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From ‘former comrades’ to ‘near enemy’: The narrative template of ‘armed struggle’ and conflicting discourses on Violent Dissident Irish Republican activity (VDR).

Abstract

Introduction

Although academic literature identifies different temporal ‘waves’ of political violence, in the Irish context it has been an enduring presence. Driven by a desire for self-determination and an end to ‘British rule’, this has been articulated through insurrectionary violence otherwise termed ‘armed struggle’ by its supporters and ‘terrorism’ by its opponents. ‘Armed struggle’ is the most identifiable signifier of Irish republicanism having featured since time immemorial although commitment to it has never been absolute. Successive leaderships have compromised, discarded it and embraced constitutional politics. As much as it is historically defined by ‘armed struggle’ Irish republicanism has too been defined by internal splits and the marginalisation of ‘former comrades’ (Tonge 2004). Writing on nationalistic Russian narratives, JV Wertsch (2002) refers to a ‘narrative template’; an account of the collective past where the general plot remains constant even though specific actors and dates change. In the Russian case an “expulsion of foreign enemies” narrative template is illustrative; historic cases of war are mapped onto a narrative plot of Russians being attacked by external forces and triumphing through heroism in the face of almost certain defeat. The foreign enemy has, depending on the era, varied from the Nazis to the Ottomans while the leader inspiring heroism has similarly varied but the plot line has *always* remained constant (Wertsch 2009). Narrative templates reduce the collective past to “the same story told over and over with different characters” (Wertsch 2012). Given the propensity of Irish republicanism to split over ‘armed struggle’ and the marginalisation of ‘former comrades’ this causes, it is the aim of this article to critically evaluate how current discourses on what has been termed ‘violent dissident republican’ activity (VDR) can be mapped onto narrative templates of ‘armed struggle’.

In applying Wertsch’s narrative template concept to discourses on VDR several caveats must be acknowledged. Primarily it should be noted that the “Balkanization of republicanism” means current division is not a simple binary of those in favour of the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and those against it (Frenett and Smith 2012). The anti-GFA constituency contains different groups that are opposed to Sinn Fein but also competing with each other over finer points of ideology, resources, recruits and publicity. A curious dynamic exists

whereby competing groups assert the need for their own existence by somehow differentiating themselves from the others. As Frampton (2011) has observed, this can see undue weight given to arcane disagreements over obscure points of ideological dogma. While he has insightfully drawn out these internal anti-GFA cleavages, it is not the purpose of this article to retrace that well-trodden ground. Rather than examining how each VDR group justifies its own ideological birth right and being with regard to similar groups, this article concentrates on how they use the past to condition their discourse on continued ‘armed struggle’ in the face of criticism from ‘former comrades’. Secondly opposition to the GFA *does not* equate endorsement of current ‘armed struggle’. As Guelke (2006) points out, the reasons for rejecting a peace accord are manifold and varied and can often be legitimate. Some in the anti-GFA constituency do advocate VDR, others adopt a position of “non-support but not condemnation” while others disagree with it as much as they disagree with Sinn Fein (Evans and Tonge 2012). These caveats do not, however, render the narrative template concept obsolete. Competing discourses on VDR are framed by well worn clichés and counter-clichés applied to present contexts. They are, depending on the narrator, framed by the rhetoric of war, rejection of “sell out” and continuing the “fight for Irish freedom” or conversely by historic arguments on lack of support and political utility (Bowman-Grieve and Conway 2012). A narrative template framework enables current discourses on VDR to be interrogated through reversion to pre-existing scripts. The salience of such a framework is its ability to use interpretations rooted in the “collective DNA” to make sense of current contexts by placing them in a schematic plot line (Wertsch 2012: 176). ‘Armed struggle’, splitting and enmity towards ‘former comrades’ are unquestionable strands of the Irish republican “collective DNA” (Morrison 2013), thus they provide an insight into internal ‘memory politics’ within the constituency. ‘Memory politics’ can be defined as the medium through which the past is selectively ‘remembered’ or ‘forgotten’ to construct, maintain or challenge dominant discourses for political benefit. Narrative templates, in being adaptable for self-legitimation in internal ‘memory politics’, are susceptible to selective ‘remembering’ and ‘forgetting’.

This article uses the narrative template concept to critically evaluate how conflicting discourses on VDR are constructed through recourse to past scripts that reinforce one’s present position while simultaneously attacking that of ‘former comrades’. The thrust of this article, however, is not merely to argue that competing groups use the past to legitimate their own position and delegitimise that of their rivals - such an endeavour would be neither novel

nor innovative. Rather the original contribution this article seeks to make by applying memory studies concepts to the empirical study of political violence is to identify *what* the dominant discursive *themes* drawn upon in discourses of self-legitimation in ‘memory politics’ contestation are and *why* they are drawn upon by two key constituencies; those formerly engaged in ‘armed struggle’ but now embracing constitutional means and those who continue to advocate or engage in ‘armed struggle’. As such, the article aims to identify the inherent value of these dominant narrative themes and why they can still be readily applied to present circumstances and discourses on VDR decades after they were initially woven into a formative narrative template. The empirical data to which this theoretical analysis has been applied has been drawn from Irish republican publications such as *An Phoblacht* (Provisional movement), *Saoirse* (Republican Sinn Fein), *The Sovereign Nation* (32 County Sovereignty Movement) and *United Irishman* (Official movement). It has drawn from semi-structured interviews conducted by the author with 30 actors within the wider Irish republican constituency.¹ Interviewees included pre and post-GFA former political prisoners, political activists and community activists from right across the broad Irish republican spectrum. Interviewees were drawn from a number of geographical locations and included both genders. All indications of name, location and gender have, however, been removed - a random number has instead been assigned to interviewees.

Contextualising recent splits

Before examining how current discourses on VDR correlate with narrative templates on ‘armed struggle’ it is necessary to summarise the trajectory of successive splits within Irish republicanism. Although not exhaustive, this account provides sufficient historical context to understand recent splits. Irish republicanism is traced back to Theobald Wolfe Tone and the United Irishmen society who used ‘armed struggle’ in 1798 to “break the connection with England” (English 2006). Physical force became integral to Irish republican ideology, passing on to the Young Ireland movement and Fenians before extending into the 20th century with longevity that Hobsbawm (1962: 112) notes was rare elsewhere. Following the 1916 Rising ‘armed struggle’ became the definitive tenet of the ideology, with the subsequent Irish War of Independence or ‘Tan War’ seeing the Second Dail Eireann vesting its authority in the Irish Republican Army (IRA) as the de facto government in waiting (English 2006). Up to this point Irish republicanism had been largely unified (thanks to the unification of the nationalist Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) strand led by Padraig Pearse with the socialist Irish Citizen Army strand led by James Connolly in 1916), its separatist aims unambiguous

and ‘armed struggle’ the unquestionable bedrock upon which self-determination would be won. This worldview was unceremoniously shattered when the Tan War waned and negotiations with the British resulted *not* in self-determination – ‘the Republic’ - but in a partitionist Free State that excluded six north-eastern Ulster counties. When the IRA split into pro and anti-Treaty factions in a vicious civil war this set the precedent for bitter division between those clinging to ‘armed struggle’ and those embracing constitutional means.

This pattern would be endlessly repeated; when Fianna Fail disavowed ‘armed struggle’, and entered constitutional politics, when the Officials embraced constitutional means and announced a ceasefire in 1972 (the Officials would later undergo further splits with the emergence of the Irish Republican Socialist Movement and its armed wing the Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) in 1974, which then itself later split in 1986 with the emergence of the Irish People’s Liberation Organisation (IPLO) – both these groups would factionalise into feuding ‘Army Council’ and ‘Belfast Brigade’ factions) and when the Provisionals dropped abstentionism (1986), accepted the Mitchell Principles and GFA (1997/8) and endorsed policing (2006/7). In each split myriad factors converged on the departure from, downgrading of or delegitimising of ‘armed struggle’, making it the issue through which disagreement is channelled, interpreted and represented. If, as Sanders (2011:1) argues, current day factionalising can only be understood through comparative analysis of a succession of splinter groups, some further analysis is warranted. Comparative analysis of the opportunity structures that different splinter groups found themselves born into can identify why some splinter groups were able to quickly supplant the parent group while others faced a constant battle for relevance. In each case the splinter group, by mere virtue of its emergence from the parent group at a key historical juncture, found itself hostage to whatever fortune the space created by the interplay between the parent group position and the wider political climate afforded it.

The post-treaty split occurred against a backdrop of military stalemate whereby the IRA were far from defeat by but just as far from imminent victory over the British (English 2003:29). Although the anti-treaty IRA did have ideological righteousness on its side during the ensuing civil war, this was little practical consolation when faced with a pro-treaty side that was better organised, better equipped and better supported. They were largely victims of a dearth of opportunity; most of Nationalist Ireland had accorded due legitimacy to the Free State narrowing its ideologically purist appeal while the Free State, due to this legitimacy and its indigenous roots, was able to exercise ruthlessness in reprisals against ‘former comrades’

without incurring the same popular backlash that the British (lacking such legitimacy) had previously encountered (English 2003: 35). By the 1930's the emergence and success of Fianna Fail, financial difficulty, organisational problems and disagreement resulting in the resignation of its more leftist element left the IRA a pale shadow of its Tan War forbearer. Often lurking from one crisis to the next, they remained intact but could not generate a concerted campaign until the ill-fated Border Campaign in 1956. By contrast, the splinter groups of the 1970's – the Provisionals and the INLA – benefitted from more favourable opportunity structures that granted them a longevity to eventually eclipse their Official IRA parent group (Sanders 2011: 86). In addition to the inherent advantage of being born into a context of intensifying political violence while the Official IRA parent group was trying to enforce movement away from 'armed struggle', both capitalised on developments on the ground during their formative years. The Provisionals rise to dominance followed their defence of the Short Strand in June 1970, their capitalising on the fallout caused by the Lower Falls Curfew in July 1970 and their lack of damage in comparison to the Officials during internment in August 1971, while the INLA benefited from its ability to attract both militant Officials and disaffected Provisionals during their 1975 ceasefire (Sanders 2011).

In comparison, the Continuity IRA (CIRA), formed following the 1986 split in Sinn Fein over abstentionism, were confronted with less favourable opportunity structures. Ironically those leading the 1986 defections were those who had originally defected from the Officials to form the Provisionals (English 2003: 315). Disquiet did admittedly exist within Provisional ranks over the dropping of abstentionism and over the increasing emphasis afforded to electoralism by the "Armalite and Ballot box" strategy. However Moloney (2002: 288) notes that the Provisional leadership were able to preclude any major split due to an amalgam of complex and interrelated factors including; important contextual difference from the Official split, electoral gains by Sinn Fein, the role leading dissenters played in brokering the disastrous 1975 ceasefire and the physical and metaphorical distance of the dissenters from the Northern theatre of war. More importantly, the Provisional leadership were able to use the recent landing of Libyan weapons and a much speculated 'Tet offensive' to plausibly deny any intention to wind down the 'armed struggle' in favour of electoralism. As a result, militant minded critics held rank meaning that those that did break away were a small minority. Moreover, as an extensive history of feuding shows, the CIRA were hamstrung by the fact that the still active Provisionals were unlikely to tolerate a splinter group encroaching on its territory. This had been underlined some months earlier when a different group of

militants were expelled from the Provisionals following a failed coup, with a further warning not to organise a new armed group (Moloney 2002: 244). Even though the Republican Sinn Fein (RSF) political party established itself as an ideological vanguard in the immediate aftermath of the split, its military wing remained largely under the radar. The CIRA only moved out of the shadows following the Provisionals ceasefire in 1994 (Sanders 2011: 147). The Real IRA (RIRA) came into being out of opposition to the Mitchell Principles and the renewal of the Provisional ceasefire in 1997. It was born into a curious climate that seemed initially favourable but later proved hostile. Most notably, the RIRA found itself in an environment defined by ‘war weariness’ within IRA ranks after decades of ‘armed struggle’ coupled with unprecedented electoral success for Sinn Fein in the 1997 Westminster and Dail elections – both providing the politically minded Provisional leadership with much needed leeway (English 2003). The soon-to-be defectors appeared to have the upper hand 18 months before their departure but they failed to capitalise on the opportunity to displace the politicians in the Provisional leadership. In the immediate prelude to the 1997 split it looked like the politically minded leadership would be toppled and the peace strategy buried by militants on the IRA Army Executive with support from elements of the rank and file. Clever politicking, however, allowed the politicians to survive, regroup and then isolate the dissenters (Moloney 2002: 479). A split entailing the departure of key figures on the Army Executive did follow but it was not as major as it could have been 18 months previously. The RIRA quickly organised bomb attacks but this campaign faltered after the Omagh attack, causing it to declare a temporary ceasefire before later re-launching its campaign with a new leadership (Frampton 2011). In the intervening years before the formal end of the Provisional campaign in 2005, the Provisionals were forced to adroitly advance their political strategy without aggrieving war-hardened sceptical volunteers who could potentially defect to existing splinter groups (Sanders 2011: 230). Post-2005 a number of new VDR groups have emerged, including localised offshoots of the CIRA and RIRA (Horgan 2013). These groups have benefited from the lack of the Provisional control mechanism to curtail their initial growth. However this is offset by the fact that they were born into a climate of increased normalisation and lack of societal appetite for a return to conflict. While none of the VDR groups – newer or older - are comparable in size or output to the Provisionals, they have nonetheless survived to continue the ‘armed struggle’. VDR groups exhibit an ‘operational diversity’ yet they also possess a certain ‘ideological homogeneity’ in their shared rejection of the Sinn Fein strategy (Frampton 2011: 280). As such, the lines of separation between VDR

groups can sometimes blur allowing for military co-operation in a tactical broad front approach (Sanders 2011: 254).

Notwithstanding all of this, the fact that competing groups have a “shared past” (Bean 2012), means those embracing constitutional politics have, by necessity, had to thread a fine line that legitimises their own past use of violence but delegitimises that of their militant opponents (Whiting 2012). This has seen attempts to monopolise the legacy of previous ‘armed struggle’ so as to conveniently differentiate between past and current violence, something naturally challenged by militants who portray their violence as the continuity of generations of ‘armed struggle’. What follows is a thematic dissection of how competing discourses within contemporary Irish republicanism on the utility, nature and motivations behind VDR have drawn from pre-existing scripts fashioned during previous splits.

Pragmatism and purity

The most common disjuncture among Irish republicans in the face of splitting is the choice between being *pragmatic* and being *pure*. Division hinges on either looking beyond ideological “taken for granted” to become progressive or seeking comfort in established certainties for fear of ideological bankruptcy – in short *tactics* or *principles*.

Pragmatism

For those formerly engaged in ‘armed struggle’ there are “obvious contradictions and dissonances” that arise from extolling “the exemplary violence of the past while condemning the violence of the present” (Frenett and Smith 2012). ‘Armed struggle’ per se is not deemed illegitimate although *current* ‘armed struggle’ is. For example in its July 2005 statement announcing the end of its campaign the IRA “reiterate(d) our view that the armed struggle was entirely legitimate”.² Likewise when Sinn Fein’s Gerry Adams asked the IRA to consider its future he said:

In the past I have defended the right of the IRA to engage in armed struggle. I did so because there was no alternative for those who would not bend the knee, or turn a blind eye to oppression, or for those who wanted a national republic. Now there is an alternative (quoted in *An Phoblacht* 2005b).

Instructive in both examples is the use of the past tense “was” – ‘armed struggle’ *was* legitimate not *is* legitimate. If Adams’ remarks are taken as a cue, it seems a way of

circumnavigating contradiction is to make the legitimacy of ‘armed struggle’ contingent on there being “no alternative”. When an alternative emerges ‘armed struggle’ is no longer legitimate. One former combatant elaborated:

You can’t say ‘I fought an armed struggle for the sake of armed struggle’. That’s nonsense. You fight an armed struggle because there is no other alternative and when there was no other alternative we fought an armed struggle. When the conditions presented themselves, when there was a realignment of the universe and Margaret Thatcher and John Major were no longer in power and Bush had gone and we had South Africa to look at you know there was - it just seemed at that moment - a possibility of another avenue. I was never handcuffed to an armed struggle so it was a tactic. It was the only tactic available to us but once there was an alternative we were dutily and morally bound to explore that (Interviewee 8).

Seemingly then ‘armed struggle’ represents a *tactic* not a *principle*, meaning it can be discarded when political circumstances are favourable to a non-violent alternative. For those subscribing to such a view the matter hinges on favouring pragmatism over purity. This involves progressing beyond being a “rebel” that clings to ‘armed struggle’ because of a historic precedent to become a “revolutionary” engaged in transformative politics (Interviewee 3). Ultimately, so the logic flows, it will be the “revolutionary” and not the “rebel” who secures the goal of self-determination through political innovation rather than ‘armed struggle’.

In consequence to this, Sinn Fein discourse on VDR has been built on the twin planks of dismissing VDR as ineffective while promoting their own political strategy as a road map to self-determination. This has been sustained by a burgeoning political mandate in addition to concessions gleaned through various political negotiations (Horgan 2013: 168). The intertwining of these is evident in Michelle Gildernew’s condemnation of a 2008 bomb attack in Fermanagh:

Those who carried out this attack have nothing to offer. They have little support and their actions will not advance Irish Unity one bit. Sinn Féin have a strategy for Irish unity and we will not be deflected by these activities (quoted in *An Phoblacht* 2008b).

Discernible in this discourse is an increasingly consequentialist view of ‘armed struggle’. Consequentialism evaluates the righteousness of violence through a calculation that the act will produce the most favourable outcome in terms of meeting an identifiable end goal (O’Boyle 2011). In the face of what has been termed the “mutually hurting stalemate” (O’Kane 2006), ‘armed struggle’ is *not* legitimate because it cannot advance towards ideological goals whereas a non-violent alternative of transformative politics can. VDR is therefore differentiated from past ‘armed struggle’ because it represents ‘armed struggle’ for the mere sake of it. Denying any sense of revolutionary or strategic agency to VDR has been central to this critical discourse. Brian Keenan dismissed it for having “no revolutionary logic” (*An Phoblacht* 2008a) while another former combatant opined that “there’s no strategy, no reason, no justification for it” (Interviewee 1). VDR is thus devoid of pragmatism and borne from the delusion of purity and the penchant for clinging to the old way, leading one former combatant to articulate:

Because they don’t have an overall strategic objective or there is no dynamic about what they are about it’s basically about killing or attempting to kill for the sake of it because it cannot achieve any political objective. If you cannot achieve a political objective by doing it well then it’s wrong. It’s wrong morally, it’s wrong politically and it shouldn’t be happening. That’s the way I see it and one of the problems is that there is still this sense amongst some of them that they can achieve some sort of military objective by what they’re doing and they fail to understand the dynamic of struggle. They just don’t get it like as far as I am concerned. And they simply say to people like me ‘well it was okay for you to do it’ (Interviewee 5).

Even critics of Sinn Fein agree to some extent with such criticism:

Killing a cop here and there and a Brit every 10 years isn’t going to get the British out of here. I think that it has been shown even in the early 70’s- 1972 over 100 British soldiers killed on the ground. They were expecting 100 casualties from Operation Motorman alone and that didn’t get them out. They were willing to take that so killing two Brits every 10 years is not going to shift British policy... the militant republicans at the moment they seem to have one aim which is seemingly just to embarrass Sinn Fein... I think they know it’s not going to get the Brits out that it’s just making life awkward for the

Proxies and their hatred of Sinn Fein I think is the only thing that gels them and keeps them going (Interviewee 11).

Running in tandem with a discourse of VDR being benighted to the *realpolitik* of ‘armed struggle’ is a discourse on the continuation of struggle whereby the ‘armed struggle’ waged by the IRA in the past has been transformed into a political struggle being waged by Sinn Fein. Despite settling for less than the ‘armed struggle’ was fought for (self-determination for a united Ireland), the fact that the Provisionals have not had the “political lobotomy” that the Officials did means that the retention of the key aim of self-determination enables a discourse of struggle by other means to take root (Rekawek 2011: 101). Epitomising this transformation one interviewee concluded:

Whenever we were active in the struggle we were political activists with guns and bombs and with weapons. I see myself today as a political activist without a gun and a bomb because we have moved beyond that (Interviewee 5).

Although discourses of pragmatism over purity support the current position of Sinn Fein they are not new. During internal debate that preceded the Civil War, acceptance of the treaty was also framed in terms of pragmatism over purity and notions of adopting a stagist theory of working towards self-determination by other means (English 2006). These again featured in the discourse of the Officials during the 1969/70 split (Hanley and Millar 2009). Accordingly, Sinn Fein have mapped their own position on VDR onto a narrative template fashioned by those who previously discarded ‘armed struggle’ for constitutional politics. This narrative template of pragmatism over purity is incredibly useful for those entering the constitutional process. In premising entry into the constitutional process on the logic of pragmatically going through stages building towards the core ideological goal of national self-determination there is an ability to frame this process as something other than an admission of failure to achieve it via ‘armed struggle’. Projecting the attainment of the core goal as a long term aim to be gradually worked towards protects those entering the constitutional process from foreseeable criticism over failure to deliver sufficient progress towards that end in the immediate “here and now”. This is particularly relevant in the current case of Sinn Fein where it must not only defend its stagist strategy but do so against an historic backdrop of persistent failure by other groups who previously adopted this approach. Despite persevering with the stagist approach for almost 20 years they are, in a tangible sense at least, no demonstrably closer to self-determination than when they signed up to the GFA.

If anything they stand accused of settling for the implementation of an equality agenda in the North of Ireland at the expense of national self-determination (Tonge 2004). The narrative template of pragmatism thus allows Sinn Fein to frame its current position not in terms of ideological shortcoming in the immediate term but in the positive potential it has in the indefinite long term.

Purity

What the Sinn Fein discourse overlooks is that for some purity trumps pragmatism meaning that adhering to traditional principles is more important than being more successful through unprincipled means (Horgan 2013: 26). ‘Armed struggle’ represents a *principle* until self-determination has been obtained and cannot be downgraded to a *tactic* otherwise. In pursuit of this goal violence has purity while compromise has corruption (Kedourie 2003). If the Provisionals adopt a consequentialist interpretation, those supportive of VDR take a non-consequentialist view where political violence is legitimate if it adheres to a moral code (O’Boyle 2011). This moral code ordains that until self-determination is granted ‘armed struggle’ remains legitimate regardless of any peace agreements that birth stagist theories. The GFA ,as Whiting (2015:1) notes, failed to herald a “defining moment” where militant Irish republicanism ceased to be, while Sluka (2009) notes that continued failure to confront the core issue of conflict in the “not-war-not-peace” context of post-GFA Northern Ireland has left it conducive to residual political violence. In this context VDR represents “outside spoiler” violence designed to spoil any internal settlement on the basis of principled opposition to it (Zahar 2008). Tonge (2012) has noted that when militant republicans have been marginalised and made politically irrelevant by larger sections entering politics the trend is one of “seeking refuge in historical dogma” via an “inevitability of struggle” thesis. This suggests that justification for VDR is constructed through what Gurr (2011: 170) identified as a “violence-expectancy-justification-violence” nexus whereby failure to address underlying issues coupled with experiences of past violence creates an expectation of and historic justification for current and future violence. Read from a protracted script of generations of ‘armed struggle’ it seems that until self-determination is granted there will *always* be ‘armed struggle’ and this will *always* be legitimate:

While the British occupation remains there will always be those who are willing to resist it. At different times that may take different forms and it may be on a large scale or a small scale but I think that there has hardly been a year

in the history of the British occupation in Ireland that there hasn't been some form of resistance and I don't think that that's going to change (Interviewee 16).

Much like discourses on pragmatism, this discourse of inevitability in the face of failing to address the core issue of conflict is not new. It mirrors the Provisional's' previous justification of their campaign. For example in rejecting the Sunningdale Agreement the Provisionals argued that 'armed struggle' was inevitable as long as occupation remained because "British rule and peace in Ireland are incompatible" (*Republican News* 1974). Likewise they derided the stagist approach of the Officials for suggesting that "the six-county state could be 'democratised' from within and that the so-called democratic process was one method by which this reformation could be made" (*An Phoblacht* 1981). The notion of a cyclic history replaying itself pervades a justificatory discourse on VDR as evidenced by the argument that:

Irish history is a cycle of armed resistance, followed by coercion and attempts constitutionally to square the circle of British rule and Irish democracy. It is a circle which can never be squared because British rule denies the exercise of true all-Ireland democracy, namely the right of the people of Ireland acting as a unit to self-determination. The only way to break the cycle of history is to end British rule in Ireland once and for all (*Saoirse* 2009b).

Unsurprisingly, then, Tonge (2014b: 59) concludes:

History becomes cyclical, as spoiler groups become part of the mainstream and in turn are outflanked by later spoilers... spoilers are part of a historical process which demotes tactics in favour of principle, eschews compromise and relies upon supposed lessons of history to reject all compromise.

Although these competing discourses draw on the past they are geared towards legitimating *current* positions. These positions correspond to two competing moral frameworks – purity and pragmatism – that define internal politicking that follows Irish republican splitting. To correlate with these moral frameworks by giving succour to present self-images selective 'remembering' and 'forgetting' is adopted. Demonstrating the link between the "narrated self" and the "narrating self" (Antze and Lambek 1996), the latter day "revolutionaries" with their new political foresight 'forget' how the criticisms they make today were once levelled at

them and that the arguments used by their opponents mirror Provisional justifications for ‘armed struggle’ in the past. The pragmatic “narrating self” of today ‘remembers’ with the benefit of politically informed hindsight that the pure “narrated self” of yesterday did not have. Adopting the process of “structural amnesia” that sees whole swathes of the past excised (Tota 2001), they ‘forget’ anything that does not adhere to a narrative of continuing ‘armed struggle’ through pragmatic political struggle. Similarly VDR advocates ‘remember’ the past ideological justification for ‘armed struggle’ but ‘forget’ the markedly different political context existent then. An insular worldview has cocooned their discourse from changed external political realities. Purified justification of VDR because ‘armed struggle’ has always been engaged overlooks external factors like the ending of the Cold War, the destruction of the South African apartheid state and the ‘War on Terror’ and how these have created a context completely different to that of past ‘armed struggle’.

The ‘micro group’

If VDR is differentiated from past ‘armed struggle’ because it lacks revolutionary nous it is differentiated too because it lacks similar intensity and scale. A critical discourse attributes this to the size of VDR groups and their apparent lack of support. That the scale of VDR is not in the same league as the intensity of the Provisional campaign is unquestionable. There has, however, been an increase in the scale *and* success of attacks in the current ‘third wave’ of VDR when compared to the lull of the ‘second wave’ that followed the disastrous ‘first wave’ forever associated with civilian deaths at Omagh (Horgan 2013: 71). Omagh invoked a “backlash” whereby a haemorrhaging of communal support follows unacceptable conduct (Horgan 2009: 23) - something also noted by Burton (1978) and Sluka (1989) in their analyses of the Provisionals’ relationship with the wider Nationalist community. That this happened so early in the VDR lifespan curtailed its potential to develop a protracted campaign.

Scale

Notwithstanding that VDR still poses *some* threat, Tonge (2014a) calculates that it has only reached 12% of the 1980’s rate and 30% of the 1990’s rate. In assessing VDR former combatants naturally draw parallels with the Provisional campaign before dismissing it as incomparable:

After years of armed conflict we fought the British government and the British Army to a standstill. They haven't fought them to a start and most of their activities have hit at our own community harder than they have ever attacked the British establishment (Interviewee 8).

Disadvantageous comparisons like this enable VDR to be naturally decoupled from the Provisional campaign yet they also elide fundamental truths about VDR. In setting the halcyon days of the Provisional campaign as the barometer by which VDR should be measured, those critical of it have consciously set a standard it cannot in the immediate term reach. The intensity of the Provisional campaign was a product of its time, owing itself to a combination of factors including plentiful recruits, the outworkings of repression-mobilisation theory, initial lack of “war weariness” and the omnipresence of scope for and targets of attacks. To deliberately overlook these contextual discrepancies is an adroit piece of selective ‘remembering’ that imposes the temporal limits of ‘memory politics’ to 1969 as this is favourable to the anti-VDR position. The memory of episodic pre-1969 ‘armed struggle’ is essentially ‘forgotten’ even though it represents a more apposite comparison to measure VDR against – it too was far from intense, successful or popularly supported. This was alluded to by one veteran who was critical of VDR but recognised that it mirrored pre-1969 ‘armed struggle’:

I'm not saying there's support for violence now. There wasn't support for violence in the '60's. We might have blew up Nelsons Pillar and a few other things like you know burnt post offices and stuff like that. I think that was more that ‘you know we're still here’ (Interviewee 12).

As well as contextualising VDR in a wider historic context this observation provides a more nuanced insight into what sustains it. VDR seems in part to be motivated by a need to prove that a radical Irish republicanism exists today. Propagandistically self-referential it may be but it does solve an existential crisis. Comparable to showing that the IRA were “still here” in the 1960's, VDR can too be seen as “strategic violence” in that although ultimately aiming to change the power balance of internal affairs, in terms of immediacy in a post-conflict state its value is merely “signalling a willingness to fight” (Boyle 2014: 30). In this regard then, just like residual IRA activity in previous eras, while VDR may not represent a threat to the state comparable to that posed by the Provisionals it nonetheless challenges what Gurr (2011: 186) calls the “regime legitimacy” of post-GFA Northern Ireland through non-compliance

and spoiler violence. A nuanced interpretive difference between seeing VDR as “strategic violence” as opposed to seeing it *only* as “spoiler violence” exists. As “strategic violence” VDR assumes an uneasy degree of usefulness that VDR as mere “spoiler violence” cannot. Instead of being negative in the sense of seeking to spoil the political process, it can, albeit somewhat paradoxically, be seen to underline why the political process *must* succeed. Essentially VDR activity, even if against its express intentions, actuates on a restricted scale the “dooms day” scenario awaiting collapse of the political process. The residual levels of political violence manifested through the phenomenon are a (so far) contained yet constant reminder of the alternative to a successful peace process. VDR groups - whatever their numerical state or exact organisational allegiance - will step into the breach if need be to take up the cudgels full time just as the Provisionals did after bygone leaner days.

When evaluated in this wider context of spoiler violence, the rationale for VDR is grounded less in inflicting mounting casualties on the security forces and more in disrupting any semblance of normalisation in the post-GFA state. It is about “engaging normalisation head on” because “there cannot be a peace process without peace” (*The Sovereign Nation* 2010b). The Real IRA openly acknowledged their intention to “reject the ongoing process of pacification and normalisation” (*The Sovereign Nation* 2007). What criticism about the intensity of VDR neglects to recognise is that its immediate aim of disrupting normalisation can be achieved *without* mounting a campaign matching that of the Provisionals. This reflects Guelke’s (2006:97) considered observation that spoilers face only the limited task of generating a certain level of disruption or negativity commensurable to temporarily upsetting the political process. This point was illustrated in a *Belfast Telegraph* (Young 2015) article on a picture of two masked gunmen in Lurgan that had been promoted on social media:

Over 20 years after the paramilitary ceasefires, two masked gunmen strut and preen on the streets of a Northern Ireland housing estate, waving their weapons around with impunity... this is the savage reality of Lurgan’s Kilwilkie estate in 2015.

This activity is performative rather than perfunctory; it serves to reinforce a historical narrative but it does not have any actual military benefit. Its value lies in the symbolism rather than substance of the act. It serves to disrupt normalisation through “propaganda by deed” (Dingley 2001). No enemy fatalities recorded, no casualties claimed, not even a shot fired - the mere sight of armed republicans was sufficient to communicate the VDR message.

Thus even a highly performative, bloodless act of violence endows VDR groups with a “political voice” capable of “drowning out quieter and calmer voices and changing the debate over who speaks, by what right and for whom” (Prince and Warner 2013). This “political voice” echoes that heard in the past without any innovation or departure, reinforcing the narrative template that ‘armed struggle’ will continue regardless of flawed internal settlements. VDR becomes an integral component of Thornton’s (1964: 82) “advertising” process that uses political violence as a means of bringing attention to a groups existence and goals. According to its proponents VDR dispels the notion that militant republicanism is “politically irrelevant” today by “bringing back the issue of British occupation and placing it at the top of the political agenda” (*The Sovereign Nation* 2010a).

However, the *long term* viability of relying on infrequent performative acts to disrupt normalisation is debateable. *Short term* strategic payoff is unlikely to be sustained on an indefinite basis. With the memory of pre-1994 conflict becoming more distant, the nascent ‘normalisation’ process - in tandem with the burgeoning political process - has already begun embedding (to the degree that the North of Ireland can ever be considered ‘normal’). As this concretises, the VDR campaign must respond by increasing its intensity, relevance and visibility to successfully prevent society from increasingly functioning around a severe official threat level.

The notion of “passing on the torch” to the next generation is evident in how the names adopted by VDR groups mirror those used in the past – normally with some revised prefix to the ‘IRA’ trademark but also continued use of the *Oglaigh na hEireann* (Irish for ‘warriors or soldiers of Ireland’) nom de guerre. The IRA name in itself engenders a sense of legitimacy, thus as Rekawek (2011: 1) notes it is a “brand name” worth contesting. For those partaking in VDR a sense of continuity bound up in the name legitimises their campaign. Those opposed to VDR have unsurprisingly sought to challenge this by denying that VDR groups are descendants of previous ‘armed struggle’. To this end Gerry Adams bluntly argued that VDR groups “are not the IRA” (*An Phoblacht* 2011). Adams’ comments found a willing audience in former combatants who ground differentiation between current and past ‘armed struggle’ in the fact that the IRA “as an organisation” moved to support the Sinn Fein strategy (Interviewee 7). Accordingly ownership rights of the IRA legacy are determined by weight of numbers - a calculation benefiting Sinn Fein:

All that I can say is that the vast majority of the guys who were active at the period, who remained active right the way through, right up until the IRA declared the ceasefires that they have stayed on the path and have stayed true to the republican leadership. One of the things that is very hard to take is people who were active for a while during that period who... walked away from the conflict have now become some sort of superheroes or are attempting to portray themselves as more republican than any of the rest of us (Interviewee 5).

If a weight of numbers argument ordains Sinn Fein the inheritors of the Provisional's 'armed struggle' due to a corporate transfer of 'armed struggle' into political struggle then VDR groups can be relegated to numerical insignificance. From their inception VDR groups have been portrayed by the Provisionals as minute factions. In the aftermath of the split that birthed the Real IRA the Provisionals dismissed defections as "a small number of resignations" before asserting "the IRA as an organisation remains intact" (*An Phoblacht* 1997). This has become more central to the Sinn Fein discourse on VDR groups with their preferred term now being 'micro groups' (*An Phoblacht* 2005a). "Structural amnesia" masks the irony that the Provisionals were a fledgling breakaway faction at one point too. This was 'remembered' by other observers. One noted that the Provisionals were "still very much a splinter group" when they opposed Sunningdale (Interviewee 12) while another commented that listening to talk of 'micro groups' was "like rewinding back to 1970-71" (Interviewee 13). Accordingly then this narrative template on 'micro-groups' fashioned during the 1969/70 split persists today even if those cast as the 'micro group' has changed. In any event the charge of being small and conspiratorial is not perceived as a slight by the 'micro group' but rather seen as an affirmation of their ideological purity and steadfastness (Whiting 2015).

Support

A similar dynamic underpins narratives that VDR has no support, which are problematic for their simplistic approach to the matter - measuring support for political violence is more complex than trying to gauge open support for militant groups (Burton 1978; Sluka 1989). Admittedly VDR *does not* ostensibly have the considerable support - electoral or otherwise - that the Provisionals had but sympathy for it is *higher* than the Sinn Fein discourse suggests (Evans and Tonge 2012). In any event VDR groups regard themselves as the faithful few and have little heed in securing majoritarian support for 'the Republic'. Their mandate comes

from the patriot dead and history *not* illegitimate parliaments or partitionist votes. A cynic might opine that this discourse is contrived avoidance of confronting the reality that the appetite for political violence has significantly lessened among a war weary community willing to accept an imperfect “not-war-not-peace” over renewed violence. Legitimacy today, as in the past, stems from historic truth and not popular support:

The use of arms prior to 1916 was legitimate. The use of arms in Easter 1916 was legitimate. The use of arms after 1916 was totally legitimate. In the existing political context of partition, illegal occupation and the denial of national self-determination, armed struggle, in 2015, remains a legitimate act of resistance (Ardoyne republican Dee Fennell quoted in McDonald 2015).

Invoking this purist narrative template accentuates the observed reality that ‘armed struggle’ has always been a minority pursuit. Even the 1916 rebels-turned-heroes were “unrepresentative of public political opinion” (English 2006: 262). The same applied to the ‘Border Campaign’ (Hanley and Millar 2009) and, to a lesser degree, the Provisionals too (Tonge 2012). Former Provisionals nevertheless argue that, unlike VDR groups today, they had a “mandate” from their community even before Sinn Fein contested elections (Interviewee 8) and the backing of a “strong movement” sustained by communal support (Interviewee 2). Similar arguments were used by successive Dublin governments to differentiate between the campaign of the ‘old IRA’ (a term used to describe the pre-1969 incarnation) and that of the Provisionals, the implication being that unlike the Provisionals, the ‘old IRA’ had a mandate from the Irish people and did not attack civilians - this was often repudiated by ‘old IRA’ veterans, sections of the Irish public and the Provisionals (Hanley 2013). The Provisionals challenged this narrative by pointing out the similarities between ‘old IRA’ attacks that killed civilians and its lack of contemporary support and those in the context of the Provisionals own campaign (Sinn Fein 1985). Discourses suggesting that VDR is different to ‘armed struggle’ of the past because it has no support among the Irish people are therefore reflective of a narrative template previously used by the Dublin government.

‘Felon setting’

Despite an overarching discourse dismissing the ‘micro group’, the fact remains that the emergence of new groups creates competition for support within a limited constituency. Consequentially the parent group must protect their hegemony. Historically within Irish republicanism this has been done through questioning the motivation and war record of

break-away groups (Hanley 2003). This does not necessarily deride the violent substance of the VDR act per se (after all it is substantively verisimilar to the shooting and bombing of past ‘armed struggle’) but those committing the act are unequivocally denounced. Undermining the credibility of those engaged in and promoting political violence is, after all, one of the easiest ways to dampen the appeal of such violence (Grossman 2014). This ‘felon setting’ process has birthed critical narratives dismissing the ‘micro group’ as an amalgam of ‘truceleers’ who never fought the war, egoists driven by the cult of personality and a desire for ‘hard man’ status and gangsters using Irish republicanism as a front for wanton criminality.

‘Truceleers’

Unsurprisingly Sinn Fein discourse on VDR has adapted itself to this narrative template by relying on the “war record” of its leadership to sanctify their current position (Frennett and Smith 2012). This has stemmed from the continued support of notable operatives – those Bowyer-Bell (1998) calls “sound” volunteers. This reinforces their continuation of struggle narrative through personifying the “rebel” to “revolutionary” evolution but also further dismisses VDR groups by inferring that they cannot claim the IRA mantle as they never actually fought the ‘war’. The most blatant manifestation of this was when Martin McGuinness stated that as a former IRA commander he could authoritatively say VDR groups had “no right” to restart ‘armed struggle’ (quoted in Friel 2009). Former combatants at grassroots level have adopted this discourse to dismiss their VDR critics as latter day republicans with no demonstrable war record. One former combatant showed indifference to VDR critics because “I never seen them 20 years ago” (Interviewee 2). A more scathing synopsis inferred that:

As for the individuals who castigate and who point fingers. I know some of them... they are of the age that when the war was on they could have got involved in the war. They chose not to. They chose to go and live a life and have jobs or have a social life that existed from Monday to Monday and now they see themselves as some saviour of or the representative of the republican movement (Interviewee 6).

In asserting that VDR groups never fought the ‘war’, former combatants neatly differentiate between their past ‘armed struggle’ and current VDR and, just like with the weight of

numbers argument and denying any revolutionary agency to VDR , attempt to silo off the IRA legacy to legitimise their current position.

That these arguments have been used in the past was not lost on others:

Another one that I hear coming up again and again is this idea – and I think Martin McGuinness touched on it recently... in a speech at the Provisional Sinn Fein Ard Fheis he made reference to people over a certain age who he hadn't seen during the 'war' and others who were far too young, this 'post-conflict' generation as they are described. Again this stuff is as old as the hills. That similar kind of pejorative language was used during the Civil War for example when the pro-treaty side referred to a lot of the young generation who had joined as 'truceleers', that these were young people who hadn't been out in the Tan War, they didn't really know what they were fighting for and were dismissed and you know that was seen to be a fallacy (Interviewee 15).

The Provisionals themselves were previously on the receiving end of such derisory dismissal from the Officials (*The Plough* 1973). Current criticism of VDR on this basis therefore adheres to a longstanding narrative template used to delegitimise breakaway groups and protect the hegemony of the increasingly constitutionalist parent group.

Likewise the narrative of young impressionable people being exploited by the "men of violence" echoes previous criticism made of the Provisionals (Kelly 1986) – particularly that from the clergy (Sluka 1989). Criticism that VDR groups are "happy to risk the lives and liberty of young, impressionable people to achieve nothing" (Gerry Kelly quoted in Hedges 2012) and that the "wee young ones... sucked into all this auld talk" will "end up in jail" instead of the "men of violence" (Interviewee 7) again reflects previous discourses. Moreover this regurgitated criticism overlooks how the membership of VDR groups is "diverse and heterogeneous" and includes "former Provisional IRA members... others [who] were teenagers or young adults during the peace process... others ... [who] are not old enough to remember the 1994 ceasefires" (Horgan 2013: 135). This latter observation fundamentally challenges the narrative that VDR groups never fought the 'war' - particularly given more recent defections by senior former Provisionals - and that they are young people exploited by older "men of violence". Notwithstanding this, those engaged in VDR have been depicted as the "enemy other" in mainstream discourse that depoliticises their actions and motives by reducing them to the status of "evil" people stuck in the "bad old days" (Whiting 2012).

Egoists

The ideological basis underpinning VDR has also been questioned. Given that the modus operandi of ‘armed struggle’ has seen little substantive change there is an imperative to not find fault with the substance of an act once perpetrated but to instead find fault with the current motivation for such an act. Shifting the critique from an unchanged modus operandi to a supposedly much changed *raison d’être* provides a buffer from natural charges of blatant hypocrisy – i.e. the “it was okay for you to do it” argument alluded to by Interviewee 5 earlier. This vein of criticism is less about the *what* of VDR and more about the *who* and the *why*. VDR has been portrayed as personality driven, with the Provisionals noting that the earliest defections involved “a very small number of people” that were “closely associated with each other” (*An Phoblacht* 1997). While there is doubtless veracity in observations about the link between defection and personality and localised loyalty, this ‘forgets’ how these factored in previous splits with the Officials (Hanley and Millar 2009) and after the Treaty (Rice 2015). The importance of localised loyalty is particularly evident in relation to more marginal groups like the INLA and IPLO, with their presence and influence concentrated in certain districts like Divis in West Belfast (Sluka 1989; Sluka 2012: 284). More politically calculated are the claims that VDR is driven by ego and status chasing rather than ideology. This argument speaks more fundamentally to the nature of involvement in political violence and spoiler violence. Existing academic research demonstrates that there are a multitude of motivations behind and pathways into political violence (Della Porta 1995; Shirlow, Tonge McAuley and McGlynn 2010; Bosi 2012). VDR is hardly an exception to this but neither were the Provisionals, the Officials or the ‘old IRA’. Similar observations apply to spoiler violence. Spoiler violence, be it VDR, post-Oslo accord Hamas violence (Tonge 2014b: 74) or that of Kosovar Liberation Army (KLA) splinter groups (Boyle 2014: 178) can of course be ideologically driven. In Kosovo, however, spoiler violence was also driven by power, prestige, status and financial gain (Boyle 2014: 179). Similar conclusions have been drawn about the link between vested interests and spoiler violence in South Africa (Sisk 1993; Guelke 2006). More general observations reveal that a sense of ego and status retention lies behind spoiler violence when those who held a certain position of power or influence during conflict do not wish to engage in conflict settlement if it involves losing this status (Steadman 2008: 158). As a form of spoiler violence VDR is unlikely to be the exception to overlap between these mixed motivations.

Sinn Fein have, however, inflated status related motivation and excised any ideological motivation by cultivating a discourse that VDR is “more to do with egos and personal fiefdoms than anything else” (Gerry Kelly quoted in Hedges 2012). This pervaded the assessment of one former combatant who articulated:

The way I see people who are still involved in that. Some of them it's because of ego, because once the war is over once they do not have the persona of you know the local commander and they don't have access to weapons... they've lost this status and they find it very, very hard to deal with (Interviewee 5).

Another argued that those behind VDR were only trying to position themselves as “some kind of hard man” within the community for status and self-gain (Interviewee 6). As Feldman (1991: 47) notes, the violence of the ‘hard man’, depoliticised and predicated on status and recognition, is different to the ideologised violence of the ‘gunman’ that is worthy of community support. Ideologised violence may be brutal but it is for a noble ends. The violence of the ‘hard man’, on the other hand, is simply deviant and gratuitous – worse, perhaps, than misguided ‘armed struggle’ for the mere sake of ‘armed struggle’.

Gangsters

Criticism of the ‘hard man’ reflects Steenkemp’s (2005) argument that if denuded of political motivation spoiler violence becomes thuggish and/or criminal. To this end those engaged in VDR were labelled “criminals and rogues” (Interviewee 4) and “very dodgy, suspect characters” (Interviewee 6), and VDR groups lambasted as “flags of convenience for criminality” (*An Phoblacht* 2010). Divesting continued ‘armed struggle’ by ‘former comrades’ of political connotations adapts the thrust of state criminalisation policies to internal ‘memory politics’ for the hegemonic purpose of separating current ‘armed struggle’ from the exemplary ‘armed struggle’ of the past. Nothing is less revolutionary, after all, than common criminality. Given that Irish republicans have been prepared to die rather than accept the slur of criminality, there can be no greater affront to those engaged in ‘armed struggle’ than to have their endeavours wilfully dismissed as mere criminality – particularly if so dismissed by erstwhile ‘former comrades’. This ‘felon setting’ tactic has a notable history in internal Irish republican politicking. The Officials, for example, argued that the Provisional’s membership “contains a large criminal element whose self-interests takes precedence over all other considerations” (*The United Irishman* 1972). The Provisionals countered by condemning the Officials as a “criminal gang” involved in “gangsterism”

(Hanley and Millar 2010: 317). A ‘felon setting’ narrative template criminalising rivals therefore exists within the constituency. Admittedly such discourses were evident during the conflict too when competing groups vied for hegemony among a limited support base and constituency. Having managed to largely attain such hegemony by the late 1980’s, the Provisionals were able to reject any suggestion that competing groups represented the Irish republican constituency (Wright 1991). A scathing discourse dismissing, initially, the INLA (Sluka 1989) and then the IPLO (Sluka 2012: 285) as a rag-tag band of psychopathic, criminal misfits took root. Post-conflict, however, there has been a more notable and concerted adoption of what Grossman (2014) has termed “the grammar of terrorism” that was formerly used by the state to delegitimize Provisional violence but is now used by such quarters to politically attack VDR groups. This revised internal ‘memory politics’ “grammar of terrorism” sees VDR groups labelled ignorant truceleers oblivious to the harsh realities of ‘armed struggle’ and egotistical criminals intent on using the guise of ideologised violence for their own nefarious ends. The latter is extremely useful in maligning VDR groups because it cuts against the grain of the conventional maxim that Irish republicanism offers only a life of hardship and sacrifice rather than one of unbridled glory and personal enrichment.

The ‘near enemy’

Sinn Fein discourse, however, extends beyond criminalising and depoliticising ‘former comrades’ to depict them as enemy agents. Discrediting break-away groups like this is a natural way for the parent group to bolster their hegemony. Break-away factions are thus portrayed as the antithesis of a noble ideology rather than the purest epitome of it. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), for example, argued that Karuna’s break-away faction were in a league with the Sri Lankans (Hoglund 2005). VDR is similarly about working to “sabotage the republican movement” (*An Phoblacht* 2010) by serving “MI5 agendas” intent on “defeating republicanism” (Interviewee 6). This has a resonance with Official claims that the Provisionals were a Fianna Fail inspired creation designed to defeat radical republicanism (*The United Irishman* 1979). If the parent group moves to protect its hegemony in intra-communal politicking then the break-away faction must too justify its own existence. This is channelled through the alleged ideological corruption of the parent group who have opted for constitutional means over ‘armed struggle’. In announcing its arrival, the Irish Republican Socialist Movement, for example, charged the Officials with embracing “reformist and counter-revolutionary attitudes” (*The Starry Plough* 1975). This charge provoked the rebuke that the accusers were serving “the same purpose as the British Army”

(*The United Irishman* 1975). Similarly the IPLO justified its emergence on the basis of “need” not “desire”, attributing their existence to the “degeneration” of the INLA and the lack of revolutionary socialism among the Provisionals (*Socialist Republican* 1988). This ideological corruption is then used to underpin a narrative on the absorption of ‘former comrades’ into the repressive state apparatus of the enemy. Current Sinn Fein ‘felon setting’ is therefore likened to that undertaken by ‘former comrades’ in previous eras. It is mapped onto a narrative template where pro-treaty forces used “British guns” on the Four Courts in the 1920’s and the infamous ‘Broy harriers’ repressed republicans at the behest of Fianna Fail in the 1930’s(*Saoirse* 2009a). In drawing out this argument one republican asserted:

Over the last 90 years I think at this stage there has been we’ll say five/six major departures, major divisions within the republican movement... on each occasion those who took what we would regard as that reformist position despite their protestations at the beginning that this was simply another tactic, opening another front or whatever the particular jargon or language of the time... have ultimately been absorbed into the apparatus of the state to the point that for instance we’ll say Fianna Fail within 16 years were actually executing and interning republicans. You know likewise particularly the Workers Party you know ultimately got to a point where they were actively opposing and speaking out against the hungerstrikes and so on. And the Provisionals I suppose are probably the more striking example because I think they’ve actually brought it to a level that none of their predecessors have (Interviewee 15).

This unprecedented level refers to Martin McGuinness labelling those who killed two British sappers as “traitors” and instructing the republican community to support the subsequent police investigation into the attack (McKittrick 2009). On the one hand this signals, from a VDR perspective, irrevocable absorption into ‘the system’, but from the perspective of the Sinn Fein discourse asking people to ‘inform’ is the most emphatic manifestation of differentiating between VDR and past ‘armed struggle’. There is no clearer way of criminalising VDR and communicating that it embodies all that past ‘armed struggle’ did not by asking people to actively conspire against it.

These competing discourses highlight the accuracy of Bowyer-Bell’s (1998: 241) argument that the “end game” of ‘armed struggle’ sees the enemy “redefined” so as to include ‘former

comrades'. 'Former comrades' become the "near enemy" (Gerges 2005), an internal and more immediate threat than 'the Brits' as "far enemy". The "near enemy" has a long history in the internal politicking of Irish republican factionalisation whether as criminal counter-revolutionary saboteurs of the revolutionary transformative political project or as treacherous collaborators assimilated into the system to conspire against 'the Republic'. While the "near enemy" has been a constant feature of internal Irish republican politics, in keeping with the nature of narrative templates, the specificity of who it is has changed from Fine Gael to Fianna Fail to the Officials to the Provisionals to VDR groups.

Conclusion

This article identifies that common discursive mechanisms on the utility, character, scale, support for and motivation behind 'armed struggle' exist within the Irish republican constituency. Drawn from previous splits but adapted to current contexts, these enable those entering constitutional politics to protect their hegemonic position, monopolise the legacy of previous 'armed struggle' and delegitimise 'former comrades' intent on carrying on 'armed struggle'. At its most base level this involves criminalising 'former comrades' and depicting them as enemy agents. These discursive tropes can also be highly complex and incorporate a wider examination of the utility of political violence in a changed 'War on terror' environment in the face of a 'mutually hurting stalemate'. At other times they hinge on the more simplistic machismo of arguments about who 'fought the war'. Whether complex or simplistic, however, the intention remains differentiating between past 'armed struggle' and current 'armed struggle' in order to legitimise one's current political position and to delegitimise that of 'former comrades'. This provokes a response from those supportive of continued 'armed struggle'. Relying in the first on ideological purity and the historic mandate passed on from previous generations, justification for 'armed struggle' is channelled through an 'inevitability of struggle' narrative template that depicts it as legitimate and indeed foreseeable until 'the Republic' has been attained. Drawing from the past, they argue that a cyclic history of 'armed struggle' is in their favour regardless of any internal political settlements, lack of support or 'felon setting' by 'former comrades' imbibed into 'the system'. These competing narratives have seen 'former comrades' recast as the 'near enemy' threatening to peace, threatening to 'the Republic' and, whether through criminality, sabotage or unprecedented ideological dilution, threatening to Irish republicanism itself. If 'armed struggle' is thus inevitable as long as 'the Republic' eludes, then as long as Irish

republicanism continues to split the marginalisation of ‘former comrades’ through reversion to pre-existing scripts seems inevitable also.

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²Text of Irish Republican Army (IRA) Statement on the Ending of the Armed Campaign, (28 July 2005). Available from: <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ira/ira280705.htm>.