage, arson, assassination and counter-insurgency between 1919–21 (the Irish War of Independence), and a brief but deadly civil war, 1922–3. Its combatants were Irishmen and women whose contributions varied from passive service that included activities such as concealing weapons, conveying intelligence and sabotaging communications, to active service in the form of ambushes and assassinations. Ireland's own 'scattered units' mimicked the type of resistance that had occurred during the Peninsular War of the early nineteenth century, during which the Portuguese and Spanish applied guerrilla tactics against the French army with a 'monotonous regularity' that wore down and frustrated Napoleon's larger, better equipped forces.[1]

British Crown forces attempted to curtail counter-revolutionary activity in their own time by using a legal pretext to intern offenders and violent measures to suppress the Irish independence movement and intimidate the population into submission. After the revolution, the Irish Free State created military service and pension legislation to recognise and indemnify those who fought for independence. However, legislators struggled with the definition of active service, the accuracy of membership rolls and to authenticate claimed military service.[2] Assessors also stratified service awards based on the physical or geographic proximity of guerrilla and auxiliary activities to the presence of, or direct engagement with, Crown forces, which marginalised many passive participants. These parameters failed to recognise military service in the context of guerrilla warfare, where combatants historically utilised and manipulated landscapes to offset material inferiority. This article shows that passive service, particularly environmental manipulation, significantly contributed to the military campaign for Irish independence, and argues that contributing service during the period often extended beyond the rigid definitions laid out in later pension schemes.

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[1] George Lefebvre (trans. J.E. Anderson), *Napoleon: From Tilsit to Waterloo, 1807–1815* (Presses Universitaires de France, 1936; New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 101.

[2] Marie Coleman, 'Military Service Pensions for Veterans of the Irish Revolution, 1916–1923', *War in History*, 20, 2 (2013), 202; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Between Two Hells: The Irish Civil War* (London: Profile Books, 2021), 129–32.

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In his 1963 autobiography, *Vive Moi!*, Irish literary figure and former freedom-fighter Seán Ó Faoláin reflected on the nature of his service during the Irish Revolution: 'In my six years as a rank-and-filer of the IRA [Irish Republican Army] I shot nobody and I was briefly under fire once. I have no war memories to record except to say: "Were those the Troubles? And if so was it a revolution?"'[3] Ó Faoláin saw himself as a misunderstood artist rather than a gunman. As he put it, the Irish Revolution boasted neither the preceding grandiosity of national resistance to Napoleonic France, nor the personal hardships endured by mid-twentieth-century revolutionaries.[4] Guerrilla war was a slow process that required patience, preparation and contributions from a variety of quarters. The majority of Ireland's rebels were, Ó Faoláin wrote,

> . . . given such undemanding if essential jobs as the gathering of more or less useful information, watching over the billets of the fighters, scouting, carrying dispatches, doing police work, helping to trench roads or fell trees across them in order to hold up reinforcements when an ambush was due, marching in the public streets to defy some military order against it, perhaps standing guard at the public lying-in-state of some patriot. . . . Otherwise we hung around, drilled, waited, felt nervy, groused, and were supremely proud and happy whenever even the most modest task made us feel we were really doing something positive for the struggle for independence.[5]

Though it lacked the scale and drama of the anti-colonial conflicts Ó Faoláin took to embody genuine struggle, Ireland experienced revolution in other ways. Indeed, those outside the immediate dynamics of interpersonal violence could nevertheless be said to have actively participated. Hundreds of instances of ambush, assassination and reprisal throughout the period demonstrated the continuous and often non-negotiable nature of revolutionary violence. The destruction of property pulled non-combatants into the conflict by displacing familiar spatial and temporal boundaries in an increasingly militarised Ireland.[6] Chris Pearson explained that combatants and non-combatants co-exist (often unwillingly) within militarised landscapes, which produce 'contact zones' where military activity invades private spheres.[7] In addition to its impact on rural and urban landscapes, the intimate, liminal and incessantly destructive nature of guerrilla warfare in Ireland changed social environments and disrupted daily life, often deconstructing the relationships and identities they hosted.[8] As such, a diverse milieu of damage to Irish landscapes and built environments throughout the revolutionary period bound many more than the combatants to the wide-ranging dynamics of partisanship and its state-directed consequences. Environments were versatile targets for both republicans and Crown forces. Throughout the guerrilla phase of the conflict, 1920–1, rebels felled trees, trenched and scattered brick walls along country roads to impede motor traffic and create ambush sites. Police and soldiers retaliated by means of home invasion, injury to property and arson against static and practically defenceless Irish communities. In most cases, property functioned as an extension of the individual, as was the case in homes, businesses, or sentimental belongings. Familiar or intimate spaces also carried emotional attachment or provided psychological safety in some form; violating these spaces compounded the destructive act at hand, extended the environmental impacts of revolution and implicated non-combatants as both victims and protagonists.

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[3] Seán Ó Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1963), 174.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid., 175.

[6] Chris Pearson, 'Researching Militarized Landscapes: A Literature Review on War and the Militarization of the Environment', *Landscape Research*, 37, 1 (2012), 116, citing Woodward (2004), 3; citing Arthur Westing (1980), 191; Brian Graham, 'The Imagining of Place: Representation and Identity in Contemporary Ireland', in Brian Graham (ed.), *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 193.

[7] Pearson, 'Researching Militarized Landscapes', 126.

[8] Ibid., 116, citing John Schofield, *Combat Archaeology: Material Culture and Modern Conflict* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 2005), 44.

Though it applies many of the same sources that informed preceding studies, the impressive spatial representations within the recent *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* help us further understand the complex 'process by which individuals, through interaction with their environment, became revolutionaries'.[9] Observing these influences in the literal sense pivots from Joost Augusteijn's implied social contexts to emphasise how many men and women interpreted 'helping the cause of national emancipation' to mean cutting wires, sawing trees and digging trenches.[10]

In this context, Seán Ó Faoláin service and that of countless others was indeed valuable. Records illustrate that IRA companies were in perpetual negotiation with their surroundings. Narrative evidence from the Bureau of Military History Witness Statements and the Brigade Activity Reports within the Military Service Pension Collection show that the majority of IRA and Cumann na mBan auxiliaries spent the better part of their service preparing attacks rather than executing them. This was extensive if repetitive work, reports for which often withheld the monotonous details. Volunteers described their work in indefinite terms and on floating timelines. Landscape manipulation often required widespread logistical organisation and muscle as trenched and blocked roads could extend for miles beyond an ambush point.[11] The resulting scale of disruptive, destructive activity quickly outpaced the Royal Irish Constabulary's [RIC's] ability (or the necessity) to report it in detail.[12] IRA Volunteer statements were equally vague. David Hall and the Meath IRA destroyed 'about twenty bridges in the area' by the time of the truce, 'all on the main arteries used by the enemy'.[13] In Carlow, John McGill and his comrades 'knocked' bridges and felled one or two trees each week from autumn 1920. 'When we got information that the military lorries used other roads, we blocked them immediately', he recalled, concluding, 'I don't think there is any need to go into details of these operations, as every one of them had the same preparation, the same labour and watchfulness'.[14]

Re-examining the Irish Revolution at its centenary shows how the experiences of human displacement and environmental destruction complicated the definitions and criteria for 'participation' and 'active service' in that conflict. Detachment from contemporary events also proved difficult in an atmosphere in which both the IRA guerrillas and British Crown forces pressed the population to support or suppress the republican movement, which underlines 'the difficulty in associating behavior (or alleged behavior) with political allegiance', as Brian Hughes documented.[15] RIC General Inspector Joseph Byrne reported in September 1919 that, 'in the face of such terrorism witnesses cannot be induced to come forward and give evidence against the criminals'.[16] As a result, many civilians endured intimidation, curfews, bans on public markets and restricted access to public space, while others lost their homes, property and businesses through disciplinary destruction. In this context, revolutionary violence dislocated people from their previously lived experiences, further entwining them with the movement as a whole.

The damage to built-up and natural landscapes in Ireland between 1916–23 remained a feature of urban and rural landscapes years after independence, presenting an Ireland politically transformed yet still physically disfigured. An environmental reading of the process through which this damage occurred calls into question many of the revolution's established lessons and interpretative boundaries, including the agency and insights of those who participated in and witnessed it, as well as the nature of revolutionary participation and victimhood. To 'environmentalise' the revolution is to consider how Ireland's natural and man-made features – landscapes, topography, climate, resources and infrastructure and human networks – affected and influenced revolutionary behaviour. Incorporating cultural geography pushes the envelope further. Raids and reprisals – that is, the violation and destruction of personal and communal spaces – altered their associated meaning for individuals and communities.[17] As a result, the environmental history of the Irish Revolution extends its meaning beyond its orthodox source base, chronology and political interpretations. There is no lack of data to document 'criminal injury to property'; archivists continue to catalogue and release new collections that permit a deeper reading of the destruction to personal property and changes to the built environment in Ireland. In addition to the tens of thousands of compensation applications lodged under various government schemes, it is very likely that many other incidents went unreported. Victims often failed to report small scale or personally insignificant damage (broken windows, trampled gardens, or loss of trade, for instance), while an applicant's known political sympathies or religious affiliation could result in dismissing, deprioritising, or simply not filing other claims. Conversely, there are many files that claim compensation for the most banal damage, including one Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) file that claims restitution for, 'Damage to one egg'.[18]

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[9] Augusteijn, 'The Emergence of Violent Activism, 1916–21', 333, in John Crowley, Donal O Drisceoil, Mike Murphy and John Borgonovo, eds., *Atlas of the Irish Revolution* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2017), 352; 378.

[10] David Fitzpatrick, 'The Geography of Irish Nationalism 1910–1921', *Past & Present*, 78 (Feb. 1978), 114–15, 114; Peter Hart, 'The Geography of Revolution in Ireland 1917–1923', 144.

[11] Blocking roads and cutting telegraph and telephone lines 'could extend several miles from the centre of the attack'. Richard Abbott, *Police Casualties in Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2000), 55; Every road and lane in a ten-mile radius was blocked during separate operations at Pallaskenry (Limerick) and Porrisokane (Tipperary) in June 1920. Inspector General's Report for Jan. 1920, TNA, CO/904/111; Outrage reports (throughout) CO 904/148.

[12] See destructive activity in Donegal and Mayo for July 1920 as being a 'daily occurrence' in Inspector General's Monthly Report for July 1920, TNA CO 904/112.

[13] Statements of David Hall, WS 1539, 17, and Michael O'Donnell, BMH WS 1145, 8.

[14] Statement of John McGill, BMH WS 1616, 5.

[15] Brian Hughes, *Defying the IRA? Intimidation, Coercion, and Communities During the Irish Revolution* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), 3.

[16] Joseph Byrne to Under Secretary, Inspector General's monthly report for Aug. 1919, 15 Sept. 1919 (TNA, CO 904/109).

Not every Irish rebel could be a gunman. Scarcity of arms and ammunition made it impossible, and only a select few within the typical Irish Volunteer demographic pursued the opportunity.[19] Also, many in the Irish independence movement found difficult the transition from protesting, parading and soft defiance that defined the 1917–18 period, to active service involving interpersonal violence between 1919–21. Moral attitudes toward killing, the fear of imprisonment or death, the threat of losing one's job or business, and potential reprisals against families and communities influenced individuals' willingness to participate in certain revolutionary activities and to comply with social and political expectations, and caused even devout republicans to withdraw.[20]

Moreover, different geographies of conflict demanded different forms and scales of participation, service and vigilance. That is to say, communal dynamics enabled or curtailed revolutionary activity in a given area due to its prevailing political and religious sentiment. For example, a memo outlining the activities of the 2nd Northern Division activity in Tyrone and Derry to the pensions board shows that Crown force police and soldiers were not necessary to create hostile environments for Irish Volunteers and their families.

> The most outstanding peculiarity was that approximately 50% of the entire population of the area was actively hostile to the Volunteer Forces. Even prior to the formation of Special class constables in Ulster, every second man and women (even the children at school) were active agents of the enemy forces – supplying details of all Volunteer movements. . . . Immediately [after] a volunteer went 'on the run' his people were harassed, their property destroyed and not infrequently were they marked for reprisals. . . . These difficulties, we respectfully submit, show that the role of a volunteer

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[17] Alexander B. Murphy and Douglas Johnson, eds., *Cultural Encounters with the Environment: Enduring and Evolving Geographic Themes* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, Inc., 2000), 3.

[18] 'File relating to the destruction of an egg', c. 1923–24 (Public Record Office Northern Ireland, HA/5/374).

[19] Joost Augusteijn outlined the typical Volunteer: young, Catholic, working or middle-class. Officers tended to be older than the rank-and-file, from urban areas and better educated. Joost Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare: The Radicalization of the Irish Republican Army – A Comparative Analysis, 1916–1921* (Kildare: Irish Academic Press, 1994), 75; Foster remarked, 'I.R.A. activists came from the youth of the small towns, and the rural lower middle classes; unlike the Volunteer movement at large, the eldest sons or local notables from the strong-farming and shopkeeping classes were not prominent, whereas the unattached, younger "men of no property" were'. R. F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600–1972* (London: Penguin Press, 1988), 500.

[20] Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare*, 69–72. Further, David Fitzpatrick identified participation in the revolution (in various forms) to involve risk calculated at the personal, collective, and financial levels; see Fitzpatrick, 'The Geography'.

> in this area was much more difficult than in areas where the Volunteers had the wholehearted support and cooperation of the vast majority of the population.[21]

Conversely, in Cork, where Volunteers enjoyed greater community support and cooperation, a brigade account explained that support activity – 'raids for arms, raids for mails, digging of trenches, blowing up of bridges, general disruption of enemy communications' – was so widespread and frequent that some men 'should be able to claim equal service with ASU [Active Service Unit] men because of their particular work'.[22] These polemic examples illustrate how varying communal dynamics influenced revolutionary engagement.[23]

Most students of the period are familiar with the type of material damage carried out during revolutionary activities. Arson erased police barracks, loyalists' homes and businesses that supplied the police garrisons. Such acts were strategic; they manifested the changing political atmosphere in Ireland and sought to establish a presence without physically occupying 're-conquered' territory. But republicans established their presence in other ways as well. Republican-led incendiarism, sabotage and ambush were, on the whole, neither wholly spontaneous nor singularly destructive events but instead entailed large-scale landscape preparation and collateral damage to natural features. For both the IRA and Cumann na mBan, as well as the Crown forces, control of space represented a struggle over Ireland's territory. That is to say, Ireland's natural and built environments acted as 'platforms for the expression of power'.[24] Gemma Clark's work examines the strategic importance and symbolism of fire in this regard as an overall 'highly destructive and deliberate' act.[25] Arson, an ambush or barracks raid, felling trees and trenching roads to support revolutionary operations reified republican presence and, in effect, an active resistance. This was especially the case as republican participants prepared numerous ambush spots for assaults that never materialised, and sabotage continued to feature in counties where violent confrontations rarely occurred. Conversely, replacing a boastful tricolour with the Union Jack atop a public building, banning public meetings and enforcing curfew, and raiding a home in search of seditious literature, weapons, or rebels (often repeatedly), illustrated Crown force attempts to suppress the independence movement by controlling or disrupting republican symbols of defiance. Therefore, unremarkable day-to-day environmental manipulation, degradation and destruction underpinned the revolution's more celebrated violent exploits. Each environmental modification implicated non-combatants in new ways by changing the cultural (communal) and emotional (individual) connections to space. These dynamics shaped cooperative zones of violence to create a 'system of shared presence', one that conveyed to authorities that the republican movement was alive and well, and limited the control of Crown forces to the ground on which they presently stood.[26] On the whole, instances of material damage greatly exceeded the number of violent interpersonal encounters between the IRA and Crown forces.

It is against this backdrop that we can accurately contextualise the environmental antagonisms of this period in Irish history with the broader, established field of the environmental history of war.[27]

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[21] Irish Military Archives, Military Service Pensions Collection, 1 Brigade. 2 Northern Division. Rec'd 14/7/36 (IMA/MSPC/A/44(3).

[22] IV Cork Brigade MA/MSPC/A/4(2).

[23] Coleman, 'Military Service Pensions for Veterans of the Irish Revolution, 1916–1923', 210–1.

[24] 'Territoriality' refers to the 'social construction of spaces by political processes that act as platforms for the expression of power'. Colin Flint, 'Introduction', in Colin Flint, ed., *The Geography of War and Peace: From Death Camps to Diplomats* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5–6.

[25] Gemma Clark, *Everyday Violence in the Irish Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 55, 65, 69.

[26] Jeremy Black, 'Geographies of War: The Recent Historical Background', in Colin Flint, ed., *The Geography of War and Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 24.

[27] For example, see Chris Pearson, *Mobilizing Nature: The Environmental History of War and Militarization in Modern France* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Chris Pearson, 'Researching Militarized Landscapes: A Literature Review on War and the Militarization of the Environment', *Landscape Research*, 37, 1 (Feb. 2012), 115–33; Richard P. Tucker, Tait Keller, J. R. McNeill and Martin Schmidt, eds., *Environmental Histories of the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

These studies focus on the impacts of industrialised conflict, and guerrilla warfare and interwar paramilitarism fall outside those boundaries. But we can start to make connections between these areas of inquiry thanks to a recent translation of Carl Schmitt's 1962 treatise on partisanship that illustrates the dynamics of low-intensity, non-industrial warfare experienced in Ireland during the War of Independence period. The key factors Schmitt outlines include the legal ramifications of citizens' resistance to a foreign power, state-directed reprisals and the 'tellurian character' of irregular conflict.[28]

In a similar sense, Irish studies has, on the whole, produced histories of landscape and culture, or nature and the environment, as opposed to methodologically-oriented environmental history. For instance, Andy Bielenberg's deep study of the industrial revolution's impact on Irish industry sets a broad foundation for a study of its environmental impacts, but does not pursue the topic outright.[29] Nigel Everett makes an important contribution to the study of Irish woodlands by underscoring their significance in native Irish culture, and how a denuded Ireland came to personify England's colonial legacy. His study stops at the Act of Union but nevertheless contributes to a broader continuity evident in the revolutionary period, as remaining forest cover, along with mountains, bogs, and fields, provided cover for Irish guerrillas as they did for their sixteenth-century woodkerne predecessors.[30] Eoin Neeson's work provides further continuity with this study. His contribution to the considerable volume, *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History*, edited by John Wilson Foster, notes tree mutilation as a form of republican protest in the nineteenth century, a practice that re-emerged during the Irish Civil War when combatants felled foreign, ornamental species on landed estates.[31] While Neeson's study examines the role of Irish timber during the First World War and reafforestation policy after the establishment of the Irish Free State, it overlooks widespread tree-felling and related compensation connected with the revolutionary period. These activities underscore the voluntary and coerced activities of Irish rebels and civilians, respectively, their contribution to the revolution's environmental impacts, and a reassessment of participation during the Irish Revolution.

How does an environmental reading of 'active service' emerge from the record? How did altering landscapes and destruction to property indicate revolutionary activity? Rebellion manifested in various forms after the 1916 Easter Rising, a brief but destructive uprising in Dublin that ruined large portions of the city. Sinn Féin candidates saw success in by-elections in 1917 and gained a majority of Irish seats in the House of Commons after the 1918 general election. The threat of conscription into the British Army in 1918 expanded Irish Volunteer and Cumman na mBan rolls alongside Sinn Féin political success, and raids for weapons and ammunition increased. Spatial politics expanded opportunities for participation in the Irish independence movement, and politicised and militarised otherwise quotidian spaces. For instance, the Irish Labour Party directed a 'down tools' protest prior to the 1918 Easter Holiday, which many laborers observed throughout Ireland. Dublin Trade Unionists' anti-conscription pledge received over 100,000 signatures. Forty thousand Irishwomen pledged to refuse to fill the positions of men dismissed from their work for resisting conscription, and Cumann na mBan established a 'Green Cross' corps in anticipation of violence resulting from an enforced draft.[32] Irish bishops validated the Irish Anti-Conscription Committee's protests through their added support.[33] Other demonstrations sought to not only resist Ireland's contribution to the current war effort, but to efface installations that honoured past wars, colonial figures and marks of ascendancy. Nationalists assaulted monuments to British wars and religious markers during the period, sometimes repeatedly. Republicans defaced statues, plaques and monuments as a challenge to the

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[28] Carl Schmitt (trans. C.J. Miller), *Theory of the Partisan: An Interjection to the Concept of the Political* (Reprint, 2021; originally published in German, 1962), 14–15.

[29] Andy Bielenberg, *Ireland and the Industrial Revolution: The Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Irish Industry, 1801–1922* (New York: Routledge, 2009; 2014 edition).

[30] Nigel Everett, *The Woods of Ireland: A History, 700–1800* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2015 edition).

[31] Eoin Neeson, 'Woodland in History and Culture', in John Wilson Foster, ed., *Nature in Ireland: A Scientific and Cultural History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997), 150.

[32] *Donegal News*, 15 June 1918.

[33] 'All Nationalists Combine for Defense', *Strabane Chronicle*, 27 Apr. 1918.

British state and in an effort to revise its colonial narrative. These actions went both ways as effigies commemorating nationalist milestones fell at the hands of military and police.[34] Control over public space continued with the removal of Union Jack flags and replacing them with tri-colour flags (and vice-versa), part of the reactionary political 'mood' prevalent after 1916.[35]

Between 1919 and 1921, the IRA observed a loosely coordinated war strategy that sought to disrupt and alter Ireland's urban and rural landscapes in order to stage ambushes, raid for arms, generally frustrate British forces and resist the King's writ. Asymmetrical reprisals for attacks on state authority damaged environments, displaced individuals and families, disrupted local economies and induced emotional trauma that came to define the period in many respects. Examining the environmental framework of this strategy highlights, on one hand, how the IRA perceived landscapes and climate as tools for waging war and, on another, how republicans mobilised environments and non-combatants as a fifth column.

Participation is a difficult dynamic to examine for several reasons. Communal pressure to join the local Volunteer company or Cumman na mBan, to boycott policemen, or billet rebels was very real. Reflecting on his basic conception of revolutionary social dynamics, Thomas Hevey recalled his 'boy-ish reasoning' that at the time saw 'anyone who did not resist [the Crown forces as] acquiescent by default'.[36] In this sense, it is important to acknowledge how both the IRA and Crown forces regarded civilians as an extension of the war setting. Civilians functioned as tools that could manipulate or repair environments, carry or conceal arms or information and whose persons and property might be subject to destruction as deterrents.

Brian Hughes explains that 'everyday' intimidation and coercion existed in an atmosphere where the threat of violence or non-violent personal sanctions (boycott, loss of business, social ostracism) influenced compliant behaviour.[37] The IRA intimidated and punished those who violated standards of republican social etiquette, which essentially comprised housing, serving or extending graces to policemen and those labelled political and religious dissidents. Eroding the social foundations of these groups significantly altered existing communal dynamics. Specifically, it weakened police authority and public resistance to republicanism. Pressure came to bear on constables to leave the force. The Irish Volunteer journal, *An t-Oglach*, encouraged local initiatives toward this end, which Dáil Eireann sanctioned as national policy. Proclamations distributed throughout County Clare in September 1919 listed various offences treasonous to the Irish Republic, which included 'having intercourse with the Police or Military, supplying them with goods or transport, assisting them in their investigations' IRA. Numerous notices posted near barracks throughout the month echoed these warnings. Lodging constables was also forbidden, and offenders risked the destruction of their boarding house as a penalty. Sometimes the IRAIRA communicated orders directly. Landlords in the small Clare village of Corofin refused to let vacant houses to police and their families after they received threatening letters. In Youghal, Cork, the IRA hand-delivered instructions to landlords that delineated acceptable loyalties. They read:

> Fellow Irishman, You are unfortunate to have taken up the attitude you have. Why harbour police, soldiers, and coastguards[?]. It is regretted you associate with the enemies of our country. You are hereby warned to cease communication with those class of people, otherwise you must be dealt with as an enemy of Ireland. If you value your life get rid of them from your house, and obey the laws of your country. [signed] Intelligence Branch, IRA.

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[34] *Irish Independent*, 17 May 1920; *Freeman's Journal*, 21 Apr. 1921; *Belfast Newsletter*, 16 Apr. 1921, *Skibbereen Eagle*, 16 Apr. 1921.

[35] David Fitzpatrick, *Politics and Irish Life: Provincial Experience of War and Revolution* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998 edition), 111, 119.

[36] Statement of Thomas Hevey, Bureau of Military History [B.M.H.], Witness Statement [W.S.] 1668, 35.

[37] Hughes, *Defying the IRA?*, 5.

The program had a powerful effect, as one policeman's letter to the *Constabulary Gazette* clearly illustrates.

> Dear Editor, I do not know that you are aware that there never was a time in the history of the Force that there was less respect for the Irish policeman than there is at present. Nobody respects them, and nobody fears them, and they are not wanted in any society. . . . He [a constable] is not welcome in the locality he was reared in – his actions have been well circulated there. . . . He is met by ingratitude on one side, on the other by contempt.

Contemporary definitions of participation, willing and unwilling, during the period cloud already muddy waters. Working closely with the military pension files for revolutionary participants, Cécile Chemin-Gordon identifies how definitions of 'Active Service' within the Military Service Pensions Acts were 'made of shades of grey'.[38] Similarly, Diarmaid Ferriter observed that, 'There was no easy or satisfactory definition of what constituted active service [in the pension schemes] and it remained a contentious issue'.[39] Qualifying participants were recognised as belonging to a military body based on the interpretative model of Easter Week 1916, and participation was defined against merely belonging to a military body. Physical proximity to the enemy was an additional qualifier, and equally problematic as the majority of landscape manipulation occurred in areas of anticipated enemy presence as opposed to their actual location. Observers wrote to newspaper editors with their own interpretations. Surveying the qualifications for active service, in 1924 a 'Local Volunteer' pointed out to the *Freeman's Journal* that the Board of Assessors had 'a knotty problem' on their hands. 'The local volunteers were a much more numerous body', he explained. 'They were responsible for active service work in the way of street ambushes and the destruction of British military property. . . . The Board of Assessors cannot well consider the active service unit and leave out the local volunteer companies'.[40] There is much evidence to show landscape manipulation occurred on a wide scale and was a continuous occupation for many 'local' volunteers.[41]

Other activities fell outside the official administrative definitions for 'active service'. For example, the IRA commandeered civilian labour to manipulate landscapes in order to divert or stall Crown force patrols, often as part of a broader ambush plan. Conversely, Crown forces commandeered civilian labour to fill trenches and clear obstructions from roadways.[42] In certain localities, the IRA was able to press a single labour group into performing both the sabotage and its repair.[43] It is in this way that environmental damage extended conditions for participation.

Ireland's diverse natural features, together with the presence and concentration of Crown forces, dictated the geography of revolutionary violence. Woods, mountains, and rivers, elevations and curves in the road, and proximity to urban centres influenced the scope and pace of obstruction, offered routes for evasion, and formed a nexus where environmental damage and interpersonal violence intersected.[44] The widespread and diverse damage to Irish landscapes shows that environmental engineering was indispensable to republican militancy and revised the scope of active service for participants and non-combatants alike. For Crown forces, road obstructions distinguished the Irish landscape as a tool of war and further eroded the boundary between Irish civilians and rebels.

Though Britain was reluctant to classify its counter-insurgency as a war, the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland, citing the 1907 Hague Convention, identified destroyed property as a significant qualifier for such status.[45] From autumn 1919 Volunteer companies manipulated landscapes surrounding police barracks, tax record offices and other centres of state authority in preparation for raids and attacks. Most operations occurred without sanction from General Headquarters in Dublin.[46] As such, scattered activity and attacks against property initiated a war scenario sooner than the early 1920 chronology most historians acknowledge.[47] A House of Commons report that attributed over one hundred instances of arson and malicious injury to property to 'Sinn Féin outrages' for 1919 further reinforces this earlier timeline. Statistical returns for non-agrarian criminal offences identified 671 injuries to property, which rose significantly from previous years.[48] But 1920 and 1921 represent the revolution's deadliest and most destructive years prior to the civil war. They were also the years that saw flying columns, ambushes and men 'on the run' create popular memory of the period; guerrilla warfare enforced a moral geography that permitted republican Ireland to level the playing field against a numerically and materially superior opponent.

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[38] Cécile Chemin (@MuayCe), Twitter, 18 Oct. 2021. Redirects to 'Definitions of Active Service', IMA; Military Service Pensions Acts, 1924, 1934, and Military Service Pensions (Amendment Act), 1949.

[39] Diarmaid Ferriter, *Between Two Hells: The Irish Civil War* (London: Profile Books, 2021), 130.

[40] 'Pensions for Volunteers', *Freeman's Journal*, 13 Oct. 1924.

[41] See also, 'Definition of Service', *Limerick Leader*, 16 Nov. 1935; 'Fair Play', to the Editor, *Irish Independent*, 20 Aug. 1942.

[42] Statements of William Keane, B.M.H., W.S. 1023, 27; and Walter Brown, B.M.H., W.S. 1436, 9.

[43] William Sheehan, *Hearts and Mines: The British 5th Division, Ireland, 1920–1922* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2009), 75.

[44] Though predominantly flat, open land may have prevented operations, Ireland's most mountainous and densely wooded regions failed to host an inverse spike in interpersonal violence. Hart, 'The Geography of Revolution in Ireland, 1917–1923', 146; 158–9; Michael Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), 200.

Some natural features and existing infrastructure aided rebels and frustrated the British counterinsurgency, which relied on mobility. Crown forces struggled in the face of inadequate transport and greatly deteriorated Irish roads. George Fletcher's 1922 survey of Connacht confirmed as much: 'The roads, being repaired with limestone (the only available rock) are generally bad – dusty in summer, sticky in winter, and rutty all the time'.[49] Excessive motor traffic and poor weather compounded road damage.[50] Sligo Corporation recorded that military lorries cut up a local road so deeply that 'you could bury a horse in some of the ruts'.[51] On the whole, the volume of military traffic did not overburden Irish roads, which hardly neared the 'heavy' category established by civil engineers at the time. Rather, a sizable increase in the frequency of traffic and increased rebel trenching neutralised the benefits of compacted sediment even after being refilled, thus accelerating the deterioration of Irish roads.

The Irish landscape disadvantaged mechanised patrols in other ways. Motor vehicle engines grumbled throughout an otherwise industrially mute countryside;[52] they kicked up dust that betrayed position; and narrow, winding roads and single carriage bridges slowed the pace of travel and limited forward sightlines.[53] More recent innovations of modern warfare contributed little to the situation.[54] Armoured cars were too few and too heavy to be effective on Irish roads. Both had been 'developed to meet a conventional threat in a conventional war'.[55]

Bird and beast offered simpler solutions. In January 1920, the Irish command of the British army requested homing pigeons and mobile courier stations to circumvent intelligence leaks and dead communication lines throughout Ireland. By August, Crown forces distributed eight horse-drawn pigeon lofts to commands at Killarney, Galway, Killybegs (Donegal) and Waterford.[56] The Crown attempted to mobilise horses to overcome poor road conditions and extend its forces beyond conventional routes, but even this proved difficult in certain areas.[57] Crown forces worked in tandem to flush out and corral republican combatants. In some cases, cavalry operated along open fields, bogs, and hedges to beat out concealed republicans, while infantry soldiers occupied nearby villages and blocked roads to prevent their flight.[58] Toward July 1921, horse-led round-ups combed previously inaccessible landscapes, notably mountainous regions and county borderlands.[59] Coordinated operations conducted 'on a war-like scale' brought in hundreds and at times thousands of suspects, though a general catch-and-release policy meant all but a handful remained in custody after interrogation.[60] The IRA responded to the use of pigeons and horses by destroying their lofts, stables, and food supplies – work that neutralised enemy communications and mobility.[61]

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[45] Albert Coyle (transcriber and annotator), *Evidence on Conditions in Ireland Comprising the Complete Testimony, Affidavits and Exhibits Presented before the American Commission on Conditions in Ireland* (Washington, D.C., 1921), 46–7.

[46] Dorothy Macardle, *The Irish Republic* (Dublin, 1965), 291, 307, 353.

[47] Joost Augusteijn, 'Military Conflict in the War of Independence', in Crowley et al., eds., *Atlas of the Irish Revolution*, 351; Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence*, 25; Hughes, *Defying the IRA?*, 13; Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare*, 69.

[48] Previous year returns were 1917: 215; 1918: 285. C.J.C. Street, *The Administration of Ireland, 1920* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1921), 62.

[49] George Fletcher, *Connaught* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 9.

[50] W. H. Kautt, *Ambushes and Armour: The Irish Rebellion 1919–1921* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), 160.

[51] Alderman John Jinks, Sligo Corporation, *Sligo Champion*, 21 Feb. 1920.

[52] Brighid O'Mullane, B.M.H., W.S. 450, 26.

[53] Kautt, *Ambushes and Armour*, 53–5; Gordon Pattison, 'The British Army's Effectiveness in the Irish Campaign 1919–1921 and the Lessons for Modern Counterinsurgency Operations, with Special Reference to C3I Aspects', in *Cornwallis XIV: Analysis of Societal Conflict and Counter-Insurgency Workshop* (Vienna, 2009), 95.

[54] Charles Townshend, *The Republic: The Fight for Irish Independence* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), 153.

[55] Kautt, *Ambushes and Armour*, 42.

[56] Lofts redistributed. Killybegs to Londonderry (26 Oct. 1920); Renmore Barracks, Galway, to Boyle (1 Oct. 1920). Wagon units featured two loftmen, a small table and chairs, pigeon lofts and corn feed. WO 35/180A; *Freeman's Journal*, 6 Aug.

By 1921, various companies reported that 'extensive' road blocking occurred 'constantly' throughout their battalions.[62] In more active areas, such as in Bandon, County Cork, and Trim, County Meath, road blockades completely paralysed traffic as the IRA prevented movement *in toto* by demolishing or barricading all available routes.[63] Road conditions in Killaloe, County Clare, forced police to resort to the use of bicycles because blocking made motor transport 'useless'; the *Freeman's Journal* praised donkeys as the sole method for navigating trenches and felled trees.[64] IRA companies employed road obstruction as a form of resistance, a 'safe and popular amusement for the IRA',[65] but it was also a political statement. Open trenches and felled trees exhibited republican control of a region, or at the very least a sustained rebel presence.

Not all landscapes were complicit, however. In the case of roads, compaction and drainage – how difficult it was to dig – influenced trench location, size, and the labour required. Most times, labourers outnumbered the succeeding gunmen. For example, sixty men from two companies moved 1,200 cubic feet of earth to open a large trench at Boherash Cross between Mallow and Buttevant, County Cork, in March 1921.[66] Smaller pits, artificial fencing, large stones and short ridges in the road required fewer hands to destroy and were effective in diverting lorries toward larger traps. Other methods were more deceptive. Simon Donnelly concealed trenches with small brush and dirt to give the impression of safe passage.[67] Engineering schemata captured during the civil war show how road traps evolved since 1919.[68] One featured a trap-door mechanism where a wooden plank balanced on a central beam over a six-foot-wide trench, camouflaged with mud or road dust, would collapse when triggered.[69] British forces came to recognise widespread and innovative obstruction as a significant military

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1920. For an overview of Britain's mobilisation of pigeons during the First World War, see Jilly Cooper, *Animals in War* (London: William Heinemann, 1983), 72–7.

[57] Kautt, *Ambushes and Armour*, 160. Horses aided British cavalry in Palestine in 1940 to overcome difficult terrain. Cooper, *Animals in War*, 51.

[58] Sheehan, *Hearts and Mines*, 24–5, 89–93; *Leinster Leader*, 2 Apr. 1921; 'Report on Operations 16/17 Feb. 1921', A. C. Halahan, Essex Reg. 18 Feb. 1921 (TNA WO 35/88B, Part II: Conflicts 6 Nov. 1920 – 26 Aug. 1921) WO 35/88B.

[59] *Irish Examiner*, 11 Feb. 1921; *Belfast Newsletter*, 11 Feb. 1921; *Evening Herald*, 15 Feb. 1921.

[60] For South Sligo region: *Freeman's Journal*, 7 June 1921, *Connaught Telegraph*, 11 June 1921; Galway district on the borders of Clare and Mayo. *Irish Independent*, 11 June 1921; (South Monaghan) *Irish Independent*, 17 June 1921; Navan-Kells section *Drogheda Independent*, 25 June 1921.

[61] *Evening Herald*, 29 Dec. 1920; 6 Nov. 1920; 'Homing Pigeons Taken', *Irish Independent*, 30 Apr. 1921; *Ulster Herald*, 20 Nov. 1920. Sheehan, *Hearts and Mines*, 72.

[62] Sheehan, *Hearts and Mines*, 74–5.

[63] The entire Kilpatrick Company undertook this work each night and some days throughout early 1921. Statement of Michael Riordan, B.M.H., W.S. 1638, 21; Statement of David Hall, B.M.H., W.S. 1539, 7; Statement of Con Kelleher, B.M.H., W.S. 1654, 9–11.

[64] General Cork to Irish Command, Parkgate, 21 Mar. 1921, WO 35/88B; *Freeman's Journal*, 7 June 1921.

[65] Sheehan, *Hearts and Mines*, 74–5.

[66] Statement of Leo Callaghan, B.M.H., W.S. 978, 20.

[67] Statement of Simon Donnelly, B.M.H., W.S. 481, 26; see also, *Belfast Newsletter*, 29 Nov. 1920.

[68] 'I.R.A., G.H.Q. Documents D/Engineering. No indication in records as to placedate capture', various dates, July 1922 onward (Irish Military Archives, Captured Documents, Lot No. 229).

[69] Director/Engineering to Battalion Commandant, 5 Nov. 1922 (IMA, Captured Documents, Lot 229).

achievement. The actions of local governments reinforced this view because many refused to vote to approve funds toward road repairs.[70] After the establishment of the Irish Free State, local government looked to the British Treasury to compensate roads and bridges damaged from frequent and heavy military traffic, including hauling timber for military purposes, and trenching. Collectively, local government groups filed over ninety claims that totalled nearly £600,000. Clare County Council, for instance, claimed nearly £120,000 on behalf of nine rural districts for damage to 103 bridges, 5 culverts, 90 gullets (by-roads), 3 walls, and for the repair of 160 trenches.[71] These claims illustrate the scope of low-level destructive activity, and suggest the need for widespread participation and substantial effort to achieve it.

Militant republicanism required many ancillary actors. Various Brigade Activity Reports within the Military Service Pensions Collection detail support roles in acquiring tools, weapons and chemicals; retrieving and transporting arms, mines and petrol from dumps; scouting, running interference and communicating intelligence. It may seem easy to deprioritise these efforts when examining the acute dynamics of interpersonal violence, but the observation that there was, 'not much these men could do for the organization, since there were virtually no arms to fight with', distorts the reality of guerrilla warfare at this time.[72] The majority of Volunteers remained in support roles even after autumn 1920, when the IRA strategy pivoted toward direct engagement with British forces.[73]

Ireland's forests suffered insignificant injury compared to the vast woodlands processed to serve industrialised armies in the First World War. But like much of the damage during the Irish revolution, it is necessary to contextualise the destruction of trees relative to the small-scale, non-industrial and predominantly rural conflict. In this sense, the volume of mature trees felled by the IRA was widespread and constant. Axes and saws were more readily available than rifles, which created opportunities to contribute to the cause without the moral burden of violence. Moreover, a volunteer army that sawed trees by hand to block country roads under the cover of darkness permitted a sense of romanticism to prevail in Ireland against the disillusionment of the mechanised evisceration of nature that occurred along the Western Front.[74]

Unlike trenches, which republicans regularly dug, filled, and reopened in the same locations, trees were single-use obstacles. Their removal permanently altered the landscape within a generation as saplings rooted in their place, or as part of larger afforestation programs in the 1920s, required decades to mature. Native and imported species cut included hardwoods such as alder, ash, aspen, birch, oak, elm and willow, which varied by location. Volunteers considered several factors when selecting trees to fell, including trunk diameter, density and the labour needed to construct an effective barricade. Smaller calliper (younger) trees were easier to both cut initially and then clear when necessary; older growth trees were more effective barriers but took longer to fell due to their size and potential for irregular growths and knots. Republicans also cut ornamental and commercially grown trees, most often extracted as tribute for political offenses. Irish participants exacted arboreal tribute, extracting trees from estates and plantations, through the civil war, and this practice was widespread in Munster and Connacht.[75]

A research sample of over two thousand instances of landscape manipulation and ensuing damage to the built and natural environment taken on a daily basis from 1 January 1919 to 21 July 1921 shows that the established geography of interpersonal violence aligned with the recorded damage. Munster was by far the most active province in regards to landscape damage or destruction during the period (1,414 instances), followed by Leinster (423), Connaught (210) and Ulster (136). County Cork registered higher instances of damage (1,063) than Leinster, Connaught and Ulster combined (769), and five of the ten most damaged counties were in Munster. Considering this information, we can revise historical understanding of passive activity, and adjust Tom Garvin's 'middle west' region of saturated revolutionary activity to the south and west to begin at Sligo-Roscommon-Longford because Fermanagh, Cavan and Leitrim registered relatively lower damage totals.

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[70] Kautt, *Ambushes and Armour*, 130.

[71] Clare County Council's claim to compensation (Ireland) Commission for War damage caused by roads from 21 Jan. 1919 to 11 July 1921, by Crown Forces. 27, 31 Mar. 1922, P.L.K. Dobbin, County Surveyor (TNA, FIN/1/1661).

[72] Augusteijn, *From Public Defiance to Guerilla Warfare*, 69.

[73] Ó Faoláin, *Vive Moi*, 175.

[74] Hopkinson, *The Irish War of Independence*.

[75] RIC IG report for Dec. 1919, to U.S., 13 Jan. 1920.

What was the relationship between environmental manipulation and interpersonal violence? Republican participants often primed landscapes for ambushes that never occurred; while evidencing activity in an area, it did not evidence violence. However, correlating Peter Hart's data for the rate of IRA violence by county per 10,000 inhabitants with the rate of total damage for each province in overlapping periods reveals strong positive correlation (Leinster: .678; Ulster: .678; Munster: .794; Connaught: .821). In short, the geography and concentration of conflict differed due to an area's ability to host that violence. This data challenges contemporary observations of 'quiet counties' and validates Michael Brennan's complaint of soldiering 'in level country' where there was little cover to aid operations. However, while terrain could inhibit local IRA activity it failed to project a nationwide model.[76]

Environmental destruction continued during the Irish Civil War, directly and indirectly impacting both active combatants and civilians alike. The fog of civil war, however, allowed certain categories of destruction to expand. These included agrarian sabotage connected to local rivalries, land jealously and unresolved land transfers, as well as the destruction of fences, walls, and earthen boundaries, cattle maiming, and the burning of fields, crops, ricks of turf and farming implements. Though not entirely distinct from damage that occurred throughout the War of Independence, destruction to private property illustrates the social nature of conflict and community response during the Irish Civil War as the withdrawal of the British Army and disbandment of the RIC intensified the vacuum of security and public order.

Overall, malicious injury records and compensation claims provide a fairly straight-forward guide to property loss but only allow a partial view toward Irish society's environmental experience of war. We must also recognise a landscape's centrality to local identity and livelihood, and a built environment's contribution to security and sense of place. In this light, broadening environmental considerations to encompass the revolution's impact on physical and mental health, as well as the concept of space and its renegotiation in war, read through the varied experiences of participants and witnesses.

Like all conflicts, the Irish Revolution drew heavily on natural and human resources. As a guerrilla conflict, however, its dependence on the civilian population often implicated non-combatants in military intelligence and combat operations, and as pawns in a wider game of social intimidation and coercion. 'Active service', as it was later defined in pension legislation, marginalised civilian and non-combatant contributions to revolutionary conflict until 1955 when the Irish government broadened the definition for participation to include many – though not all – of the ancillary duties undertaken in support of operations.[77] Many of these contributions came in the form of landscape manipulation. As such, widespread tree felling and trenching influenced the geography of revolutionary violence, which was in turn directed by the location and availability of mature trees, malleable roadways and unnavigable regions that provided cover. Refined obstruction methods carried over to the civil war period. Clearing barricades at the directive of Crown forces further implicated civilians as tools at the disposal of armed authority. The resulting environmental manipulation and human displacement demonstrate the extent to which non-combatants participated in the struggle, suffered material loss and were dislocated from everyday life.

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[76] Tom Garvin, *The Evolution of Irish Nationalist Politics* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1981), 125. As Hart concluded, 'terrain may well have made a difference in some areas under specific local circumstances, but it was not an important factor nation-wide', in Hart, 'The Geography of Revolution in Ireland 1917–1923', 159.

[77] Coleman, 'Military Service Pensions for Veterans of the Irish Revolution, 1916–1923', 211.

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