

Anti-Agreement Irish Republicans
Beyond the Armalite
Strategic Change and Survival of a
Post-Conflict Spoiler Movement



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Abstract

In a roughly two-year period between 2016–2018, three organisations within the wider Anti-Agreement Irish Republican Movement (AARM)—a cohort bound by opposition to the 1998 Northern Irish Peace Process—claim to have shifted their predominant method of achieving organisational objectives to *community activism*: the deliberate employment of non-violent activities targeted at communities in the areas they are operational within. It is a significant change within a grouping which has been most studied for its use of state-directed violence as a method of "spoiling" the post-conflict political status quo.

Two main questions emerge from this shift which has wider implications for the study of violence-utilising contentious actors: What are the mechanisms of strategic change, and what are the processes which explain the selection of strategic replacement? In other words: *why* do groups change, and *how*?

This research employed a comparative case study approach, and used data drawn from interviews with 83 participants from seven months of fieldwork on both sides of the Irish border. Findings suggest that strategic change is being driven by shared perceptions of organisational and wider movement *decline*, with community activism deemed not only to be an *adaptive* response to reversing these perceptions and achieving core commonly held objectives in what they understand as an altered operating environment, but one which fits within a wider collective identity of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism.

These findings, in what is a unique case study of a relatively recent process of significant strategic change among a cohort of post-conflict spoiler groups, offers contributions to how clandestine organisations understand and navigate (including at an intra-organisational level) organisational maladaptation to their environments. In the process, it offers salient contributions to understandings of strategic action within both "radical" organisations, and social movement organisations more broadly.

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Glossary and Abbreviations

Organisations

1916 Societies: Traditionalist Irish republican organisation founded in 2009.

ANP: Arm Na Phoblata. Irish for "Army of the Republic." Alleged splinter group from ONH (see Unity Movement) founded in 2017. Have conducted limited attacks.

Éirígí: Irish for "Arise." Left-wing political splinter group from Sinn Féin established in 2006.

IRA: Irish Republican Army. The name used by republican groups tracing lineage from the organisation established in 1919 during the Irish War of Independence.

IRM: The Irish Republican Movement. Thought to be a splinter from ONH (see Unity Movement), established in 2018.

IRSM

INLA: The Irish National Liberation Army. Formed from a split within the Official Movement in 1974 wherein it became the secondary Irish republican paramilitary grouping during "the Troubles." Remains opposed to the Good Friday Agreement though has been on an active ceasefire since 1998, with decommissioning of weapons in 2009.

IRSP: Irish Republican Socialist Party. Political wing of the INLA. Maintains a prisoner/former prisoner support group Teach Na Failte (Irish for "House of Welcomes") and a youth wing Republican Socialist Youth Movement (RSYM).

Lasair Dhearg: Irish for "Red Flame." Left-wing anti-Agreement Irish republican organisation formed in 2017.

MI5: Britain's domestic intelligence service. Has priority over investigations surrounding anti-Agreement Irish republican paramilitaries engaged in state-directed violence.

Óglaigh na hÉireann: Has three definitions,

Soldiers/Volunteers of Ireland: Both the name for the Republic of Ireland's Defence Forces and is the name used by every grouping claiming the nomenclature "the IRA."

ONH: Splinter group from the IRA established in 2009 (see the Unity Movement).

PSNI: The Police Service of Northern Ireland. Created in 2001 following the disbandment of its predecessor the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

PUP: Progressive Unionist Party. The associated political wing of the UVF (see below).

The Continuity Movement

CIRA: The Continuity IRA. The first Provisional IRA breakaway grouping.

RSF: Republican Sinn Féin, regarded to be the political wing of the CIRA. Operates the prisoner organisation CABHAIR/the Irish Republican Prisoners Dependents Fund (IRPDF) and the youth wing Na Fianna Éireann (Irish for "Soldiers of Ireland").

The New Movement

NIRA: An amalgamation of several independent and existing anti-Agreement Irish republican paramilitaries. Likely the largest and most capable of the organisations still engaged in state-directed violence.

Saoradh: Irish for "liberation." The political wing of the NIRA. Maintains a prisoner support group Irish Republican Prisoner Welfare Association (IRPWA) and a youth wing Éstigi (Irish for "listen").

The Official Movement

OIRA: The Official IRA. Produced during the split within the Anti-Treaty IRA which also created the PIRA. Declared ceasefire in 1972.

The Workers Party/Sinn Féin - the Workers Party: The political wing of the OIRA which became increasingly important following the OIRA ceasefire in 1972 and now a Marxist-Leninist party in the Republic of Ireland.

The Provisional Movement

PIRA: Formed as a breakaway faction within the Anti-Treaty IRA in December 1969, and which became the largest, most-active, and most capable of the Irish Republican paramilitaries during "the Troubles" of which it was a primary combatant.

Sinn Féin: Irish for "We Ourselves". Initially the political wing of the PIRA until the early 2000s, and subsequently a party of government in Northern Ireland since 2007. Currently the largest overall political party in Northern Ireland.

The Sovereignty Movement

RIRA: The Real IRA. Splinter group formed in 1997 following a walkout within the PIRA over core parts of the Peace Process.

32CSM: The 32 County Sovereignty Movement. Initially the 32 County Sovereignty Committee (32CSC), emerged as a faction within Sinn Féin opposed to core components of the Peace Process. Left in 1997.

The Unity Movement

ONH: RIRA splinter-group established in 2006. Announced a ceasefire in 2018 which remains ongoing.

RNU: Republican Network for Unity. Established in 2007 as *Ex-POWs and Concerned Republicans against RUC/PSNI & MI5*. Became RNU in 2008.

UDA: The Ulster Defence Association. Loyalist paramilitary group established in 1971. Also uses the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF) as a cover-name and is linked to the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP), a political party. Enacted a ceasefire in 1994 with a formal ending of its campaign in 2007. Remains in existence and is operationally active.

UVF: The Ulster Volunteer Force. The largest loyalist paramilitary group both historically and contemporaneously. Established in 1965, it also enacted a ceasefire in 1994 before officially ending its campaign in 2007 along with the UDA. Remains in existence and is operationally active.

Case Specific Terms

Anti-Agreement Irish Republicanism: A subset of Irish republicanism which has at its core opposition to the GFA and the subsequent socio-political situation it has produced.

Anti-Agreement Irish Republican Movement (AARM): A term used to delineate a social movement of actors within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism.

Anti-Agreement Movement-Field (AMF): A subset of organisations within the AARM united by a shared structure (both political and paramilitary wings), objectives, and a tactical repertoire.

Ard Chomhairle: National governing body of an organisation. Used by many Irish republican political organisations.

Ard Fheis: Annual general meeting. A term used by many Irish Republican political organisations.

Comhairlí Ceantair: Grouping in charge of all cumainn in a given territorial area.

CNR: Catholic/Nationalist/Republican. The convention used to refer to a population set and community within Northern Ireland which incorporates ethno-nationalist-political-religious dimensions which are linked historically and socially.

Community-Directed Violence: Violence conducted by paramilitary groups against members of the respective communities in which they are embedded (see also PSAs)

Craobh: Irish for "branch". Used by some Irish republican political organisations to refer to the smallest administrative unit of its respective group.

Cumann: Irish for "association". Used by some Irish nationalist/Irish republican political organisations to refer to the smallest administrative unit of its respective group.

GFA: The Good Friday Agreement or Belfast Agreement. The multi-party agreement signed in 1998 between both the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland to provide support for shared political institutions in Northern Ireland, and a set of principles for political parties to adhere to and providing space for both a consociational power-sharing devolved government and parliament elected on proportional representative grounds. Taken as the ending of "the Troubles."

Irish Nationalism: A political position which seeks the attainment of a united Ireland via non-violent methods.

Irish Republicanism/Republicans: Has three components:

- 1) An ideological position which aimed at achieving a united, independent Irish Republic and which understands violence as an acceptable method of doing so with its origins in clandestine, violence-utilising societies in the late 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries.
- 2) A specific collective identity arising largely from "the Troubles" which fuses the above ideological adherence with a local identity within working-class areas of Northern Ireland.
- 3) A working-class CNR identity.

Loyalism: Can refer to both,

- 1) A political position which stresses loyalty to the British crown and stresses the link between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.
- 2) A working-class PUL identity.

PSAs: Paramilitary-Style Attacks. More frequently known as "punishment" attacks. Violence conducted by paramilitaries against members of the communities in which they are embedded due to some perception of transgression or violation of organisational rules or wider community norms/values. Most associated with informal/sub-state/extra-judicial 'policing'.

PUL: Protestant/Unionist/Loyalist. The convention used to refer to a population set and community within Northern Ireland which incorporates ethno-nationalist-political-religious dimensions which are linked historically and socially.

State-Directed Violence: Violence with a discernible political aim designed to challenge the State which may or may-not be targeted directly against "the State" and its representatives.

The Peace Process: The broad term used to refer to efforts to end "the Troubles" and the early period following the GFA.

The Troubles: The term used to refer to the intra-state conflict in Northern Ireland broadly between 1969–1998 over Northern Ireland's political and national status which involved fighting between loyalist and republican paramilitary groupings, and between these groups and the British and Northern Irish State's through the Armed Forces and the Security Services.

Unionism/Unionists: Can refer to both,

- 1) A political position associated with belief in the maintenance between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.
- 2) A middle-class PUL identity.

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Irish republicans must use the forthcoming year to fundamentally re-evaluate the political and strategic direction of Irish republicanism. As we stand now, that political and strategic direction is *moribund*.

32CSM, 2021 (my emphasis)

The Puzzle

Sometime in 1998, motorists in Jonesborough in the south of County Armagh, Northern Ireland, were witness to an event which helped mark a significant new chapter in the history of political violence in the region. A roadblock manned by masked armed men for a propaganda video stopped vehicle goers and announced themselves to be the "IRA—the *real* IRA" (Harnden, 1999: p. 429–430).

Those observing could hardly be blamed for overlooking its importance. Gunmen claiming to be from the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in South Armagh was nothing out of the ordinary. The area in the border region between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland was a core operating location of the Provisional IRA (PIRA), the group which the moniker "the IRA" effectively solely referred to: a primary participant in Northern Ireland's ethno-nationalist conflict which raged between 1969–1998, known as 'the Troubles.'¹

But the men manning the roadblock were not from the PIRA. They were members of a group that had splintered from that organisation which had broken away one year earlier over concerns that the Provisional Movement—containing the PIRA and its

¹ Nicknamed "Bandit Country", rural South Armagh proved a particular challenge for the British Army. The difficulty of terrain, bombings, effective sniper fire, mortars (developed by the South Armagh Brigade), and surface-to-air missile systems ensured a very different conflict to those fought elsewhere by the PIRA (see Gill, 2017; Harnden, 1999; Taylor, 2018).

political wing, Sinn Féin—was moving towards a negotiated settlement with the British and Northern Irish states.

Their suspicions would prove to be correct. On 10th April 1998 the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was signed. This multi-actor agreement—between representatives of groups (including the Provisional Movement) from the two main ethno-nationalist-religious blocks in Northern Ireland and the governments of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland—set the stage for the transformation of a conflict which had killed over 3,600 people across three decades from political violence to representative power sharing (McGarry & O’Leary, 2006; Nagle, 2018; Tonge, 2008).

The group manning the roadblock in South Armagh in 1998 would become known as the Real IRA (RIRA), largely due to that video (Sanders, 2011: p. 209). It is one of several organisations which comprise what is often termed "Dissident"—or, what this project terms "anti-Agreement"—Irish republicanism.

Such a label is somewhat artificial. There are genuine differences of position among groups under this moniker (see McGlinchey, 2019, in particular). But what does unify them is the belief that: 1) the GFA has copper-fastened the partition of Ireland, perpetuating the socio-political-economic inequities within this, and 2), that in both signing this—and in becoming firstly a political participant within, and later a governing party of, Northern Ireland—the Provisionals have betrayed and abandoned Irish republicanism, Irish republicans, and the wider Catholic/Nationalist/Republican (CNR) community; particularly those within working-class areas of Northern Ireland which were the primary operating locations of the group during “the Troubles” (of the former, see both McGlinchey, 2019; Whiting, 2015).

~

Anti-Agreement Irish republicanism has often attracted attention for the continued use of continued state-directed violence by paramilitary organisations within this grouping. Violence *is* employed by groups within this cohort, both in an effort to disrupt and destabilise the post-conflict status quo and narratives of a normalised" socio-political environment, as well as an ideological component which sees violence as an integral part of Irish Republicanism (some examples include Edwards, 2011; Hearty, 2016; Horgan, 2013; Horgan & Morrison, 2011; Marchment et al., 2019; Morrison, 2017; Morrison & Horgan, 2016; Whiting, 2015).

Certainly, since 1998 political violence *has* been the primary strategy of four of the five main anti-Agreement Irish republican paramilitary groups. From the late 1990s, the RIRA, the Continuity IRA (CIRA), Óglaigh na Eireann (ONH), and the New IRA (NIRA) have all been engaged in "armed campaigns" against the British and Northern Irish states. This has included the 1998 Omagh bombing which killed 29 people; the murders of the British Army soldiers Sappers Patrick Azimkar and Mark Quinsey, the murder of the Catholic PSNI Constable Stephen Carroll (deliberately targeted due to his position as a Catholic officer), a RIRA bombing campaign in England in 2000; and more recently the murder of the journalist Lyra McKee in 2019 and the attempted murder of PSNI Detective Constable Inspector John Caldwell by the New IRA in 2022 (BBC, 2023b; Frampton, 2011).

This continued use of political violence is unusual, both in the longevity of violent spoiling beyond the holding and stability of a post conflict Peace Process; *and* as the only example of a violence-utilising post-conflict movement in Western and Northern Europe following the dissolution of Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in the Basque Region of Spain, which disbanded in 2018 with no clearly identifiable splinter-groups (Mahoney, 2019; Murua, 2016; Sánchez-Cuenca et al., 2007; Zabalo & Saratxo, 2015).

Yet despite this noteworthy historical and contemporary violence, anti-Agreement Irish republicanism appears to be changing. It is, for a start, becoming less violent. The number of attributable bombings, shootings, and hoaxes have, for a number of years, been steadily declining, as seen in **Figure 1**.

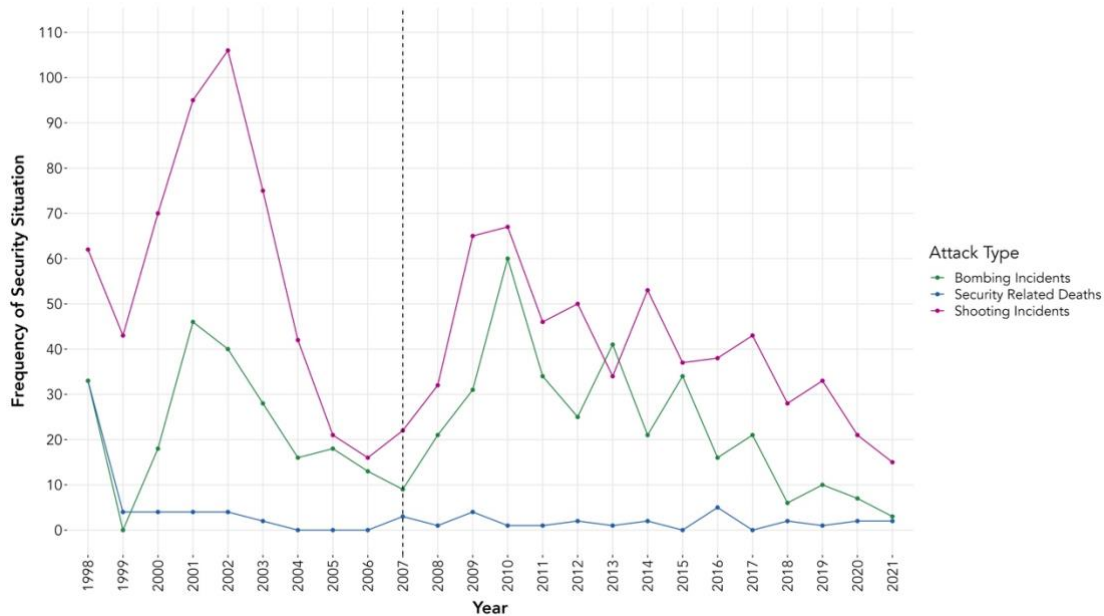


Figure 1 - PSNI security data of republican attributed violent acts. *Notes:* Data visualised from PSNI (2022) Security Situation Statistics by attribution, 1998–2021. Obtained via FOIA.

Dashed line indicates 2007, the year that the Provisional IRA accepted policing in Northern Ireland, with continued acts of violence ascribable to anti-Agreement Irish republicans. Moreover, any political violence post-1998 (proxied through bombings) is attributable to groups other than the INLA and PIRA.

This decrease is not only numeric. Since 2016, of the main four groups which have used state-directed violence *after* the GFA, two—the RIRA and ONH—have announced or affected ceasefires. In doing so, they joined the INLA—the other main anti-Agreement paramilitary organisation which despite its opposition to the GFA suspended its use of state-directed violence in 1998—in refraining from attacks on the Northern Irish and British states (McGlinchey, 2019, 2021). The two remaining groups—the New and Continuity Movements—remain engaged in state-directed violence.

Alongside this jettisoning of state-directed violence, during this time period, the political wings of the RIRA, ONH, and the INLA (the 32 County Sovereignty Movement/32CSM, Republican Network for Unity/RNU, and the Irish Republican Socialist Party/IRSP, respectively) have *all* claimed to be involved in a shift to community activism as a new strategic direction.

This change, and the different components of this, pose somewhat of a puzzle. In a broadly common time period, three different groups within this cohort have embarked upon a significant process of strategic change—for two groups, a change accompanied by a dramatic reversal in the understanding and use of state-directed violence. Organisations possessing both paramilitary and political wings appear to be engaged in a deliberate decision to peruse primary organisational objectives "beyond the Armalite".²

~

The radical nature of such a shift (and potential answers around *why* such a change is occurring) is well exemplified by one of these three groups: the Sovereignty Movement—the organisation which contains both the RIRA and its political wing the 32CSM.

In December 2021, while in Belfast conducting interviews for this project, I received an email from the 32CSM as part of a wider circulation of the group's 2022 New Year Statement, of which the quote at the start of this Chapter is extracted from. In a lengthy critique of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism and the continued use of violence within this, the statement expressed the belief that violence had been *ineffective* in achieving political goals, and that it had contributed towards the isolation and irrelevancy of Irish

² This refers to the strategic use of state-directed violence by republican paramilitary groups during the troubles. The strategy is named after the symbolic weapon of the PIRA, the ArmaLite AR-18 and AR-15 self-loading rifles imported from the United States.

republicanism. For the authors of the statement, in their opinion, anti-Agreement Irish republicanism has become 'moribund', an issue, they argue, that can only be resolved by the search for 'other forms of effective resistance' (32CSM, 2021).

Though the statement went largely unnoticed outside of the movement and its watchers, such a public rebuke from the organisation which is regarded as the first of the "Dissidents" which emerged directly as a result of the GFA, and which has long been the most dominant and violent grouping, is hugely significant in of itself as an ideological recentring and divergence around what Irish republicanism should look like (McGlinchey, 2021). But also contained in the organisation's argument is an encapsulation of the reasons for the move towards community activism as a deliberate strategic shift: perceptions of organisational and wider movement *decline* and the search for ways to combat this.

~

This Chapter sets the stage for the rest of this thesis by outlining its main theoretical underpinnings. While it is most directly an investigation into organisational change within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, it is fundamentally a wider study of strategic action: both *why* and *how* contentious, violence-utilising political actors change strategic direction and the replacements they choose.

Theoretical Snapshot and the Argument in Brief

Students of any institutional actor in modern society are interested in the same underlying phenomenon: collective strategic action.

Fligstein & McAdam, 2011: p. 2

This quote is a useful way to begin this section which situates this thesis' wider theoretical background and argument. While focused directly on the study of what

appears to be a process of strategic change within a cohort of anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations, it is more broadly a study of collective strategic action—how and why groups choose the activities they do in the pursuit of organisationally held objectives.

Within this overarching phenomenon, the groups this project focuses on are themselves representative of a distinct category of collective actor: violence-utilising, covert, contentious political groups. They are opposed to the dominant socio-political order in their operating areas, and employ (or previously employed) political violence as one of the methods of challenging this narrative and in furthering organisational objectives. Nevertheless, it is assumed that these groups make strategic choices just like any other, with these organisations motivated by the achievement of organisational objectives, possessing internal structures to allow for decisions made to be implemented, and who are capable of altering these decisions based on the understood responses from stimuli, be they internal or external—what is termed strategic change.

The specific form of strategic change as it relates to this thesis is the move towards *community activism*—within a similar time period—among a grouping of distinct organisations but which share objectives, structures, ideologies, operating environments, and a broadly similar tactical repertoire.

There are three primary questions which arise from this:

1. What explains the onset of strategic change within this cohort within a roughly comparable time period?
2. What explains the selection of community activism *within* and *across* the organisations which can be observed to have engaged within a process of strategic change?

3. Why has this occurred for some groups within this cohort but seemingly not for others?

From these questions, an argument arises which has four pillars:

1. That the alteration of strategies across a grouping of organisations within the same movement suggests a *common mechanism* of strategic change—identified to be perceptions of *decline*: defined here as a reduction of organisational capacity to meet objectives which has both an internal and external dimension.
2. That such a change is *adaptive*, with new strategies chosen to better fit the environments in which they are embedded and to better meet objectives over both the short-term (reversing perceptions of decline) and long-term (fundamental goals).
3. That group selection processes for choosing replacement strategies are *mediated* by collective identities at both the organisational and wider institutional level, with changes *framed* as an extension of this identity to "audiences" both internal (intra-group memberships) and external (potential supporters and the wider communities in which they are embedded).
4. Differential readings and interpretations of the same collective identity can also explain why some organisations *do not* embark on processes of strategic change, despite shared structures and stimuli.

Readers will observe in the above a conflation of terms and theories which pertain to different academic disciplines. This reflects at one level the reality that different scholarships talk about what are essentially manifestations of the same phenomena using subdiscipline-specific languages to communicate with discipline-specific

audiences. But it also highlights a broader challenge present from inception to writing of where to situate this work.

The result is an integrated approach which interweaves pertinent concepts and theories concerned with explaining collective strategic action and strategic change. In particular, it draws heavily from a synthesis between concepts and theories from Organisational Sociology and Social Movement Studies, and how these have been applied to the study of action and decision-making among violence-utilising organisations.

This in and of itself is not a novel synthesis. The two are heavily intertwined, particularly given the influence of Organisational Theory on the creation of the concept of Social Movement Organisations, alongside many others such as institutional fields and cultural limitations to organisational processes (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011). Likewise, the application of Social Movement approaches to other forms of contentious political groups (including violence-utilising organisations) has provided significant insights into topics including mobilisation, engagement, tactical choice, and disengagement (further explored later in the section).

But there are also real differences as the two approaches have become further alienated from each other, something which is most evident in the very different foci of these scholarships. Organisational Sociology has remain primarily wedded to the study of economic corporations, or "the firm" (Grothe-Hammer & Kohl, 2020). As described by Fligstein and McAdam, although Social Movement Studies (SMS) approaches have borrowed much from Organisational Theory and expanded concepts within this to the study of non-economic organisations, the two remain stratified (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011).

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Likewise, it should be stressed that despite using social movement concepts and terms, and situating the project (at least partially) within an SMS approach, anti-Agreement Irish republican groups do not neatly align with this bulk of the literature, which tends to focus on non-violent claims making in an effort to enact social change on behalf of a specific group (Amenta et al., 2010: p. 394), with political violence emerging at the end of these "cycles" (della Porta, 2008b; Porta & Tarrow, 1986); or the idea of social movements as,

... networks of informal interaction between a plurality of individuals, groups and/or organisations, engaged in a political and/or cultural conflict, on the basis of a shared collective identity.

Diani, 1992: p. 3

Organisations within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism share *some* of these attributes (a focus on social change by groups outside formalised power, and the ties with a specific community and identity), but this is clearly not the full picture. Groups within this cohort differ in a number of significant ways from this above definition. As will be explored in Chapters 1 and 2, they are engaged in both violent and non-violent tactics, exhibit structural characteristics of formalised organisations (see above and Chapter 3), and do not seek to influence the internal processes and agendas of the state of the country in which they reside, but to fundamentally upend it—including, for some of these groups, the use of political, state-directed violence to do so.

Yet, there are also definitional and theoretical advantages to situating this project within a social movement framework. As outlined later in this section, the categorisation of the broad range of actors within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism and the specific groups which share high-degrees of commonality within this (which comprise the

actual case-studies of the thesis) maps well onto the concepts of social movements, movement organisations, and organisational fields.

Likewise, beyond these definitional advantages, situating this thesis within a social movement framework provides a genuinely useful foundation for studying violence-utilising, non-state organisations. It is not the first project to do so. If Goodwin, (2004: p. 259) lamented that that social movement scholars 'with very few exceptions, have said little about terrorism', two decades later this can no longer be accurately argued.

By now there is a well-established sub-discipline which has incorporated social movement approaches to the study of violence-utilising, clandestine political actors. Work adopting social movement approaches (usually in the form of case studies) on extreme, clandestine, violence-utilising groups have focused on Islamic organisations (Andersen & Sandberg, 2018; Robinson, 2004; Sandal, 2021; Snow & Byrd, 2007; Westphal, 2018; Wiktorowicz, 2004), European left wing groups (Bosi & della Porta, 2015; della Porta, 2008a; della Porta, 2013; Porta & Tarrow, 1986), and ethno-nationalist groups (Schoon, 2015).

The other main case-study within this, and the most pertinent to this project (something which has also considerably influenced the decision to situate this thesis within an SMS framework) is research on the Provisional Movement and the PIRA. White, (2001, 1989, 2010), Bosi & della Porta (2012, 2015), and Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, (2018), have studied the importance of the intersection between identity and structural considerations on both mobilisation patterns, disengagements, and splits within the Movement; while Clubb (2016, 2017), Hepworth (2023, 2024) and Hannigan (1985) have focused on strategic choice within the organisation, and how the Provisional Movement was able to undertake and navigate strategic *change*.

This work, in its combination of macro-, meso- and micro- approaches, and in focusing on the role of internal and external processes, constraints, and opportunities (which includes the actions of other actors, resources, and internal identities and cultures—and how decisions and narratives are *framed*), provides fertile ground for the study of the utilisation, escalation, and de-escalation of repertoires of contention (and mobilisation and disengagement within to these groups (Beck, 2008; Beck & Schoon, 2018; Bosi & Giugni, 2012; della Porta, 2008b).

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Where Goodwin's lament still holds true, and will be explored throughout this project, is that despite this boon in literature, SMS approaches to violence-utilising groups (with some exceptions), have paid little attention 'to the more general question of how movement organizations make strategic choices, of which terrorism is one' (Goodwin, 2004: p. 259).

Bringing Organisational Sociology "back in" offers considerable advantages to understanding strategic action among contentious political actors. At the one level, it can help redress what Jasper (2004) has also understood as a gap within SMS approaches around strategic choice and change. While bringing concepts of identity and framing within understandings of *how* organisations navigate choices not only fits within existing neo-institutional approaches in Organisational Sociology, it also offers salient ways of furthering this literature *beyond* "the firm".

In making the above argument, and in focusing on mechanisms and processes of organisational choice and decision-making, this thesis offers substantial contributions to the study of violence-utilising contentious political actors and action—a field which has been significantly expanded by work beginning with Doug McAdam, Sidney

Tarrow, and Charles Tilly and their Contentious Politics framework—by formally focusing on strategic change (Mcadam et al., 1996; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

Contentious Organisations: Defining the Study

First and foremost, this project is one which is specifically focused on a study of strategic choice and change within a form of collective actor which can be classified as a contentious political *organisation*, characterised by the possession of the following attributes:

1. Defined socio-political objectives and the ability to undertake action relating to the achievement of these goals (goal-orientation).
2. Opposition to "*the State*".
3. A distinct identity *specific* to that grouping.
4. An internal structure normally characterised by a hierarchy of power-relations among its members.

Such a characterisation fuses John Selznick's definition of the organisation, with the concept of contentious politics:

[Organisations are] formal structures in the sense that they represent rationally ordered instruments for the achievement of stated goals... the structural expression of rational action... [under which] the mobilization of technical and managerial skills requires a pattern of coordination, a systematic ordering of positions and duties which defines a chain of command and makes possible the administrative integration of specialized function.

Selznick, 1948: p. 25

[Contentious Politics are] interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actors' interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties.

Tilly & Tarrow, 2015: p. 8

However, the research presented within this thesis considers not just change within *one* organisation, but rather collective change across *multiple* groups within a wider cohort of actors: labelled here as the *Anti-Agreement Irish Republican Movement (AARM)*. This is a structurally varied cohort—groups include those which are solely violence-utilising, those which are purely non-violent, and those which contain both violent and non-violent wings of the same organisation, as well as non-aligned individuals. Moreover, within this grouping, organisations and individuals have significant disagreements over specific perspectives, including the acceptability of violence in the current climate.

Yet despite this, those within the confines of the AARM are nonetheless defined by the following characteristics:

1. A conceptualisation as being part of a collective Irish republican identity, which includes:
 - a. An ideological dimension, that of Irish republicanism: a particular political perspective and lineage which advocates for the establishment of a united and sovereign 32 county Irish republic; and understands the *right* to violence as an acceptable method of achieving this (contemporaneously and/or historically).
 - b. Linkages to (particularly) working-class CNR constituencies in Northern Ireland within which they are embedded.

2. A belief that in ratifying the GFA and engaging within the wider Peace Process is a betrayal of Irish republicanism, Irish republicans, and the working-class CNR constituencies that they claim to represent.

This is explored in more detail in Chapter 1, but the project conceptualises this group as a *contentious* social movement: a broader cohort of claims-making actors which possess both shared interests, perspectives, and identities. Indeed, identity, is central to both delineating this cohort *and* in explaining organisational understandings, with the concept of collective identity defined as an,

... individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution. It is a perception of a shared status or relation, which may be imagined rather than experienced directly, and it is distinct from personal identities, although it may form part of a personal identity.

Polletta & Jasper, 2001: p. 285

Lastly, the groups at the heart of this thesis comprise another specific category: what is termed here as the *Anti-Agreement Movement Field* (AMF), a particular subset of organisations within the AARM which retain a high degree of structural, objective, and tactical homogeneity:

1. Shared internal characteristics and organisational structure, namely the possession of both a political and paramilitary wing.³

³ Somewhat confusingly, the conventional term to refer to Irish republican organisations which share both political and paramilitary wings within the same overarching structure is also that of a Movement. This convention is continued by this thesis to formally link both violence-utilising and non-violent wings of the same group who clearly possess overlapping objectives and memberships (including leaderships), something further covered in Chapter 2. To avoid confusion, where the term movement is used by itself, it should be understood as referring to the wider AARM. In all cases where Movement is used to describe distinct groups, it will be prefixed with the corresponding designated organisational name.

2. Embeddedness and engagement within the same social and geographic environment.
3. The possession of common objectives, particularly *spoiling* and *outbidding*.
4. The possession of a shared tactical repertoire containing both violent and non-violent activities.

A specific delineation of the groups contained within the AMF is found within Chapter 2 but is understood here to be analogous to a Social Movement Industry/Organisational Field, from which it borrows its name: a distinct population set of organisations 'that have as their goal the attainment of the broadest preferences of a social movement constituency' (Mccarthy & Zald, 1977: p. 1219).

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The above characterisations are useful in a definitional sense, but in this conceptualisation of organisations as adaptive actors—which are nonetheless bound by specific understandings, identities, and objectives in the pursuit of clearly defined objectives—they also offer a theoretical framework to understand how and why contentious political organisations, including those within the AMF, undertake collective action—including strategic choice and change: the primary theoretical puzzle.

Boundedly Adaptive: A Model of Strategic Choice

This project is concerned with how and why organisations select the specific strategies they do, and why and how these strategies change. But what are strategies, and how do these differ (or overlap) with other terms used in scholarship pertaining to organised collective decision-making?

Under this project, deliberate collective action in the pursuit of organisational objectives is understood to operate at multiple levels. The first level comprises *tactics*, defined as 'forms of collective action publicly deployed... in service of a sustained campaign of claims making' (Larson, 2013: p. 866). A group of tactics employed or formerly utilised by groups are *repertoires*: 'a stock of special skills, plays, and activities with which members of a group are already familiar and from which they select specific ones' (Alimi, 2015: p. 410). From within this repertoire, the elevation of one tactic as the primary method of achieving organisational objectives is defined as an organisation's *strategy*: 'integrated decisions, actions, or plans that will set and achieve viable organizational goals' (Chaffee, 1985: p. 90).

Strategies are thus part (and a distinct form) of a wider range of choices enacted by organisations to achieve pre-defined and organisationally understood objectives. But strategies are not only simply a cost-benefit calculation of which tactic (or grouping) is best placed to further goals. In defining the concept of strategies, this thesis combines Chaffee's more descriptive conception with Minkoff's more theoretical version, in which strategies are *the*,

... core feature of the organization that critically shapes its ability to mobilize support from members, sponsors, and authorities [which also] represent a continuum of institutional challenge or conformity to established methods of social and political participation, which confer distinctive levels of legitimacy *vis-à-vis* established elites and the public.

Minkoff, 1999: p. 1668

Such a definition in which strategies come to represent the organisation, and how this is perceived by those within and outside the organisation, is of particular value to this thesis. Organisations select their strategies both in terms of how they are understood to

further claims making processes, but also in how they are understood internally and externally as legitimate.

~

Such a reading has wider theoretical claims. As outlined at the start of this section, the argument sustained and explored throughout this thesis is that anti-Agreement Irish republican groups, like other forms collective actors, undertake sets of strategic action which are based on the achievement of organisational objectives, and which are deemed to be advantageous in the exact environments in which they are situated. In making these choices, however, groups are also heavily constrained by cultural understandings located within shared collective identities, with these identities themselves drawn from the organisational-, wider movement/institutional-, and broader social-environments in which members are situated.

While such an assumption of behaviour understands both rational and cultural components of choice as inseparably linked and occurring simultaneously within decision-making processes, concepts of bounded rationality and adaptation are analysed separately to illustrate the mechanisms and processes of each more clearly.

Boundedly Rational: Organisational, Environmental, and Institutional Frameworks

Cooperative systems [are] constituted of individuals interacting as wholes in relation to a formal system of coordination. The concrete structure is therefore a resultant of the reciprocal influences of the formal and in- formal aspects of organization.

Selznick, 1948: p. 28

The core assumption of this project is that the activities which comprise tactics, repertoires of action, and strategies within this that contentious political organisations deploy in their claims-making processes, are deemed to be both advantageous in

meeting these goals, but which are also heavily constrained by perceptions of acceptability. That is, that they are "boundedly" rational: an argument first developed by Herbert Simon and James March (along with Harold Guetzkow) (March et al., 1958), in their effort to understand action and choice within 'systems of coordinated action among individuals and groups whose preferences, information, interests, or knowledge differ' (March & Simon, 1993: p. 2).

In this work and in others produced by Simon (see Simon, 1956, 1964, 1979, 1991), organisations are understood to undertake decisions based on a prior organisational repertoire and internalised understandings within their 'inner environment', with actions 'based on external stimuli of some sort [with responses] that have been developed and learned at some previous time as an appropriate response for a stimulus of this class' (March et al., 1958: p. 139-140).

This does not mean that organisations are fixed in their responses. Where there are problems and solutions not already available in the problems solvers' repertoire, organisations engage in processes of search and discovery which may involve inventing and elaborating whole performance programmes, termed organisational learning in which groups are able to 'deviate from the culture in which it is embedded.' (Simon, 1991: p. 128).

~

Bounded rationality has become a core component of Organisational Theory and neo-institutional models of decision-making, and it offers many salient understandings into how groups undertake collective action. But this project is not only interested in organisationally specific processes of change and strategic selection. Rather, it seeks to discern why common processes of both change and outcome within organisational strategies can be observed *across* the AMF. Indeed, organisations within this cohort are

also defined by what are common tactical repertoires suggesting that some form of cohort-wide selection criteria.

This overlap either at a strategic or repertoire level is argued to be no coincidence. Importantly, this thesis understands that groups which are situated within an existing movement are heavily constrained by the cultural practices and identities salient at this institutional level, which provides groups within an Organisational Field a,

... cultural template embedded in the practices and relations of social movement actors that provide them with a focus of attention, source of meaning and identity, and a vision of how to 'do' contention.

Larson & Lizardo, 2015: p. 62

The outcome of these constraints is that organisational strategies and wider repertoires are largely stable, with strong convergence among similar activities deployed by groups sharing a particular organisational field, even among those in active competition for resources from the same pool—akin to the concept of *institutional isomorphism* (DiMaggio, 1997; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hannan & Freeman, 1984).

Of course, as in concepts of organisational learning, stability is not stasis. Organisations are comprised of individuals and subgroups with differing interpretations and interests (March et al., 1958; Simon, 1964, 1979). Likewise, how organisations and those within them interpret and navigate environmental changes also produces shifts in behaviour in responding to these (explored below).

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The final core assumption of this project regarding intra-organisational cultural components of strategic action is that of strategic acceptance. Strategies and wider action in general are not just passively accepted either by memberships or target

audiences. Instead, groups are involved in a constant process of *framing* action to both internal and external audiences, with framing defined as:

[a] schemata of interpretation that enables individuals 'to locate, perceive, identify, and label' occurrences within their life, space, and the world at large.

Goffman, 1986: p. 21 cited in Snow et al., 1986: p. 464

As Robert Benford and David Snow (perhaps the two central-most figures within the framing literature), note, 'framing is a verb': that is, meanings are not just taken as given but are actively created, with groups looking to ground action within specific understandings of acceptable behaviour. Strategic action is not only something which has to be navigated between organisations and the audiences within their environments, but also within groups and the wider movements in which they are situated in the construction and resonance of frames regarding actions taken: 'an active, *process derived* phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction' (Snow & Benford, 1992: p. 136).

Adaptive Actors

Furthermore, this structure is itself a totality an adaptive "organism" reacting to influences upon it from an external environment.

Selznick, 1948: p.28

The second central component of studies of organised strategic actors, both those found within Social Movement Studies and Organisational Theory, is that organisations are *adaptive*, able to process and respond to changes (or *stimuli*) within their external environments (Meyer, 1982).

For the purposes of this project, the concept of an organisation's operating "environment" has two components, as outlined by Zald and Ash (1966: p. 229–330):

1. **A broader social movement/social movement field**, which 'consists of potential supporters' which provide an organisational support base and other organisations within this.
2. **Wider society** which may contain 'the target structure or norms' that the organisation is seeking to change.

As previously outlined, the broader social movement within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is that of the AARM, a grouping which also contains a smaller cohort of the AMF as a distinct organisational field in which,

... actors (who can be individual or collective) interact with knowledge of one another under a set of common understandings about the purposes of the field, the relationships in the field (including who has power and why), and the field's rules.

Fligstein & McAdam, 2011: p. 3

Importantly, this project also understands groups to inhabit a real-world physical environment. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is overwhelmingly clustered in particular locations in Northern Ireland, which are usually working-class CNR areas which have a historic republican presence (including areas which witnessed violence, or which were core areas of CNR paramilitaries during "the Troubles"); and which are also areas of significant socio-economic deprivation.

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Within these environments, organisations in competition with one another for resources in which they 'vie for strategic advantage in and through interaction with other groups'—are reactive to changes within these environments, including changes created

by the actions of other actors (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011: p. 2). Such changes in the environment are conceptualised as being important "push" factors for organisations in producing the onset of strategic change. Again, using Zald and Ash's understanding of the environment, changes can occur among 'three interrelated aspects of the environment of MO's [movement organisations] which critically affect both their growth and transformation' (Zald & Ash, 1966: p. 330):

1. Altered societal conditions which increase or decrease an organisation's 'potential support base'.
2. Societal changes in the direction of organisational goals, or events which render organisational objectives achievable or unobtainable.
3. Inter-organisational clustering of groups with the same objectives producing competition dynamics.

The notion that strategic change is produced by environmental changes—and indeed, the concept of adaptation itself—heavily borrows from concepts in biology and ecology. This is often described within Organisational Theory as "strategic fitness" and a "Darwinian selection process", noting the adoption of population ecology approaches to group change whereby organisations look to intentionally select actions which 'aim to reduce the distance between an organization and its... environments' (Sarta et al., 2021: p. 46), thus producing an increased chance of organisational survival and continuance (i.e., reproduction).

Such a process, defined by Serta et al., (2021) in their overview of research on the topic within Organisational Theory, is,

(a) **intentional**, that is, rooted in organizational members' awareness of their environment, resulting in a choice to react to, anticipate, or ignore changes in the environment; (b) **relational**, whereby organizations and environments influence one another; (c) **conditioned**, since environmental characteristics also depend on, and evolve with, other organizations' actions; and (d) **convergent**, in that organizations seeking to adapt are attempting to move closer to a set of environmental characteristics.

Sarta et al., 2021: p. 46

Decline: Mechanisms of Strategic Change

If groups are adaptive to stimuli located within their environments, then this thesis understands perceptions of *decline* as both the major stimulus and impetus of organisational strategic change.

There are two theoretical challenges posed by the term "perceptions of decline." First, that of organisational decline itself: a concept which—despite considerable literature (mainly within Organisational Sociology)—remains contested long after Alfred Whetten's (1980) call to better delineate the topic. Decline has been interpreted as 1) a 'maladaptation' to organisational environments, 2) a 'downturn in organisation size or performance', and 3) a 'decrease in an organisation's resource base' (McKinley, 1993: p.1).

Within these definitions are external and internal components to the concept of decline, but the one adopted here combines all three interpretations. Here, decline is: 1) largely produced via maladaptation to environments, which 2) produces a decrease in resources (including material and human resources), itself resulting in 3) organisational stagnation and/or a decrease in size and performance.

The second challenge is posed by the use of *perception*, which is understood here as the recognition that organisations are in a process of decline, and that new strategies are needed to reverse this. Recognition of both decline and the need to change strategic

direction is not a given. While groups have the ability to adapt, these themselves may be constrained by a variety of factors, including management interests, internal cultures identities and wider understandings of acceptability, and resources, which may all prove to be facilitators or points of resistance to change (Cameron et al., 1987; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Weitzel & Jonsson, 1989).

While this argument is explored in more detail at the end of this section and within Chapters 4,5, and 6, briefly, decline is regarded to be a causal mechanism of strategic change, in which perceptions of decline and the need to reverse this produces an effect strong enough to overcome what Hannan and Freeman describe as 'the constraining power of structural inertia' (Hannan & Freeman, 1984: p.149).

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This is not the first work to focus on decline as it pertains to violence-utilising groups, but it is one of a relatively small number—and one of the few which understands it under the above definition as the *primary mechanism* of strategic change whereby groups adapt strategies in response to these perceptions. And though McGlinchey (2021, 2024) has similarly noted changing perceptions around violence among anti-Agreement Irish republicans—with this shift also argued to be linked to changes in the environment (see Chapter 5)—this is the first project to tie this to both strategic change and the idea that this is being driven *specifically* by perceptions of decline.

Where work has previously been conducted around decline among violence-utilising groups—which is largely comprised of individual or comparative case studies—takes decline in a strategic sense: that of a cessation of a violent campaign, with this cessation resulting in either organisational and strategic transformation or organisational collapse; and being driven by both internal components (including disengagement), external factors (such as the loss of civilian support), or some combination of the two

(Bosi & della Porta, 2015; Brock Blomberg et al., 2010, 2011; Crenshaw, 1991; della Porta, 2008; Miller, 2012; Staniland, 2014).

Cronin provides a useful example of the different pathways of decline in which both internal and external processes and events intersect in their specific overview of the topic as it pertains to clandestine, non-state 'terrorist groups' (Cronin, 2006, 2008, 2009). In their cross-case analysis of the end of 'terrorist campaigns', Cronin notes that changing dynamics between three actors—the organisation, the state, and a wider organisational "audience"—produces the following six pathways of group decline, which may produce a cessation of violence through either one or multiple of these:

1. *Decapitation'* through the killing or capture of leaderships.
2. *Transition* whereby the group pursues objectives through non-violent, 'legitimate' politics, normally elections.
3. (Perhaps paradoxically) *success*—defined as the achievement of organisational objectives.
4. *'Implosion'* and/or the loss of public support.
5. *'Defeat'* through state repression.
6. The adoption of other forms of violence and organisational transition of a group to other forms of violence-utilising non-state actors, notably criminal enterprise.

Adapted from Cronin, 2009: p. 8

This project also sees much value in the notion of decline as the result of a relational approach between different environments and the actors which inhabit them, something also previously noted by Donatella della Porta and Bosi (2015) in their comparative case studies of the PIRA and the Italian Red Brigades, in which changes at the macro-, meso-, and micro- levels produce group change or collapse.

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Yet, while this thesis is concerned with understanding strategic change (including the jettisoning of state-directed violence by two of the five groups within the AMF) as

being driven by decline, it does not treat decline *solely* as a reduction in violence as a strategy but instead—as noted at the start of the subsection—as a perception of wider maladaptation to the environment producing organisationally specific issues such as a decrease in resource aggregation (particularly cultural resources like legitimacy and human resources such as recruits and memberships).

In this way, a reduction in violence and the selection of other strategies is a symptom *and* response to perceptions of decline, and not the primary focus itself. Such a reframing offers contributions to both a wider literature on decline among organisations and a narrower body of work pertaining to violence-utilising groups.

The Argument: Adapting to Decline

Together, the concepts and theories outlined in the previous two subsections around organisational strategic choice, change, and decline produces the following argument made and sustained throughout this thesis, which understands both change and the forms that this takes as a blend of both rational and cultural mechanisms and processes at both the organisational and wider movement level:

Anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations—pursuing defined and understood goals—have selected a common response to shared perceptions of decline. These responses are driven by both a perceived advantage in meeting organisational objectives and increasing the adaptiveness to operational environments; and intra-group understandings, themselves created from prior histories, norms, identities, and cultures at both the organisational and institutional levels.

As will be further discussed in Chapter 4, widespread understandings of decline—manifested through organisationally specific components (namely arrests and defections) and wider, longer-term issues (surrounding the failure to recruit and a perceived failure of resonance within the communities they are seeking to represent)—have produced the onset of organisational strategic change. Groups recognise that they are maladapted to their environments and seek to reverse this in an effort to ensure organisational survivability.

Such perceptions of decline have both an organisationally specific component, and a movement-wide dimension, the focus of Chapter 5. For both the Unity and Sovereignty Movements (two of the three organisations within the AMF which have shifted strategic direction), the impetus for change has clearly arisen from significant challenges within these groups regarding the loss of memberships. But, at the same time, perceptions of decline have also emerged from longer-term trends within Northern Ireland which have been ongoing since the Peace Process—chiefly changes within the wider socio-political landscape which are contributing to increased conversations around the "inevitability" of a united Ireland. It is a move which has been bolstered by "exogenous shocks" which have contributed to both perceptions of the advantageousness of community activism and the futility of continued state-directed violence.

The replacement strategy—that of community activism—is at one level an adaptive response to decline. As will be explored in Chapter 4, community activism has been selected due to its viability as a method of reversing perceptions of decline (through increasing recruits from "non-traditional" republican backgrounds and in improving legitimacy within the communities in which they are operational).

This replacement also meets organisational and wider institutional understandings of acceptability. Community activism is a core part of a collective Irish republican identity, which has both a strong left-wing ideological dimension and sees the "protection" of working-class CNR communities as central components (the focus of Chapter 1); *and* has a central position within a pre-existing movement repertoire (overviewed in Chapter 2).

Combined, both the stimuli for change and the outcomes that altered strategies among groups in active competition with one another for resources (material, human, and cultural) resemble a process akin to strategic isomorphism, in which institutional norms and shared concepts of identity play a core role (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Hannan et al., 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1977). Indeed, the power of this institutionalism can be observed within how groups have both implemented and *framed* community activism as an extension of master-frames within an existing Irish republican identity, something explored in Chapters 3 and 6.

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This is the central argument that this thesis makes. But findings also provide nuance to such a neo-institutional framework of strategic action. For a project which understands collective identity as *the* mediating factor within boundedly rational processes, these identities are not set in stone, either for the three organisations within the AMF which have moved towards community activism, or the two which have not. This is most explicitly explored in Chapter 6 which demonstrates both differences in how such a collective identity is understood, the flexibility or rigidity surrounding the incorporation of the continued use of violence (and the degree of centrality this should have within this identity), and where groups and their members understand legitimacy should be sought within this.

Moreover, Chapter 3 tackles Jasper's (2004) argument for the need to focus on intra-organisational agency within movement-choices directly, explicitly networking the power-dynamics and decision-making processes within groups comprising the AMF. In doing so, it demonstrates that in strategic decision-making processes and the implementation of strategies, individual members and sub-groups have powerful influences on strategic action. Chapter 6 furthers this by arguing that for the groups which have sought to radically alter their membership cohorts, groups also risk altering organisational identities and wider understandings of Irish republicanism.

~

Chapter by chapter, the theoretical "snapshot" outlined above will be explored and deepened, with a detailed discussion at the end of each, in the process providing a holistic and nuanced understanding of strategic change and action.

Who Cares? Contributions to the (Post-) Conflict Scholarship

This project characterises Northern Ireland after the signing of the GFA in 1998 as a post-conflict environment, whereby the agreement and subsequent actions of armed state and non-state actors during the Peace Process (including ceasefires and decommissioning of both CNR and PUL paramilitary groups and the end of the British Army's campaign), alongside power-sharing by political representatives of the CNR and PUL communities (including Sinn Féin) ended the "primary conflict".⁴ While

⁴ Despite these actions, *all* of the main paramilitary groups active during "the Troubles" are operational in some capacity. Most pertinently, it is believed that components of the PIRA still exist, something demonstrated by the 2015 murder of Kevin McGuigan (explored in Chapter 5), whose murder was allegedly conducted by a PIRA unit (McDonald, 2015). In the report which followed based on intelligence from the British Security Services and the Police Service of Northern Ireland, it is alleged that 'the structures of the PIRA remain in existence in a much-reduced form. This includes a senior leadership, the 'Provisional Army Council' (PAC) and some 'departments' with specific responsibilities' (Northern Ireland Office, 2015: p. 4).

political violence continues to exist in Northern Ireland, such actions are sporadic, have been declining, and pose no realistic threat to the Peace Process itself.

In this categorisation, resultantly this thesis also intersects with disciplines within what is widely referred to as Conflict Studies—principally those which pertain to "post-conflict" environments, and particularly the following three:

1. A wider literature which focuses on *spoiler* groups: organisations which emerge in opposition to, and seek the disruption of, post-conflict peace agreements and processes.
2. Work on non-violent activism by violence-utilising contentious political actors.
3. The Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) and conflict transformation literature concerned with how groups transition from violent to non-violent methods of achieving political aims.

~

Like the above previous theoretical "snapshot", this section is not intended to provide a thorough unpacking of literatures around each of the above phenomena, but rather to demonstrate that this study of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is well positioned to offer insights and contributions to each.

Spoilers

As Chapters 1 and 2 will explore in more detail, anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations are representative of post-conflict spoilers—defined here as organisations seeking to disrupt and prohibit the successful implementation of nascent peace agreements to resolve civil conflict (Kydd & Walter, 2006; Nilsson & Söderberg Kovacs, 2011; Stedman, 2000). The AARM itself is primarily understood within this thesis to be an example of a post-conflict spoiler *movement*. Not only do the majority

of groups within the AARM emerge specifically from opposition to the GFA and specific points during the Peace Process more broadly, but a core objective of those within the AMF meet definitions of spoiling: 1) to highlight the failure of the GFA to bring about lasting change, 2) to demonstrate its betrayal of Irish republicans, Irish republicanism, and working-class CNR communities, and 3) to de-normalise and disrupt the post-GFA status quo that it has produced (Tonge, 2004; Sanders, 2011).

~

Yet, within the existing literature on spoiler groups, there is a considerable lack of analysis on how these organisations—and their activities—change over-time. Spoiling strategies are frequently treated as fixed, with a particular focus on violence as the primary method of spoiling. Yet, the organisations which adopt these strategies, are, in the eyes of this project, just like any other. They are subject to the trials and tribulations experienced by other organisations—whether they be political or economic—and are sensitive to the environments they operate in, their own internal dynamics, and *changes* within both.

Perhaps one of the reasons for why spoiling strategies are treated as fixed is the lack of longitudinal work on relevant groups. In fact, there is scant detailed literature on actual empirical examples of spoiler groups in detail. Reiter, (2015) in their attempt to quantify the phenomena and qualify the impact that these groups pose, notes that spoiler groups can be found across the globe, from Burundi to Sudan, and range from groups which have collapsed quickly to those which have remained active long after their original origin. Likewise, most of these groups fail in their objectives, something which in-turn can lead to organisational collapse.

~

Enter the AARM. The continued existence of this cohort so-long after the signing of the GFA—despite the failure to achieve core movement wide objectives—can provide much needed insight into how spoiler organisations persist *beyond* the holding (and strengthening) of the peace processes to which they are opposed. Moreover, in providing much needed nuance on how spoiling groups and strategies can change, it also illuminates non-violent methods of spoiling and anti-normalisation, something which while noted in the spoiling literature (see Nilsson & Söderberg Kovacs: 2011, p. 623), is in practice less scrutinised. As will be explored throughout this thesis, community activism *is* explicitly understood as a spoiling tool in which activities are undertaken on topics particularly salient to specific communities as a method of demonstrating the absence of the state to provide needed goods and services—highlighting the failure of the GFA and the resultant post-conflict status quo to benefit working-class CNR communities.

Non-Violent Activism

This use of non-violent, community-oriented activism by violence-utilising groups also contributes towards an existing literature concerned with understanding why violence-utilising organisations devote much needed resources to the provision of goods and services. All political groups within the AMF (and indeed the AARM more widely) are engaged in non-violent, community-directed activism, ranging from patrols around anti-social behaviour to—at its most sophisticated level—advice and signposting around access to social services.

~

That non-state insurgent groups devote time and attention to civilian targeted populations in which they are embedded is a well understood topic. Mao's quote that

'the guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea' is evident in both historical and contemporary organisations (Tse-Tung, 2014). This is true also for the Provisional Movement during "the Troubles"—a point which will be explored throughout the following substantive Chapters.

The dominant scholarship concerned with explaining why groups look to divert much needed resources to civilian populations is the Rebel/Insurgent *Governance* literature, with governance understood as the 'set of actions' that non-state actors adopt to 'regulate the social, political and economic life' of those within a given territorial area in which they are the dominant actor (Arjona et al., 2017: p. 3):

[Insurgent governors] vary greatly. They may focus primarily on regulating local residents, providing them services or encouraging their participation in decision-making. They sometimes rule through ad hoc decision-making, other times by formal rules. They may organize a wide range of services, or only a few.

Kasfir, 2017: p. 23

Much of this research (and its assumptions) has been created in contexts and using cases in which the State is effectively absent, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, to the National Liberation Army in Uganda, and the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka. (Arjona et al., 2015; Kasfir, 2005; Lecocq, 2020; Mampilly, 2012). Moreover, this literature primarily understands the adoption of non-violence as both a rational strategy to win civilian legitimacy within the areas in which they are embedded (i.e., service provision as a method of resource aggregation) and regards territorial monopoly as a core component; (Kasfir, 2017).

The concept of governance by violence-utilising groups is not only limited to political actors. There now exists a sizable literature on services provided by profit-driven and maximising criminal actors. This work, spearheaded by Diego Gambetta's study of the

Sicilian Mafia, has been applied to case studies ranging from the Russian Mafia, British organised crime groups (OCGs) and street gangs, Somali pirates, and Mexican drug cartels (Campana & Varese, 2018; Densley, 2016; Flanigan, 2014; Gambetta, 1993; Shortland & Varese, 2016). Like its political counterparts, this literature has also emphasised service provision (either to other actors or civilian populations in areas of control) as a rational choice designed to achieve organisational objectives, including, in the case of the latter "constituency" legitimisation efforts among populations in which they are embedded.

There are also some other points of overlap: namely the provision of extra-legal policing as a core component of governance. And, though work such as from Campana & Varese, (2018) and Densley (2011) have focused on criminal governance in areas of state control—something Lessing (2021: p. 855) understands as areas which have a 'duopoly of violence' but in which the 'state is the final enforcer of authority'— for the most-part, such work is centred around locations of effective state absence, with an increasing focus on Latin America (Camila & Amaya, 2024; Flanigan, 2014; Lessing & Willis, 2019; Magaloni Stanford et al., 2020).

~

Moreover, it is arguable that the *concept* of governance is too conceptually broad, while its narrowness on specific locations and definitions of territorial control (with its focus on case-studies primarily in areas of limited state or other actor control) has diverted needed attention away from a more nuanced understanding of non-state community activism.

This project is likewise concerned with the use of services targeted at civilian populations, but importantly, this is not understood through a "governance" prism, and the work does not seek to situate itself within this literature. The types of activism

employed by anti-Agreement Irish republicans fall far below the threshold which governance with its focus on defined territorial monopoly and sophisticated activism entails; and groups within the AARM do not seek to "govern" the populations in which they are embedded, nor do they have the capacity to do so.

Moreover, not only does the case of community activism offer contributions to academic understandings of community-service provision outside of a governance framework within a comparatively wealthy northern European context in which there exists a powerful state and a political actor within these areas (the Provisional Movement), but as Chapter 1 and 2 will discuss, the use of community activism as both a tactic and a strategy has cultural as well as rational underpinnings. Community activism is a core component of a wider Irish republican identity which sees such activities as an extension of community leadership and manifestation of socialist principles, offering needed nuance beyond the largely rational choice dominated approaches of the existing literature which has spent less time attempting to understand *why* the forms of activism employed by particular non-state actors resembles what they do.

Transformation

Lastly, there is one other empirical contribution this project makes, which overlaps considerably with the wider theoretical investigation of strategic change and the previously covered overview of decline within violence-utilising groups—how and why groups formerly involved in state-directed violence adapt or fail to adapt in relation to the achievement of organisational objectives primarily through non-violent methods.

In illustrating this phenomenon, consider the contrasting fortunes and organisational life cycles of the following violence-utilising, insurgent groups with their origins and operations within their respective countries dating from the 1960s onwards: In May 2018, the separatist insurgent grouping Euskadi Ta Aakata (ETA)—which undertook state-directed violence in Spain in the pursuit of an independent Basque Country—announced that it had 'completely dissolved all its structures and declared an end to its political initiative' (Jones, 2018; Mahoney, 2019). ETA, faced with a loss of internal support and continued state pressure, had undergone a slow period of organisational collapse from 2011 onwards, making a *unilateral* decision to end the organisation without either the achievement of organisational objectives or a negotiated settlement (Murua, 2016: p. 93). Just one year earlier, in June 2017 the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) announced their dissolution as an armed group, and a month later announced their reconstitution into a legal political party subsequently titled "Comunes" (Ríos et al., 2023).

Though groups within the AMF have not transformed in any structural way, and already possess political arms, such change towards the pursuit of objectives through non-violent strategies *can* be understood in the context of transformation. In each of the three case studies within the AMF who have embarked upon a move towards community activism, this move (either immediately or sometime after) has occurred as part of a wider move away from state-directed violence. Indeed, the decision to embark upon a community activism oriented strategic pathway should be understood as a method of survival post-conflict transformation, and as Chapter 6 will demonstrate, appears to be tied to a wider process of political transition.

~

Much of the existing literature on this topic, however, treats transformation as a complete jettisoning of violence and a move into electoral politics, and has again been overwhelmingly conducted in contexts outside of European case studies with the exception of the ending of "the Troubles" itself (for an overview of the wider conflict-transformation literature, see Dudouet, 2015; for an overview of conflict transformation in Northern Ireland see Shirlow, 2008; Smithey, 2011). Additionally, a core component of organisational and conflict transformation is regarded to be a deliberate effort by the State to facilitate this transition, something evidenced in both the cases of the Provisional Movement and the FARC (Matanock, 2017). Yet the anti-Agreement Irish republican groups which have shifted towards community activism are largely absent from the formal political arena, and no comparable peace accords have been signed facilitating this transition (something discussed in more detail in the project's Discussion and Conclusion Chapter).

Incorporating changing strategies within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism into the conflict transformation scholarships, therefore, offers an interesting method of testing some of the assumptions around what conflict transformation looks like, and the components necessary for such a process to occur.

Thesis Structure

Having outlined the broad overview of this thesis and its aims, the arguments made, and the contributions it seeks to make, following a discussion of the methods used, this project proceeds in a structure which can be understood to possess three discernible parts relating to the onset, navigation, and outcome of strategic change.

~

The opening two Chapters outline foundational positions and concepts. **Chapter 1** begins by providing a detailed Sociological underpinning of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism and the AARM, detailing the shared intra-movement identity by situating this movement and the groups which comprise it spatially, temporally, and ideologically. The Chapter also demonstrates how such an identity has been used to sustain these groups despite the longevity of the Peace Process and the continued marginalisation of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism.

Having established these foundations, **Chapter 2** then introduces the study of the Anti-Agreement Movement Field (AMF). The Chapter delineates this cohort as a subset of actors within the AARM which possess common structures, objectives, and *repertoires* in which movement-wide identities *and* the perceived advantages in applying a pre-1998 activity repertoire to post-1998 intra-organisational objectives are combined.

~

With the parameters of the study sketched, the next section beginning with **Chapter 3** starts the main focus of the thesis—that of strategic change among a subset of actors within the AMF towards community activism. Taking a case-study approach, the Chapter explores each of the five constituent organisations within the AMF in turn, quantifying and qualifying strategic change. In the process, it highlights the schism within this organisational-field among those groups which have adopted community activism as their primary strategies (and who are no longer engaged in state-directed violence) and those which remain engaged in the utilisation of armed "campaigns". While in qualifying this change, the Chapter outlines a generalised view of how community activism has been implemented.

By doing so, the Chapter provides caveats to a macro-level view of organisational strategy which better encompasses meso- and micro- dynamics such as the strategic

tailoring of strategies to specific operational environments and the role of membership interests, highlighting the interplay between identities, interpretation, needs, and interests in both navigating and framing strategic action to both internal and external audiences.

Having established that such a change *is* occurring among different groups, **Chapter 4** turns to the primary mechanism behind such a change: that of *decline*, and the different perceptions of this by groups themselves. A core finding here is that such perceptions are manifold, though interlinked, with both organisationally specific, and longer-term, movement wide components. Despite the impact of these organisationally distinct components in the onset of the change process for two of the three organisations involved in a strategic shift (schisms within the Sovereignty and Unity Movements), the Chapter argues that longer-term, movement-wide facets of decline are most pertinent in explaining perceptions of movement-wide stagnation. Moreover, the Chapter demonstrates that community activism *is* understood to be an adaptive process of reversing these perceptions, ensuring better strategic fit with their environments, and in the process (or so is the hope) contributing to increased chances of organisational survival.

~

The final section answers outstanding questions raised by this (boundedly) adaptive explanation of strategic change: 1) what lies behind a recognition of the need to alter strategies (and indeed the onset of this within a relatively short time frame), and 2) how should divergence within the AMF be understood?

Chapter 5 furthers the notion of decline as a symptom of longer-term organisational-environmental misalignment and the notion of organisations as being adaptive to processes, events, and the actions of other actors within these environments. It

primarily locates the overarching environmental change contributing towards strategic change as increased conversations (and the events and processes behind this) around the possibility of Irish unification brought about by peaceful, constitutional processes, and a perception that groups within the AARM are outside of major national conversations have contributed perceptions of a lack of organisational and strategic fit to these changed environments. It also argues that 'exogenous shocks' (occurring early on within nescient moves towards community activism) have had a significant effect on these narratives, which have solidified—and perhaps accelerated—strategic change by demonstrating the adaptive benefits of such a shift in contrast to the maladaptive nature of continued state-directed violence.

Lastly **Chapter 6** expands upon why such divergence has occurred within the AARM despite shared environmental stimuli. The answer, the Chapter argues, lies in a contestation over an anti-Agreement Irish republican collective identity, and the position of physical force within this as the primary source of organisational and movement legitimacy. The Chapter also notes the importance that changed strategies can have on organisations themselves, with the influx of newer members (deliberately targeted by the move towards community activism) motivated by, and interested in, this activity potentially changing internal dynamics and indeed even altering these collective identities themselves.

~

Finally, in the project's **conclusion**—alongside a summation of findings, a wider project-wide discussion, and a suggestion of the relevancy of these findings to a wider scholarship beyond anti-Agreement Irish republicanism (and Northern Ireland)—an assessment is made regarding the challenges to, and the viability of, wider organisational transition. How strategic *success* can be conceptualised.

Methods

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Introduction: (An Evolving) Research Design

This research can only be described as "iterative". My initial project—accepted before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic—was a puzzle of why apparent variation in organisational activities could be observed within the AARM north and south of the Irish border. The pandemic itself resulted in changes to *how* such research could be practically completed, with a concerted effort to move it online. But, once I was finally able to conduct fieldwork and in-person interviews with those with direct and indirect knowledge of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, such variation was recognised to be part of a far more significant change within this cohort.

~

This Chapter situates the research process and methods (and how they evolved) applied during the course of this thesis in five parts: 1) the sociological approach taken (qualitative research utilising a case-study design), 2) issues and challenges faced throughout (problems caused by, and emerging from, the pandemic alongside the practicalities of researching clandestine, violence-utilising organisations, and researcher positionality within this), 3) how the research was conducted in practice (sampling and navigating fieldwork), 4) data security and ethics, and 5) how the analysis was conducted (qualitative content analysis).

The Approach: Qualitative Research

Broadly, this work can be described as a qualitative research project. It focuses on one particular movement and topic within this (change within anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations), with data drawn overwhelmingly from online and in-person interviews during situated fieldwork in Ireland, with 84 participants drawn from inside the AARM itself (21 participants from six political groups and prominent unaffiliated

republicans), and those with good working knowledge of the movement, groups within this, and associated topics—mainly within areas of elevated levels of anti-Agreement Irish republican presence and activity (62 participants).

~

This section provides an overview of the main components of this research project: that of situated research in an effort to understand internal processes and dynamics of what are understood to be clandestine/semi-clandestine organisations, and a comparative case-study approach of the organisations within this cohort.

Situated Research on Clandestine Organisations

This project's methodological underpinnings rest on the premise that work which explicitly looks to understand processes and dynamics of organisations in general can only really be understood through qualitative research: asking questions to those within, and close to, these groups. It is a necessity which increases significantly with clandestine groups and/or hard-to-reach, sensitive topics with at-risk individuals.

The groups of interest within this research, and the topics under investigation, can be understood to fall under both clandestine organisations and sensitive topics. Anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations and the activities that they are engaged in straddle the line between public-legal-accessible; and proscribed-illegal-clandestine. They are fiercely protective over memberships who are under the watchful eye of the police and the security services and are defensive in light of what they understand to be a fundamental misunderstanding of their aims and their positions.

Additionally, though both political and paramilitary groups within this cohort *do* communicate with public audiences (including public statements, the use of organisationally produced newspapers and newsletters, and active social media

profiles), and while these can help to illuminate perspectives (see for example: Bowman-Grieve, 2010; Bowman-Grieve & Conway, 2012; Hearty, 2016; Taylor, 2004), they can only ever provide a snapshot of carefully crafted, organisationally approved and sanctioned messaging. Though they may give an idea of why groups have taken particular decisions, the underlying components of change (including how organisations have navigated these) are often left unsaid.

~

In the early stages of the PhD, as the thick of the COVID-19 pandemic closed avenues for in-person research (detailed later in the Chapter), there *were* attempts to understand organisational processes through analysis of social media profiles, statements, and a limited set of online interviews conducted in the summer of 2020. But, for all the reasons outlined above, such an endeavour was quickly abandoned as soon as a return to travel became possible again. Resultantly, this work can be best described as "field research": 'research based on personal interaction with research subjects in their own setting.' (Wood, 2007: p. 123). Almost all the data collected and used by this project have been aggregated from *in situ* interviews, predominantly in Northern Ireland, specifically in Belfast and Derry (and within these cities, a particular focus in areas of elevated AARM paramilitary presence, discussed later in this Chapter and in Chapter 1), but also in areas outside these throughout Ireland.

In the process, it joins a vibrant sub-discipline within Oxford Sociology, including Hamill's focus on the phenomenon of paramilitary style assaults (PSAs) in Belfast, Densley's work on street gangs, Varase's scholarship on mafia's and organised crime groups, Lusthaus's study of cybercrime; and more recently work by Shenk, Hauser, Drott, and Rosenblatt; which have all been defined by their in-person situated research and interviews with those within, affected by, and associated with clandestine groups,

be they political or criminal (Densley, 2011, 2016; Drott, 2021; Hamill, 2010; Hauser, 2022; Lusthaus, 2018; Rosenblatt, 2021; Shenk, 2022; Varese, 1994, 2017). It also draws from and joins a reach seam of qualitative research based on republican paramilitary groups in Northern Ireland, both anti-Agreement Irish republicanism (see in particular McGlinchey, 2019; Whiting, 2015) and countless more around the Provisional Movement.

~

Anti-Agreement Irish republicanism offers perhaps the best cases for studying decision-making processes within clandestine political groups. Organisations here possess both legal political wings and illegal paramilitary wings, with political wings allowing researchers, mediators, and journalists to access groups and ask questions that would be prohibitive in many other contexts. Though political wings refute claims of affiliation with paramilitary groups, as Chapter 2 will evidence, in practice, they can be understood as being heavily linked.

The Case Study Approach

This project used a case study approach, with case studies characterised as qualitative research possessing the following criteria (see Morgan, 2012: p. 668):

1. An investigation of 'a bounded whole object of analysis.'
2. The maintenance of 'a considerable degree of open-endedness' which may remain 'fluid' during the research process: i.e., 'the topic or problematic of the research question is chosen in broad terms, but the extent of the work undertaken, what is studied, and the divide into content and environment or context emerge only during the process of research.'

3. The research of 'a real-life whole which creates a considerable depth of engagement with the subject and dense evidential materials across a range of aspects of the topic.'
4. 'The outcome is a complex, often narrated, account that typically contains some of the raw evidence as well as its analysis and that ties together the many different bits of evidence in the study.'

While the definition of what comprises a 'case' within the social sciences is broadly flexible, and the term may refer to a particular organisational unit (e.g., country, region, corporation, or social movement), phenomenon or event (e.g., revolution, social policy, state formation, armed conflict; Hamel et al., 2011; Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019), the case study research, in the view of this project, forms a type of 'epistemological genre' of sorts (Morgan, 2012: p. 669).

~

Case studies possess several key benefits both when conducting research, including exploration of (comparatively) small-*n* phenomena, and exploration of more generable theory through interesting cases (Eisenhardt, 1991).

Common to most forms of case study research is an in-depth investigation into a concrete and bounded case (Hamel et al., 2011; Morgan, 2012). Research treats these cases as 'bounded wholes', with the researcher seeking to fully understand the case through thorough engagement and 'dense evidential materials' collected across the range of the topic under investigation (Morgan, 2012: p. 668). As opposed to quantitative research in which variables are disaggregated and conditions are treated somewhat individually, the case study approach treats the case as a whole, and the thorough analysis of the case in its entirety (and the resulting "thick description" which

is produced) helping to highlight the contextual uniqueness of the case under investigation (Geertz, 2020; Gerring, 2004; Morgan, 2012; Ylikoski & Zahle, 2019).

To reach a greater understanding of the case, ‘a case study should not be limited to the case in isolation but should examine the likely interaction between the case and its context’ (Yin, 2013: p. 321). This allows for a greater understanding of this contextual richness, but does not automatically disqualify generalisability of findings, or the applicability of causal mechanisms to other contexts in which the same, or similar phenomena may be observed. Indeed, Gerring, (2004: p. 342) notes that case-studies are useful *precisely* due to the fact that they are comprise an 'intensive study of a single unit for the purposes of understanding a larger class of (similar) units.' They can help to build theory on a particular phenomenon (Eisenhardt, 1989), identify necessary and sufficient causal mechanisms which may hold among multiple cases (Goertz, 2006; Seawright, 2002), or they may challenge or bolster existing theory by introducing supplementary cases. In agreement with Gerring (2004: p. 347–8), this project similarly argues that case studies can assist with theoretical or process-level generalisations, but that this generalisation is strongest when applied to similar contexts. In building up an understanding of strategic change within the AMF, it limits its claims to the specific context of violence-utilising contentious political actors, particularly those within post-conflict environments.

Moreover, this close examination of work can help to reduce the likelihood of measurement error, with a detailed understanding of the case helping to produce detailed operational definitions and indicators (Mahoney, 2007: p. 128). Operational indicators can be assessed and ‘refined’ through an iterative approach to the case study, with theory and measures constantly checked against the case selected, and thus can help strengthen the validity of findings (Mahoney, 2007: p. 128).

Such a focus on holism and context should be regarded as a benefit of using a case study approach, as, if done right, context can help explain missing variables, and produce valid forms of inference, particularly useful for exploring outlying cases on a particular phenomenon—for which an understanding of the heterogeneity of specific cases is vital to acknowledge (arguments made by Sambanis, 2004 in his argument for the need to incorporate case studies within the largely quantitatively driven scholarship on civil conflict).

~

Originally, the "case" itself was conceptualised as being anti-Agreement Irish republicanism as a whole. But as my work progressed and I realised that I was concerned with strategic variation among groups within the same organisational-field and broader movement, this developed into a comparative case study in its own right. 'Virtually all empirical social science involves comparison of some sort' (Ragin, 2014:p. 1), and case research is no different. Gerring (2004) notes that case studies within the social sciences are by nature comparative in some form or another, and that by necessity, covariation is inbuilt into the approach—a tenant utilised by this paper. But as preliminary data collected "in-field" pointed to strategic variation within a population subset of actors within the AARM, this need for formal comparison between the organisations within this took on even greater importance.

Cross-case approach design is often noted to take an approach similar to Mill's conception of "method of agreement/disagreement", with cases selected on either common profiles or dissimilar ones (Anckar, 2008). In the case of the AMF, inbuilt commonalities (structures, objectives, repertoires, identities and ideology, and locations) with variation at the level of outcome (groups which have moved towards community activism at the same time and those which have not), provides a good blend

of the two which may help elucidate causal mechanisms of change (Beach & Pedersen, 2018). Moreover, such explicit comparison can help provides a strengthening of the validity of findings, mitigating against claims that the findings of this project are just "a good story" (Eisenhardt, 1991; see also the Data Triangulation section of this Chapter).

Challenges: Pandemics, Positionality, Trust, and Safety

Research on clandestine organisations provides inherent challenges. But what was already a difficult research process was further complicated by an unforeseen, exogenous event: that of the COVID-19 pandemic which commenced in the first year of my PhD and persisted *throughout* my data collection period.

~

This section overviews challenges of this form of research (including my outsider status, gaining trust, and participant and researcher safety), the pandemic, hard-to-reach participant cohorts, and the processes by which I attempted to circumnavigate them.

The Pandemic

On 26th March 2020, six-months into my PhD, England and Wales went into the first and most prolonged of what would be a series of lockdowns aimed at halting the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) virus. The impact of these lockdowns proved the first significant challenge to this project.

Though efforts were made to move this project online—including a number of exploratory interviews with those outside of groups (including one mediator and all academics interviewed)—it was deemed that not only would members of these

organisations refuse to talk online due to genuine safety concerns and the potential risk of prosecution, but also that those around these groups would likely be reluctant to talk and give information freely.

This realisation did not help the realities of what would become rolling lockdowns, and differing COVID rules and travel constraints imposed across the devolved areas of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. When these did abate to the level where fieldwork could be conceptualised, there remained issues with the University's own particular rules on field-based research, navigating data protection legislation (including *what* is classed as in the public domain regarding social media), and added components of insurance.

Eventually, a lull in the lockdowns in the summer of 2021 allowed for fieldwork. But the ongoing pandemic proved a continuous stress while collecting data: with the extra-layer of ensuring interviewees would feel comfortable, finding interview locations which were socially distanced, navigating vaccinations, and the constant worry about either getting ill myself or the daunting prospect of another lockdown occurring when in the field.⁵

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Perhaps the greatest issue to emerge from the pandemic in relation to this research was the time lost during this process. It was August 2021 by the time that travel restrictions in both Northern Ireland and England had relaxed enough to enable fieldwork to occur—over a year since the fieldwork had been originally planned. As a result, the allotted time and money to conduct fieldwork resulted in a period of just seven

⁵ The challenge with vaccinations was something which was complicated by the devolved nature of the NHS which prevented recognition of vaccines undertaken in one country and not the other and took up even greater time (and a significant stressor), in navigating healthcare bureaucracy in the field. This took on even greater emphasis following legislation in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland around vaccine passports for indoor venues during the autumn and winter of 2021 while I was in Northern Ireland.

months—six in Northern Ireland (three months each in both Derry and Belfast) and one month in Dublin.

Thus, when I entered the field, there was limited time to reach data or theoretical saturation, and my planned year of fieldwork (six months in Derry and six months in what was originally conceptualised to be Dublin). Such extra-time may have allowed for further data to be collected from within groups inhabiting the AARM over a longer period, but by the time I had finalised my period of data-collection, I believed that I had nonetheless reached empirical saturation.

Trust

This research can be broadly classified in the following two ways:

1. That the topics involved are "sensitive": that is, they 'potentially pose [*sic*] for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched, the collection, holding and/or dissemination of research data' (Lee & Renzetti, 1990: p. 512).
2. That the principal research subjects are clandestine/semi-clandestine organisations: what I define as being deliberately organised around the maintenance of secrecy or obfuscation of internal structures, activities, and memberships.

These two components are very much intertwined. The organisations within the AMF are understood to be political wings of illegal, violence-utilising organisations, which have conducted murders, shootings, assaults, and bombings, and which are all under active investigation from the police (and in some cases, the intelligence services).

This produces its own set of challenges. The first of these are the related issues of gaining *access* and *trust*. Despite the possession of political wings allowing for dialogue, groups within the AARM are nonetheless, on the whole, extremely secretive, and suspicious of outsiders—including researchers.

This is not only for the aforementioned reasons of the genuine possibility of arrest, incarceration, and organisational disruption, but due to the failures of previous academic research. There remains the legacy of the Boston Oral History project on Irish Republicanism during "the Troubles", which resulted in data being subpoenaed by the PSNI and the arrests of senior figures within the Provisional Movement for terrorism offences, including the arrest of Gerry Adams in 2014 for the disappearance and murder of Jean McConville by the PIRA—Adams was released four days after his initial arrest without charge (Palys & Lowman, 2012; White, 2017). More recently, research on anti-Agreement Irish republicanism has been affected by a jettisoned Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)/Liverpool University project which—unbeknownst to the primary researcher, Dr Marissa McGlinchey and participants—the person in charge of the application to the ESRC itself, Professor John Tonge, stated in the research application that data findings would be shared with the PSNI, MI5, and the British Army (Hayes, 2018: p. 180–181), a project referenced directly during my own interviews.

Most recently, in a remarkable series of allegations, the US academic and longstanding expert on the PIRA, John Bowyer Bell, was implicated as working for the US intelligence services, including in the production of a documentary which directly implicated and evidenced a number of senior members of the Provisional Movement including Martin McGuinness (onetime head of the PIRA in Derry, alleged member of the PIRA Army Council, one of the three members of the Provisionals including Gerry

Adams behind the push towards politicisation and the acceptance of the GFA, and eventual Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland), which was apparently seen by British intelligence (MacIntyre & Thornton, 2024; McBride, 2024a). Such revelations given the close links between Bell and his extraordinary access within the Provisional Movement (alongside the documentary, Bell claimed to have conducted interviews with over 1000 members of the PIRA over an approximately 20 year period), will no doubt further muddy the waters between academia and the intelligence services on clandestine groups in Northern Ireland and result in a worsened overall environment for academics.

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Indeed, full trust was never something I achieved with any participant during the research. Though interviewees could be friendly, there were constant "jokes" made about me either being a member of, or passing information to, the intelligence services. There was also a marked difference in how both myself and my research was treated by those within political organisations associated with continued state-directed violence and those who had jettisoned this. In my first interview with Saoradh, it was suggested that the group would arrange follow-ups with other members of the organisation and to observe activism, this never materialised. I was passed the contact information for another branch of the group in a different location, but seemingly without reason contact largely stopped. For Republican Sinn Féin (RSF), while I was able to speak to members or those with close access to the group, this was never in an official capacity, and the organisation itself never responded to multiple written requests. As such, data drawn from direct access with this group is missing from the project.

~

This raises another issue with access to groups themselves beyond the gatekeeper level, and issues of self or organisational selection, phenomena well delineated in studies within qualitative research more broadly, but something particularly challenging when studying hard-to-reach groups for whom secrecy and access through sanctioned channels is essential, and which is often reliant on "chain referral" (see Densley's, 2011: p. 48 comments on how access was gained within criminal groups, or White's, 2007: p. 289–290 access to the PIRA). While one of the benefits of non-proscribed political organisations is the ability to clearly identify points of contact, there is also the challenge of progressing past this. My access to groups and their members was entirely dependent on the decisions of others, and in a number of cases it was clear that those interviewed were at senior levels of the organisation, or who were particularly engaged and competent in interviews. Sometimes some invisible key appeared to unlock further access, while at other times even those once seemingly very interested in talking essentially disappeared. It is impossible to know why this happened and produced in myself significant worry around personal failings in interviews.

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The only way of dealing with issues of suspicion is to be as open and transparent as possible with research subjects, and hope that people will accept this and yourself. I have been fortunate over the course of this project that many people within the groups I was interested in researching took the time and the risk to talk to me.

Safety

The above challenges of interviews with clandestine, politically violent groups also ties more broadly to issues around researcher safety. Though I never felt directly threatened or under threat—something which would have immediately resulted in abandoning the

research and leaving the field—I also never felt completely comfortable. One of the challenges with this work was that while I deliberately limited my engagement with groups within the AARM to legal political organisations, the link between the two factions within the AMF is often blurred (see Chapter 2). Though no one in this project ever discussed active involvement in a paramilitary organisation (something which would have been omitted from the data regardless), there were occasions in which this overlap could be felt more than others.

This also directly impacted on concerns surrounding the police and/or the intelligence services themselves, something not spoken about nearly as much as it should be regarding research around clandestine actors. As discussed in the above section on gaining trust with suspicious actors, this would have posed a significant challenge to this process, alongside issues of ethics. Many of the groups that I spoke to are under clear and seemingly constant surveillance by the security services, something which I became manifestly aware of when, on one occasion when traveling with members of an un-named anti-Agreement Irish republican organisation, the vehicle in which we were travelling was pulled over and those within the car questioned. In another instance, during instances of protests and events I attended, I was questioned (though not under caution) by the police as to my identity and my reasons for being at the event.

State Actors

As discussed through this section, there were also issues around reaching out to those within the state positions in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. From the start of the thesis, there was a deliberate decision taken not to reach out to British government or government departments, and particularly the Northern Ireland Office which contains within this the intelligence agencies. Such a decision was taken due to

my own personal opinions as much as a genuine concern for personal, participant, and project safety.

Yet, I also understood that anti-Agreement Irish republicanism does not operate in a vacuum, and that there is a tight interlinking between the government and their departments and organisations themselves. As will be explored later in this project, the persistence of extra-legal policing by paramilitary groups is something which continues to be driven by perceptions of a lack of effective community policing and justice, and so I was interested to learn more around these topics and others including around transition and around the issues, needs and the response taken by particular departments and statutory bodies within areas which have elevated levels of paramilitary activity in both CNR and PUL communities.

This, however, never really materialised. Interviews with those on this topic were often unhelpful and indeed uncomfortable, with the distinct feeling that participants themselves were pushing for more information from me as opposed to genuine assistance, and with answers which fit a particular narrative or which they claimed they would be unable to answer. Likewise, all attempts at contacting those working on comparable topics within the Republic of Ireland also failed to materialise. There were those at a local level who did contribute to this project around topics pertaining to community policing and youth work, but these were few and far between, and often in an unofficial capacity.

Positionality

Finally, though not explicitly a challenge, there are issues pertaining to researcher positionality. I never tried to "blend in" within the areas in which I was primarily embedded, and as a result, stuck-out. In one incident which drove home just how much

of an outsider I resembled, while in the Galliagh estate in Derry, a car pulled up and the person inside asked if I was Thomas Evans, as they were a participant but had needed to change the location of an interview for that day. Very surprised I replied that I was, but how could they have possibly known? Their cheerful response that I simply looked like I did not belong in the area and that I was not a familiar face brought home the realisation just how much of an outsider I actually resembled, the small-world nature of my field sites, and that during my many "familiarisation" walks in my research areas (discussed below), I had likely been identified as a clear outsider by everyone.

~

My status as an outsider and my position as a student worked both in favour of the research and against it. At one level, my outsider status appeared to reduce my perceived "threat", and I found interviewees going into detail that they perhaps would omit for other researchers if they assumed or could not decide my position within Northern Ireland. As an outsider I did not contain the baggage of ethno-national labels, and plenty of participants seemed genuinely keen on "educating" me on a raft of topics pertaining to Northern Ireland and republicanism, alongside an interest in sharing these with a wider audience through the dissemination of my research.

But I did contain plenty of baggage being coming from an "establishment" British University as an Englishman. Rather than opening doors, within republican locations and anti-Agreement Irish republican groups it proved a significant source of suspicion and even hostility. At its most benign, I was simply a curiosity. I lost track of times in which I was asked with genuine perplexity why I personally was interested in Irish Republicanism. At the most difficult, it contributed to significant levels of distrust, as outlined above.

"Doing" the Research

With the broad research design and challenges outlined, this section now turns to *how* research was conducted.

Reaching Out and Gaining Access

How to gain access to groups which are both secretive and suspicious to outsiders? And how to understand internal dynamics within clandestine or semi-clandestine groups? As discussed, one of the quirks of paramilitarism in Northern Ireland is that organisations possess political wings which allow those seeking to engage groups to do so without the potential for prosecution. These political wings have websites, email addresses, and even social media profiles.

Prior to the beginning of fieldwork, I attempted to gradually build up a profile and to publicise—as much as possible, considering my position outside of Northern Ireland—that I was interested in talking to those within and around organisations within the AARM. This involved the identification of both relevant community groups, organisations themselves, and academics working on related topics, and sending various forms of electronic communication (both emails and messages to social media profiles) that I was planning on conducting in-person interviews in the near-term future, and if they or others they knew might be interested in participating.

This involved email templates (using the template shown in **Figure 2**, below), but also the creation of project-specific social media profiles and a mobile telephone number not tied to my existing profiles to minimise potential risk—approved by the University.

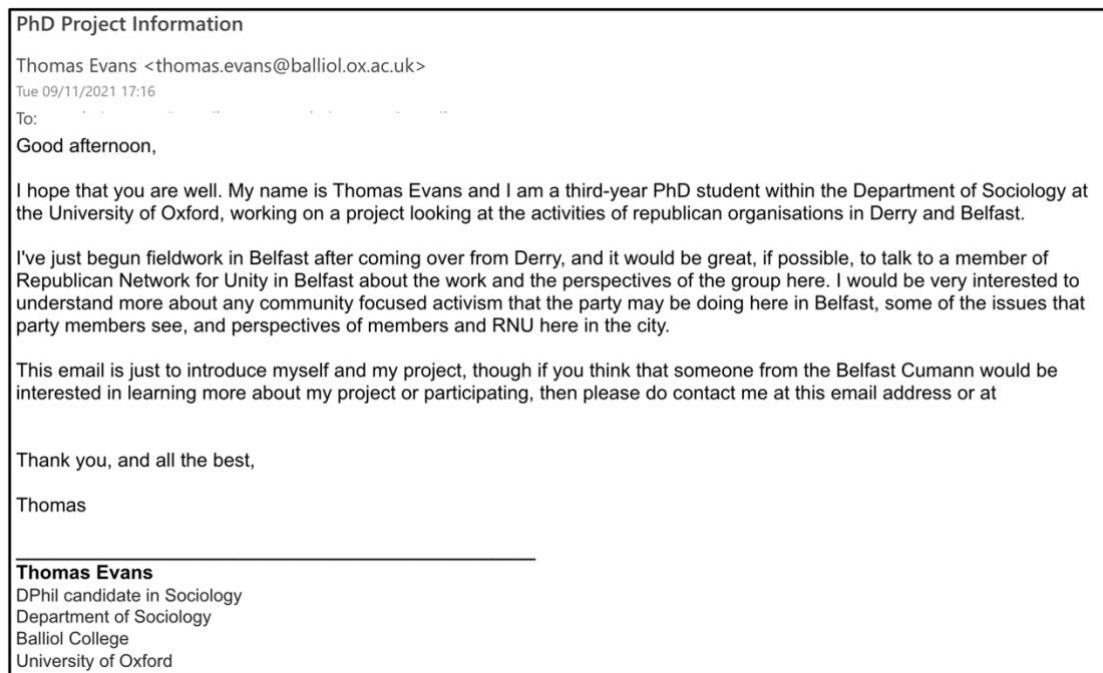


Figure 2 - Email sent to RNU.

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When in Northern Ireland, messages were again sent to groups about my project, explaining that I was now available for in-person interviews and reiterating my desire to talk. Access in this early stage proved the hardest. Organisations often never replied or went quiet after initial conversations which seemed at the time successful and promising. And though many of the groups (both community groups and groups within the AARM) had a physical presence including office space, due to my outsider position and the need to establish trust, I ruled out just turning up unannounced, something which would have only sounded alarm-bells and raised suspicion of myself and my intentions.

Instead, gaining access to groups and individuals within this took time, the generosity of others, and involved learning how far to push. For the most part, due to the small world of both groups within the AARM and those working within the community landscape with either direct or indirect knowledge, what emerged was a form of snowballing access (see the Data Triangulation and Sampling section below). This was

incremental. One interview with one person would lead to a name being mentioned somewhere else. Sometimes these other participants and the context in which I interviewed them were expected, but at other times they were very surprising. As one participant noted when discussing the landscape of working-class CNR areas in Northern Ireland, "people wear different hats" (32CSM-2), and it was often unclear before meeting that individual which hat they would be wearing in the interview before we sat down.

Most interviews were one-off events with a single participant, though sometimes follow-ups occurred, were conducted in ad hoc situations—such as while at protest events—or were group interviews in which there were multiple participants present.

Situated Fieldwork

Before embarking upon fieldwork one of the challenges was deciding where to situate myself and what would constitute my primary fieldwork sites, given practical constraints such as the lack of access to a vehicle and limited funds.

A few locations were discussed as being potentially suitable candidates: what are classed as B4 or Community-in-Transition areas: locations identified by the Northern Irish government as being areas of elevated paramilitary presence (see Chapter 1). Due to knowledge of the geospatial clustering of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, and discussions from online interviews with those with knowledge of groups and Irish Republicanism more broadly, Derry emerged as the strongest candidate for reasons discussed in Chapter 1.

My original second field site location was Dublin in the Republic of Ireland. As discussed above, in the earlier iterations of the thesis, an understanding of geographical rather than organisational variation was the primary motivator early into the project. But, after conducting interviews in Derry, it quickly became apparent that a more

practical location would be Belfast for both the number of groups active, the ability to transfer contacts, travel opportunities to other parts of Northern Ireland and even the Republic of Ireland via public transport, and a reduction of "start-up" costs associated with beginning afresh three-months into establishing roots in Northern Ireland. As the one month of work in Dublin attested, though the risks of altering fieldwork locations during data collection *during* the fieldwork process constituted a significant gamble, in hindsight it proved to be the correct decision.

~

Though this project was originally conceptualised as an ethnography, it does not meet core components of this. It is decidedly not characterisable by its long-term embeddedness within a specific community, "thick" description, and participant observation of (or participation within) a given grouping in an effort to determine some aspect of how this cohort understands their world; which relies as heavily on fieldnotes as it does interviews themselves (see Chapter 1 in Harrison, 2018).

Aside from the relatively short-term nature of the fieldwork conducted here, the data of this project are overwhelmingly drawn from interviews, particularly with community organisations, with interviews taking, on average, an hour to complete. Likewise, while initially conceptualised as being heavily embedded in particular field sites, as the research progressed it became clear that to gain a better understanding of groups themselves and the perspectives, organisational structures, and processes within these, it would be necessary to travel outside of these locations. Groups are scattered across Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland resulting in trips (often taken on long coach journeys) to areas such as Strabane, Newry, Cork, and the counties of Armagh and Tyrone. It quickly became apparent that in order to understand and assess what was being framed as organisational-wide strategic change processes, it would be

imperative to talk to as many members as possible within groups *across* operational environments. The main locations in which interviews occurred are outlined in **Figure 3** below.



Figure 3 - Interview Locations

Note: Map data copyrighted OpenStreetMap contributors and available from <https://www.openstreetmap.org>.

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The field work did, however, still contain some ethnographic adjacent elements, akin to what Fujii (2015) refers to as "accidental ethnography". I did attempt to build up as detailed a picture as possible of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism and the areas in

which they are situated in both Derry and Belfast. Considerable effort was made to identify community groups and community workers and organisations within the AARM themselves, and I spent considerable time simply walking around areas within these cities which were known AARM locations to familiarise myself. This included attending AARM-linked bonfires in Derry (see **Figure 4**), protest events and commemorations with organisations (**Figure 5**), including RSF's Hunger Striker commemoration in Bundoran and Saoradh's in Ballegahy.



Figure 4 - Bonfire in Bogside, Derry. On the left, construction of the bonfire on 15/08/2021. On the right, lighting event later that evening. Photos are my own.



Figure 5 - Protest in Armagh with the 32CSM, October 2021. Grey blocks are to protect the identities of protesters. Photos are my own.

Walks around research areas were particularly important in building up profiles and helping illuminate hidden meanings. Even seemingly small details have considerable information within them. Take the photos in **Figure 6** below. As well as murals noting locations of the dominant (loyalist) paramilitary groups in that area—along with their size, locations on gable-end walls, and the sophistication of these indicating time-spent without interference of the paintings or the painters from either residents, the State, or other groups—the painting of a post-box green tells the "reader" that they are in a predominantly CNR location in which identities of "Britishness" (even as small as post boxes being painted red) are actively contested.



Figure 6 - "Walk About" Pictures. Shows images of a letter box painted green and covered in Irish Republican stickers, and murals from the UVF and UDA. All taken in Belfast.

As also noted by these images, interviews were also undertaken with those within the PUL community in areas in relevant areas of both Derry and Belfast. Anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations are not the only non-state, violence-utilising political actors in Northern Ireland, and in order to build up a holistic picture of the cities I was interested in (and in an effort to provide the potential for comparison), interviews were undertaken from those both from within the community sector with either direct or indirect knowledge of these organisations, and affiliated political groups. Though it was ultimately decided to omit this work from the project based on the need to closely focus on changes *within* anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, some of these findings are presented in the Discussion and Conclusion around possible future comparisons.

~

There were also periods around Christmas 2021 in which interviews understandably decreased in frequency. To keep myself busy, I used the archives of Linen Hall library which possess a considerable catalogue of publicly available paraphernalia relating to politically violent groups in Northern Ireland, including materials produced by anti-Agreement Irish republicans such as statements, newsletters, and newspapers (see

Figure 7). During the days before and just after Christmas and the New Year, I decided to go through this documentation. Very little of this is used in this thesis, but it did assist with general understandings and in building up a historical and cultural/ideological profile of the RSF, 32CSM, and the IRSP in particular.



Figure 7 - Linen Hall Library, Belfast, and archival work of Anti-Agreement Irish Republican physical media. Image Shows back copies of *The Sovereign Nation*: The 32CSM's newspaper.

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Following six months of continuous fieldwork in Northern Ireland, I returned to Oxford in late January 2022 before leaving for Dublin in early May for one additional month of fieldwork. This was significantly less intensive than data collection in Northern Ireland. Anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is significantly smaller and also less geographically concentrated in Dublin than it is in cities in Northern Ireland (see Chapter 1), with a lack of engagement both from AARM organisations in the area, as

well as a lack of data gathered from community workers. I also became very ill for a one-week period, further cutting down on allotted time.

Lastly, following the conclusion of periods of in-person interviews, the occasional interview with participants affiliated with statutory organisations were undertaken online. It should be stressed that this was not a large cohort, and one which was deliberately limited as to not seek participants which had the risk of intersecting with the security services. Likewise, interviews occurred outside of fieldwork periods due to the risk posed to both me and the project given any suspicion of passing on information to elements of the State.

Data Gathering, Triangulation, and Sampling

A major challenge with this work was understanding how to ensure the reliability and validity of findings—a conundrum both of both qualitative research work more broadly and a particular issue for work from small clandestine groups with strong incentives to overstate the forms of positive, community-oriented work they are involved in (White, 2007).

As a result, considerable effort was undertaken to triangulate data both within and outside of the primary organisations under investigation, with purposive sampling the primary tool of this task. A form of geographical sampling had already been conducted prior to fieldwork occurring, and within these areas I attempted to identify as many organisations as possible within the AARM, locations in which they were operational, and organisations with likely knowledge of organisational activities in these areas including community workers, youth workers (particularly those working around recruitment prevention), and mediators. These groups provided the base for the main participant categories, outlined in **Table 1** below.

Table 1 - Full list of participant cohorts and those interviewed within this.

Cohort	Description	Contains
The AARM	Political wings and non-aligned individuals associated with republican opposition to the GFA.	The IRSP 32CSM RNU Saoradh The 1916 Societies Lasair Dhearg Independent republicans
Community Workers	Those working within locations of elevated anti-Agreement Irish republican presence, including those who work directly around topics pertaining to these groups.	Residents' associations Youth workers Community bodies
Mediators	Those working directly with paramilitary and political groups within the AARM around transition and mediation.	Omitted for participant confidentiality.
Statutory Organisations	Governmental bodies which overlaps in some way with anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations and wider paramilitary phenomena.	The Education Authority The Justice Department Independent monitoring bodies.
Mainstream Political Parties	Current and former councillors, MLAs working in core research locations.	Sinn Féin The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)
Academics	Academics working directly on anti-Agreement Irish republicanism or associated paramilitary issues such as PSAs and recruitment.	Omitted for participant confidentiality.
PUL Participants*	Those within the PUL community interviewed in relation to loyalist paramilitarism. Contains political parties, community organisations, and mediators.	The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) The Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) Community workers (including youth groups) Mediators

Note: * = Omitted during the main body of this project due to the need to focus specifically on the AARM but included in the Discussion and Conclusion Chapter.

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Each of these categories provided a different level of insight, a check on the findings of others, and a method of strengthening research findings and subsequent arguments.

Yet (as is the reality of fieldwork) a large proportion of eventual participants within these categories were ultimately recruited through snowball sampling, defined as participant recruitment whereby,

... the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants. This process is, by necessity, repetitive: informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on. Hence the evolving 'snowball' effect, captured in a metaphor that touches on the central quality of this sampling procedure: its accumulative (diachronic and dynamic) dimension.

Noy, 2008: p. 330

This was largely unescapable. Prior to fieldwork I had a very limited number of contacts with knowledge on the topic under investigation, and the nature of these groups as tightly guarded meant that I had to refer myself through the permission of another member of that organisation. But it also posed some problems. As previously mentioned, these "chains" were sometimes unexpectedly cut, either by existing participants or potential participants "going cold". However, that the snowballs were started from different points within these cohorts ensured that some degree of mobilisation was constantly occurring; and, as interviews progressed, the small world of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism began to get reduce further.

Ethics and Data

Projects involving human participants contain ethical and information security concerns. Who to approach, how collect data, how to store this data, and how to use it all provide challenges. It is something which takes on added complexity—and

importance—when the topics and groups are themselves extremely sensitive. This section explores the processes of data gathering, storage, and the utilisation of data as it pertains to ethical and safety considerations for those involved in this project.

Data Gathering

A decision was taken at the start of my PhD process—and approved by both the Department of Sociology and the Social Sciences Division under CUREC2—to divide participants into two camps according to assessed *risk* or the potential of *harm* (i.e., the impact that could emerge if data-depersonalisation were to occur), with this assessed as the potential damage for participants in the event of a data leak ranging from reputational harm (including the risk of expulsion or censure from embedded organisations or employment), to the threat of violence, and/or the potential for arrests from the state.

In the first camp were those deemed to be at least risk—predominantly those outside of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism—while those in the second category were deemed to be more sensitive and at a higher risk and was overwhelmingly confined to those within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism.

In both cases, data gathering was based around the principle of "informed consent": the guiding approach to qualitative research and direct data collection, and a necessary precondition to undertaking research projects through the University. This had two parts: Firstly, participants were given information about myself, the nature of my research, my reasons for contacting and seeking information from them, and how data would be collected, stored, and used. In the overwhelming majority of cases, this involved reaching out online and sending over a copy of my participant information sheet. In a small minority of cases, copies of the information sheet were provided in-

person with participants reading through and asking questions before interviews commenced. Before interviews were undertaken, these positions were recapped, and participants were given the chance to ask any questions before proceeding.

For those in the former category of being assessed at a lesser risk, consent was sought (unless specified) primarily through written and signed consent forms. For those in the latter in which it was assessed that they were at a higher sensitivity level, it was decided (along with the University) to gain consent orally, and it was made explicit during the participant information period that I would not seek or record any potentially incriminating information.

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Issues of harm also contributed to *how* data were collected, with a decision being made early into the research to record interview data manually rather than using recording equipment. This proved a double-edged sword. At one level, in some interviews, the lack of a recording device *was* appreciated by participants. But it also proved a challenge. Accurately recording information via pen and paper is difficult, especially in semi-structured interviews. I found myself listening, writing, and thinking of response questions where relevant. As a result, this thesis *looks* different to other qualitative research projects. Though genuine efforts were made to record data and quotations, they are noticeably shorter in length than other projects using interview data. Much of the supporting evidence used throughout this project is not directly quotable. Where this is the case, to increase data transparency for the claims that I am making, these are still tied to an associated interview transcript where the data has been taken from.

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Lastly, interviews were transcribed on the same day and transferred onto a secure, 64-bit encrypted device, with identifying information held on another, similarly secured device, both using separate 15-digit passwords. Paper recordings were destroyed prior to leaving the field.

Data Usage

Finally, there are ethical and security considerations pertaining to the usage of data. Indeed, qualitative research involving embeddedness is often characterised by a tension between ensuring participants could not be linked to data provided *and* providing necessary context. The approach taken throughout this thesis closely ascribes to that of Varese (2020), who argues that data should only be obscured as is necessary to provide adequate safety for participants but should not be used in a blanket manner:

... anonymization has evolved into a default position, routinely used even when unnecessary... Thus, there are benefits but also serious costs to anonymization and an assessment should be made case by case. [The research] should strive to keep anonymity at a minimum because the practice of hiding or distorting identifying information reduces the ability to construct cumulative social science.

Varese, 2022: p. 222

In the case of this project, certain identifying information is vital. For instance, real-world locations *are* important to this work. As previously discussed, and overviewed in further detail in Chapter 1, Irish republicanism—and anti-Agreement Irish republicanism within this—is heavily tied to geographic space and the communities within these, and variation is observable the types of activities conducted tied in different locations (see Chapter 3). A project concerned with explaining why this can be observed (alongside why anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is so geographically concentrated) *necessarily* has to engage with these locations. But similarly, these spaces

are small both geographically and inter-personally. In many cases, identifying participants under the categories they have been designate regarding their roles with precise geographical markers would, in effect, render any attempts of obscurity as impossible.

A solution is provided in which participants are identified by category and where necessary or appropriate the broad locations in which they have been interviewed are given. For example, work may refer specifically to the exact activities undertaken by a group within the AARM by referring to that organisation and the city or town in which participants have been drawn from, such as forms of community activism undertaken by the IRSP in North Belfast, or Saoradh in Derry. Likewise, participant codes are used in ways which identify the exact AARM grouping, but due to the sensitive nature of the topics discussed and the potential for participant tracing, for other interviewee cohorts these are aggregated into overarching codes. This is outlined explicitly in **Table 2**, but as an example, members of the RNU are referred to by the code RNU-*i* (where *i* is the particular number associated with that participant); but those within a particular community organisation would be simply collated under COM-*i*. Additionally, where participants have been interviewed in a group, they are designated by their participant code and a sub-indicator of a, b, c, etc. (e.g., YOUTH-3a).

Analysing Findings

By the time I had concluded with the data collection phase of the thesis, I was left with the following dataset segmented into seven categories, with 83 participants; outlined in **Table 2** below.

Table 2 - Participant final count.

Cohort	Interviewee	Code	<i>n</i>
AARM	The IRSP	IRSP-	6
	32CSM	32CSM-	4
	RNU	RNU-	4
	Saoradh	SAOR-	3
	The 1916 Societies	1916-	1
	Lasair Dhearg	LASAIR-	1
	Independent republicans	IND-	2
Community workers	Youth workers	YOUTH-	13
	Community bodies	COM-	7
	Miscellaneous	MISC-	2
Mediators		MED-	4
Statutory organisations	The Education Authority	YOUTH-	3
	The Justice Department	GOV-	8
	Independent Monitoring Bodies	GOV-	3
Mainstream political parties	Sinn Féin	POL-	3
	The Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP)	POL-	2
Academics	On the AARM	ACAD-	3
	On associated topics	ACAD-	2
PUL participants	The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)	PUL/POL-	1
	The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP)	PUL/POL-	1
	UVF Linked/Affiliated	LOY-	2
	Community workers (including youth groups)	PUL/COM-	5
	Mediators	PUL/MED-	2

Such a varied dataset from different participant cohorts provided a challenge around the best way to undertake analysis in a method which would allow for nuance and reflect the differences within these cohorts and questions asked, and still provide aggregate findings.

To do so, the project employed a manual qualitative coding analysis. Interview transcripts were printed out, and then read through multiple times for an initial data familiarisation process. Notes were then assigned codes, before being collapsed into larger themes. These themes were then transcribed into notebooks for each interview

cohort, with supporting evidence written out, as demonstrated in **Figure 8**, below (Bauer et al., 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Gibson & Brown, 2009; Grbich, 2010).

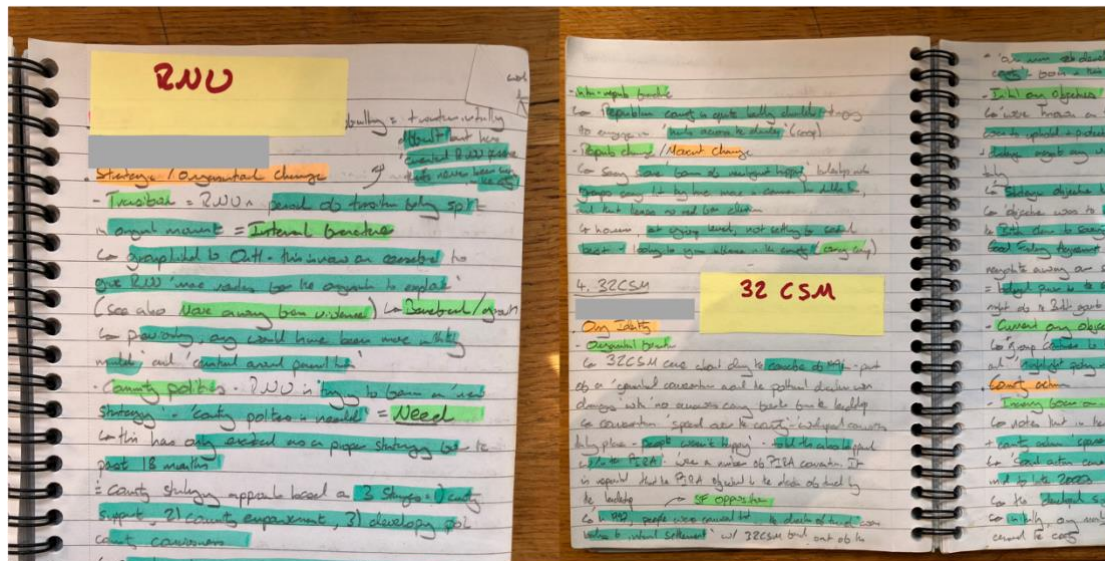


Figure 8 - Physical Coding Examples.

Note: Highlight colour indicates different part of the coding process, including top-codes, sub-codes, and nodes.

This process was neither fully deductive nor inductive. I was aware of dominant narratives and topics as they had emerged from conversations with participants, with commonalities produced in part by similar research questions asked during semi-structured interviews. But when analysing my data, I tried to be as inductive as possible, undergoing multiple rounds of coding before collapsing these into my final coding scheme.

By breaking down my interviews into cohorts, my coding schemes also slightly differ accordingly. For instance, interviews with members of anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations themselves were mainly centred around internal structures, processes, and understandings, while those with community workers and mediators were concerned largely with activities, presence, local issues, and needs.

~

As a final point on the data as it relates to the rest of this thesis, though this project has produced a range of data from different categories, in its focus on internal processes *within* organisations, it draws most heavily from interviews with groups themselves and those engaged in mediation and dialogue; though interview data from other cohorts forms a substantial part of Chapters 1, 2, 5, and the Discussion and Conclusion.

1

Identity within "the Dissidents": The Anti-Agreement Irish Republican Movement

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See ourselves as the vanguard...the vanguard of the proletariat.

IRSP-6

1.1. Introduction

A central premise of this thesis is that there is something distinctive about a cohort of actors concentrated largely in Northern Ireland which have their immediate or lineal origins within paramilitary groups active during "the Troubles", and can be understood—and that they understand themselves—as being part of a wider pantheon of Irish republicanism, with the latter understood to have the following components:

1. An ideological position which seeks,
 - a. the achievement of an independent Irish Republic, and which understands the right to use violence (either absolutely or conditionally), as an acceptable method of achieving this goal, *and*
 - b. the "protection" and "emancipation" of a CNR community "oppressed" by British rule, colonialism, and a capitalistic socio-economic system.
2. A wider lineage of violence-utilising secret societies in Ireland dating from the late 18th (but particularly the early 20th) century which have sought to bring about a united Ireland.⁶

⁶ There are four organisations and their "armed uprisings" which can be seen to form the nucleus of this outside of "the Troubles": 1) **the United Irishmen and their failed 1789 Rebellion**; 2) **the Irish Volunteers** (itself composed of a number of clandestine groups) whose failed **1916 uprising** (waged primarily in Dublin), against British rule in Ireland has, along with the subsequent all-Ireland elections of 1918, become the uncontested central legitimising factor for subsequent movements claiming the mantle of Irish republicanism, with all republican groups claiming lineage from this event and professing fealty to the ideals codified in the Proclamation; 3) **the Irish Republican Army of 1919**, which waged the successful **Irish War of Independence**; and 4) **the Anti-Treaty IRA of 1922–1969** which fought in the **Irish Civil War** regarding opposition to the Anglo-Irish Treaty (for an overview, see Coogan, 2000, particularly Chapter 1 and more broadly Part 1; English, 2012, Chapters 1 and 2; and Frampton, 2011, Chapter 1).

As noted by the name adopted by this project to refer to this grouping—anti-Agreement Irish republicanism—what is argued to separate actors (both individuals and organisations) which comprise this cohort as a phenomenon within the wider Irish republican movement and history is the opposition to the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) and the socio-political status quo which emerged from this and the wider Northern Irish Peace Process.

This is itself not a novel understanding. There is a thriving literature around this grouping of actors, but republican opposition to the GFA is a broad church. If studies of Irish republicanism are frequently prefaced with Brendan Behan's comment that 'the first item on the agenda of any new Irish organisation was "the split"' (Sanders, 2011: p. 1), in reference to Irish republicanism's fractious nature, then the first item on the agenda for any work on those who are more commonly referred to as "dissident", "radical", or even "traditional", Irish republicans is trying to label and delineate this phenomenon.⁷

The broadest commonality is the belief that the Provisional Movement in signing the GFA have betrayed central principles of Irish republicanism: "a negation of everything republicanism had ever known" (IND-2). The Provisionals (under this argument) have not only accepted both the continued partition of Ireland by their active involvement of both the legislatures of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (and in becoming a party of government) but have *strengthened* partition and Northern Ireland as a distinctive political and national entity.

⁷ Additionally, this project eschews the term "dissident" due to its loaded connotations. As frequently noted by interviewees, the term not only has negative and violent connotations, but it also places "ownership" of Irish Republicanism with the Provisional Movement, who these groups believe are the ones who have actually "dissented" from Irish Republicanism. Likewise, the term traditional is avoided due to the changing nature of both this wider cohort and the actors which comprise it—something at the very heart of this thesis.

Yet, outside of this reading of the GFA, there is considerable divergence around positions of policy and ideology *within* this cohort. The most significant of these are perspectives on violence and the acceptability of this. Certain organisations such as the Continuity Movement and the New Movement understand state-directed violence as an indisputable part of Irish republicanism: "carrying the flame" (MED-1) of a movement which has taken up arms against British presence in Ireland since the United Irishmen's rebellion of 1789, and for whom the PIRA's ceasefire and eventual disarming was a grave ideological sin. For others, state-directed violence should be understood as a tactical consideration, subject to the context in which republicans find themselves in:

[It is] not conducive to continue with the armed campaign... a cessation of arms is in line with "traditional" republicanism.

IND-1

There is also structural confusion. Anti-agreement Irish republicanism contains both distinct groups and wider non-aligned individuals. Of the former, there are those which exist solely as violence-utilising paramilitaries, others as non-violent actors (including political parties which contest or are able to contest elections), and those which contain both, as shown in **Table 3**. These groups have also emerged at different times, for different reasons.

Table 3 - Organisations within the AARM

Organisation	Founded	Political Wing	Paramilitary Wing	Status of Paramilitary Group[†]
New Movement	2012	Saoradh	New IRA	Active
Continuity Movement	1987	Republican Sinn Féin	Continuity IRA	Active
Sovereignty Movement	1994	32 County Socialist Movement	Real IRA	Not Active (2012)
Unity Movement	2007	RNU	Óglaigh na hÉireann	Provisional ceasefire (2018)
Irish Republican Socialist Movement	1974	Irish Republican Socialist Party	Irish National Liberation Army	Ceasefire (1998)
1916	2009	1916 Societies	-	-
Lasair Dhearg	2017	Lasair Dhearg	-	-
Éirigí	2006	Éirigí	-	-
Arm Na Phoblata	2017	-	Arm Na Phoblata	Active
Irish Republican Movement	2018	-	Irish Republican Movement	Active

Note: † = Refers to status of actions against the state.

Despite this heterogeneity, there are, nonetheless some core points of commonality which allows for these actors to be subsumed into what this project terms the "Anti-Agreement Irish Republican Movement" (AARM). Of these, there are two salient shared components:

1. A belief that the GFA is unacceptable as it has reinforced (even strengthened) the partition of Ireland and perpetuated socio-economic inequity stemming from this (i.e., that of a "betrayal" of Irish republicanism).
2. A geographic clustering and dimension to which has emerged in particular from "the Troubles" and which is intertwined deeply with working-class CNR communities in Northern Ireland which were core areas of violence and paramilitary emergence and activity during this period.

Together, these agreed understandings—which is argued here to comprise a distinct collective identity—allows this project to assert that those who subscribe to these positions constitute a distinct *social movement* (see *Contentious Organisations: Defining the Study*).

~

It is the first time that this argument has been made (at least explicitly) as it pertains to anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, which has, more often than not, been analysed outside of a Sociological lens. Though the occasional Sociological concept has been borrowed, and though substantial efforts have been made to group together ideological commonalities and differences (McGlinchey, 2019; Whiting, 2015) and the profiles and reasons for joining for adherents (Reinisch, 2020; Taylor, 2016), surprisingly, no stand-alone work has sought to aggregate this within a movement framework. This is despite significant work around other cases and contexts in which movement approaches have been applied to violence-utilising groups, including the Provisional Movement itself (see for example Bosi, 2006; Bosi & De Fazio, 2017; Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018; Hannigan, 1985; Hepworth, 2021, 2023; Reinisch, 2019; Stevenson & Crossley, 2014; White, 2001, 1989).

This predominantly descriptive Chapter rectifies this absence and grounds the argument that anti-Agreement Irish republicanism can and should be conceptualised and analysed through a social movement framework by establishing a common sociological profile and shared identity which comprises the AARM. To do so, it situates this movement: 1) *temporally* (i.e., post-1998), 2) *geographically* (within particularly working-class communities in Northern Ireland), and 3) *ideologically* (a perception of Provisional "betrayals" and the need to safeguard both Irish

republicanism as an ideological position and the working-class CNR communities that it claims and seeks to represent.

In doing so, the Chapter provides foundational positions for the rest of this thesis—particularly the importance of this multi-layered collective identity on organisational understandings—and contributes to a more holistic picture of anti-agreement Irish republicanism: both ideologically and *what* this actually looks like in practice.

1.2. Betraying "the Community": Ideological Underpinnings

Consider the timeline shown in **Figure 9** which charts the emergence of four of the five⁸ main organisations which comprise the AARM:

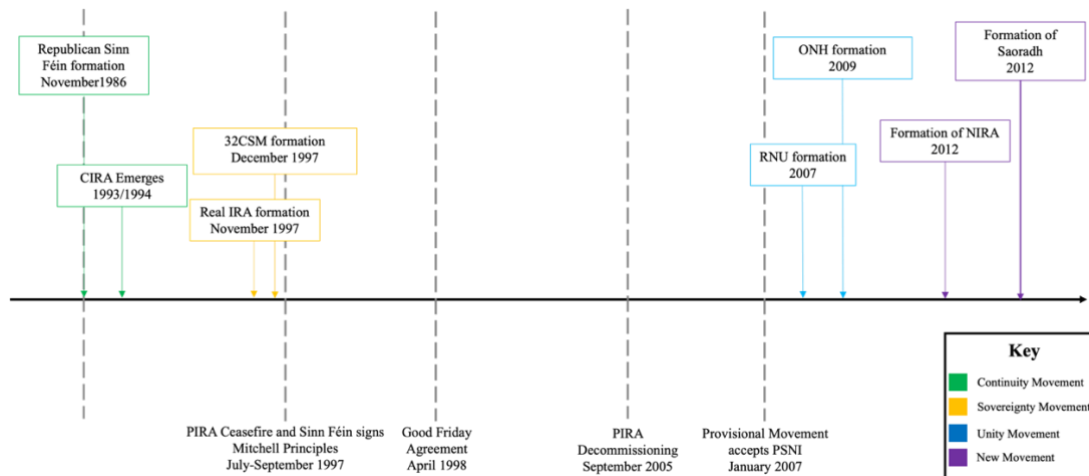


Figure 9 - Timeline of Anti-Agreement Irish Republican Organisation Emergence

In tying the origins of all but two of these groups (the IRSM and the New Movement) *directly* to events undertaken by the Provisional Movement during the Northern Irish

⁸ The IRSM, containing the paramilitary Irish National Liberation Army (INLA) and the political party the Irish Republican Socialist Party (IRSP), is not contained here due to its emergence in 1974 during the height of “the Troubles”.

Peace Process, this figure demonstrates a core position within such a shared movement identity: a belief that in signing the GFA and engaging within the Northern Irish Peace Process, the Provisional Movement has betrayed "the community"—with "the community" comprised of the two components outlined below—and forfeiting the right to both the title of Irish republicanism and the leadership of both:

1. An inner community of Irish republicans.
2. The wider communities in which they are embedded.

This idea of a two-part Irish republican community is itself largely a legacy of "the Troubles." Indeed, while groups within the AARM are part of a wider ideological pantheon of Irish republicanism, and Irish republicanism has always sought to "represent" or "defend" CNR communities, it is this conflict and the primary CNR paramilitary groups active during this conflict (the IRSM and the Provisionals) which have shaped much of subsequent Irish republicanism and contributed to such a blending.

A full delineation of this conflict, the wider Anglo-Irish history upon which it sits, and the interplay between the different paramilitary groups and the State is not possible in this project, and is therefore not included. But it is important to understand that the emergence of the conflict and republican paramilitaries has done much to colour subsequent Irish republicanism and the positions and understandings within this. These organisations are themselves predominantly Northern Irish: tied to overwhelmingly to CNR communities who had long suffered a second-class citizenship, but which, during the 1960s, were also subjected increasingly to violence (Bosi, 2006; Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018; White, 1989). During this period, state-repression surrounding the failed civil-rights movement of young Irish nationalists, rising intercommunal violence

including from state forces and PUL paramilitary groups (and the perceived failure of existing Irish republican paramilitaries to defend these areas); *and* the presence and increasing role taken the British Army which entered Northern Ireland first in a peacekeeping and later what was perceived to be a heavy-handed counter-insurgency capacity have been well demonstrated as core ingredients of mobilisation for what would become largely Northern Irish based CNR paramilitary groups (Bosi, 2006; Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018; White, 1989). Together, these experiences of repression, an existing identity of being part of this community and the desire to resolve historical wrongs with identities held 'prior to their mobilization' (Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018: p. 36)—and the linking of these to Irish republican positions—fused both wider Irish republican objectives seeking British withdrawal from Northern Ireland and Irish unification, along with the protection of the working-class CNR communities in which they emerged and were embedded, both as operational areas and in locations for recruitment and support.

~

This argument of a wider Irish republican identity which fuses both a geographic/constituency component with a narrower "republican" one is a concept well established within studies of the Provisional Movement. Yet it is surprisingly absent from the existing literature on anti-Agreement Irish republicanism.

It is, however, a concept which is foundational to this project, and explored throughout both this Chapter, and indeed the wider thesis. But before doing so, it is important to delineate how anti-Agreement Irish republicans have extended this to specifically understand Provisional "betrayals": not only of Irish republicans, Irish republicanism, and the "the Patriot Dead" who died for the cause of an independent, united Ireland,

(see for example: Hoey, 2018; Hopkins, 2016; Whiting, 2012), but the wider civilian communities they have emerged from and are supposed (and claim) to represent.

The GFA: The First Betrayal

By the late 1980s and early 1990s, the leadership of the Provisional Movement—faced with a growing recognition that British withdrawal looked unlikely through violence alone—had begun a process of conversation within and outside the organisation over the possibility of Sinn Féin's engagement in Northern Ireland's political system (Clubb, 2017).

This internal debate within the Provisional leadership and rank-and-file produced two factions over the future direction of the organisation. On one side were the "reformers" led by Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness, seeking a negotiated settlement, while on the other were those opposed to a cessation in violence and the ending of abstentionism in Northern Ireland. This latter faction was led by senior figures within the Provisional Movement from both wings of the organisation, including prominent members of the PIRA's seven-man leadership, the "Army Council", including PIRA Quartermaster Michael McKevitt, and Seamus McGrane, the Executive's Chairman (Frampton, 2011: p. 90).

A prior fracturing within the Provisional Movement over alleged ideological backsliding by this reformer wing had already occurred in 1986, whereby the then "Northern leadership" of the Provisionals of McGuinness and Adams had successfully won debates in both the PIRA and Sinn Féin over the ending of abstentionism by Sinn Féin in the Republic of Ireland's parliament (Dáil Éireann) (Hepworth, 2024: p. 232-233; White, 2010: p. 343). This decision produced the departure of figures within the Republic of Ireland's "Southern leadership" among both wings, who argued that the

removal of an abstentionist position for any legislative body north or south of the Irish border would de-facto recognise the legitimacy and reality of Irish partition, a hitherto republican "red-line" (Frampton, 2011: p. 53–54 ; Whiting, 2015: p. 99). They would go-on to create what this project terms the Continuity Movement of Republican Sinn Féin and a then-hidden paramilitary organisation the Continuity IRA (CIRA) (Frampton, 2011: p. 53–54).

While significant as the first Provisional splinter-group, those who left the Provisionals during this split were small in number, largely middle-aged, and overwhelmingly tied to the Republic of Ireland (Frampton, 2011: 53–54). In contrast, debates over potential involvement in what would become known as the Northern Irish Peace Process were far more substantial. In 1994, a ceasefire between the PIRA and the British government to pursue conversations regarding electoral participation resulted in the hard lining of both factions. Those opposed to negotiations formed an internal group within Sinn Féin called the 32 County Sovereignty Committee (32CC). One interviewee, who was present at that time, noted that the organisation emerged from,

... a generalised conversation around the changing political direction... spread over the country–widespread conversations taking place. People weren't happy... no answers [were] coming from the leadership.

32CSM-1

Likewise, the same participant noted a similar process would have occurred within the PIRA:

I'm told that this also occurred within the PIRA. [There were] a number of IRA conventions. It's reported that the PIRA objected to the direction of travel by the leadership.

32CSM-1

As Hepworth (2024: p. 233) notes, throughout the early 1990s, 'with overwhelming support' internally, Sinn Féin's leadership had 'largely redefined republican strategy.' Yet, at this stage, 'for the IRA's rank-and-file supporters, the Peace Process was about building on the campaign rather than marginalising it' (Hepworth, 2024: p.235). By 1996, however, the introduction of the Mitchell Principles—which committed all political parties to renouncing violence as a precondition of peace talks—created more dissention around the future direction of the Movement. As one member of the 32CSM who was present at the time noted, such a move,

seemed to signify a shift away from republicanism... [it was] seen in contradiction to republicanism.

32CSM-2

By 1997, this split ruptured following McGuinness and Adams's proposal that the Provisionals should agree to the principles—committing the PIRA to non-violence and de facto ending the conflict—a position which they won following a special council of the IRA and a special general meeting (or Ard Fheis) of Sinn Féin, precipitating walkouts and expulsions within both (Frampton, 2011: p. 90-91; Hepworth, 2024: p. 236):

In 1997, people were convinced that the direction of travel was leading to internal settlement.

32CSM-1

Those within the 32CSC who departed would quickly consolidate into what is labelled here as "the Sovereignty Movement" containing the political organisation the 32 County Sovereignty Movement (32CSM) and paramilitary organisation the Real IRA

(RIRA); with both groups tied together with personnel and ideological positions, and containing senior republican figures (Frampton, 2011: p. 97–99 Whiting, 2015: p. 100). The Provisionals would go on to be a core signatory to the multi-party negotiated settlement found within the GFA in April the following year, ending the conflict.

~

It is apt to start a section on Provisional "betrayals" by focusing of the GFA. But though it maintains a central position within the emergence of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, the AARM itself incorporates other groups with their origins prior and following this: including the IRSM (which refused to recognise the GFA), the Continuity Movement (which split from the Provisionals prior to the signing), and other groups which have subsequently emerged. Indeed, as noted by McGlinchey (2019: p.17),

Literature on so-called "dissident republicanism" has often focused on the North of Ireland and on the post-Good Friday Agreement period, thus neglecting that the fault lines of dissent were actually drawn from the early 1980s.

Yet, for all republicans within the AARM, the GFA is significant due to its stark violations of what is argued to be central components of Irish republicanism. Chief among these is the inbuilt notion of "consent." Contained within the GFA are a number of principles and agreements around the political and national future of Northern Ireland, including what has become known as the "consent principle": a series of six points which outlined that Northern Ireland's position inside the United Kingdom was the wish of the majority of the population in Northern Ireland, though that if desired, the people of Ireland could bring about a united Ireland, but that this 'must be achieved and exercised with and subject to the agreement and consent of the majority of the people of Northern Ireland' (Northern Ireland Office, 1998).

For dissenting Irish republicans, this notion of "consent" in a Northern Irish context is a fallacy due to the inbuilt PUL majority of the six-counties, the recognition of Northern Ireland as a legitimate political entity, and in its undercutting of the all-Ireland elections of 1918 in which Sinn Féin won a majority—the starting pistol of the Irish War of Independence, and which republicans traditionally have held as the only legitimate Irish election (Tonge, 2012). As McGlinchey (2019: p. 97) notes, the acceptance of this by the Provisional Movement meant that: 'Sinn Féin had fundamentally altered its position on consent, thus abandoning a fundamental ideological cornerstone on which republicanism had rested.' As one independent Irish republican, who left the Provisional Movement over the GFA, argued:

Republicanism is a body of thought that departs from the notion of "unity of consent". Unity of consent is a partitionist position.

[The GFA] was a negation of everything republicanism had ever known. The "consent principle" is another word for the partition principle... [on being asked to accept the GFA] for republicans it was like turkey's being asked to celebrate Christmas.

IND-2

The charge, as those opposed to the GFA framed this, was that the Provisionals were argued to have facilitated and contributed towards the "upholding of British rule in Ireland" with the GFA "Westminster writ" (32CSM-2). As noted by multiple participants, being opposed to the GFA and the Peace Process should not be understood as being opposed to "peace" but rather what they take to be the "normalisation of British presence" in Northern Ireland (RNU-3). It is this point that allows for the inclusion of organisations and individuals who are unsupportive of state-directed violence within the AARM.

Decommissioning and the PSNI

In the mid–late 2000s, as the Peace Process matured and the Provisional Movement increasingly took actions which would contribute to its embeddedness within the post-conflict political landscape, the number of anti-Agreement organisations would increase in opposition to these perceived additional Provisional "betrayals".

McGlinchey (2019: p. 50–51) sees two as particularly important to the growth of organisations and adherents within the AARM:

1. The suspension of state-directed violence and the decommissioning of the PIRA in 2005.
2. The Provisional Movement's acceptance of the PSNI in as legitimate in 2007 following the decision taken at a special Ard Fheis, where the majority of Sinn Féin's membership voted to accept the PSNI in order to facilitate that organisation entering Stormont as a party of government in the consociationalism system for the first time (Perry, 2011).

Both decisions produced departures from within the Provisional Movement, most substantively in the formation of the Unity Movement—though the exact linkages between what would eventually be its political wing Republican Network for Unity (RNU) and the paramilitary organisation Óglaigh na hÉireann (ONH), are unclear (established links are provided in Chapters 2, 3, and 4). RNU—established in 2007—emerged specifically in opposition to policing, having started life as an umbrella group *Ex-POWs and Concerned Republicans Against RUC/PSNI & MI5*, with one member present from the inception of the group tying the establishment of the organisation to a "groundswell" of those within the Provisional Movement having left specifically in response to the outcome of the Sinn Féin Special Ard Fheis on policing, and ex-

prisoners who had not already "attached themselves to existing dissenting groups" (RNU-1); (see also Hoey, 2019: p. 80–81).

~

Of the two events in the mid-2000s, the decision to accept policing is particularly notable in the development of the AARM (McGlinchey, 2019: p. 81–82). This is due to both its quantitative developments to organised anti-Agreement Irish republicanism—producing an 'exodus of republicans to new organisations such as Éirígí and RNU in the mid-2000s' (Hoey, 2019: p. 75)—but also in its contribution towards perceptions of further abandonment of Irish republicanism, including in the removal of a core component of this identity (the *right*, if not the use, to engage in state-directed violence) and in what was perceived to constitute an abandonment of the defence of working-class CNR communities.

From 1969 onwards, the "policing" of working-class CNR areas had largely been the purview of republican paramilitary groups, mainly the PIRA, which exercised a graduated system of violence including beatings, expulsions, and murder of those perceived to have transgressed both community and organisational norms and informal, unwritten rules, both political and criminal (see for example work by Hamill, 2010; Monaghan, 2002; Rickard & Bakke, 2021; Topping & Byrne, 2016). Even after the ceasefires and suspension of the armed campaign, the PIRA had remained heavily involved in extra-legal policing (which actually increased during this period) through the threat or actualisation of violence (Silke, 1999b). Indeed, much of the narrative around why supporting the PSNI was unacceptable had been made by the Provisional Movement itself: that the PSNI was a rebadged RUC—Northern Ireland's overwhelmingly Protestant police force from 1922–2001, which had been heavily involved in sectarian acts, being a primary participant during "the Troubles" and which

had and continues to be heavily implicated in 'collusive behaviours' with loyalist paramilitary groups (McGlinchey, 2019b: p. 157).⁹

Supporting an organisation whose perceived "role is to uphold the State" (32CSM-3), marks, for anti-Agreement Irish republicans, yet another example of the Provisionals abandoning their legitimate claim to Irish republican credentials. The PSNI is seen as a fundamental part of the state: "whoever pays the piper plays the tune... commanded by the Crown" (32CSM-2). At another level, organisations have also abandoned the wider CNR communities that they are supposed to represent, something further explored in Chapter 2. Put bluntly by one member of the 32CSM, when explaining the difference between Sinn Féin and themselves: "Sinn Féin have accepted the police. We haven't" (32CSM-2).

Socialist Republicans and Working-Class Defenders

All anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations can be regarded as "socialist republicans"—that is, they adhere to a specific understanding of republicanism which situates Ireland in a particular imperial and capitalist context: "republicanism, community projects, socialism are all one of the same" (32CSM-2).

~

This is not unique to the AARM. Socialism within Irish republicanism can be traced to the inclusion of James Connolly (the godfather of socialist republicanism as one of the leaders of the Easter Rising), his Irish Citizen Army (ICA) within the 1916 Easter Rising, and from the 1960s onwards, with the Official, Provisional, and Irish Republican Socialist Movements all adhering to socialist principles (English, 1996).

⁹ In 2022, evidence relating to "collusive behaviours" around the RUC as it related to loyalist paramilitary groups was published by the Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (Anderson, 2022).

Of the AARM, the role of socialism and how this is manifested through actions undertaken is explored in Chapter 2's focus on community activism, but nonetheless, it is important to delineate this on its own.

This is perhaps most explicit within the IRSM (established in 1974 explicitly as a socialist organisation), but it can also be found across the wider movement (IRSP-2; IRSP-4; IRSP-6). The Continuity Movement, for example, has a social and economic policy of Saol Nua, which aims to bring about the 'social, cultural and economic emancipation of all the Irish people'; with 'local worker/producer owned cooperatives and community enterprises would be encouraged and developed' in an effort to achieve sustainable economic growth (Republican Sinn Féin, 2016: p. 9–10). Saoradh are also committed to left-wing social and economic positions, with its constitution stating the central goal of the organisation is: 'to establish a 32 county Irish Socialist Republic based upon the constitutional principles of sovereignty, self-determination, public ownership, democracy, liberty, equality, and international fraternity' (Saoradh, 2016). Members of RNU noted that the organisation is presently collectivist, and that socialist credentials have been integral to the party since its inception: "very much on the left" (RNU-1).

In practice, interviewees within this cohort were candid that a socialist Irish Republic would be difficult to achieve even if Irish unification were to occur,

[A united Ireland] wouldn't be the united Ireland outlined in the 1916 proclamation... need to see how strong the call is and where the Brits want to go with it.

RNU-3

Rather, the position of these groups, as they see it, is to act as a counterbalance to the Provisional Movement, who they see as becoming increasingly detached (if not

completely severed) from republican principles (including socialist republicanism) following the GFA and becoming a party of government in Northern Ireland. This includes developing republicanism within the community, both in the activism they are involved in—"building infrastructure for a united Ireland" (IRSP-6)—and in what is argued as increasing socialist republicanism principles at a community level (explored in Chapter 2).

~

This focus on socialist principles is contrasted sharply with what all organisations regard as an ideological "abandonment" from the Provisional Movement in perusing political power and becoming a party of government—something which has left the organisation with "no ideological centre" (IRSP-3).

Again, this abandonment is understood to have both an ideological and wider community component. Of the former, such arguments have become notably prevalent within the AARM from the mid-2000s as the Provisional Movement entered power-sharing in the Northern Irish executive. In response, the AARM grew further with the emergence of groups with no discernible paramilitary wing, notably *Éirígí* in 2006, which can be seen to emerge directly as a response to the Provisional Movement's perceived 'rightward-shift' (Hoey, 2021; McGlinchey, 2019b: p. 46–47).

Closely tied to this is the betrayal of the latter in perusing electoral politics. A common allegation levelled at Sinn Féin is that in this pursuit of power, Sinn Féin has sought to both mollify positions (moving the organisation to look to maximise votes among a more moderate—and largely middle-class—nationalist base), *and* in the creation of an electoral machine designed to win power rather than to transform the lives of, and

represent, their traditional base.¹⁰ Moreover, as Sinn Féin has become a party of government—and responsible for decisions around benefits, housing, and healthcare—such arguments have taken on greater weight (McGlinchey, 2019b: p. 48–49):

[Sinn Féin are] more interested in maintaining power than assisting people.

SAOR-1

People [*sic*] feel like they've been abandoned 20 years ago... [Sinn Féin has] effectively become the State.

IRSM-1

The second they [Sinn Féin] went into Stormont, they went back on this community focus.

RNU-2

At a more nefarious level, common arguments heard repeatedly within interviews include a belief that senior members of Sinn Féin were major landlords in the area and have contributed to unaffordable rents and the "gentrification" of areas (IRSP-1), alongside a prevalent argument that the organisation had "monopolised" the community sector (SOAR-1), particularly in Derry—further discussed in Chapter 2— selling out the community for personal gain: "Sinn Féin have become the Armani brigade" (RNU-3).

~

In contrast, groups and members within the AARM portray themselves as "pure working-class" organisations (IRSP-6) who are, in their position as members of

¹⁰ Certainly as McGlinchey (2019a) argues, in moderating core positions and in retaining a stronger "green" (i.e., nationalist) image, Sinn Féin *has* capitalised and effectively outbid the former largest nationalist party in Ireland, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP).

community and with members looking to help these communities: "helping our own people" (SAOR-1); "defenders of communities" (IRSP-1); "see ourselves as the vanguard... vanguard of the proletariat" (IRSP-6).

1.3. Strongholds or Holdouts? The AARM's Geographical Dimension

The above perspectives can all be understood as core, unifying positions within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. But there is another component to such a collective identity: that of being part of, and claiming to represent, working-class CNR communities in which groups are situated and from where the bulk of their memberships come from.

Yet, surprisingly, there is very little academic work on the physical realities of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. There is no work which has sought to specifically demarcate the operating locations of these groups. Doing so, however, is vital not only to understand *what* the AARM actually resembles in a practical sense, but also because of its centrality to the very identities of these groups and the activities they conduct.

~

This section, in further unpacking the specific geo-spatial component of the AARM, moves away from anti-Agreement Irish republicanism as a theoretical construct and situates this physically, in the communities in which they are embedded. In the process, it demonstrates the importance of this local community dimension on both a particular collective identity, and, as will be explored in the next Chapter, how this identity is manifested through both objectives and the forms of strategic action undertaken within this cohort.

Northern Ireland: The Home of Anti-Agreement Irish Republicanism

Despite claims by anti-Agreement Irish republican groups to exist across Ireland, in reality they are concentrated largely in working-class CNR areas with elevated levels of socio-economic deprivation, which were often core areas of the republican movement between 1969–1998. This is not to say that anti-Agreement Irish republicanism *only* exists in Northern Ireland. All groups have some level of presence in the Republic of Ireland, namely in Dublin and Cork (two areas which have historically been key operating locations for republican groups, including the Provisionals and the IRSM during "the Troubles"), but such a presence is considerably smaller and not as ingrained as its presence in Northern Ireland. As one interviewee described:

These groups have always been most active in the six counties, the south was always additional.

IND-2

~

Mapping the operating locations of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism comes, in part, from data compiled by the Northern Irish government. In 2015, as part of the Fresh Start Agreement aimed at restarting power sharing in the Northern Irish government (a topic covered in further detail in Chapter 5), a taskforce was commissioned into how to reduce paramilitarism within eight paramilitary "legacy" areas in Northern Ireland which retain elevated levels of paramilitary presence: the Communities-in-Transition (CiT) B4 areas (Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, 2017). Among these eight locations, four are predominantly CNR areas in which observable concentrations of anti-Agreement organisations can be observed:

- **West Belfast:** in the areas of Lower Falls, Twinbrook, Poleglass, Upper Springfield, Turf Lodge and Ballymurphy.
- **Derry/Londonderry:** in the areas of Brandywell and Creggan.
- **North Belfast:** in the areas of New Lodge and Ardoyne.
- **Lurgan:** the Kilwikie estate.

Alongside the above, interviewees also highlighted the towns of **Newry** and **Strabane** as other areas in which several anti-Agreement groups are active within; locations highlighted in **Figure 10**, below, with participants within the AARM also interviewed in these towns.

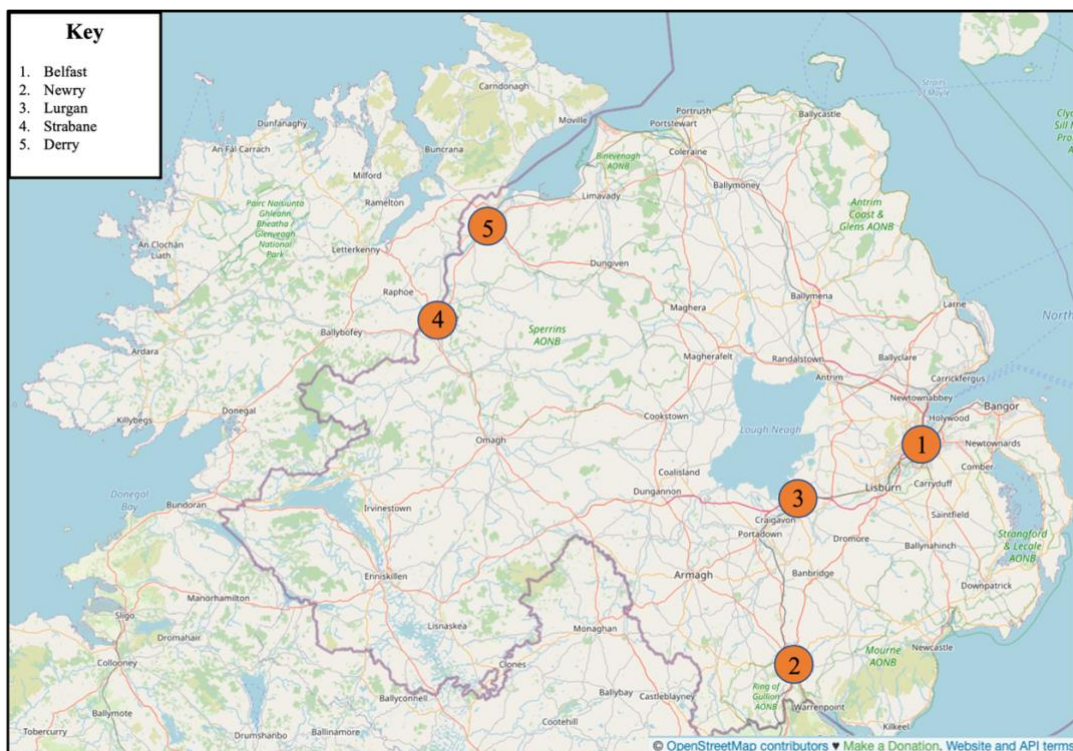


Figure 10 - Locations of Elevated Anti-Agreement Presence in Northern Ireland
Note: Map data copyrighted OpenStreetMap contributors and available from <https://www.openstreetmap.org>.

Of these five locations in Northern Ireland, Belfast and Derry are notable for the number of groups active and the strength of these groups compared to other operating locations, as well as being key driving forces of Republicanism historically and contemporaneously. Though exact numbers are not possible to discern, both cities were routinely noted within interviews as containing the highest concentrations of anti-Agreement groups who operate in particular CNR housing estates both through paramilitary and political arms. Likewise, both—though particularly Derry—are leading areas of PSAs by anti-Agreement paramilitaries, a topic more thoroughly covered in the next Chapter. Likewise, publicly available data from the PSNI around terrorism act arrests shows these two locations as being heavily overrepresented, and though not disaggregated between loyalist groups and republicans, in a two-year period between February 2022–2024, a combined 102 arrests were made in Derry and Strabane, followed by 49 in Belfast (PSNI, 2024).

In both cities, mediators noted that the IRSM and its paramilitary wing the INLA are the largest of the operational anti-Agreement republican groups, closely followed by the New and Unity Movements (MED-1; MED-2). Interviewees across cohorts noted that the New Movement is particularly active in Derry—the main operating area of the group—particularly in the Bogside and Creggan estates of the city (see **Figure 11**, below), with the group having been formed of a merger of groups including Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD)—a vigilante paramilitary group operating exclusively in the city.

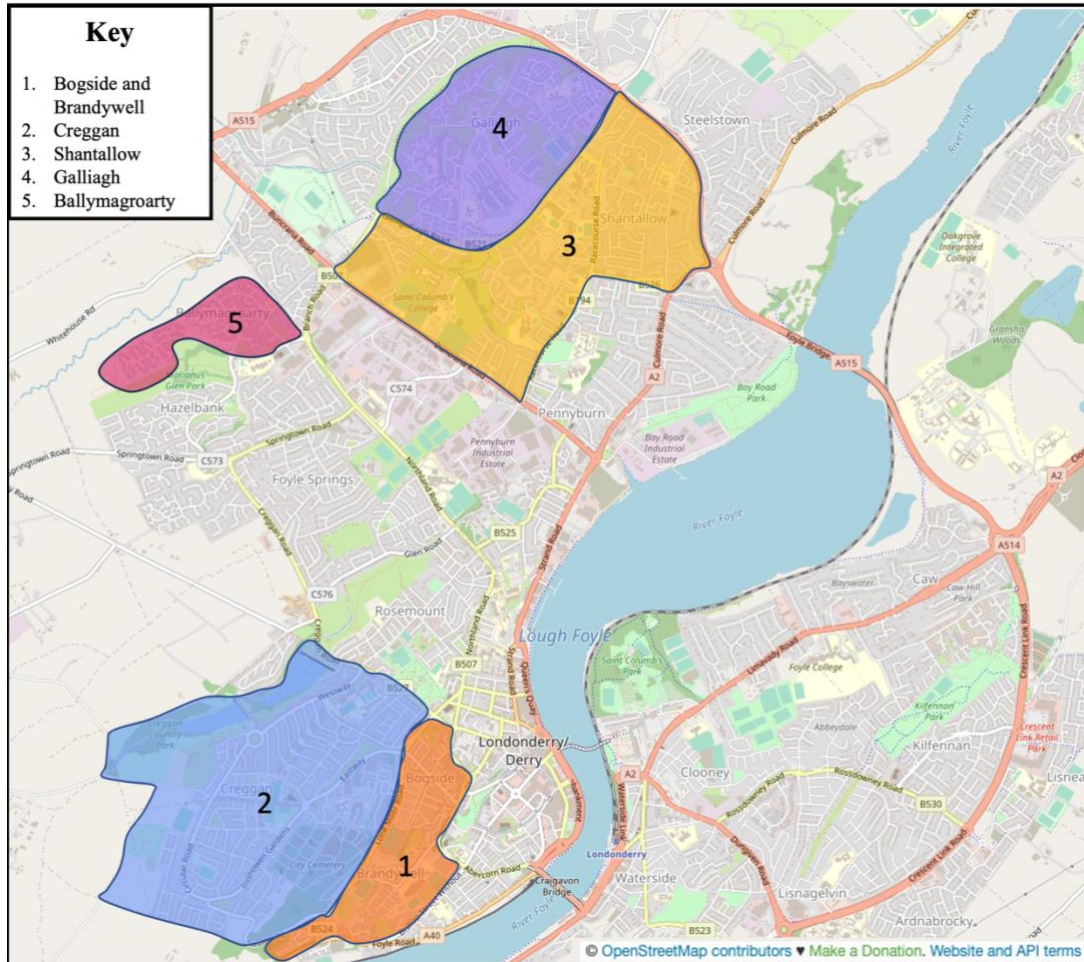


Figure 11 - Anti-Agreement Operational Presence in Derry

Note: Map data copyrighted OpenStreetMap contributors and available from <https://www.openstreetmap.org>.

This geographical, sub-city concentration of groups is important. As demonstrated in both **Figure 11** and **Figure 12** (created through both CiT and interview data), anti-Agreement presence is itself confined overwhelmingly to sub-locales within these areas.¹¹

¹¹ These are not perfect mappings of operational space. The closeness of communities results in overspill, and groups would have memberships and capacity throughout these cities.

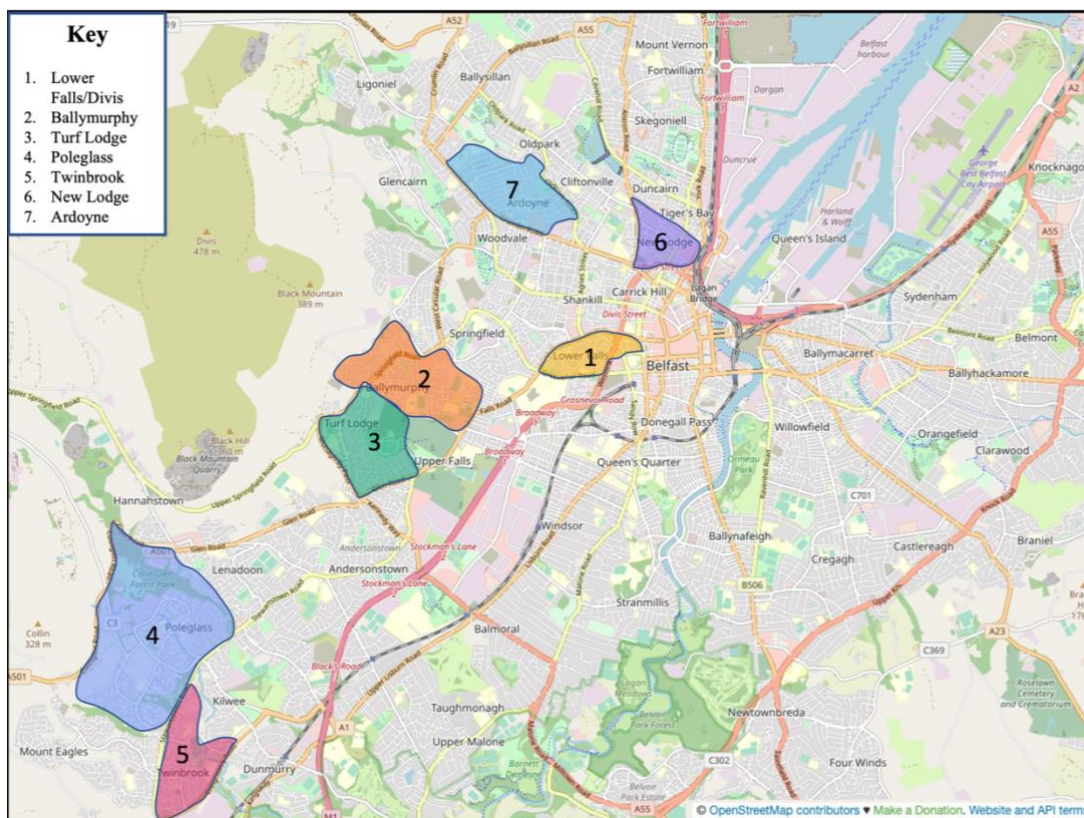


Figure 12 - Anti-Agreement Operational Presence in Belfast

Note: Map data copyrighted OpenStreetMap contributors and available from <https://www.openstreetmap.org>.

Additionally, what this anti-Agreement presence looks like differs at a local level. For example, in Derry, noted by participants as a "driving force of Republicanism" (YOUTH-3a), the two dominant paramilitary groups, the New Movement and the IRSM, had distinct areas of control, something agreed on by the majority of interviewees. The New Movement is the largest and most active in the Bogside and Brandywell/Creggan Housing estates in the south-west (MISC-1; YOUTH-4; POL-2), with the Creggan in particular being notable as a particularly strong location of the group, something noted across interviews and also evidenced by documented instances of paramilitary activity:

Creggan would be seen as a—stronghold is the wrong word as they don't have strongholds—but a presence. And to a lesser extent in the Bogside.

POL-2

The estate has been the location of a number of "colour parades" (parades led by personnel in paramilitary style fatigues carrying flags associated with Irish republicanism), and high-profile riots and attacks on the police, and was the location of the murder of the journalist Lyra McKee in 2019 at one such event (covered in more detail in Chapter 5; BBC, 2024; Reid, 2023; Young, 2019). The IRSM, meanwhile, are regarded to be particularly active in the Galliagh and Shantallow areas in the north-east of the city, alongside Ballymagroarty and with an element reported in the Rosemont area, not highlighted on the map (MISC-1; YOUTH-4; POL-2).

In Belfast, organisational stratification could also be observed, with the New Movement, for example, having a particular presence in Ardoyne, the IRSM dominant in the lower-Falls and the Ballymurphy areas, and the Unity Movement operating a strong presence in West Belfast: "[groups] tend to stay within their own areas... won't encroach" (YOUTH-1). However, more so than in Derry, interviewees painted a picture of multiple organisations being present and active in the same communities, though street-level separation was observable among "subsections" of organisations,

Part of this estate would be INLA, another part would be ONH, another bit NIRA... [all groups] vying for control.

YOUTH-1

~

Explaining *why* anti-Agreement organisations remain present and concentrated in these areas is not straightforward, but some overlapping qualities can be seen across these locations. Both cities and the sub-locales within them were key republican areas during "the Troubles." For instance, the Bogside area of Derry was a core operating location

of the Provisional Movement during the conflict, as well as the location of the infamous 1972 Bloody Sunday Massacre, where British paratroopers shot and killed 14 civilians when they opened fire on a demonstration in the area (Conway, 2003, 2009); while Ballymurphy—an area associated with the IRSM—was the location of another Parachute Regiment massacre of civilians one year prior, in which 11 people were killed (Carroll, 2021).

Right through the conflict, Bogside and Creggan were most affected.

POL-1

[Around areas of AARM activity] Not a street where someone hasn't been shot or killed.

YOUTH-3a

These are also sub-locales in which either the IRSM or the Provisional Movement (or indeed both), had an operational presence. This is unsurprising given that all anti-Agreement organisations have their origins in these groups, with interviewees also noting that groups are "top-heavy" with leaderships often having those active in the Provisionals or the IRSM during "the Troubles": "those "who didn't find a home in the Peace Process" (MED-1)—something borne out of interviews with groups themselves and explored further in the next section. Likewise, interviewees noted that there is strong republican sentiment (if not tied directly to groups or the AARM) within areas which are "sites of memory" of the conflict (ACAD-2).

Moreover, these locations are areas of considerable socio-economic deprivation (Tackling Paramilitarism Programme, 2017). Interviews from community operating at the ground-level within communities painted a broadly similar picture of their areas and the needs these areas face: poor employment opportunities and statistics, poor

educational attainment and opportunities after graduation, poor health profiles, including mental health (such as trauma and inter-generational trauma tied to living in a post-conflict area), intra-community violence (particularly among young men), anti-social behaviour concerns, and narcotics issues. As one interviewee put it poignantly, in the early 1900s, businessman Andrew Carnegie built three libraries in Belfast in the most deprived areas of the city, in the Divis area in central West Belfast, in North Belfast in Ardoyne, and on the Falls Road in West Belfast, which remain high areas of economic and social deprivation, as well as being core operating locations in Belfast for anti-Agreement groups (YOUTH-1).

For academics, community workers, and members of statutory agencies such as figures within Northern Ireland's Educational Authority at a ground level, these issues contribute to continued paramilitary presence in two major ways. Firstly, it contributes to a narrative in which the GFA and the Peace Process has failed to deliver for working-class CNR communities; and secondly, it provides a fertile recruitment ground for anti-Agreement groups—a topic covered in more detail later in the Chapter.

In particular, participants from Derry were most explicit in tying deprivation and a widespread perception of state abandonment (noted widely across interview cohorts) and support for anti-Agreement Irish republican groups.

[Derry is] supposed to be the second city in the North [Northern Ireland]. Hasn't received the investment in jobs and the economy that it should... just over 20 years after the Peace Process and still suffering poverty and other social issues with this.

POL-1

"The Good Friday Agreement hasn't delivered for the North, let alone the northwest [Derry].

YOUTH-3a

The state doesn't care about this area because it's full of rebels.

COM-6

One person closely working around AARM activity in the area noted that Derry is a "driving force of republicanism" precisely because of what they understood as a lack of investment—what they termed as an "economic blackspot"—and believed that the government was trying "to keep the northwest down" (YOUTH-3a). Such perceptions of abandonment leave the government and the Provisionals in supporting the GFA and now as a party of government particularly vulnerable to narratives from within the AARM. It is an issue which has been considerably bolstered by perceptions of both PSNI ineffectiveness and a policing vacuum *and* heavy-handed political policing (explored further in Chapters 2 and 5), alongside—in Derry in particular—widespread allegations of Sinn Féin corruption (explored in Chapter 2).

~

While organisations may have an outsized profile in these areas compared to other locations in Northern Ireland, it is important to note that organisations within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism are *small*, particularly when compared to the Provisional Movement during "the Troubles."

No interviewee apart from Saoradh in Derry and the 32CSM in Cork put a membership figure over 30 members within a given city. Indeed, in Derry, members of the 32CSM noted that while at one point the organisation would have been large enough to split the organisation into three *cumann* (the smallest operational grouping), the organisation currently only operates one *cumann*, with around nine to ten active members, though argued that they could mobilise more: "that's good enough" (32CSM-OMMITTED).

Additionally, members of the 32CSM active at the time of the split from the Provisional Movement were candid about the lack of community support from within these areas even historically, conceding that though the organisation's perception has been improving, in the early period of the split "the community were against us" and that the organisation found it "difficult to survive", something which became particularly acute after the 1998 Omagh bombing (32CSM-3).¹²

Beyond this, these groups do not enjoy anything close to either the levels of sophistication, service provision, or community support in the areas that they currently exist within compared to the Provisionals during the conflict. No area, for example, is a "no-go" area for police patrols, and members from RNU, the 32CSM, the 1916 Societies, and the IRSP were open that organisations within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism were suffering in regard to a lack of resonance within communities, a topic explored in Chapters 3 and 4.

This was stressed by mediators and community workers and mainstream political figures in both Derry and Belfast:

Can't stress how small a minority these groups are in this town... very little community support even within these [prior identified] areas.

POL-2

One way of demonstrating this lack of effective control and support is through the use of graffiti. The use of murals by political organisations in Northern Ireland used to denote areas of control for respective groups, both loyalist and republican, is well

¹² Members of this organisation also pointed to a fear of PIRA retribution. This is plausible. Frampton (2011: p. 136–140) notes that in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a number of alleged attacks were alleged to have been perpetrated by the PIRA against anti-Agreement Irish republicans, including the murder of Joseph O'Connor alleged to be the leader of the Belfast RIRA, something which demonstrated the Provisional's preparedness "to deploy violence and intimidation to secure their position."

explored (Rolston, 2018). In republican areas of Northern Ireland, historically the Provisional Movement and the IRSM have been able to create large, gable-end murals, akin to the loyalist equivalents exemplified in **Figure 6**. Many remain standing. These take time to create, with artists sitting for extended times. To create these murals, therefore, requires enough support to do so without being challenged. In contrast, anti-Agreement republicans do not enjoy a comparable mural space. While certain areas have space given over to republican political groups for murals, such as the International Wall in West Belfast (see **Figure 13** below), and the Bogside in Derry, aside from particular areas (including Creggan, and Ardoyne, and areas around the New Lodge flats) there is a lack of anti-Agreement murals.

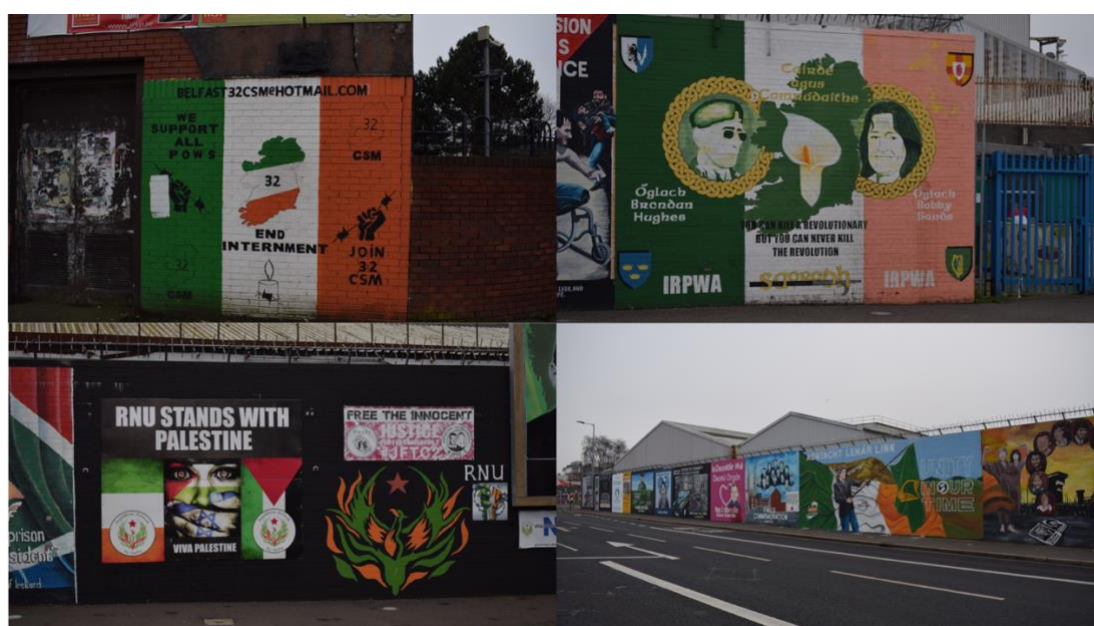


Figure 13 - International Wall Murals in West Belfast

Note: Photographs my own.

Instead, the demarcation of organisational presence frequently comes in the form of graffiti, both stencilled and freehand; or erected boards (see **Figure 14**, below), with most of these small in profile.



Figure 14 - Anti-Agreement Graffiti in North Belfast
Note: Photographs my own.

Having spent time in different field sites, the above is a fairly accurate snapshot of anti-Agreement republican street art and messaging. Organisational graffiti referencing paramilitary organisations is usually unsophisticated and quickly spray-painted freehand likely due to the threat of arrest, while more sophisticated political murals are often reliant on stencilling or boards which can be quickly erected.

Yet it is also notable that these murals and graffiti remain un-defaced, indicating some level of support or control by organisations in these areas. Groups, both political and paramilitary do clearly enjoy some support within the areas in which they are operational. The members of groups are often well-respected figures, involved as the rest of the project will demonstrate in genuine community activism, and with valid critiques around issues of democracy, social issues, and economics, with legitimate points of divergence from the Provisional Movement. While at another level, for paramilitary organisations, there are also clearly elements of coercive control, as summarised by one community worker:

These are people who live in the community. They're your neighbour.
Not going to tout [colloquial term for informing] because touts get shot.

YOUTH-4

The Republic of Ireland: Hangers on?

While predominantly based and staffed by personnel in locations across Northern Ireland, anti-Agreement Irish republicanism also has a presence within the Republic of Ireland. Yet, despite notable exceptions (McGlinchey, 2019b, 2024; Reinisch, 2020a), there is a longstanding omission of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism south of the Irish border within academic analysis. Such an omission is lamentable and obscures a full picture of the AARM, intra-organisational and movement dynamics, and the activities (and the differences within this, focused on in Chapter 3), undertaken in different locations *across* the island of Ireland.

Indeed, while the locus of Irish republicanism can be understood to have shifted during "the Troubles", prior to 1969 republicanism was most associated with the Republic of Ireland. Central events within Irish republicanism—the Easter Rising, the Irish War of Independence, and the Irish Civil War between the pro- and anti-treaty IRAs—all occurred solely in the 26 counties, with Northern Ireland largely immune. Indeed, drawing from the work of (Ó Faoleán, 2019: p. 25, p. 30–31), one of the very few academics to undertake a comprehensive look at the role of the Republic of Ireland on its own, if a comparable project to this one were to have occurred in the mid-20th Century, the map of activity and presence would include County Clare, County Kerry (particularly North Kerry); West Limerick, areas on the coast of Roscommon and Mayo, North and Finglas in Dublin city, and pockets of Cork—particular hotspots of Republicanism during the Irish War of Independence and locations of fighting during the Irish Civil War, and areas which remained centres of republican support and

Provisional activity during "the Troubles". Where violence in Northern Ireland did occur, such as the IRA's 1956–1962 Border Campaign (known by republicans as "Operation Harvest"), attacks were planned by a southern-based leadership, and launched from across the Irish border into Northern Ireland by flying columns as opposed to guerrilla and urban combat by those embedded within working-class CNR communities there (Coogan, 2000: p.279, 281).

~

As Ó Faoleán (2019) notes, the Republic of Ireland continued to play a role—albeit largely a supporting one—during "the Troubles" in many of these same geographic areas, with both the Provisionals and the IRSM active there. Indeed, despite its increasing associations with Northern Ireland, and though based on issues occurring in six-counties, of the dominant figures in the Provisional movement in the early stages of the organisation's history were Sean MacStiofain, Daithi Ó Connell, and Ruari Ó Brádaigh—all southern-based Irish republicans (Coogan, 2000: p. 366–377), with cumainn in Dublin and Limerick overwhelmingly joining the Provisionals, and with the Provisional Movement initially headquartered in the Irish capital (Ó Faoleán, 2019: p.34–35). Both Ó Connell and Ó Brádaigh would become the dominant figures within the Continuity Movement, leading the CIRA and RSF, respectively, from inception (Sanders, 2011: p. 144–145). Likewise, the IRSMs founder, Seamus Costello, was also from and continued to be based in the Republic of Ireland—he would also die there, being murdered in Dublin in 1977 (McDonald & Holland, 2010: p. 5, p. 141–143). Indeed, throughout "the Troubles", Dublin was of particular importance to the republican movement, though particularly the Provisionals. Here the organisation, through Sinn Fein and the PIRA, looked to integrate itself within community activism around salient issues including around housing (with links to the Dublin Housing

Action Committee, an existing social movement and protest group), and water rates (Hanna, 2010: p. 1030–1031; Hannigan, 1985). Likewise, the Provisional Movement, operated a violent campaign against drug dealers in Dublin during the 1990s and also involved themselves in grassroots organisations such as Concerned Parents Against Drugs (Lindsay, 2012: p. 29).

Sinn Féin also actively contested elections both for council positions in the Republic of Ireland (particularly Dublin), and later the Republic of Ireland's parliament, Dail Eiréann. For the PIRA, the Republic of Ireland more generally was used for training, evasion for members in the North "on the run", and financing operations such as cross-border smuggling, money laundering, and bank robberies (Horgan & Taylor, 1999, 2010). Recent archival material from the security services held at the National Archives at Kew, London, points to evidence that the PIRA continued to involve themselves in bank robberies, money laundering and kidnap-for-ransom in the Republic of Ireland even during the PIRA ceasefires of 1994 (McBride, 2024b).¹³

~

This composition and history of republicanism in the Republic of Ireland made it inevitable that during the splits in the Provisional Movement, anti-Agreement Irish republicanism would also retain a presence, even if small. Dublin is the location of RSF's headquarters, and the organisation has both previously contested elections in the Republic of Ireland and continues maintain a councillor in County Roscommon (IND-1). Saoradh also maintains a Dublin cumann (IND-1), and a number of high-profile figures including Brian Kenna (the previous national Chairperson) and Kevin Braney, the chairperson of Saoradh (Reinisch, 2018) until his arrest in 2017 for murder for

¹³ Some high-profile PIRA kidnappings in the Republic of Ireland by the PIRA include West German businessman Thomas Niedermayer (who was subsequently murdered), Lord and Lady Donoughmore, Dutch industrialist Tiede Herrema, Irish businessmen Ben Dunne and Don Tidey, and the racehorse Shergar, which was shot (Rasmussen, 2017: p. 545).

which he was convicted in the Republic of Ireland (Reynolds, 2019). McGlinchey also notes that those convicted of charges relating to anti-Agreement Irish republicanism are currently imprisoned in the Republic of Ireland in Shelton Abbey Prison (County Wicklow), Castlerea Prison (County Roscommon), and Portlaoise Prison (County Laois)—with the majority of these affiliated with the NIRA (McGlinchey, 2024: p. 313). In January 2024, a statement from the NIRA was posted on walls in the Tallaght area of Dublin, indicating at least some form of presence in the area (Campbell, 2024). And RNU previously operated a cumann in Dublin until this organisation split in 2017 (explored in Chapter 3 and 4).

Yet, work for this project illuminated the challenges with discerning the actual scope of anti-Agreement Irish republican presence in the Republic of Ireland. Despite requests to contact all groups in the Republic of Ireland, only two—the 32CSM in Cork and the IRSP in Dublin—responded and agreed to interviews. Even then, attempts to reach out to others within these organisations such as the IRSP in Cork and the 32CSM in Dublin failed to materialise.

~

Regardless, Irish republicanism in the 26 counties is comparatively small and members of organisations here conceded genuine challenges in recruitment (explored further in Chapter 3):

It's harder to sell your brief down here... it might as well be a different country... people think it's a thing of the past.

32CSM-4

It has also suffered in terms of perceptions over the past 25 years, something which interviewees noted stemmed largely from damage caused by allegations of criminality,

something further assessed in Chapter 5: "republicans have suffered down here" (32CSM-4). In Dublin, for example, elements of the RIRA are generally believed to have had some involvement with criminality in Dublin, resulting in the 2012 murder of Alan Ryan, then head of the Dublin RIRA, and the subsequent "punishment" shootings (including murder) of those within the group by other anti-Agreement Irish republicans (Reynolds, 2019). The INLA have also been heavily implicated in criminality in the Republic of Ireland (Deeney, 2021; McDonald & Holland, 2010: p. 458–459; O'Neill, 2021). Other isolated cases of killings in the Republic of Ireland by criminals against those with ties to anti-Agreement groups are also notable, including the murder of Michael Barr in 2016 (BBC, 2016a) which have raised allegations of these organisations or members within them having some connections to organised criminality.

More bluntly, one independent republican when asked their assessment of the anti-Agreement Irish republican movement in the South replied that until the death of Lyra McKee, people would guess that Saoradh was "an exotic animal in Dublin Zoo" rather than a political party (IND-2).

1.4. Profiles

Having established where anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is physically located, beyond this, what does this movement actually look like when stripped down to its human components? Though there is scant literature on the actual membership profiles of those who join organisations comprising the AARM—something borne out of the sensitive and clandestine/semi-clandestine natures of these groups—where it has been conducted, a common theme emerges which typifies the "traditional" base of these groups.

Such a profile is largely male, working-class, tied to specific operational areas, and who, importantly, have some prior or familial ties to the wider republican movement; and dominated by those also active during “the Troubles” (Horgan, 2013; McGlinchey, 2019; Reinisch, 2020; Taylor, 2016).

In the process, the section contributes to this narrative of commonality within the AARM in both structure and identities. Indeed, it is not possible to understand either movements or the identities within them without exploring the members which comprise them (Polletta & Jasper, 2001; Friedman and McAdam, 1992).

The Core: The "Traditional" Republican Cohort

At the core of the groups which comprise the AARM are those which this project terms "traditional republicans". As delineated above, academics of contemporary Irish republicanism note a common profile of working-class men who live in areas in which there has been a legacy of violence via paramilitaries, and who, importantly, often have some direct or indirect connection—usually through familial links—to Irish republicanism. Interviews with those working in relevant fields, such as those in youth work engaged in preventing recruitment and mediators, agreed with this profile, with one youth worker in Belfast noting that in the city:

Republicanism is very much hereditary... traditionally confined to a small cohort of families—traditional republican families.

YOUTH-5

This is also true of Irish republicanism historically. Family legacies and connections for those in republican "strongholds" had a strong effect on Irish republicanism throughout history. Gerry Adams, for example, noted the role of a republican familial

lineage—not just parental but stretching back to his grandfather's involvement in the Irish War of Independence—in shaping his own understanding and involvement of Irish republicanism (Hepworth, 2021: p. 426). Adams' story is a typical one. Robert White has noted across his work on profiles and motivations for mobilisation within the Provisional Movement how prior familial ties could be found in the vast majority of those interviewed (White & Demirel-Pegg, 2017; White, 2017).

As Hepworth notes in their focus of the importance of familial ties across the Movement, these 'republican families' have long been 'incubators' of a 'minority tradition' of Irish republicanism:¹⁴

When conflict re-emerged in 1969, militant Irish republicanism was very much a minority tradition in Northern Ireland, subscribed to and supported by a handful of dedicated individuals and families. Families were the core incubators of the republican tradition and had carried that responsibility often for several generations, sometimes with little external support from the leadership of the movement.

Hepworth, 2021: p. 426–427

Likewise, it appears that family dynamics continue to play a role within contemporary Irish republicanism, continuing the idea of the family unit as an ideological 'incubator'. In Dieter Reinisch's (2020) study of teenagers and young adults involved in the Dublin branch of RSF's youth wing, Na Fianna Éireann (to date the only work which has looked specifically at youth wings of anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations), family links and social networks were identified as a core mobiliser for recruitment,

¹⁴ Though outside the focus of this section, it is also worth noting that 'ownership' of republicans and the republican family became important and contentious following the GFA and the splits within Irish republicanism. One example of this can be seen with Bernadette Sands-McKevitt—the sister of Hunger Striker Bobby Sands—who became a foundational member of the 32CSM, argued forcefully that the decision to embark upon the Peace Process by the Provisional Movement (who still claim him as a Provisional "martyr") was a betrayal of his death and memory (Hepworth, 2021: p. 426).

with all participants 'either recruited by family members, friends, or had active republicans in their closest family'—it is a profile which due to the close similarities across organisations, likely to be found in other groups within the Movement (Reinisch, 2020: p. 712).

Organisational Leaderships

Another common membership similarity across the AARM is that the leaderships of groups are often older men with some previous engagement during “the Troubles.”

In part, this reflects the nature by which organisations within the AARM with the exception of the IRSM came into existence: splinters from the Provisional Movement.

As previously noted, those involved in the foundation of the Sovereignty Movement were well respected figures within both the PIRA and Sinn Féin including key figures such as Michael McKevitt, then the PIRA's Quartermaster General (Frampton, 2011:p.

90). Ruairí Ó Brádaigh, the founder of the RSF was similarly at one point the PIRA's Chief of Staff as well as the head of (Provisional) Sinn Féin (Frampton, 2011:45–48).

Moreover, many other leaders of groups had prior experience within the Provisionals including time served on charges related, something also visible within the IRSP, whose Chairpersonship, Martin McMonagle, has previously served a prison sentence for planning a bombing in England (Kirby, 1993).

Who Joins and Why?

Despite being largely "top-heavy", organisational memberships more broadly are not static. All anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations—with the exception of the 32CSM in Northern Ireland—are actively recruiting.

Recruitment and motivations for joining looks different for both political and paramilitary organisations, mediators note, with those "who are attracted to politics and to paramilitary activity are two different people" (MED-2), though in practice, as the next Chapter will demonstrate, sometimes the "subtle differences between groups" is often, in practice, blurred: "at times the lines can become pretty thin" (MED-1). Those for whose motivations lie predominantly within non-violent politics are primarily motivated by national, political, and social issues.

As Reinisch (2020a) also notes in their study, these recruits are often motivated by the aforementioned political ties, a prior interest in Irish and republican history, social-deprivation, and family dynamics (Reinisch, 2020a). Similar dynamics could be observed during interviews conducted for this thesis. One of the introductory questions with those within the AARM, concerned both the reasons for developing Irish republican principles, why the participant decided to join their particular group over another.

Within answers around entry-points into the movement, a distinct age differential could be observed between older members who had been active in the wider Irish republican movement during "the Troubles" and younger members who had joined after 1998. Older members routinely tied their introduction into Irish republicanism directly to their position within working-class CNR communities during "the Troubles" in a manner which overlaps with Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh's (2018) and White's (1989) understanding of existing identities as a primary pathway. For these participants, reasons for involvement in Irish republicanism included perceptions of "second class citizenship" and "harassment" from the police, army, and auxiliaries, and loyalist paramilitary groups, as one participant from the 32CSM described in their own micro-mobilisation process:

...during the 70's the UDR¹⁵—our Protestant neighbours—stopped and harassed people from the local [CNR] area. This was totally unacceptable. This was influential in my political direction.

32CSM-1

Others pointed to familial involvement in republicanism as a gateway into activism including paramilitary engagement, often noting that their fathers or brothers were also involved.

Beyond mobilisation into Irish republicanism, those interviewed who were present at the very beginning of their respective organisation during its emergence as an anti-Agreement Irish republican group, often tied disengagement from the Provisionals and mobilisation into their new organisations around perceptions of republican "betrayal" mapping with those outlined earlier in the Chapter—with these deemed incompatible within their understandings of a republican identity. Most of the time, these participants, perhaps aware of criticism within the AARM around specific departure points, couched their positions within the Provisional movement prior to their departure as critical or suspicious thinkers who were "prepared to give it [the Peace Process] a chance, but who felt forced to leave" (RNU-1).

Likewise, within these interviewees, there was sometimes the acknowledgement of a moving landscape of Irish republicanism (particularly in the early days of the evolving Peace Process) from organisation to organisation in an attempt to find the best fit around a participant's own understandings of republicanism. For instance, one member of RNU present for much of the organisation's history noted that the group's emergence in 2007 over broad dissatisfaction over the direction of the Provisional's and acceptance of state policing posed a considerable challenge:

¹⁵ The Ulster Defence Regiment. A branch of the British Army in Northern Ireland.

How do we as an umbrella group, as an umbrella group of republicans, how do we bring them into one [group] and offer a credible alternative to the status quo?

RNU-1

As noted by this participant "you can only be a broad Church for so long" and that cracks were present from the start around positions of ideology, including between those "who are Marxist and traditional republicans in the RSF view of the world", and that following a period of "12 to 18 months of kicking the proverbial can down the road", when policies were announced and voted upon, splits "inevitably occurred" (RNU-1).

This quote also demonstrates another important factor when explaining reasons for joining—that of ideological "fit." One participant, when asked why they joined one group and not the Provisional Movement given that groups strength during the period that they left, while acknowledging that "the obvious decision" was to join the Provisionals, their reasons for joining a splinter organisation was based on the belief that the particular group "had the title deeds of the thing [Irish republicanism] based on republican credentials (IND-1).

Members of the IRSM also noted the importance of ideology in explaining differences between recruitment into the Provisionals or the IRSM during "the Troubles." As one member of the IRSP explained, given the differences in capability and equipment between the INLA and the PIRA, recruitment was often predicated on the former's republican-socialist position:

... in every area you had the INLA you had provos... the INLA had broke .22 rifles [smaller calibre firearms] as opposed to rocket launchers and sniper rifles... [illustrates the] ideological factors [around differentiation] what differentiates the Republican Socialist Movement from other groups is its socialism and anti-sectarianism.

IRSP-3

Indeed, sentiments of ideological purity were expressed by other participants:

[I] just knew the organisation was ideologically sound... just knew the organisation was right for me.

IRSP-6

There are additionally clear inter-personal dynamics to recruitment and the mobilisation of pre-existing networks. Two more recent members to groups within the RNU and Saoradh both noted this: "people follow people... people tend to come to people" (RNU-4), while one member of Saoradh noted that their involvement would have been started by an conversation with a pre-existing member "who schooled me as such", though they additionally acknowledged that they themselves came from a "heavily republican family" (SAOR-2a). When inside of groups, strong inter-personal dynamics can assist with retention to some level. All groups within the AARM are small, and participants noted that there were close personal ties. One independent anti-Agreement Irish republican participant for example confessed that their own journey of leaving their respective movement was personally challenging, and expressed a belief that these the challenges of leaving "keeps people in movements longer than they believe":

[The organisation] becomes their world, to leave that world would be outside of it... people have to develop new networks of people... become very dependent on one network. People's whole identity is based around the status of one organisation [on leaving] their whole identity is affected.

IND-1

~

Moreover, organisations within the AARM are actively looking to recruit members from particular demographics—especially young people motivated by political and social activism. Here, the motivations for targeting young people for recruitment seem obvious: they provide a new generation of members able to sustain organisations over long periods of time, as well as allowing for more engagement in activism: "You're hoping for youth; they're the ones with the energy" (32CSM-4).

Yet, the image portrayed by groups themselves frequently noted the challenges of recruiting young people, a topic more fully explored in Chapter 4. Indeed, many participants noted a concern with people looking to join for the "wrong reasons", these being seemingly (though unstated) a focus on violence:

See ourselves as the vanguard... at this point can't allow the vanguard to be run-down or held back by allowing anyone to join.

IRSP-6

... wouldn't accept 70% of applicants... of the 70% who wouldn't be accepted, the majority would be middle aged men frustrated by Anti-Social Behaviour in their area and who want a voice... this wouldn't be enough.

32CSM-4

Would love a youth wing... the only problem [with youth wings] is that sometimes young people around 16 or 17 without guidance can come in thinking they're joining something different.

RNU-3

~

Within paramilitary wings, these recruitment dynamics may look similar, but they also have added dimensions. A challenge here was the decision to not interview those directly within paramilitarism, but during interviews with community workers engaging directly with those at risk of paramilitary recruitment and those within dialogue and mediation, a broadly common profile was created of young men, often with prior criminal involvement, or who would be known to police, drawn to groups both through inter-personal ties, but also for the desire to gain greater power and status within the community:

[Reasons for joining are to] assert masculinity and seen as a way of getting status within the community... being one of the boys, one of the elite.

MED-2

This profile is interestingly the same as for those who are at risk of PSAs by these very same groups, and multiple participants from within this sector noted that such attacks would also be used as a "recruiting strategy", with some recruits "often having been subject to paramilitary attacks in the past" (YOUTH-1). However, the reasons behind this were not clearly explained, and it also seems likely that those recruited through familial ties would fit a different profile than others.

Like political counterparts, youth (though groups were noted to have a policy against either violence or recruitment for those under 16) is again a desirable trait, with young people noted as being sought "for a specific role": violence (YOUTH-3b).

~

Lastly, both paramilitary and political recruitment additionally have a geographic dimension, as underpinned by the geographically bounded nature of anti-Agreement

Irish republicanism. Academics working closely on recruitment noted that Derry was be a core recruitment area for the New Movement—particularly the sub-locales of Creggan and Brandywell—something also noted by community workers within these areas (ACAD-2; ACAD-3).

1.5. Discussion: Survival through Collective Identity

This chapter has demonstrated that anti-Agreement Irish republicanism—and the organisations and memberships which comprise it—along with having specific organisational identity among their respective groups, share a *common movement identity* of what it means to be an Irish republican.

Such an identity is multi-faceted. Likewise, it is not fixed—an argument which will be sustained and explored throughout subsequent Chapters. But there are some broad overarching components which can be discerned and divided into three distinct, if overlapping parts:

1. A broader identity of being part of a long tradition of Irish republicanism particularly from the 1960s onwards.
2. A specific dimension to this identity which stresses uniqueness from the Provisional Movement and regards their actions as a betrayal to Irish republicanism, Irish republicans, and working-class CNR communities.
3. A geographic dimension, again with its roots in the 1969–1998 conflict, in which groups are embedded within, and regard themselves to be the defenders of, working-class CNR populations largely in specific areas of Northern Ireland.

These facets of this wider collective identity and their effects on organisational understandings and activities will be explored throughout relevant Chapters, including

that of both shared objectives and tactical repertoires in achieving these (Chapter 2), common responses to organisational change (Chapter 4), and the different, geographically specific variants this takes at the level of local implementation (Chapter 3).

But, alongside the impacts of this identity on organisational collective choice, it can also be used to explain a core puzzle of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism: why, despite the holding of the GFA, organisations within the AARM retain a presence in *particular* locations.

~

The importance of collective identities to violence utilising groups has been well established. A core tenant of Social Movement Studies is the overlap between salient political opportunities with existing identities in ways in which allow for mobilisation into, and the sustenance of, protest cycles, and Social Movement Organisations themselves; something which has also been applied to violence-utilising groups—including the PIRA. As Bosi and Ó Dochartaigh note in their study of mobilisation into the PIRA during the early stages of "the Troubles",

Micro-mobilization into armed activism is strongly motivated by the enactment of an identity that people already have prior to their mobilization. Individuals are in a search not for identity, but for the best vehicle for enacting that identity in the face of major changes in the political context, as a way to assert and emphasize their agency as individuals.

Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018: p. 36

There is strong evidence that this is the case in times of visible and active repression—including working-class CNR communities in Northern Ireland during "the Troubles"—or where there are sustained periods of activism in response, which may

constitute as 'critical junctures': 'the loosening of the constraints of structure to allow for agency or contingency to shape divergence from the past, or divergence across cases' (Soifer, 2012: p. 1572 see also Bosi & della Porta, 2012).

Moreover, beyond Northern Ireland, existing literature on how identities, and discursive and emotional frames within these, are utilised to mobilise and sustain violence-utilising groups when they coincide with structural conditions have been outlined in cases ranging from RENAMO in Mozambique, to Iraqi militia groups during the Coalition occupation of Iraq post-2003 (Sargsyan & Bennett, 2016; Thaler, 2022).

Together, and importantly for this project, understandings of how and why—social movements broadly, and violence-utilising groups specifically are able to persist centres around: 1) the socio-political structure, 2) levels of wider support within a given base (and how the loss of this can result in collapse and disengagement, and 3) continued membership adherence and support; and how these overlap and intersect with existing identities within both members and the wider environs in which they exist. The loss of part or all of these components can produce both individual disengagement and wider organisational collapse (Bosi & della Porta, 2015; Cronin, 2009; della Porta, 2008a).

~

Yet, though the image of organised anti-Agreement Irish republicanism portrayed in this Chapter demonstrates an absence of all three, organisations within the AARM and the movement more broadly continues to exist. Groups do not enjoy widespread support, nor can they be understood to exercise any significant control in these areas, and they are not large entities. In comparison, the Peace Process to which they are opposed has just celebrated its 25th anniversary, which was accompanied by Sinn Féin

becoming both the largest party in Northern Ireland, and the dominant party within the devolved government, led by a Sinn Féin head of state.

How then, to explain not only this persistence? The majority of literature on anti-Agreement Irish republicanism has sought to explain continued existence through ideological components—chiefly around deep-seated positions and understandings regarding the Provisional Movement's "betrayals" (McGlinchey, 2019; Whiting, 2015). As demonstrated in this Chapter, this is undoubtedly a core component of explaining cohesion within, and the sustenance of, organisations comprising the AARM. Yet more broadly, such narratives themselves can be understood to fit within a wider frame extension and alignment process which ties a specific movement position to a broader collective identity operating at the community level (see Benford & Snow, 2000b; Snow et al., 1986).

Here, anti-Agreement groups sustain mobilisation by not only tapping into existing understandings and claiming a similar republican master-frame of repression and "second class citizenship" which is resonant to these communities, but in which distinctiveness from the Provisionals is created through fostering a sense of betrayal: a narrative which has both an ideological component (see above), but also a local dimension in which the Provisionals have abandoned these communities in the search for increased political power. And, within organisations, mobilisation may be sustained not only through a perception of being on the "correct" ideological path, but also in a sense of being given agency within groups in which they, and *not* the Provisionals, are the rightful defenders of their own communities (something explored in more detail in Chapter 2).

~

Within this wider anti-Agreement collective identity there are, of course, organisationally distinct components. Different groups within the AARM have their own identities which this Chapter has tied to points of departure, ideological perspectives, and particular organisational histories but also in the given operating environments and networks within these in which they are embedded. A potential recruit in the Creggan may be motivated to join the New Movement based on that group's position on state-directed violence, but it seems just as likely they are drawn to that group due to existing inter-personal networks.

Likewise, the image of groups across the AARM presented in this Chapter challenges the *salience* of these identity frames within the communities in which they operate. Anti-Agreement Irish republicanism remains at the very fringes of society—even within the areas which can be seen to have an elevated presence. They are also characterised by relatively small membership sizes, and an aging profile—with leaderships often having a pre-1998 entry-point into Irish republicanism. Entry into organisations (particularly within paramilitary wings) appears to be more reliant on these pre-existing networks. While this may help to sustain particular organisational identities and likely provides substantial intra-organisational cohesion, it also seems plausible that these networks pose a constraining factor to wider recruitment. This will be shown to be a recognised challenge (indeed something behind strategic change) in later Chapters.

Notwithstanding this, demonstrating the strength of this identity and the values and perspectives within this is important not only in providing a more nuanced understanding of the maintenance of, and micro-mobilisation into, anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, but also for providing a template for which to better analyse what

appears to be significant commonality among both intra-movement objectives and the repertoire enacted to achieve these—the focus of the next Chapter.

2

The AMF: Boundedly Rational, Collective Actors

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Community activism and republicanism go hand in glove...an extension of republicanism... republicanism, community projects, socialism are all one of the same.

32CSM-2

2.1. Introduction

Having established the AARM and the components within this salient to a particular collective identity, this Chapter now turns to delineating the specific study of this project: that of the Anti-Agreement Movement-Field (AMF), outlined in **Table 4**, below.

Table 4 - The components of the Anti-Agreement Movement-Field (AMF)

Organisation	Founded	Political Wing	Alleged Paramilitary Wing	Status of Paramilitary Group[†]
New Movement	2012	Saoradh	New IRA	Active
Continuity Movement	1987	Republican Sinn Féin	Continuity IRA	Active
Sovereignty Movement	1994	32CSM	Real IRA	Not Active
Unity Movement	2007	RNU	Óglaigh na hÉireann	Provisional ceasefire
Irish Republican Socialist Movement	1974	Irish Republican Socialist Party	Irish National Liberation Army	Ceasefire

Note: † = Refers to status of actions against the state.

This subset of actors within the AARM is a construct created to better group together and highlight the similarities between the main organisations present within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. But its construction is not wholly artificial, with all five groups possessing considerable overlap around the following components:

1. **Organisational structure:** the possession of both paramilitary and political wings.
2. **Objectives:** the shared primary objectives of spoiling (the disruption of narratives of a post-conflict, stabilised, Northern Ireland) and outbidding (competition for shared resources, namely recruits and wider support).
3. **A shared, intra-movement repertoire:** with the selection of activities (both violent and non-violent) characterised both by the achievement of the above objectives and conditioned by wider movement understandings of acceptability.

~

There is an important caveat here. The argument made in this Chapter—central to the entire thesis—is that the groups which comprise this cohort *can* and *should* be treated as distinct and identifiable organisations: able to make collective decisions on behalf of the whole and to carry out (coordinated) action in response to these decisions. Yet no group is a monolith—it is difficult to ever ascribe full and complete control within collective actors. Clandestine and semi-clandestine groups pose further challenges, particularly in their operations in different geographic areas—and, as will be outlined demonstrated in Chapter 3—there exists considerable autonomy and variation among groups within these different areas. As one participant noted of an unnamed political group,

There's a joke that when talking about [redacted]: which one are you talking about? The one in Derry? The one in Dublin? Or the one in Belfast?

32CSM-1

Indeed, this was a sentiment expressed across interviews more generally (though not necessarily about this particular group). Moreover, as will be discussed in Chapter 5,

those involved in mediation and dialogue with groups seemed unsure as to the extent to which links with criminality and organised crime within some paramilitary groups are sanctioned by organisational leaderships. This seems to vary by location, with participants from the community sector describing that despite good relations with a group overall, in one particular area of the city those claiming an organisational name would be discernibly different: "the faction down in [redacted] are a new group... a vicious wee group" (POL-2). This was also something noted by those within dialogue and mediation, who confessed that breakaways and offshoots (described as "micro-groups") make it sometimes difficult to ascertain affiliation: "hard even for us" (MED-1).

Similarly, mediators and those in community work engaging with those under threat of PSAs (see later in this Chapter) explained that threats can be hard to mediate or resolve when conducted by individuals within an organisation not operating under the sanction of the leadership, or when those issuing the threats are tangentially associated with an organisation (YOUTH-2b).

Yet, as this Chapter and others will demonstrate, it *is* possible to understand groups as organisations capable of collective decision-making around objectives, tactical choices, and strategies; and this *should* be done.

~

This Chapter provides an overview of the AMF and demonstrates that such common characteristics distinguish these organisations as a particular entity for investigation. But it also determines that these organisations should be understood as *boundedly rational* actors: that is, while motivated by discernible goals, the repertoire of activities which groups possess in common are not simply the product of cost-benefit calculus around these objectives, but also internal understandings, norms, and identities which

are themselves located at the movement level—something which helps explain a high-degree of commonality in organisational objectives and tactics.

In doing so, this is the first attempt at an academic analysis of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism to formally link together political and paramilitary wings and the employment of *both* violent and non-violent activities to specific organisational objectives and wider cultural understandings.

Outside of these immediate Chapter goals, it provides wider foundations for the rest of this project in positioning a fundamental model of collective-action and organisational choice. In turn, this will be used to understand how a subset of these actors have been able to embark upon strategic change through the elevation of a particular tactic within their wider tactical repertoire, which has become the primary method in which organisational objectives are being pursued.

2.2. Organisational Structure: Two Sides of the Same Coin?

As overviewed in the previous Chapter, organised collective actors within Anti-Agreement Irish Republicanism fall into three categories:

1. Purely violence-utilising organisations, or paramilitaries.
2. Purely political groups which are solely engaged in non-violent activism.
3. Those which contain both paramilitary and political wings under *the same organisational structure*.

It is this latter category that primarily defines the groups within the AMF. This is not unique to groups within the AARM. In Ireland, this dual structure is observable from at least the early 1900s and the overlap of Sinn Féin with first the Irish Volunteers, and

then the IRA, with the IRA thought to have occupied the dominant position in the relationship between the two from 1949 onwards (Richards, 2010).¹⁶

The benefit of such a structure—as will be seen later in the Chapter—is that it allows groups to contest political space both violently and non-violently and maintain a legal community presence in full public view. Additionally, as one participant involved in mediation described, it allows mediators, representatives of the State, media organisations, and academics, to talk to otherwise unreachable and proscribed organisations:

We work with Saoradh, and by extension the New IRA... with RNU, and by extension ONH... with the IRSP and by extension the INLA.

MED-2

This separation poses a challenge, particularly when looking to discern commonality within strategic action *across* both paramilitary and political wings. Firstly, groups within the AMF themselves strongly refute any linkages between political and paramilitary groups—a sentiment which was noted frequently during interviews throughout this project.

Secondly, there are challenges in determining the exact dynamic between both. Mediators, for example, were keen to stress that while paramilitary and political wings are different faces of the same organisation, intra-organisational tension exists between violent and non-violent wings around collective decisions affecting the entire organisation, and over which wing would be ascendent in the organisation, a topic further explored in Chapter 6 (MED- 2). As previously discussed, despite overlaps, at

¹⁶ Loyalist organisations have also operated joint political and paramilitary wings, with the both the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) operating the political groups of the Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) and the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP), respectively (Bruce, 2001; Mcauley, 2004; Reed, 2011).

a membership level there are real differences among those who join paramilitary and political wings. Like all organisations and collective actor groupings, there are also factions and differences among different sub-groups, with those joining different wings seemingly cognisant of these differences, doing so for "very different reasons" (MED-2). As explained by one participant who has previously served time for charges tied to INLA membership, while the two wings are "as close as can be",

In my view as an INLA prisoner, I see them as two very separate and distinct organisations... totally different roles... one does everything in secret, the other is as open as possible.

IRSP-OMMITTED

~

Yet, it *is* possible to discern organisational linkages in a meaningful sense, something alluded to in the above quotation. Indeed, there exists significant evidence allow for the grouping together of both paramilitary and political wings within the same organisation, namely:

1. **Shared membership:** usually established through arrests, charges, and sentencing of members of political groups on charges relating to paramilitary organisations.
2. **Political representation of prisoners:** All five organisations have prisoner welfare wings which are heavily associated with paramilitary wings.
3. **Paramilitary representation:** the presence of paramilitary colour parades and statements at the public events of political organisations.

This is visible in all groups within the AMF, but the Unity Movement provides a helpful illustration. In 2015, Carl Reilly, then National Chairperson—the organisational head—of RNU, was arrested alongside other members of RNU for charges relating to

ONH (Irish Republican News, 2015). Though charges of directing terrorism were dropped, Reilley pled guilty to IRA membership charges (McDonald, 2023). RNU's prisoner group, Cogus, represents prisoners tied to ONH activity or members. While at RNU's 2022 Easter Commemoration, masked and armed representatives from ONH used the event to read out a statement declaring that loyalist paramilitary groups would be targeted by the organisation if they attacked CNR communities following a period of loyalist paramilitary activity (Young, 2022).

It is by no means the only organisation in which these linkages can be observed. A number of Saoradh members—including those at senior levels of the organisation—have been arrested on charges relating to the NIRA. This includes Kevin Braney—the former chairperson of Saoradh (Reinisch, 2018) who is currently in prison in the Republic of Ireland after being convicted of the murder of RIRA member Peter Butterfly (Reynolds, 2019)—while the coordinated arrests of nine senior members of Soaradh in 2019 (Reinisch, 2020b) under Operation Arbacia (explored in more detail in Chapter 5) are alleged by the prosecutors to constitute the leadership structure of the NIRA (McDonald, 2020).

Given these linkages, and with the prior understanding and academic analysis undertaken on the shared structures and decision-making-processes of the PIRA, it is therefore assumed that decisions are agreed-upon jointly—including processes of strategic change in which one side of an organisation may take precedence over the other in implementing activities under its respective remit.

2.3. Organisational Competition, Objective Overlap: Goal Oriented Collective Actors

In defining organisations, a central determinant is that they can be characterised as goal-oriented collective actors: that is, they possess clearly understood *objectives*, of which achievement and fulfilment are their central organisational function (Klein et al., 1999; Locke & Latham, 2002; Simon, 1964). These act as a unifying force, helping to establish specific organisational identities (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Jeyavelu, 2009; Whetten, 2006) as well as directing attention and energy towards strategic action (Cohen et al., 1972; March, 1991; March et al., 1958; Simon, 1964, 1979).

Organisations within the AMF are no different. During interviews with participants from members of these groups, six organisational objectives were noted to be of primary interest, with remarkable commonality (see **Table 5**, below).

Table 5 - AMF Organisational Objectives

Group	Organisational Objective					
	32- CSR [†]	Community leadership	Highlight Sinn Féin failure	Highlight State/Peace Process Failure	Recruit members	Improve perception
Saoradh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-
IRSP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
32CSM	✓	✓*	✓	✓	✓*	✓
RNU	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
RSF	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	-

Notes: ✓ = At least one interview with a representative of this organisation mentioned this as a strategy. † = The establishment of a 32 County Socialist Republic. * = Mentioned by interviewee in the Republic of Ireland only.

That such a high degree of commonality in group objectives can be observed within the AMF among distinct organisations is important, indicative of shared movement-wide goals. Most of these, with the exception of perception improvement and

recruitment (explored in further detail in the next Chapters), can be classified as medium- to long-term objectives. That is, they are understood to be ongoing and not immediately fully achievable—with the ultimate, longest-term goal being the establishment of an independent and united (socialist) 32 County Irish Republic: the overarching aim of all Irish republican groups.

These objectives can be collapsed into two overarching goals which themselves fit within existing literatures of insurgent, post-conflict violence-utilising organisations:

1. ***Spoiling***—the disruption of a post-conflict status quo and Peace Process, and narratives around post-conflict normalisation (see McGlinchey, 2019; Whiting, 2015).
2. ***Outbidding***—inter-movement competition for resources within a shared constituency, specifically support and recruitment.

~

This section unpacks these two objectives in more detail, conceptualising the organisations within the AMF primarily as spoiler groups concerned with disrupting post-conflict narratives *and* with challenging the right of the Provisional Movement in particular for "leadership" within Irish republican communities (both adherents and those within working-class CNR areas of Northern Ireland). In the process, it continues with concepts of a shared collective identity outlined in Chapter 1 in demonstrating the important effects of such an identity on organisational understandings and objectives.

Spoiling: Disrupting the Status Quo

That this project understands groups within the AARM as "spoilers" is clear: as outlined in Chapter 1, opposition to the GFA and the Peace Process is *the* defining characteristic of the movement.

Indeed, spoiling has been the predominant method in which anti-Agreement Irish republican groups have been analysed, with an emphasis given to the use of violence as a method of challenging State narratives around the Peace Process and in demonstrating opposition to this (e.g., Hearty, 2019; Whiting, 2015). These interpretations correspond to the bulk of scholarship on spoiling, which understands this as a tactic or strategy rather than an objective itself, and which is specifically tied to the early stages of negotiation around the Peace Process and its implementation whereby the overall objective is to prevent the successful ratification of such a process primarily through violence producing a backlash from the State, civilian communities, and rival organisations (Kydd & Walter, 2006; Stedman, 1997).

While this *could* be seen in the early stages of the Peace Process whereby organisations such as the RIRA engaged in a concerted effort to use violence to upend the process, and though groups within the AARM and the AMF remain engaged in state-directed violence, this exact definition is obviously no longer applicable to the wider movement in which there are only a few groups within the AARM, and the AMF specifically, who are engaged in state-directed violence.

Instead, this project uses Nilsson & Söderberg Kovacs', (2011, p. 623) definition of spoiling as its starting point, with spoilers here understood as,

... key individuals and parties to the armed conflict who use violence *or other means* to shape or destroy the Peace Process and in doing so jeopardize the peace efforts.

(my emphasis)

The sections of the definition italicised are of particular importance: as the Peace Process has held, spoiling and what this looks like has itself changed. No organisation (even those which remain involved in this activity) is under the view that violence will

produce a backlash necessary to destroy the Peace Process or to force a reconstituted political settlement:

Organisations know that they can't succeed [but there is a] perception that it's their duty to pass on the flame.

MED-2

Perhaps, a more accurate definition is that of what McGlinchey (2019) terms as "anti-normalisation", with actions undertaken to demonstrate that post-conflict Northern Ireland retains the same socio-structural-national issues as during and *before* the conflict. Moreover, for groups which have jettisoned violence, such actions do not constitute an abandonment of spoiling or anti-normalisation goals. These groups still refuse to accept the resultant socio-political landscape which has been created by the GFA and the Peace Process. Rather, through the employment of a variety of disruptive strategies (explored further below), these organisations, and political wings within the AARM more broadly, aim to signal to audiences that the reasons behind the primary conflict remain active, and are actively seeking to undermine the post-conflict state through both highlighting state failure and providing an "alternative" (IRSP-6)—further explored in Chapter 4:

No-one wants to go back to the way it was but need resistance... need to stop getting people to do what Brits want us to do... and look at new ways of resistance... this is the resistance now... have to offer alternative and show there is an alternative.

32CSM-3

~

This is not to suggest that spoiling is solely non-violent. The next section of this Chapter will demonstrate that for the groups which remain engaged in this activism, violence

(both state-directed and at the level of the community) continues to be used to demonstrate the "failure" of the State, the Provisionals, and the GFA, while simultaneously highlighting the "abnormal" nature of Northern Ireland despite post-conflict narratives. However, it is important to broaden a conceptualisation of spoiling beyond violence if a more nuanced and accurate picture of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is to be posited.

Outbidding: 'Winning' Intra-Movement Competition

Outbidding—inter-organisational competition in which a given organisation looks to bolster its credentials to represent a given constituency at the expense of at least one other rival group who claims the same constituency (Kydd & Walter, 2006)—is argued to be the other main organisational objective found within the AARM. This occurs both *ideologically* and in terms of *resource aggregation*, whereby organisations look to demonstrate their republican "purity" and win community support, materials, and recruits at the expense of rivals: both the *Provisional Movement*—which remains the largest Irish republican organisation across Ireland and within CNR communities in Northern Ireland—and the other groups *within the AARM*.

~

Outbidding as it pertains to the Provisional Movement has been well covered in the last Chapter, but it is important to further unpack how outbidding and intra-movement competition can be observed *within* the AARM and the AMF.

Bluntly, anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations do not get along. Throughout fieldwork, interviewees frequently painted a picture of a landscape which is "very much fragmented" (32CSM-1)—in the words of one participant, a "dick measuring contest" (32CSM-2), defined by inter-organisational hostility, suspicion, and deliberate isolation

from one another. Summing up their perspective on the landscape of the AARM, one independent republican described it as: "self-referential, hermeneutically sealed. Impervious to cooperation" (IND-2).

That said, interviewees were careful not to openly disparage other groups. Indeed, as explained by one member of RNU when asked about inter-movement relations, they noted that they would avoid "provocative language" when talking about other groups, even if they believed some are "anti-republican", for the simple reason that it is "hard for people to listen if [*sic*] shouting abuse" (RNU-1).

Yet, disparagement of other organisations occurred frequently across interviews, both directly and indirectly. For example, all groups interviewed for this project noted a distrust of Saoradh, the political organisation which emerged in 2016 and is tied to the New IRA. The hostility is mutual. For their part, members of Saoradh stated that they are the dominant anti-Agreement organisation, contrasting themselves with "smaller, non-active groups" who are "social-media based" and "not very active within communities" (SAOR-1). Organisations also expressed their genuineness *vis-à-vis* other groups both in terms of their composition's "genuine-ness" (a topic explored later in the Chapter):

[the community] can tell quite quickly [that the IRSP] is different... can't articulate why. Working-class people smell bullshit... If you didn't look at Facebook you wouldn't know they existed.

IRSP-6

Much of this is undoubtedly tied to inter-personal differences and when people and groups departed from the Provisional Movement—"you didn't come with us" (32CSM-1)—alongside differences tied to policy positions—"different for a reason" (RNU-2). However, importantly, it is also understood to be a *deliberate* method by which groups

look to preserve their distinctiveness within a wider movement in which a good degree of commonality can be observed and which are operating in landscapes in which groups are geospatially concentrated.

Indeed, on community activism, groups across the wider AARM portrayed a picture in which organisations would consciously work on their own areas of activism: "individual stuff—that's the arrangement" (RNU-2). This was also corroborated by two participants involved in mediation and dialogue across a range of anti-Agreement groups, who belied frustration when noting that even on issues where groups would possess common accord, there would be a considerable absence of cooperation with groups who "work in silos" (MED-1); "working in isolation" (MED-2). This goes beyond the AMF itself. A participant from Lasair Dhearg noted that "very rarely would cooperation occur" within the broader AARM, something that they explained has emerged from "lessons from the past" (LASAIR-1).

Groups within the AARM *are* in active competition for resources, explained by one participant as "not settling for second-best" (RNU-1). Some resources, such as organisational legitimacy and wider community support, are not necessarily zero-sum resources (someone may believe that two organisations are worthy of their support), but recruits *are*—as Chapter 1 and further explored in Chapter 4.

~

Again, like spoiling, most academic work on outbidding among insurgent groups has centred around violence and violent appeals to a given ethnic, religious, or nationalist group in order to demonstrate organisational purity, of which there is now a significant sub-literature (Lieberman & Zahid, 2019; 2004; Conrad, 2021; Jaeger et al., 2015; Kydd & Walter, 2006; Larys, 2023). Scant work, however, has focused on how violence-utilising organisations can engage in outbidding beyond the use of violence.

Parallel literatures of outbidding within Political Science do exist. One strand demonstrates how, particularly within consociational political systems, ethnic appeals within party politics can help legitimise a group at the expense of another (Horowitz, 1985; Mitchell et al., 2009; Moore et al., 2014; Vogt et al., 2021; Zuber, 2013). Another strand of literature on religious outbidding among extreme groups (such as Al-Qaida and Islamic State) has demonstrated how groups may engage in signalling religious purity at the expense of rival organisations who are portrayed as having betrayed these positions (e.g., Sandal, 2021; Toft, 2013).

But there has been little focus on how non-violent activities may be used to engage in outbidding processes among violence-utilising groups themselves. The AMF in Northern Ireland offers a chance to expand how outbidding is practically achieved by both violent and non-violent means, through an assessment of the activities within a shared repertoire specific to the groups within the AMF, the focus of the next and final substantive section of this Chapter.

~

This is not to say that those within the AARM are completely isolated from one another. Among groups not employing state-directed violence there is evidence of cooperation and good relations among individual members of different groups and these organisations themselves within the AARM. While accompanying participants of one organisation to a protest, on the return journey we stopped off at the location of another participant from a different organisation for a cup of tea.

Likewise, a member of the IRSP with knowledge of the organisation's independent councillor on Derry and Strabane council noted that is good cooperation across independent councillors on voting and passing motions for issues, including with those tied to other anti-Agreement Irish republican groups, something they conceded had

caused surprise from mainstream political parties assuming the factionalised nature of Irish republicanism would prevent such alignment: "not expecting this" (IRSP-5; also explored in Chapter 6). At a more organised level, multiple members of organisations noted some form of cooperation with different groups.

At one level, this "working relationship" is one of necessity—one member of the RNU noted that a number of groups operate in the same areas as RNU, and that resultantly, they will come across members of these other groups frequently and, as such, relations need to be "as smooth and accommodating as possible" (RNU-1). Participants frequently expressed some form of collaboration with other groups on a range of topics pertinent to both republicanism, internationalism (particularly activism and demonstrations around Palestine—a core republican cause), and socio-economic issues. Indeed, what appears to be embryonic developments around higher-degrees of cooperation among groups which do not utilise, or which have jettisoned, state-directed violence is something explored in further detail in the project's overall Discussion and Conclusion.

But, despite this, organisations remain largely isolated from one another, at least at a practical level, which seems unlikely to change soon.

2.4. Repertoires of Contention: Tactical Overlap

There is one final commonality within the AMF which has been alluded to throughout this Chapter: that of a similar range of both violent and non-violent activities, outlined below in **Table 6**.

Table 6 - Activity Set of the AMF

Group	Violence		Non-Violence		
	State-directed	Community-directed	Elections	Protests	Community activism
New	✓	✓	-	✓	✓
Continuity	✓	✓	†* ¹⁷	✓	✓
Unity	*	✓	*	✓	✓
Sovereignty	*	*	†	✓	✓
IRSM	*	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: ✓ = Current sectioned activity. † = Members engaged in an individual capacity. * = Historical usage.

This section delineates why such commonality around activities can be seen within this cohort, the first scholarly effort to explore *shared* tactical choice and implementation of violent and non-violent activities holistically across the AARM and in ascribing collective processes to different actions within the same organisational structures through both political and paramilitary wings.

In doing so, the section makes and sustains the argument that such commonality comprises a distinct intra-movement *repertoire*, with constituent actions selected due to:

1. A perception that they are advantageous in meeting the previously defined and overviewed objectives of spoiling and outbidding.
2. A belief that these are core parts of Irish republicanism.
3. A prior usage during “the Troubles”.

¹⁷ RSF has one remaining county councillor in the Republic of Ireland: Tomás Ó Curraoin, in the Connemara South ward of Galway County Council.

Indeed, the dual structure of violence (both state- and community-directed) alongside non-violent forms such as community activism closely resembles that of a prior repertoire utilised by the Provisional Movement during their "Armalite and the Ballot Box" strategy from the mid-1980s, which understood that,

...military action and political mobilization are not inherently contradictory but, rather, may be pursued jointly with each reinforcing the other.

Hannigan, 1985: p. 32

But these activities and the motivations behind them can also be understood to also rest on both a wider identity of Irish republicanism and what this should look like, and in marrying objectives which are distinctly post-conflict—namely spoiling/anti-normalisation and outbidding within this new landscape.

~

Taken together, this argument for why such a repertoire can be discerned and the utilisation of these actions has both a cultural and rational-action component in which a perception of utility for organisational objectives is combined with a manifestation of a collective identity which has been outlined in both this Chapter and its predecessor. To demonstrate this overlap and to understand the dynamics behind both individual activity selection and the creation of a common repertoire, the section overviews three of the most prevalent and high-profile of these tactics—state-directed violence, community-directed violence, and community activism.

State-Directed Violence

Though only two groups within the AMF—the New and Continuity Movements—remain presently engaged in this activity, it is included as part of a shared activity

repertoire due to its historical usage among all groups within this cohort. Indeed, this has been the dominant primary tactic for the vast majority of the AMF within the history of the movement, with ONH declaring a ceasefire in 2018 and the bulk of the RIRA effectively being absorbed into the NIRA around 2012 onwards.

This continued violence *after* 1998 has multiple components. At one level, for those involved, it is understood to be a core and fundamental part of Irish republicanism itself—a topic covered in more detail in Chapter 6. But it also has clear spoiling and outbidding functions, with violence both used to undermine a narrative of a post-conflict Northern Ireland, and to signal to internal and external audiences as a message of strength, capability, and organisational purity to the continuing of the "Unfinished Revolution" (McGlinchey, 2019): a classic reading of insurgent violence as "Propaganda by the Deed" (de Mesquita & Dickson, 2007).

~

As discussed earlier in the Chapter, this spoiling component of state-directed violence has been the predominant way in which anti-Agreement groups have been seen within the existing literature (e.g., Edwards, 2011; Ross, 2012; Tonge, 2004; Whiting, 2015). This is particularly true when analysing violent acts against the PSNI, Northern Ireland's police force. In the absence of the withdrawal of the British Army (effectively from foot-patrols post-1998 and officially with the end of Operation Banner in 2005), the PSNI remain the most visible sign of the State left in Northern Ireland (McGlinchey, 2021). Moreover, while the PSNI *has* attempted to rebrand, including in terms of composition with attempts at increasing Catholic officers, in reality, the group remains overwhelmingly drawn from the PUL population (PSNI, 2024b), and policing still remains abnormal in many of the areas in which groups within the AMF operate (see the next sub section).

Many of the most recent of the attacks by republican paramilitary groups are directed at the PSNI. This, in turn, is taken as an argument as to the perceived inability to conduct normalised police operations within these locations, including a lack of community foot patrols in areas with paramilitary presence and continued use of armed officers and the use of armoured cars and Land Rovers, and longer response times:

We don't have community police... Dissident republicans point that the reason that this [policing situation] exists is the threat that we pose... we just have to be here.

MED-1

[Police responses have] helped foster the argument by these groups that they don't have a police force... Heavy handed... treat every call as a potential ambush...won't get community support unless they change their tactics.

POL-1

Likewise, there has been a deliberate attempt—particularly in the early stages of police restructuring—to target Catholic officers, seemingly in an effort to prevent wider recruitment from the CNR population. This includes the murder of Catholic police officer Ronan Kerr in 2011 (Frampton, 2012; Morrison & Horgan, 2016).

For those groups utilising violence as a spoiling tactic, its effectivity is not necessarily tied to the actual taking of life, but rather its presence and threat is enough to disrupt a narrative of a peaceful, post-conflict Northern Ireland, including by producing events which result in British military callouts (bomb-attacks), demonstrating the continued presence of the Army (Frampton, 2012; McGlinchey, 2024). This also contributes to an understanding of what has been labelled by Hearty, (2019: 592) as 'performative spoiling tactics': 'ritualistic militarised displays' aimed at disrupting post- agreement narratives of normalisation and moving beyond conflict. For Hearty, these

'performances' which can include forms of military or semi-military performances such as riots directed against the PSNI, "shows of strength"—where members of paramilitary organisations brandish weapons or fire shots into the air—and "colour parades" (semi-militarised commemorative marches involving trappings such as face coverings and combat fatigues) primarily have an aforementioned spoiling function, though they also serve as a method of outbidding the Provisional Movement's monopoly on the history of Irish republicanism and appealing to new recruits by,

... building an emotive connection between the dead and new martyrs-to-be, who having borne witness to the sacrifice of others, are now prepared to step up to the challenge themselves.

Hearty, 2019: p. 592

These may also have signalling functions to both insider and outsider groups. For example, interviewees in Derry believed that a recent spate of "shows of strength" in the city were probably tied to declining relations between the two dominant anti-Agreement paramilitary organisations in the area, the NIRA and the INLA—with the brandishing of weapons intended as an inter-organisational warning (YOUTH-3a Morris, 2021). Meanwhile, the warning made at RNU's 2022 Easter Commemoration to loyalist paramilitary groups by armed and masked members of ONH *after* this organisation's supposed ceasefire, appears to be a clear message to both loyalists, other republican groups, and the State, that the organisation still possess weapons, command and control structures, and have the ability to engage in violence (Young, 2022).

~

The actual effectivity of state-directed violence is something which is an active question within the AMF, something focused on throughout the remainder of the thesis. Certainly, political violence has decreased not only quantitatively (again, see **Figure 1**

- PSNI security data of republican attributed violent acts but also in regards to sophistication. The initial stages of anti-Agreement violence saw a number of attacks utilising vehicle-borne explosives akin to those utilised by the Provisionals, including on the British mainland (see Frampton, 2011: p. 118–121). Aside from a car-bombing of Derry's courthouse (BBC, 2019a) and a brief letter bombing campaign in 2019 against targets in Britain (Dodd & Siddique, 2019) —both in 2019 and tied to the NIRA—and what appears to be a failed lorry-bomb created by the CIRA in early 2020, most attacks take the form of shootings.

Yet, continued violence does impact Northern Ireland and emphasises its difference to other areas of the UK and Ireland. It has a separate terrorism rating (currently at "substantial" meaning that 'an attack is 'likely' (McGlinchey, 2024), has a continued differential policing situation, and MI5 takes an active role in policing paramilitary groups engaged in state-directed violence. Moreover, it demonstrates to both supporters, potential recruits, and the State itself that groups remain an active threat. Groups routinely conduct hoax bombings, or ring in bomb threats, which produce significant disruption and poses a threat to those responding (Marchment et al., 2019). And the attempted murder of a senior police officer—DCI John Caldwell—in 2023 helps to maintain the image of groups as effective and capable.

Extra-Legal "Policing"

Violence within the AMF is not limited to actions directed against the State. Far more common and conducted by paramilitary groups both on-ceasefire and not, is the use of violence against those who are *not* representatives of the State (Morrison & Horgan, 2016). Often, this involves attacks or threats against those deemed to have violated organisational and community 'norms' and unwritten rules, such as a severe breach of

organisational rules for those within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, and those who alleged to be involved in criminality (Morrison & Horgan, 2016; Topping & Byrne, 2012.). This overwhelmingly takes place within the operational environments outlined in Chapter 1, though this has also occurred in the Republic of Ireland¹⁸:

A couple of years back the RIRA was very active in cork... took action against drug dealers.

32CSM-4

In practice, this form of extra-judicial "policing" in Northern Ireland is one which relies heavily on violence: both the threat of violence and the application of this. Previous work on this form of inter-communal violence and interview data from mediators and community workers builds a picture of "punishments" which are gradated, ranging from the expulsion of an individual from an area, to the shooting of an individual, primarily around offences tied to anti-social behaviour and drugs—"most people under threat are related to drugs" (MED-1)—with victims sharing common profiles: those who are often on the periphery of the community (MED-1) who are frequently "persistent offenders" (YOUTH-3a), male, and between the ages of 16–25 (Hamill, 2010; Rickard & Bakke, 2021).¹⁹ Those associated with serious levels of criminality would be under threat of murder, with a number of high-profile killings in Belfast over the past few years tied to organised crime (see Chapter 3).

¹⁸ This also includes the actions of the Dublin branch of the RIRA, with head of the RIRA in the city, Alan Ryan, murdered by what is thought to have been an OCG group in 2012 (BBC, 2012a)

¹⁹ Interestingly, a change also appears to be occurring around *who* is targeted. Multiple participants noted that Anti-Agreement groups would no longer subject anyone below the age of 16 to punishment attacks. This reasons for this were not provided in enough detail to link a change in tactics to wider organisational change and perceptions driving this, but it is a topic which would be well worth exploring in further research.

True figures around these attacks are difficult to discern due to security statistics around republican attributed shootings including shots fired by those designated as a proscribed organisation, shots fired by the security forces, paramilitary style attacks involving shootings and shots heard (and later confirmed by other sources; PSNI, 2020). Nevertheless, publicly available information from the PSNI, shown in **Figure 15**, demonstrates the prevalence of this activity.

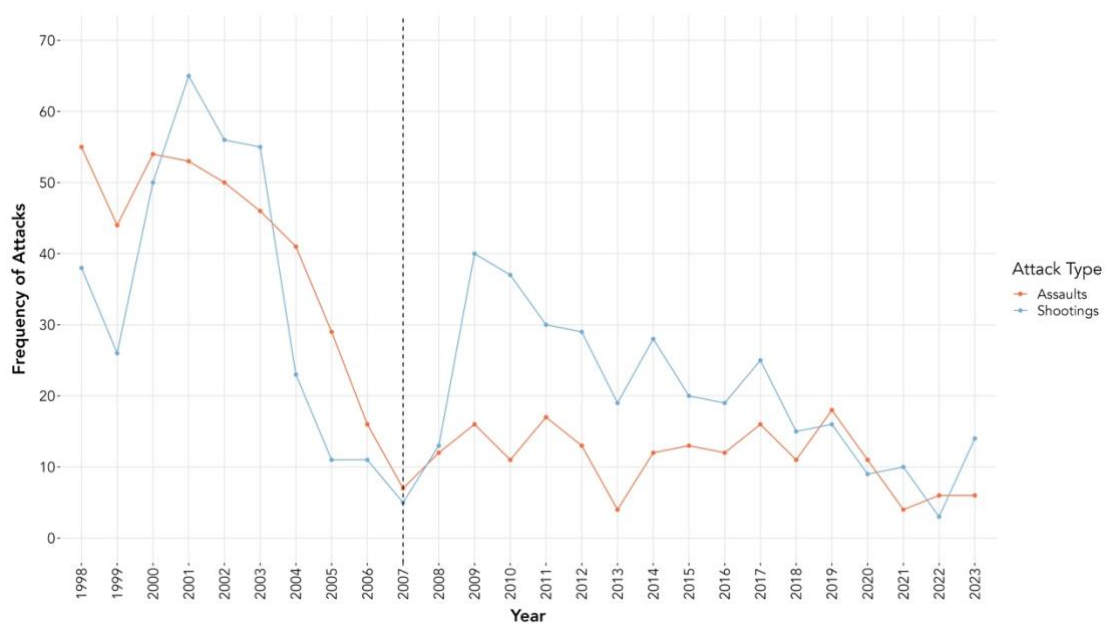


Figure 15 - PSNI statistics of republican attributed paramilitary style attacks. *Note:* A dotted line on the year 2007 marks the decision by the Provisional Movement to accept the PSNI. It is taken here that most attacks after this period should be attributable to groups within the AARM.

Data visualised from PSNI ‘Security Situation Statistics’. <https://www.psni.police.uk/official-statistics/security-situation-statistics>

There is also data around where these instances occur. Though specific area-level data is not made public, through both publicly available PSNI data and interview data some form of mapping can occur. From this, Derry and Belfast can be seen to be outliers. Indeed, during the course of interviews, participants noted that even within these areas, certain locations have higher rates of shooting. Most notable of these is the Creggan,

in which a majority of those shot by republican paramilitaries occur in a particular location, and that this would be an area used by all groups in the area with people taken from other locations of the city to a specific area in order to be shot: "People are taken round the back of the shops and shot" (COM-5a); "people come to [their] house and tell them to come to the shops at a certain time to be shot" (POL-1).

~

Importantly, community-violence through this provision of extra-legal policing rests upon a longer history of sub-State violence in Northern Ireland, but it is "the Troubles" which tied the practice specifically to working-class communities undertaken by both loyalist and republican paramilitary groups in areas of their control, particularly in the latter due to real lack of normal policing in conflict areas resulting in a service "vacuum" easily filled by the PIRA and the INLA (Monaghan, 2002; 2010; Hamill, 2011; Rickard and Bakke, 2021).

Rickard and Bakke (2021) have noted that the longevity of this practice is also tied to genuinely perceived continued vacuums in State policing and the abandonment of the PIRA from the practice in 2007, with the informal institution of paramilitary implemented "extra-legal" policing having "sticky legacies" within these communities. During interviews for this thesis, a similar narrative was mentioned, with community-directed violence understood within a longer history of extra-legal policing: as "historical" and a "community-based response" (COM-1),

Seen as acceptable 30 years ago, it's still seen as acceptable now...
normalisation of violence here.

YOUTH-3a

This space for continued involvement in community violence is not only based on historical legitimacy. In all areas of anti-Agreement activity, a common perception, even among those working closely with the police and the State and who are supportive of State-policing, was that of a genuine lack of community buy in from the community around the police, tied to the perceived heavy-handed activities of the PSNI, a focus on Irish republicans (including those not linked to paramilitarism) and a lack of effective community policing in the area. The sample of quotations below provide an accurate snapshot of sentiments expressed repeatedly throughout interviews:

2016 marked a degradation of community policing teams—put back the situation 20 years...

YOUTH-3a

... we were just getting police to the point of tolerance—mistook this for acceptance.

YOUTH-3b

[There's] no relationship between the police and the community.

COM-4

Confidence in policing is at an all-time low... people aren't anti-police, they're anti- how it's being policed... seeing "misstep after misstep.

COM-5b

As long as young people are seeing their doors kicked in and [family members] dragged out, they're going to grow up with hatred of the police in another generation.

POL-1

Not a normal policing situation... massively anti-police sentiment in the community even among moderates here.

COM-6

[PSNI have presided over a] calamity of errors in Derry—not easy supporting the PSNI... fuels narrative that the police are unaccountable. A narrative now with some elected members that the police are unaccountable.

POL-5

Everyone knows that MI5 is running the Paramilitary Crime Task Force... [actions of the police] gives the dissidents stones to throw at you... still the same police force.

COM-3a

Indeed, interviewees, even those working closely with police and the state, noted that a lack of community-buy in around policing due to legacy issues, perceptions of heavy-handed policing, and a lack of viable community policing would be a major reason for continued paramilitary presence: something that has "totally turned people" while putting back the police normalisation process by "four or five years" (POL-1). Another community worker argued that a lack of community police presence in republican areas meant that for many in the community, their exposure to the police would be during house raids against suspected paramilitaries, and well-armed and armoured police patrols in vehicles, something which reinforces the narrative that "your area isn't safe" (YOUTH-3b).

Additionally, despite claims by those with knowledge of the PSNI that the organisation has attempted to refocus policing tactics in CNR locations which have elevated levels of paramilitary presence following the murder of Lyra McKee and the conditions in which this happened (see Chapter 5), participants from the community sector (including those supportive of the PSNI) argued that this has not happened.

Another common sentiment was that where community policing is being developed, both the high-rate of turnover among these officers and the actions of the Tactical

Response Group—a specialised unit within the PSNI which conduct house searches and counter-terrorism action—prevents widespread acceptance of these officers; and the threat level posed by groups was deemed to be small, posing questions about a continued abnormal policing environment:

When was the last time there was an attack on the police in this area? A lot of nonsense. The INLA are no threat to cops, they [the police] see them as a criminal gang, but still going to say that they're under threat.

COM-3a

Interviewees from the community sector expressed a belief that this "gap" in policing (both in terms of legitimacy and an actual absence of what participants argued was an effective criminal justice system) contributes towards continued pressure for extra-legal 'policing' within these areas, with the activity regarded as both needed and effective in deterring wrong-doing in the absence of both policing from the Provisional Movement and the PSNI:

In the absence of results they'll take it where they can... [groups can] deal with things in five minutes...overnight... [People will] happily pick up the phone to them.

YOUTH-3a

In the absence of justice any justice is acceptable.

YOUTH-3b

Gives them credibility to get involved in community politics... responding to the people.

MED-2

[Groups have] picked up on policing, see it as a gap to be filled... [of those attacked] They're the ones who the community asks to do something about it.

YOUTH-2b

Policing is sometimes non-existent in the area... because the police force isn't there for the community, see people going to one of the groups for a solution.

COM-3a

Other interviewees went further, describing the level of acceptance as so great that family members of offenders would arrange for those under-threat to be subject to extra-judicial violence, what has become known in Northern Ireland as "punishment by appointment" (MED-1; Knox, 2001).

~

In this way, extra-legal policing meets both spoiling and outbidding objectives. On the one hand, the need for community-violence is portrayed as arising from continued failings of the State and promises made over policing as part of the Peace Process. As one participant from a mainstream political party noted: "[the PSNI] need to fill this vacuum, not leave it open to these groups" (POL-2). Another community worker expressed frustration about attempting to tackle the legitimacy of anti-Agreement Irish republican groups:

The biggest legitimacy issue is the police... if we had a proper police force they'd move on.

COM-3a

At the same time, organisations still engaged within this activity are able to contrast themselves to the Provisional Movement who they portray as abandoning the community to criminals and anti-social behaviour: a "quick populist win" (YOUTH-6)

by organisations who are "trying to be the defenders of the community" (YOUTH-1). Moreover, there is a lack of risk to groups involved in being caught and prosecuted, with community workers *across* both Derry and Belfast noting frustration with the police and justice services over a lack of convictions for PSAs, something which only contributes to perceptions of community neglect: "A lot of people could tell you who's done it, but no charges" (POL-1); "If police are only able to protect themselves, then what is the point of the police?" (MISC-1).

~

Though political groups within the AMF maintained that they are be active around mediation, including the phenomena of "public patrols" aimed at deterring anti-social behaviour in a non-violent manner—and while some form of more sophisticated mediation can be observed such as RNU's links to the mediation group Conflict Resolution Services Ireland (CSRI) in West Belfast and the IRSM's ties to the AYE project in Strabane—in reality, the majority of work conducted in this landscape is one which is predicated on violence and would fall below the threshold of conflict resolution that one may expect to see within an insurgent governance definition. It is certainly not comparable to mediation services provided by the Provisional Movement, which—alongside considerable paramilitary PSAs—operated a sophisticated justice system including "people's courts" in the 1970's (Auld et al., 1997), civil administration panels and the ability to report crime by those living within republican areas (Hamill, 2010: p. 34-35); and was involved in the emergence of restorative justice organisations including what would become Community Restorative Justice Ireland which is still operational as a mediation and restorative justice group (Eriksson, 2009; McGrattan, 2010).

Nevertheless, groups do appear to understand community-directed violence as a resonant activity within communities, while also providing a space to further community engagement, and which acts as a salient method of achieving spoiling and outbidding objectives.

Community Activism

For a project which argues that organisational strategic change is occurring within a subset of actors within the AMF which consists of the adoption of community activism as a *new* strategic direction for these groups, it may seem unusual to include a subsection which explicitly argues that as a tactic, this is not a new phenomenon.

The difference, as will be shown in later Chapters, surrounds the primacy afforded to this as a method of achieving organisational objectives. But it is important to note the role that community activism has played both within anti-Agreement and historical Irish Republicanism.

~

Community activism is found across virtually all political organisations within the AMF and the AARM more broadly. All groups and participants interviewed for this project would be and are engaged in community activism to some degree. These are sometimes organisational initiatives, whereas other times these are conducted by members themselves involved in very sophisticated forms of activism.

Indeed, it is understandable as a core component of Irish republicanism itself, a perspective which was present in all interviews around community activism:

Community activism and republicanism go hand in glove... an extension of republicanism... republicanism, community projects, socialism are all one of the same.

32CSM-2

[Republicanism cannot be] just the tricolour [nationalism] without community-based politics... [not a tension between] the red flag and the tricolour.

RNU-1

If those within the AARM understand themselves to be socialist republicans, then community activism is understood to be "socialism in-practice", a manifestation of a key component of a collective Irish republican identity (IRSP-6).

Importantly here, all those interviewed within the AARM around community activism understood (and were keen to stress) the difference between their actions and charity: "100% against charity" (LASAIR-1); with charity disparaged as a "sticking plaster"(IRSP-6)—perpetuating the structural inequalities inherent in capitalism and imperialism. Rather, community activism is regarded to be what was frequently referred to as "community empowerment" (IRSP-1), with participants stressing the need for community engagement with the work they are conducting:

Important that if we do something within the community, that the community stands with us. Can't go solo on this.

RNU-3

Republicans are drawn from these communities, and community activism within these areas is genuine and closely tied to ideological understandings. As explained by one member of the IRSP when asked about the activism that they are involved in around young people they replied,

I'm doing this because I'm a republican socialist, not because I'm a youth worker... when I go out into [omitted] and there's a riot situation, you'll have all the youth workers out in fluorescent jackets and paramilitary police [the PSNI]—when you look at us, we're sitting down with them, wearing the same "urban camouflage" and listening to them.

IRSP-3

This intersection between ideology and a prior identity closely tied to the areas in which they have come from and remain situated within, was a strong narrative among interviewees, in which "most members have come from a community setting" and who join when they find that the organisation's "politics matches" their own understandings and interests in activism:

... that's where your socialism starts... "I owe my allegiance to the working-class"... all abide by this.

IRSP-4

This understanding of both republicanism as an integral part of socialism is also something which members noted would be historically resonant to Irish republicanism itself, as described by one member of the 3CSM:

Traditionally, republicans have always been part of the community and involved in community work.

32CSM-1

This is particularly true of republicanism in Northern Ireland during "the Troubles" in which, from the 1980s onwards, the Provisional Movement in particular managed an impressive array of services, operating community groups, youth centres, effective police stations, advice centres, housing and residents' collectives, and cultural groups—not only as a method of winning support in these areas, but due to genuine beliefs that community activism marked an extension of Irish republicanism (Cassidy, 2005).

Many of these structures remain in existence. In the words of one member of Sinn Féin interviewed, the organisation "founded the community sector in this city", with the

party implementing a "cradle to the grave" approach to community work in key areas of Provisional control, such as Andersonstown in West Belfast, and Creggan in Derry (POL-1). It is not an exaggeration to say so. Interviewees from the community sector and Sinn Féin members in Derry tied this move towards community activism to a real community need, with these republican areas understood as being historically under-supported from the State: "no one was going to do it for us" (POL-1). This building work continues to be felt, with community workers noted that in Derry in particular, the legacy of this push by the Provisional Movement, and a lack of corresponding activism by loyalists, has produced a landscape in which working-class PUL communities are suffering from a dearth of community centres in comparison to CNR ones, something also noted during fieldwork (YOUTH-4).

~

Alongside this personal, organisational and movement resonance, community activism also appears to be understood as an important way of meeting organisational objectives.

As one member of the IRSP noted, republicans are:

Not just doing homelessness work for the sake of it [activism] allows the party to be among the coalface.

IRSP-6

In the first instance, community activism clearly has a spoiling component, with participants noting that such work enables organisations to demonstrate State failure:

Going out in major housing estates that have been abandoned. [It's] two fingers up to the councils... we're doing your work for you.

RNU-3

Indeed, for participants, "everything from cutting the grass of old people to running for election", "regardless of the immediate transformative effects", can be understood as a radical method of undermining the State (IRSP-6): "We're leading the community" (RNU-3). Groups were also keen to note that activism is documented and advertised, particularly on social media (see the next Chapter), something which was again understood to have a "strategic impact:

Key to highlight activism. Has a strategic impact—Look to inform people of the difference between us and the people running the system.

IRSP-6

This statement additionally demonstrates that community activism has an outbidding component. Indeed, when groups were talking about the State, given previous statements on the role of Sinn Féin within this, it seems likely that they are also included within this bracket. More directly, interviewees argued community activism helped to highlight what organisations allege constitutes Sinn Féin corruption; contrasting their own activism to "established parties who are happy to sit in Stormont and draw salaries" (RNU-3).

Sinn Féin is vulnerable to such perceptions of nepotism and beneficial funding to community organisations alleged to be controlled by the organisation: a strong theme throughout the dataset. This is particularly true in Derry, in which Sinn Féin has been badly damaged by these allegations. In 2021, after an internal investigation following the loss of five council seats in Derry and Strabane Council (with two of these seats taken by independent councillors tied to anti-Agreement Irish republicans), the entirety of the leadership of Derry's Sinn Féin cumann was stood down, including republican stalwarts like Martina Anderson (McClements, 2019b). Members of the party in Derry

acknowledged that the group had received "backlash" from the community over perceptions of Sinn Féin corruption (POL-1). Community workers here were also quick to note (and refute) perceptions that they and their organisations have strong links to Sinn Féin, noting that they would be seen as a "Shinner [Sinn Féin] centre", resulting in hesitancy from within the community to use such services (COM-5a).

Yet, despite refutations, such perceptions *are* prevalent in CNR areas of the city, with these narratives routinely utilised by anti-Agreement Irish republicans, in which Sinn Féin are argued to have grown the party "at the expense of the community" (32CSM-2), "more interested in maintaining power than assisting people" (SAOR-1). The result of this perception collapse in core areas of Derry is that it "leaves a vacuum" for anti-Agreement groups, including around community activism as an effective strategy (COM-1). It was also a statement noted in other areas of Northern Ireland where Sinn Féin have an existing legacy presence. The IRSP's *Drop the Rents* campaign, for example, was noted by members of the IRSP to be effective in portraying Sinn Féin as betraying the community, by drawing attention to what the group sees as links between the party and landlords and property agencies in West Belfast and the rise in rents (IRSP-1).

2.5. Discussion: New Dogs, Old Tricks?

If the previous Chapter established a shared anti-Agreement Irish republican collective identity, then this Chapter demonstrates how such an identity is *practiced* through both providing a common set of clear objectives and a set of tactics used to pursue these aims *despite* these organisations being in active competition with one another. Indeed, that these tactics can be understood to constitute an existing Irish republican movement repertoire also seems clear, given the previous employment of many of these tactics by

the Provisional Movement during "the Troubles". This fits with Biggs' (2013) definition that 'the crucial implication' of repertoires themselves is that of...

... instances of a tactic [which] belong[s] to one or a few lineages, each radiating from a single invention and comprising a series of adoptions and repetitions.

Biggs, 2013: p. 407

The repertoire utilised by the Provisionals, however, was developed due to a particular socio-political environment, and among the community, a set of needs regarding an absence of State service provision. How then, to explain the continued usage by groups operating in radically altered environments? Two components appear to be at play here:

1. Activities and objectives themselves are believed to be integral parts of Irish republicanism. That is, they are deemed to be core parts of an existing collective identity—shared across Irish republicanism—and personal identities held by participants *prior* to their involvement within these groups.
2. These activities (both violent and non-violent), are understood to be *advantageous* within operating environments in achieving organisationally salient objectives, particularly spoiling and outbidding objectives in which groups are both:
 - a. seeking to disrupt and demonstrate the failure of the Peace Process to resolve longstanding issues emerging from capitalism and the continued partition of Ireland, and,
 - b. looking to challenge other republicans within the community, though particularly the Provisional Movement.

The two appear to be closely intertwined. Actors within a given movement do not seek to reinvent the wheel (something which also corresponds to bounded rationality concepts as applied to search and discovery processes of organisations, see for example March et al., 1958; Simon, 1979, 1991), particularly when activities or an existing repertoire is understood to be advantageous and where the costs of developing new forms of activities and indeed wider repertoires are high (Mcadam, 1983).

All these activities can, in some way, be seen to correspond to requirements of 'feasibility, legitimacy, and effectiveness' (Biggs, 2013: p. 409). At one level, groups understand that both state-directed violence and community-directed activities are both integral parts of an existing republican identity *and* salient at an individual level for those within the movement: that is, activism is seen as "legitimate" by the organisations involved.

At another level, groups also understand that these activities are "feasible". All three activities are relatively low cost in terms of resources. State-directed violence which is limited largely to gun attacks is less costly (both in terms of manpower and expertise) than largescale bombings; there exists some form of demand (and little chance of being caught) around community-directed violence; and community activism itself (as will also be shown in the next Chapter) is largely unsophisticated, with activities undertaken requiring a smaller resource pool.

Lastly, all three can be understood to be effective in corresponding to both spoiling and outbidding objectives. There is strong evidence to suggest that organisational activities within this shared repertoire are understood to be advantageous in meeting organisational objectives. State directed violence *clearly* meets concepts of spoiling as understood both in a classical interpretation of post-conflict disruption. But as the Peace Process has evolved, so too has the types of violence that this is now primarily taking,

with violence less sophisticated, yet violence still serves a purpose in demonstrating threat, disrupting narratives of post-conflict normalisation, and—for some groups—meeting understandings around the need to maintain an armed campaign against the State as a core component of Irish republicanism (see (McGlinchey, 2021;Chapter 6). Outside of violence, community-directed activities (both community activism and PSAs) also meet spoiling and outbidding objectives. Of the latter, groups look to exploit genuine grievances around the State's criminal justice system, and in the process, highlight the Provisionals "abandonment" of the community due to their decision to support the PSNI and in removing the PIRA from a policing role. While of the former, community activism (as will be further demonstrated in the next Chapter) corresponds closely to resonant community issues and serves to demonstrate the continued abandonment of working-class CNR communities and the failure of both the GFA and Sinn Féin to improve living conditions.

Lastly, as explored in Chapter 1, such activities (and their framing) clearly meets a frame-extension process by which groups are actively seeking to demonstrate that post-conflict structural issues (economic, social, and political) are no-different to a pre-1998 set of issues (Diani, 1996; Moore et al., 2014; Snow et al., 1986).

~

This combination of organisational and member understandings around what is both a part of what it means to be an Irish republican, and is effective in attaining organisational and movement objectives, is akin to a diffusion process—'[the] flow of social practices among actors within some larger system' (Strang & Meyer, 1993: p. 488). There is a clear human component to this, with hierarchical and proximal diffusion methods operational among a collection of organisations which have direct ties to legacy Irish republican groups (Meyer & Whittier, 1994; Soule, 2007).

This, and the reasons discussed above, can also help explain clear isomorphism around activities across the AMF. Activities utilised here do appear to have emerged from existing membership and organisational memories (Kubal & Becerra, 2014), are deemed to be feasible, legitimate, and advantageous, and are salient to communities both within their wider areas of operation and internally within groups themselves.

Despite this longstanding homogeneity regarding activities, however, there is also a divergence within the AMF in terms of the particular tactics elevated to the level of organisational strategy. Delineating this cleavage is the focus of the next Chapter. In doing so, it looks to establish *how* (beyond the outcome-level focus provided here) groups navigate activity selection, incorporating micro- and meso- components of decision-making processes.

3

Beyond the Armalite: Community Activism as Strategic Change

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The history of the Republican struggle in Ireland over the past 225 years has seen various phases of armed struggle and non-armed struggle. If a military campaign fails to achieve its aims, the campaign has to be called off, the failures and weaknesses analysed, and the movement prepared for the future. Let us be clear! The end of one campaign is not the end of the struggle but merely the beginning of a new phase of the same struggle.

Republican Network for Unity, 2018

3.1. Introduction

On the 23rd of January 2018, the paramilitary organisation ONH announced a ceasefire. A few months later, the organisation's linked political wing, RNU, gave an Easter commemoration speech in Ardoyne, Belfast, from which the above statement is taken. It marks the beginning of what is argued here to be a radical strategic change for an organisation long associated with state-directed violence.

While groups within the AMF share common repertoires of largely agreed upon and utilised tactics, certain activities within this occupy an outsized position, and can be characterised as organisational strategies: specific and deliberate deployments of a set of tactics, or dominance of a particular tactic within this, which are selected to achieve group objectives (Chaffee, 1985).

For most of the history of the AARM, and the AMF within this, the dominant strategy has been that of state-directed violence, with all groups bar the IRSM (whose paramilitary wing the INLA enacted a ceasefire in 1998) engaging in shootings, bombings, and hoaxes perpetrated against representatives of British and Northern Irish states—particularly the police—and infrastructure, both State and civilian, mainly in Northern Ireland.

This remains an active strategy for two of the five constituent groups within the AMF. For much of the past 14 years, the terrorism threat in Northern Ireland has been assessed at "severe", meaning that an attack is "highly likely", although it currently sits at "substantial" (McKee, 2024).

Yet, from the mid 2010s, a cleavage can be observed between those groups which remain wedded to state-directed violence as their primary organisational strategy, and those which have embarked on what is identifiable as a process of strategic change towards community activism: the provision of non-violent public services and goods to civilian populations in areas in which they are operational.

Out of the five groups within the AMF, just two continue to use political violence as their primary activity: the New and Continuity Movements. Conversely, within a roughly two-year period between 2016-2018, the following three groups have claimed to be in a process of strategic change in which community activism is now positioned *explicitly* as the best method of achieving organisational objectives:

1. **The Irish Republican Socialist Movement**—containing the political IRSP and the on-ceasefire paramilitary INLA.
2. **The Sovereignty Movement**—containing the political 32CSM and the now defunct paramilitary group the RIRA.
3. **The Unity Movement**—containing the political RNU and the on-ceasefire paramilitary organisation ONH.

Interestingly, among these three, while there are significant differences in the nuances of this shift, according to participants, the timing of the shift has occurred within a remarkably similar time period, as delineated in **Figure 16**, below.

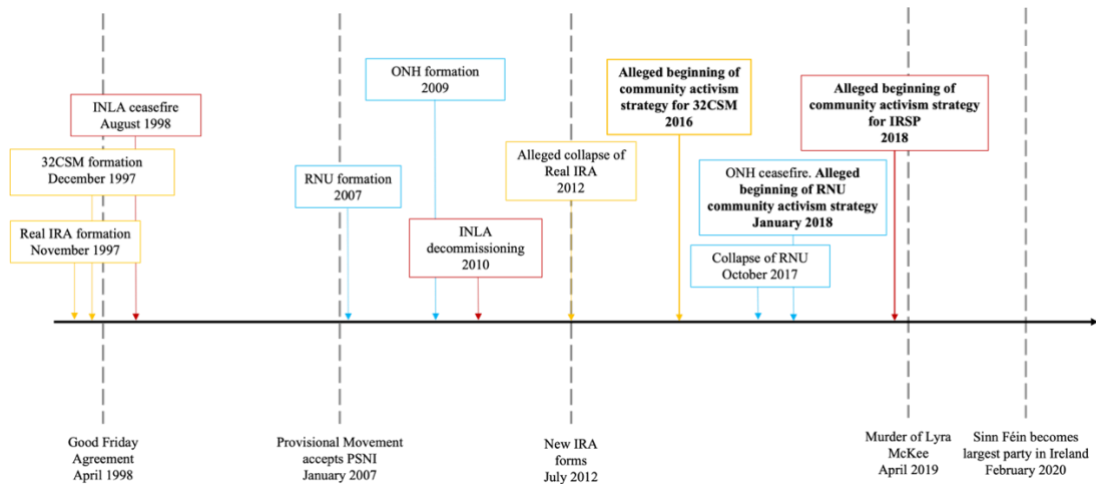


Figure 16 - Timeline of Strategic Change

~

Why this shift has occurred is the primary investigation and puzzle of this project. But before such an assessment can be made it is first necessary to demonstrate that it is indeed occurring in the first place, what this looks like for each of the groups involved, and *how* organisations have been able to navigate and implement this new strategic direction.

Again, as noted in Chapter 2, assessing collective processes within organisations containing both clandestine paramilitary arms and semi-clandestine political wings is challenging, and these issues are compounded in attempting to empirically (and reliably) measure strategic change. Groups have vested interests in portraying themselves as community-oriented actors who are strongly motivated by, and responsive to, community issues (something which will take on greater saliency in Chapter 4). Moreover, all groups within the AARM regard community acceptance and engagement to be important in terms of this being a core component of republicanism (and one particularly salient to memberships) alongside organisational considerations. As one independent anti-Agreement Irish republican noted, without community support "you don't have the water to swim" (IND-1).

Members of an organisation must also *understand* that they themselves are involved in an intentional process of strategic change. On the surface this may seem obvious, yet as one interviewee from IRSP noted about their own organisation's strategic shift, "you're in the middle of these things before you realise it" (IRSP-2).

~

To overcome these challenges, and accurately measure and delineate change, this Chapter attempts to qualify and quantify that change is occurring and illustrate how this has been achieved in-practice.

It begins by focusing on each case study individually, outlining community activism as a deliberate, and observable, change in organisational direction within the IRSM, Sovereignty, and Unity Movements—while also demonstrating the absence of a discernible similar process of change for the Continuity and New Movements.

Additionally, it evidences strategic change as a deliberate and internally understood process of altering actions and activities to achieve objectives by exploring the selection and implementation of community activism. In the process, it provides a wider overview of how decision-making processes actually occur within anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations—the first time any academic analysis has attempted to do so.

The result is an overview of strategic change which both highlights the exact contours of this shift for each organisation in ways which do not obfuscate the uniqueness of these three distinct groups, while offering a platform for comparative analysis undertaken in the remaining Chapters of this project.

3.2. The Continuity and New Movements: Notable Exceptions

One method of demonstrating this shift is to highlight the absence of such a move within the two groups in which a strategic change *cannot* be observed:

1. **The Continuity Movement**—containing the paramilitary group CIRA and the political wing RSF.
2. **The New Movement**—containing the paramilitary group NIRA and the political wing Saoradh.

This is not to preclude community activism entirely from these groups, or to give the impression that this activity is not regarded to be important. As the previous Chapter outlined, it is a core component of activism within the repertoires of all groups within the AMF, including these two; members from these organisations both individually and within groups themselves are engaged in genuine activism at the community level; and it is understood to be a core component of what it means to be an Irish republican.

But, as will be shown for both organisations, their heavy involvement in state-directed violence, and the absence of a clear shift in strategies, means that such violence appears to remain the primary method that these organisations look to achieve objectives. The emphasis here is on where organisations understand their primary focus to lie.

The Continuity Movement

An accurate assessment of both thought processes and actions of the RSF is difficult due to the lack of engagement from this group within the project. Yet, there is perhaps one event which demonstrates the current thinking within the organisation:

In March 2021, an interview with Des Dalton, the President of RSF from 2009–2018, and, at the time a member of the organisation's Ard Chomairle (or executive/governing body), given as part of a wider series of interviews for a University of Liverpool project on Northern Ireland's constitutional future, was provided to *The Observer* newspaper (McDonald, 2021). Though stressing that this was his own personal view and not that of RSF, Dalton gave the following argument:

I would feel that the present climate, in the moment we are in, it is not conducive to armed actions. From the viewpoint of advancing republican goals it is counterproductive. Look at the actions of the last couple of years and none of them have advanced the cause of traditional republicanism. If anything, they have set back that cause... when traditional republicans are making some advances in gaining support there have been armed actions where all that has been lost. Armed action swings against and drowns out any message that we traditional republicans try to make. One only has to look at the aftermath of the tragic death of Lyra McKee and the way it turned so many people against traditional republicans.

It is a lengthy quote, but worth exploring in its entirety. Dalton has been one of the most prominent voices within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, and his statements reflect a broader perspective which will be shown to have contributed to the move away from state-directed violence and the adoption of community activism within other sections of the AMF. The RSF reacted differently. It responded by censuring Dalton for his comments, who subsequently resigned from the organisation later that year.

~

RSF's willingness to remove a high-profile and respected figure both within and outside the group, and who had led the organisation for almost a decade, is indicative of what appears to be a dominant intra-organisational position around the centrality of state-violence to the specific organisational identity of that group, and its understanding of

what Irish republicanism should resemble and the primacy afforded to violence within this—a topic explored in further detail in Chapter 6.

This is not only a position of ideology. For the Continuity Movement, state-directed violence has been the primary activity employed by the group since 1996 when the CIRA announced itself with a car-bombing in Enniskillen (Sanders, 2012: p. 202). The group has subsequently been engaged in a (somewhat sporadic) state-directed violent campaign, which has included attacks on PSNI officers and stations, attacks on commercial properties, army barracks and bases, and most recently, the claimed attempted car bombings of off-duty PSNI officers and a failed lorry bomb plot due to explode on a ferry to coincide with the UK's withdrawal from the EU on 31st January 2020 (BBC, 2023).

~

This is not to say that violence is the only activity conducted within the group. Community activism by those within the organisation has been linked to a food-kitchen in Dublin's O'Connell Street outside the General Post Office, though interviewees could not discern if this activity was officially endorsed by the organisation or if this was brought about by individual members within the group (IND-1). RSF has also stood for local elections in the past, and currently has one councillor—Tomás Ó Curraoin—sitting on Galway County Council in the Republic of Ireland as an independent councillor (IND-1).

Yet interviews with those close to the organisation and mediators suggest that state-directed violence remains the primary strategy of the group. One interviewee previously involved with RSF expressed frustration that despite organisational encouragement, community activism by the group would be "very hit and miss" and

noted that for some members "[community activism] seen as a distraction from republicanism" (IND-1).

The New Movement

The importance of state-directed violence within the New Movement is discernible in the very foundations of this group. As noted in Chapter 1, most of the groups within the AMF (with the exception of the IRSM) can be tied directly to decisions made by the Provisional Movement during the Peace Process which have been interpreted as violations of Irish republicanism. This is not true of the New Movement which is likely the largest and most effective of the groups which remain engaged in state-directed violence.

The foundation of first the NIRA in 2012 and later Saoradh in 2016 is not tied to any particular event. Rather, in its first public declaration of formation—a statement given to The Guardian newspaper in July 2012—the NIRA claimed to be the amalgamation of a number of existing paramilitary groups from ONH, the RIRA, and the Derry based vigilante group RAAD (McDonald, 2012).²⁰ Of these, the group was widely believed in interviews to be largely a product of a formation between the mainstay of the Sovereignty Movement and the Derry based vigilante group Republican Action Against Drugs (RAAD)—itself a Provisional IRA splinter—giving it a particular geographic dimension.²¹ Members of the 32CSM also noted that the organisation was badly

²⁰ Despite this claim, ONH continues to exist as an independent paramilitary group.

²¹ Certainly, the group appears to be strongest in Derry's Creggan housing estate, which gives this argument more credibility, and two high-profile members of Saoradh, Thomas Ashe Mellon and Fergal Melaugh have been named by the BBC as being on the leadership of RAAD previously; while other alleged leading figures such as Stephen Murphy, and Kevin Barry Murphy have previously been involved in Éirígí and the Sovereignty Movement, respectively (BBC, 2011, 2012b; Spackman & Fee, 2019).

impacted by the emergence of the group, including the haemorrhaging of both political and paramilitary members:

[Saoradh's emergence] created confusion within the community about who was who, but this has settled down now.

32CSM-2

This atypical formation for Irish republican paramilitary groups in bringing together such a wide range of disparate organisations previously in competition with one another, and in the long gap between the establishment of the NIRA and Saoradh appears indicative over where the balance of power lies within the organisation, and the importance given to state-directed violence. Indeed, in its foundational statement to *The Guardian*, the group prefaced its creation on the basis of the 'necessity of armed struggle in the pursuit of Irish freedom', while critiquing the 'phoney peace, rubber-stamped by a token legislature in Stormont' (McDonald, 2012).

~

As with the Continuity Movement, this is not to say that the organisation is bereft of community-focused activism. During interviews with representatives of Saoradh in Derry and Belfast, members noted that the organisation is active in establishing popular assemblies through community organisations, had conducted activism around COVID-19 (such as the delivery of food parcels to vulnerable residents), and appeals such as a recent school uniform drive for those unable to afford school uniforms (SAOR-1; SOAR-2). Evidence of community activism can additionally be seen both on the organisation's website, and interviews with members in Derry and Belfast occurred in community centres (clearly signposted as Saoradh) on William Street in Derry's city centre, and off the busy Antrim Road in North Belfast, demonstrate an active

community presence in these locations, as well as other areas of Northern Ireland including Dungannon and Newry.

~

But the presence of state-directed violence within the organisation, and continued high-profile attacks, indicates that the group still regards state-directed violence as its primary strategy. In February 2023, the NIRA claimed the attempted murder of PSNI DCI John Caldwell, the highest profile attack in Northern Ireland since the murder of the journalist Lyra McKee by the organisation in April 2019.

Mediators additionally expressed the belief that the group is predominantly centred around the activities of the "army" (MED-2); a claim which appears strengthened by the decision by the State to arrest nine senior members of Saoradh in an intelligence led operation against the NIRA, with the state not only claiming that those arrested on terrorism charges, but that they comprise the leadership structure of the NIRA. Such charges, though strongly denied by Saoradh itself (Reinisch, 2020b), makes it challenging for both Saoradh to distance itself from the NIRA and gives an indication that militarism occupies a central position.

3.3. Changing Strategies: The Community "Turn" of On-Ceasefire Anti-Agreement Organisations

If the New and Continuity Movements are observable in their continued usage of political violence, and the centrality of this within the understandings of these organisations, then for the remaining three this is no longer the case. Outside the context of the INLA—which ended its campaign and began a process of community and political refocusing from 1998, and which formally decommissioned weapons a decade later (McDonald & Holland, 2010:p. 455–456, p. 464–467)—over a short period of

time the RIRA has effectively ceased to exist having being largely absorbed into the NIRA, and ONH has announced its provisional ceasefire (which continues to hold as of the time of writing).

Moreover, the political wings of all three organisations (through both public statements and in interviews for this project) have separately announced that they are involved in a shift in organisational strategy towards community activism.

~

This section is the first of two which looks to assess this shift. It is not intended to discern *why* such a common process of strategic change towards community activism is occurring across the AMF among groups with very different organisational histories and particular organisationally specific issues, but rather to demonstrate that it is indeed occurring, through both action (further explored in the next section) and in the statements of groups themselves in determining where they understand their primary focus should reside. To do so, it focuses on delineating change across each of these three organisations, treating each as an individual case study, providing both nuance and searching for commonalities across all three.

The IRSM: Outliers?

Starting with the IRSM as this section's first case study seems apt. It is the oldest organisation of those within the AARM, having been created in 1974 when it split from the Official Movement (containing the Official IRA and the Workers Party) largely as a result of factionalism within the Officials created due to that organisation's ceasefire in 1972 (McDonald and Holland, 2010: p. 38–39). It is also the first of the anti-Agreement groups to pursue political objectives *primarily* through non-violent

strategies following cessation of INLA violence in late August 1998—and the enactment of what it terms a 'no first strike policy' in 1994 (IRSM, 2009).

~

The timing of the IRSM's cessation of violence and an earlier move towards activism makes assessing claims made during this project that a strategic change has occurred within the organisation around 2018 harder to assess.

Certainly, participants from this group noted that the move towards greater community engagement through non-violent activities has occurred gradually and has been a process ongoing since the INLA's ceasefire undertaken in 1994 and which was ratified in 1998:

The IRSM and members] have always been engaged in community work but became more serious [post-ceasefire].

IRSP-2

During the early period following the ending of state-directed violence as a clear organisational strategy, members of the INLA were "directed or advised to move into community politics" (IRSP-2); with members present at the time noting that the organisation's prisoner support group, Teach Na Failte, took a dominant role in spearheading community activism as a process of integration post-prison, becoming "an integral part of the movement" (IRSP-5). Many of the campaigns that Teach Na Failte built over this period, such as mediation and youth work, are ongoing and the group continues to work in community activism (IRSP-5).

The move towards community activism appears to have been deepened around 2009/10, when the INLA declared a formal ceasefire and undertook a decommissioning process (IRSP-2). Statements from the IRSP and the INLA during this period further

reflect this formal change in how the organisation conceptualised the meeting of wider group goals:

... the armed struggle is over, and the objective of a 32 County Socialist Republic will be best achieved through exclusively peaceful political struggle... We urge all comrades, members, volunteers and supporters to join the political struggle ahead with the same vigour, commitment and courage that was evident in our armed struggle against the British State. To paraphrase James Connolly 'let us arise', build a left political alternative in Ireland and support the struggle against global capitalism.

IRSP 2009

Whilst our tactics are changing our objectives remain the same—the establishment of a 32 County Socialist Republic

INLA, 2010

As exemplified by these statements, such a shift is understood to be congruent with existing organisational aims, in which the primacy afforded to violence and community activism are understood as two conflicting strategic choices but which both meet wider organisational goals. Put by one participant active within the organisation at the time of the IRSM's transitional period, the question faced by the organisation was: "how are we now going to agitate against the State?" (IRSP-5).

~

Yet when asked to characterise this prior focus on community activism following the jettisoning of political violence, one member of the group described activities undertaken within this rubric could be characterised as the organisation "dipping toes in" to check the viability of such a strategy (IRSP-3).

Instead, interviewees within the IRSP pointed to a more recent "national change in thinking" within the Movement which culminated in a new five-year strategy plan in around 2018, of which community activism is an integral part (IRSP-1):

Slowly coming to community development... realising that community development can be a way forward."

IRSP-5

According to one member of the IRSP, this new strategy revolves around the writings of Ta Power—a member of both wings of the IRSM—being formally adopted and centred, a point echoed by other members of the organisation who similarly noted a national-level strategic change within this time period (IRSP-1).

The significance of this should not be understated. Prior to his death in 1987, Power wrote a two-part document assessing the current state of both Irish republicanism broadly, and the IRSM specifically. Deeply critical of the INLA's dominance within the IRSM—something he characterised as a "macho culture"—Power argued for the need to place the IRSP in a commanding position within the Movement, while additionally agitating in politics, including at the community level, engaging in working-class empowerment on a broad front of social and political activism (Power, 2004). For Power, the pre-eminence of the INLA's 'anti-imperialism' significantly constrained the ability of the IRSP to establish 'fundamental change' through 'building structures which... will ensure stability, to inculcate in everyone a revolutionary ideology' (Power, 2004).

Power's writings have long occupied an important position within the IRSM, but the decision to recentre these writings as the foundation of a new strategic direction further supports the idea of a more recent and concrete shift and development of community activism as an integral part of this. Likewise, one participant within the IRSP noted that the shift was a deliberate move of (in echoing Power) removing "machoism" in the organisation and "putting ideology in command" (IRSP-1). It also acknowledges that a further shift towards community activism, and a move away from paramilitary

dominance within the organisation is still needed, despite the movement's longstanding ceasefire. Moreover, other participants criticised what they argued had been a failure for the party to more explicitly move towards occupying a position within the left, lamenting that this has instead been filled by other organisations, which they categorised as "posh-left, champagne socialists" (IRSP-6).

Furthermore, in 2017 the IRSP launched a new policy document: *Britain out of Ireland, Britain out of the EU* which it argues is,

a result of a yearlong internal debate within the IRSP, our proposals reiterate our honestly held opinion that Ireland is transitioning into a new era in which the primacy of politics is more important than ever.

IRSP, 2018

The organisation is also shifting its position on elections, with the group standing (for the first time) candidates for the 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly elections, in Derry, Strabane and Belfast: a radical step for an organisation which differs from other groups within the AARM in its willingness to enter national legislative assemblies (further discussed in Chapter 6).

Tied to this, one member noted that the party currently sees itself as in an in-between stage, in which it is looking to "build a platform" for a wider political transition, with the organisation attempting to build the political structure necessary for political power, of which community activism would be a part; though they concede that at present this is "time consuming and largely theoretical" (IRSP-6). Such activism, this participant noted (and as outlined above) is not antithetical to the IRSM, but that the emphasis on community activism has increased:

A lot is what the party was doing 20–40 years ago [but] can do more of it.

IRSP-6

The motivations for this shift, including the belief that a united Ireland is now within reach of republicans, is something explored in the following two chapters. But the outcome of this apparently new strategic direction is outlined by interviewees as community activism undertaken on community resonant issues: a focus on “what’s closest to the knuckle”—referring to community specific and salient issues and campaigns within communities in which the group is already operating within (IRSP-6).

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It is important to note that despite this move towards community activism, the INLA still clearly exists within the Movement and is activity involved in community directed violence. Indeed, in some areas, the group was noted to be the predominant organisation involved in PSAs. It is also thought to be the largest paramilitary group within the AMF. Members of the group conceded that this would be the case, arguing that the continuation of the INLA was a "safety net" for "abandoned" communities in which the "cops really don't give a fuck" (IRSP-REDACTED). Indeed, even after the move away from state-directed violence, the IRSM has long been thought dominated by the INLA, referred to within the organisation as "Section B" (see McDonald & Holland, 2010: p. 103–108), something noted by those with working knowledge of the organisation interviewed for the project (again, covered in Chapter 6).

Yet, the decision to recentre the Power document within the organisation in an attempt to "get rid of machoism within the party" and to put "ideology in command" (IRSP-1)

can be understood as part of a broader effort within the organisation which has long been dominated by its paramilitary wing.

~

This manifests itself in the following snapshot of activities conducted in different locations across Ireland in which the IRSM has an elevated presence, with the below list compiled from interviews with both those inside and outside of the organisation:

1. **Housing Activism:** Particularly prevalent in Belfast and Dublin. In Belfast, the organisation is engaged in the campaign *Drop the Rents or Drop Your Shutters*, targeted at landlords and housing agencies who are alleged to be renting out properties which are either unfit or have rental prices over the housing benefit cap.
2. **Non-Violent Community Patrols:** Particularly the housing estates of Galliagh and Shantallow in Derry—core operating locations of the IRSM. The group has been tied here to a specific non-violent community patrol organisation which emerged following a spate of anti-social behaviour in the area.
3. **Youth Work:** Occurring in both North Belfast and Strabane with members of the group operating independent but affiliated youth organisations, engaging with young people from the CNR population who are deemed to be at risk of PSAs.
4. **Housing and Benefit Advice:** Conducted in the physical offices of the organisation in Derry (Costello House) and West Belfast (Connelly House).
5. **Residents' Groups:** The organisation was noted by both members and community workers to be linked to a residents' association in West Belfast.
6. **COVID-19 Specific Activism:** With the formation of Republican Socialist Aid at the beginning of the pandemic delivering food parcels to vulnerable members

of the community and producing PPE and hand sanitisers for care homes and medical centres. This started in Derry before being replicated across the IRSP's other operating locations.

The Sovereignty Movement

The second anti-Agreement republican organisations in which an identifiable shift in strategic direction can be observed is the Sovereignty Movement. This change looks different to that of the IRSM in that such a shift can be directly tied to the ending of a previously dominant organisational strategy: that of state-directed violence.

Indeed, it is a shift made all the more remarkable given the organisation's life-history where, as well as being the first of the republican Movements to emerge *specifically* in opposition to the Provisional Movement's move towards the Peace Process, the RIRA has long occupied a dominant position within the AARM both through size, capability, and attacks conducted, including the sophistication of these (see both the Introduction and Chapters 1 and 2). From inception as a discernibly separate group in 1997, the 32CSM has been linked to the RIRA, itself formed by high-ranking members of the PIRA—including the then Quartermaster and chairman of the Executive of the Army Council, both positions of considerable prestige and power (Sanders, 2012: p. 209; Frampton, 2011: p. 90–91). Indeed, from between the years of 1998–2012, the dominant strategic direction of the group can be observed to be state-directed violence, with the 32CSM occupying a subservient role as a way to 'publicise the cause that united the two organisations—and in the process create a hinterland of support for the Real IRA and its violent campaign' while sharing overlapping membership, including at a leadership level (Sanders, 2011: p. 100–101).

~

Again, though members of the organisation active during this period noted that the group conducted community activism, particularly in urban areas post-2005, they conceded that such activism could be characterised as "sparse and reactionary" (32CSM-1). Instead, on the non-military side, the focus and primary direction pursued by the group through the 32CSM was its attempt to use legal avenues to negate any potential negotiated compromise to the civil conflict, with the 32CSM lodging a document with the UN on the subject prior to the signing of the GFA:²²

The objective was to use international law to challenge the British claim to sovereignty and to challenge the participants in the Good Friday Agreement about what right they had to negotiate away our sovereignty.

32CSM-1

Yet as early as 2012, the RIRA had ceased to functionally exist wherein much of the membership and structures of the group was subsumed into the NIRA, and later much of the 32CSM membership joined the NIRA's alleged political wing, Saoradh (32CSM-3).

In 2012, media outlets published a series of articles following the shooting of the alleged Officer Commanding of the RIRA in Dublin, who had been shot in a "punishment attack", part of the starting of a purge by a new leadership being termed at this point the "new" IRA; and which was confirmed later that year (An Sionnach Fionn, 2012).

Such a shift was contested internally. The New Movement took over the Sovereignty Movement's longstanding prisoner welfare and representation organisation, the Irish

²² The document remains on-hold due to the proscription of members of the 32CSM entering the United States to formally pursue the document at the UN in New York following the designation of the group as a terrorist organisation by the US following the Omagh bombing perpetrated by the RIRA, the paramilitary wing of the Sovereignty Movement (32CSM-1).

Republican Prisoner Welfare Association (IRPWA), with members noting that there were active threats to life against those who stayed within the Sovereignty Movement (32CSM-3). There was even tension over ownership of mural space given over to the 32CSM on the "International Wall" in West Belfast (see **Figure 13**; 32CSM-3).

It is also unclear as to why what was left of the RIRA decided not to rebuild (as it had done in the past regarding other splits). McGlinchey, (2021: p. 718) regards the group to be inactive following the merger of much of the structure and personnel into the NIRA, which suggests that membership and some organisational structures of the group remains active—though members of the 32CSM interviewed maintained that they would be the only group within the AARM not to possess a paramilitary wing (3).²³

~

Yet, the 32CSM did not cease to exist. Instead, the organisation has begun to pivot into community activism in both areas where it was previously active in the Republic of Ireland (notably Cork, where members noted that both the RIRA has a strong presence and retains an active Cumainn), and Northern Ireland.

Importantly, members within the organisation noted that the shift towards community activism can be understood as a specific "strategy" (32CSM-2), something which can also be discerned in the statements made on behalf of the 32CSM's leadership body in their Bodenstown address of 2017:

²³ Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the Cork RIRA remained active beyond the creation of the NIRA, with a PSA of former RIRA member Adrian O'Driscoll in Cork in June 2013 attributable to that organisation and not the NIRA due to the releasing of a statement on the attack by the 32CSM (RIRA, 2013).

In these changed times, Irish republicanism must have the courage and foresight to adapt to the political environment we find ourselves in. A fundamental recognition of these changed times is an essential prerequisite to political advancement. Our objectives remain the same. It is our strategic approach to them which must change.

32CSM, 2017

Within this changed strategic pathway, which they characterise as "Applied Republicanism", which they note was developed with the National 1916 Commemoration Committee, is an argument around the need for both increased republican cooperation, and relevance within the community:

Applied Republicanism observes that the Republic we strive for is not an end point, but a constant work in progress. An Irish Republic will not fall from the sky, nor be yielded from a so-called border poll, but will be built on the foundations of established rights secured by republican and socialist activism. Republicans have always feared that social politics could distract from the national question. But the point we need to stress is that social politics itself contains many national questions to answers to which demands the removal of partition. Therefore, it is imperative that republicans and socialists integrate social and national struggles in order to achieve both.

32CSM, 2017

Within this statement is both a recognition of the need to recentre community and political activism within a new strategic republican direction, *and* that such work is, like that of the IRSM, understood to be an active method of achieving wider objectives. In practice, this amounts to what members of the group see as a renewed emphasis on community activism, which members claimed the majority of personnel within the organisation are involved in (32CSM-3).

~

Again, like the IRSP, the manifestation of this strategy has a notably local character, with cumainn engaged in locally specific campaigns:

1. **Housing Activism:** Mainly in Belfast, including picketing landlord events.
2. **Environmental Campaigns:** Predominantly conducted in rural areas in the Republic of Ireland on ad hoc issues.
3. **Anti-Drug work:** Activism particularly focused on in Cork and appears to be limited to 2016. Involves demonstrations outside the homes of alleged drug dealers.
4. **Housing and Benefit Advice:** Notably conducted through the organisation in Derry with a linked community centre in the Creggan, though not managed directly by the organisation.
5. **Sporadic community patrols:** Often tied to particular flares in sectarianism in Belfast, and community patrols around anti-social behaviour in Derry.

The Unity Movement

The final organisation which has both observably moved towards community activism as a primary organisational strategy and which has ceased state-directed violence is that of the Unity Movement.

Like the previous organisations covered, state-directed violence has been the main organisational strategy of the group since 2009, where RNU is thought to have merged with the paramilitary organisation and RIRA splinter ONH. In the nine years that the organisation was identifiably active, ONH had been linked to, or claimed, at least 16 separate state-directed violent acts, including attacks on commercial premises, the PSNI, and the security services; and had been regarded as one of the more capable of the anti-Agreement paramilitary groupings (Morris, 2018).

Like all groups within the AMF, the Unity Movement during this period, through RNU, was also engaged in non-violent activism. From 2008–2015, one participant noted that

the group were engaged in "a lot of community work" (RNU-3). Such identifiable activism during this period included: protests, an effort to engage more with mainstream media, and what Hoey describes as 'more attention grabbing stunts — guerrilla activism like occupations and vandalism of premises', noting the overlap between these forms of activities and 'the republican activist strategies of the Troubles' (Hoey, 2018: p. 157). Overwhelmingly, however, this same participant also conceded that within this time period, "the big one [issue the group was engaged in] would have been the prisoners issue" (RNU-3).

~

In January 2018, the strategic direction of the Unity Movement dramatically changed, beginning with ONH's announcement of its ceasefire:

While ONH accept that the right of the Irish people to use armed disciplined force to end the violation of Irish national sovereignty is unquestionable, our review has concluded that, at this time, the environment is not conducive to armed conflict.

ONH, 2018

It was not unexpected. A few months earlier, in October 2017, RNU's Ard Chomhairle (Irish for executive body), and cumainn in Derry and Dublin suddenly announced their mass-resignation, effectively collapsing the group. Those resigning explained their reasons for doing so in a statement published on *The Pensive Quill*—the website of Anthony McIntyre, a former member of the PIRA and prisoner and one of the leading independent critical voices within independent Irish republicanism—those leaving characterised RNU as an organisation,

... no longer capable of functioning and thriving in the current political climate... [suffering from] a lack of any political strategy—and more precisely one to differentiate it from the other republican groupings—poor morale, stunted growth and a growing issue within the unmanageable and ambiguous organisation of Cogús [the organisation's prisoner group].

The Pensive Quill, 2017

These resignations themselves followed the arrests of key members of the organisation on paramilitary charges. In 2015, the then chairperson of RNU, Carl Reilly, was arrested on directing terrorism charges²⁴, while Seamus McGrane (one of the primary figures in the establishment of ONH as a distinct group) was also arrested on (and later convicted of) directing terrorism charges following an alleged bombing conspiracy against then Prince Charles during his visit to Ireland that year (MacDermott & Hickey, 2017).

Interviewees acknowledged that these collapses started a conversation around strategic change, in a process self-titled as the "rebuild": a "new strategy" (RNU-2) based on social and community activism within working-class CNR areas, undertaken by continuing members of the group who had begun to reform and re-establish the party. Such a change was explicitly labelled as a "political transition" (RNU-4).

Further corroborating evidence around a strategic shift can be found in the statements of RNU during this period in which this pivot is both well demarked and explicitly understood as a continuation of achieving existing objectives:

Let us be clear! The end of one campaign is not the end of the struggle but merely the beginning of a new phase of the same struggle.

RNU, 2018

²⁴ Later dropped. Reilly was sentenced in 2023 for the lower offence of IRA membership, which he pled guilty to (McDonald, 2023).

~

It is important to note that despite this change, like the INLA, ONH still clearly exists as a paramilitary entity and has been repeatedly tied both in the press and among interviewees to continuing community-directed violence, notably in an uptick in high-profiles of murders of drug-dealers in West Belfast from 2018 (coinciding with ONH's ceasefire) within a small area and with attacks sharing similar profiles (Morris, 2024). Yet, the continuation of this type of violence does not preclude community activism as the organisation's primary strategic direction, and may actually be linked to it, with mediators tying the increase in community-directed violence and PSAs by ONH post-ceasefire to a wider process whereby the organisation is attempting to establish community support and engagement from which further activism can be further built upon:

ONH is becoming more involved in community violence and at the same time want to become more involved in community politics... [trying] to build up a community base by shooting dealers... gives them credibility to get involved in community politics.

MED-2

The logic, the same mediator noted, is that "if people are already going to them for one thing", then in the future they could go to them for another (MED-2). This is also similar to the Provisional Movement's uptick in community-directed violence during the PIRA's ceasefires in the 1990's, described as a "template for the dissidents" (MED-2).

~

As with the preceding cases, the community-targeted activities within this strategy differ according to location:

1. **Suicide Prevention Patrols:** An activity exclusive to Derry where the organisation is tied to its own grouping which conducts patrols along the River Foyle, a hotspot within the city for suicide.
2. **Community Patrols:** Conducted in working-class CNR communities in both Derry and Belfast.
3. **School Meals Campaign:** Members in Derry claim to be working with community groups in the city to identify young people in food poverty.
4. **Christmas Meals Campaign:** Food parcels in Belfast to those in food poverty over the Christmas holiday period.
5. **Food Bank:** RNU is currently engaged in one foodbank in Belfast, and notes plans to operate its own in the near future.
6. **The Trade Union Movement:** The group has also become involved in the trade union movement in Belfast.

3.4. Same "Hymn Sheet", Different Tunes: Strategic Choice and Implementation

The previous section has outlined strong evidence that strategic change *is* visible within three groups within the AMF around a belief that community activism is now the best method of perusing organisational and movement objectives. Similarly, it has demonstrated that for two of the five groups, such a move has been accompanied by a cessation of state-directed violence.

This poses some questions. The first of these, *why* this is occurring and *why now*, is explored in the next Chapter (moreover, why this is observable within some but not all groups within the AMF is covered in Chapter 6). But additionally, there remains two outstanding questions surrounding processes of change and its implementation:

1. How are groups able to navigate processes of strategic change?
2. Why can such inter-organisational variation be observed within the groups regarding community activism?

Combined: what explains this homogeneity at an organisational level, and heterogeneity at a local level?

This section specifically looks to ground how groups within the AMF are able to alter strategic directions, and the inter-organisational mechanisms by which this occurs. In doing so, it creates, for the first time within studies pertaining to anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, both a networked image of organisational structures and decision-making processes (common to all groups within the AMF) and an understanding of *how* organisations navigate and decide upon processes and changes in directions internally.

Moreover, it offers significant advantages both in further unpacking the somewhat organisational and institutional approach to decision-making processes within the AMF outlined in the previous Chapter, *and* further evidences that strategic change is indeed occurring (and is understood at a membership level) within a subset of actors within this cohort—going beyond the macro-organisational level to incorporate local dynamics and individual preferences.

Who Decides? Networking Strategic Choice

If the argument made both in the last Chapter and the above sections holds that organisations possessing both paramilitary and political wings share common overarching decision-making processes and are able to take collective decisions pertaining to both, then an outstanding question remains *how* they are able to do so.

This is something particularly important if discussing processes of strategic change which is accompanied by a decreasing role of one part of that organisation, and an increasing role of another.

Yet there is no existing work which explicitly delineates how this actually occurs. Perhaps one of the explanations for this gap lies in the hierarchical nature of republican paramilitaries, and the dominant position that these have historically had in groups possessing both paramilitary and political wings (Hannigan, 1985; Von Tangen Page & Smith, 2000).

Where work has been undertaken on the organisational structure of the PIRA, for example, a rigidly top-down structure has been established, characterised as 'a cellular-based, hierarchically organised authoritarian structure ensuring both operational and non-operational efficiency' (Horgan & Taylor, 1997: p. 3). While there currently exists no work in which has mapped the structure of anti-Agreement Irish republican paramilitaries, it is assumed that due to the direct lineage of all but one of the groups within the AARM from the Provisional Movement, this network structure (overviewed in **Figure 17** below) should also be expected to be broadly replicated across the cohort.

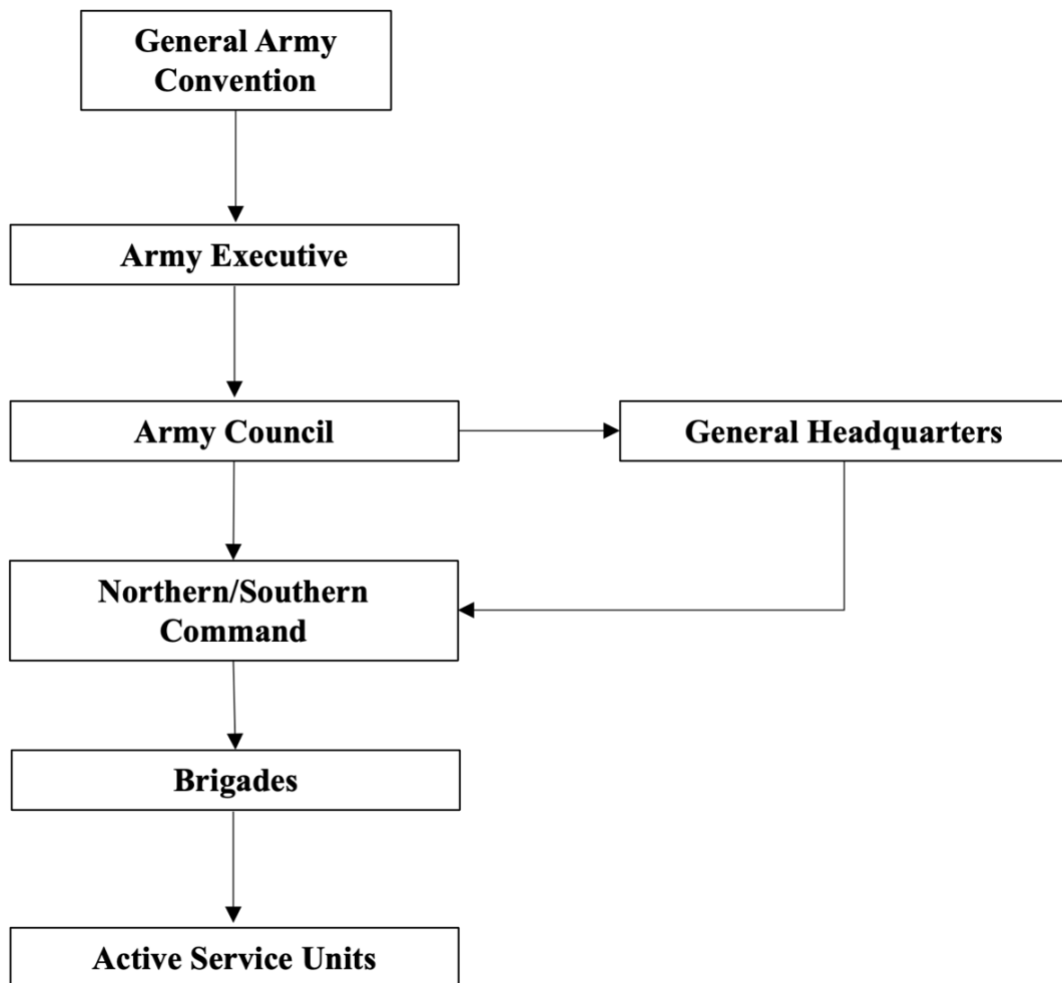


Figure 17 - PIRA Structure

Notes: Adapted from "The Provisional Irish Republican Army: Command and Functional Structure," by J. Horgan and M. Taylor, 1997, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 9(3), p. 26.

Within political wings—the groups tasked with conducting non-violent tactics including community activism—it is possible to provide nuance and indeed challenge this hierarchical model of decision-making.

During the course of interviews, members across the range of political organisations engaged with for this project provided a broadly common overview of what the internal structures would look like within their groups, and how decisions are made within this. This model was overwhelmingly similar across groups to the point in which a standardised model can be created for the first time, shown below in **Figure 18**.

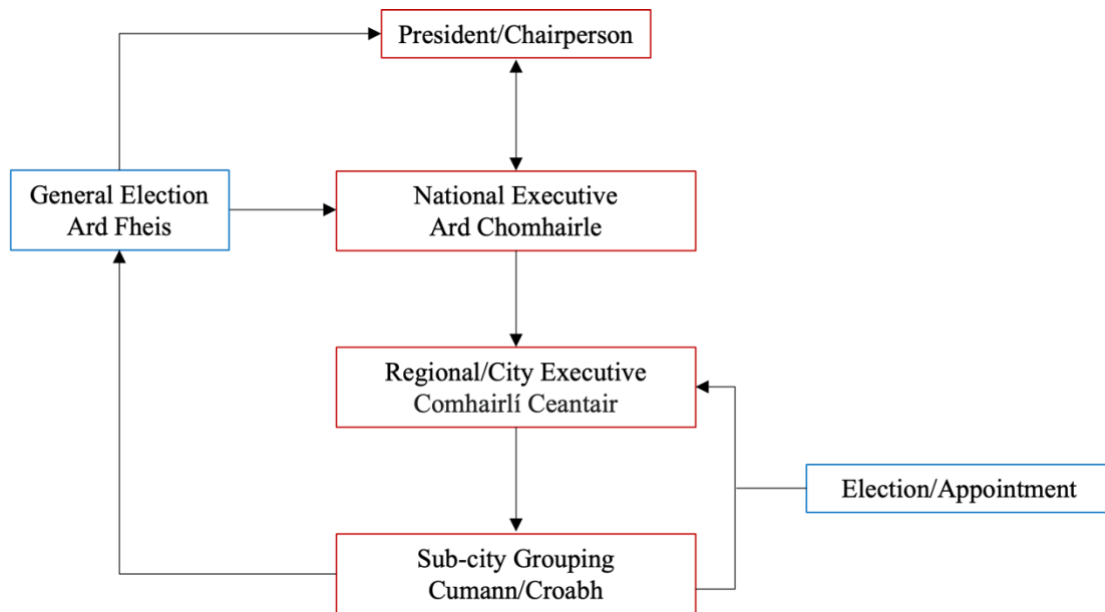


Figure 18 - Composite AARM Political Organisation Structure

Note: Boxes coloured blue indicate elections, red boxes indicate organisational sub-groups, arrows indicate flow of power.

At first glance, this network looks again, as in the case of paramilitary wings, to be considerably hierarchical. At the top level of the organisation lies the National Executive (Ard Chomhairle—Irish for 'high council'), responsible for all decisions which affect the group nationally, including organisational strategy; and then implemented by the city or sub-city groupings, known as craobhs (plural: Irish for "branch"), or cumainn (plural: Irish for "association"; singular: cumann)—smaller local groups over a particular area which correspond to areas of support and membership.²⁵

In reality, however, this image of intra-organisational power is far more nuanced. Firstly, there are different "middle management" positions throughout political wings.

Most groups operate a sub-national executive (Comhairlí Ceantair), and regional/city executives in areas which cover specific geographies (including locations in which

²⁵ These are also tied to membership size as well as support. For example, the IRSP notes that in Belfast the organisation would operate five cumainn, with a growth in membership in particular locations resulting in a corresponding increase, while the 32CSM in Derry noted that while the organisation would have once operated 3 cumainn, the organisation would now just operate one.

groups are large enough to operate several different *cumainn*)—with these having their own autonomy (see below).

Likewise, executive positions at these different levels are elected. Elections not only ensure democratic representation from different locations of the party, but members also vote on members and policies and candidates running on specific policy platforms. This most obviously occurs during an organisation's *Ard Fheis* (annual general meeting), which serves as a forum to decide the future strategic direction of the organisation and air debate, with the freshly elected executive during this event reviewing existing organisational strategy (SOAR-1; IRSP-5).

This is also the same structure used by Sinn Féin, which undertook all-organisational votes to accept positions at each stage of the Peace Process, including the decision to stand for elections in the Republic of Ireland, the decision to end abstentionism in Northern Ireland, and the decision to accept the PSNI in 2007; and who voted on the leaderships of Adams and McGuinness (Hepworth, 2024; White, 2017).

~

These votes and elections not only ensure a substantial degree of organisational "buy in" for strategic change, but they also serve as a check on the previous decision-making of the national executive over the past year, while additionally allowing individual members to have a voice on the direction of the organisation as a whole through voting on motions and the composition of the *Ard Chomhairle*.

Moreover, in the processes of strategic change within the 32CSM, the IRSP, and RNU, there is significant evidence (both through the statements of groups and interviews), that such outcomes are part of wider processes of debate *across* organisations. In the initial move towards community activism within the IRSM, for example, the statement

by the IRSP indicate debates within both the INLA and the IRSP over the future direction of the group:

Since the referendum, we have been engaged in consultations with many agencies and individuals and have come to the following conclusions... we call on the Irish National Liberation Army, who we know have been considering a ceasefire, to reach a decision quickly.

IRSP, 1998

The recent move towards community activism by the organisation was noted by interviewees and statements to have emerged from 'a yearlong internal debate within the IRSP' (IRSP, 2018b) and approved at the Ard Fheis (IRSP-1). Interviews with members of the RNU about their process of strategic change characterised this as resulting from a "think tank situation " in which those within the organisation "brought all our members together and elected people together" to form a new organisational leadership and decide upon a new strategic direction (RNU-3).

~

Such a model of decision-making can help with understanding how community activism has been decided upon within the organisations which have done so. It is unlikely that actual networks between paramilitary and political wings will ever be discernible given the clandestine nature of paramilitary groups. Yet the evidence presented here suggests an image that strategic change *is* heavily mediated by organisational memberships, who give their consent to both changes in strategic directions through voting and elections, and who may be heavily integrated within the change process.

Implementation: Top-Down Orders, Local Decisions?

The other puzzle posed by organisational claims of strategic change surrounds the heterogeneity within how this appears to have been (and continues to be) implemented, as evidenced by the different activism undertaken by cumainn operating in different locations.

The answer, as the previous sub-section has alluded to, is that of autonomy within cumainn. It should be made explicit that interviewees within these groups noted that there are clear limits to the extent of this local freedom, with all groups keen to note there would remain clear organisational oversight around strategic implementation and activism engaged within:

[There are] very clear expectations within RNU over grassroots and the leadership to focus on community activism.

RNU-4

There's a structure—a cumann wouldn't have a free run.... If a local grouping has an idea that it would like to involve itself within [they would] bring it forward for approval and guidance...if we approve something, we take responsibility.

RNU-3

If a cumann has an idea or policy design, go to the Ard Chomhairle for approval.

IRSP-2

This top-down oversight and structure was also noted to be important in ensuring the long-term feasibility of actions undertaken in a manner which ensures that the strategy itself is both replicable and will have the best opportunity at success:

Don't want a cumann to do something that lasts six weeks—want something long term to attract the public.

RNU-3

Beyond this oversight, however, local cumainn have significant flexibility in the forms of activism that they conduct. At one level, this variation appears to be an effort through which organisations are seeking to be as resonant and relevant as possible within the communities in which they are engaged by focusing on salient issues within these areas—a topic further explored in the next Chapter.

Looking to be as relevant as possible with the community at the ground level and building up from here...choose things relevant to the community.

RNU-3

Quite focused on what local issues members see and [activism] would be down to them.

32CSM-1

This differentiation was often explained by the following phrase: "what's relevant in X location may not be relevant to Y location":

What's relevant in Derry is not necessarily relevant in Belfast.

RNU-2

If something effects a housing estate in Lurgan, it may not filter down to Newry—local cumainn deal with that.

RNU-3

While all activism would be under one hymn sheet... [the] template trying to use in Cork may not be something that works in other areas.

32CSM-4

Put bluntly by one participant, organisations ask the question: "what raises the profile" of a group in a particular area by focusing on pertinent issues (32CSM-4), and while all groups noted to some degree that activism is "reactive" (IRSP-6)—"whatever social issues come up" (32CSM-2)—they were also aware that perceptions that groups were being "opportunistic" by the community could backfire and that this could be seen as a lack of genuine interest (32CSM-3). Indeed, this perception of "reactionary" activism and involvement was something frequently levelled at groups themselves from those within the mainstream community landscape and discussed in detail in the Discussion and Conclusion.

If you try to force [activism] down [the community's] throat, it backfires on you.

32CSM-4

~

Issue identification itself occurs primarily at the local level via members' own deep links within the communities in which they are embedded: "normally it's being brought to your attention" (32CSM-4). Interviewees note that it would be these community links and their profiles of being republicans which ultimately determines organisational awareness of relevant and salient issues—"most members would be recognised as republicans" (32CSM-4), and that contact is usually made by people who "knock on your door" (IRSP-2): "people know who we are and come to us for assistance" (SAOR-1).

Groups also identify issues—and signal engagement around this to communities—via hyper-local social media profiles. Facebook appears to be the predominant method across all groups of communicating with local communities online, partly due to the ability to curate specific Facebook pages for given geographical operating areas. The IRSP, for example, has at least three social media profiles (active as of the time of writing) for Belfast, with each page corresponding to a particular area in the city that the organisation has an existing physical presence within²⁶. Interviewees from all organisations pointed to the "massively important role" that social media has in highlighting active real-world community activism—particularly those within the local area itself, allowing for the "hyper-focusing" of organisational messaging (IRSP-1)—for contacting groups—"vast majority [of issues] coming by social media"—and picking up salient issues.

~

Additionally, groups appear cognisant of community norms which can constrain or drive the types of policies pursued in a given area, perhaps most clearly seen in the different forms of activism undertaken on each side of the Irish border.

For interviewees present in the Republic of Ireland, they routinely expressed that activities undertaken by groups in locations south of the Irish border are different to those in Northern Ireland due to the different community norms in these locations and challenges in attempting to demonstrate the relevancy of Irish republicanism to communities which have not experienced the same level of violence or paramilitary embeddedness as Northern Ireland: "there's a different type of activism in the south" (32CSM-4):

²⁶ As previously mentioned in the Methodology Chapter, social media profiles are very subject to change, with Facebook removing multiple pages, something particularly notable around Saoradh which launched a legal challenge against the platform in 2019 (Kearney, 2019).

Anti-imperialism [is] not as big as a motivating factor—distinctly second place.

IRSP-6

Instead, participants from the Republic of Ireland explained that due to this difference, organisations in these locations had long focused predominantly on community activism, preceding even strategic change (32CSM-4):

Focus on local issues here—housing, healthcare, drugs—have to identify something that's relevant.

32CSM-4

A lot is what the community was doing 20–40 years ago... not reinventing the wheel.

IRSP-6

Moreover, groups also conceded that a different acceptance of particular forms of activism by the community in the Republic of Ireland, such as community patrols, would preclude groups from engaging in this compared to this activism being actively conducted in areas of Northern Ireland.

~

Beyond both push and pull factors around activism based on strategic considerations and the salience of this in furthering organisational objectives, variation can also be explained by member interests. Indeed, a common talking point from participants across the AMF was the strong effect members can have on overall activism in a particular location, and how this is seen by the public:

It's horses for courses... people are attracted to what's personally interesting to them, it doesn't make them less of an activist... people have interests and are drawn towards these.

RNU-3

Partly, this is due to memberships of local sub-units of organisations being comparatively small. No organisation (outside Saoradh and the IRSP in Derry, and the 32CSM in Cork) placed a local membership figure above 20. Within these small groups, interviewees acknowledged that policy itself is driven by an even smaller "inner core" of members, with one member of the IRSP noting that within their specific cumann, while there are 20 members "constantly" involved in activism, a committee of five are responsible for organisational operations on a daily basis (IRSP-4).

This committee size was broadly consistent across the AARM, in which 4–5 members are actively involved, but a lot more would be active and involved in independent work, with members doing things that "motivate them" (32CSM-4). To take the example of youth work in Belfast, an interviewee within this cumann noted that the membership of this group is largely female and brought in by youth work itself, increasing the organisation's engagement on the topic—something also noted across RNU, and explored in more detail in Chapter 6.

Outside of organisational leaderships, sub-organisational variation through member effects can also be observed through the impact that individuals have on strategic implementation through their own actions undertaken either within or outside of local groups; with all groups noting that members are encouraged to join organisations outside their own (32CSM-4; IRSP-4):

[Organisational leaderships] encourage members to join other organisations to help the working-class.

32CSM-3

Allowing members to involve themselves within activism that they are most interested in and inspired by additionally encourages members to stay and remain engaged within that organisation. One interviewee within the 32CSM, for example, noted that the organisation, in allowing members to pursue their own areas of interest, had been "learnt from the mistakes of the past" in adopting too rigid structures, and argued that it would be "political suicide" to change this (32CSM-2).

Moreover, participants also argued that their respective organisations would encourage some form of obfuscation over activism. This deliberate decision to, in-some cases, operate outside without a visible organisational link allows groups to encourage engagement in forms of activism which by those not affiliated with the group participating allowing for the better managing organisational resources, and with an acknowledgement that linked activities by other parts of the organisation (namely allegations of paramilitary activity) could damage these initiatives if linked:

Historically, the Erps [IRSP] have been very reluctant to fly a flag... have always operated in the shadows... some places [community groups] is all Erps but done under different fronts.

IRSP-5

Allows us, in smaller numbers, to have more influence... anything RNU does negatively impacts them.

RNU-2

3.5. Discussion: Internal Components of Change; Power, Agency, and Legitimacy

This Chapter has sought to outline and evidence the main focus of this project: a comparatively recent shift and cleavage within the primary organisational strategies pursued by organisations within the AARM between community activism and state-directed violence.

There is clear evidence from across groups that such a process is occurring. For the Unity and Sovereignty Movements, this has been accompanied by a cessation in state-directed violence, with community activism understood as a deliberate strategic re-orientation in light of this (further explored in Chapter 4). For the IRSM, it is more subtle: it is a process by which community and political activism is being increased rather than a dichotomy between this and state-directed violence, with the organisation increasingly pursuing this since the 1990s.

Yet for all three, community activism *is* understood as the primary method of achieving organisational objectives, accompanied by genuine changes within policy and organisational understandings alongside activism conducted.

~

Of the latter, the Chapter—alongside its descriptive value in setting the stage for wider analysis of why such change has occurred—in demonstrating evidence of this strategic change through implementation, and by providing a network model of *how* decisions are made within organisations within the AMF, it also offers insights into organisational decision-making, power, and agency, among violence-utilising groups *beyond* the isomorphic institutional forces outlined in Chapter 2.

Implementation, neatly surmised as 'what happens after a decision has been reached concerning organizational action', is the process of how organisations turn strategies

from theory to reality (Sproull & Hofmeister, 1986: p. 43). Such a focus has obvious importance for understanding organisational choice, something well described by Jasper (2004: p. 2–10) in their argument that:

Without examining the act of selecting and applying tactics, we cannot adequately explain the psychological, organizational, cultural, and structural factors that help explain these choices... Participants in social movements constantly face choices. It is in those choices that we see the cultural meanings, moral sentiments, emotions, and forms of rationality of groups and individuals.

Deconstructing choice, therefore, by exploring *how* organisations actually navigate these does more than simply outline processes but can actually help to understand the *mechanisms* behind these.

Yet despite its obvious importance, implementation, and indeed decision-making structures more broadly, receives surprisingly scant attention across the disciplines pertinent to this project. Organisational Theory has been criticised for a tendency to 'assume too simple a link between the development of strategic direction and its actual implementation via the allocation of resources' (Day & Wensley, 1983: p. 86; see also Noble, 1999; Rapert et al., 2002). Likewise, within Social Movement Studies while there is considerable literature around structural components for *why* groups enact the activities that they do, far less has been written about micro-level components of choice and the end product of this (Jasper, 2004: p.3). This is not only a critique among studies of non-violent groups. As Shapiro has lamented—in one of the few works to specifically focus on how covert, violence-utilising organisations are *managed*—there exists a 'critical gap' in the current literature on how these types of groups practically make decisions (Shapiro, 2017: p. 17).

Additionally, there remains an issue in all of these literatures around *power*. Despite a decade having passed since della Porta and Rucht's (2013) lament that—despite few exceptions—there exists a lack of literature on *power* and internal dynamics within Social Movement Studies, and the field on this topic still remains understudied. Within the scholarship on violence-utilising groups, processes of decision-making and power is effectively ignored. And though, of the latter, there exist genuine difficulties with effectively networking internal structures, as Shapiro (2017) argues,

From a policy perspective, understanding how terrorist groups are organized is obviously valuable in its own right, but it can also provide insight into policy debates by providing a stronger foundation for thinking through what we should expect groups to do under different scenarios.

Shapiro, 2017: p. 17

~

In understanding processes and networks of decision-making within groups and how strategies are manifested through implementation processes, the central argument of this thesis—that choices made are adaptive to the environments in which they are embedded, but which are also culturally resonant in that they meet core components of organisational and wider movement identities—is discernible. What community activism looks like within the specific areas in which groups are embedded exhibits clear signs that they have been adapted to better resonate with particular issues faced and pertinent to the communities within them. But it also demonstrates the importance of member agency and interests in navigating activism. Organisational hierarchies exist, but at every level of the decision-making process from discussion to implementation, individuals and subgroups have a considerable amount of agency and power.

~

The size of these organisations within the AMF may of course provide strong incentives for democratic processes and the need to allow local agency. The small networks of these groups make it imperative to structure choice in ways which conform to inter-organisational understandings and how these decisions are framed internally in ways in which they are understood to be *legitimate* (Rucht, 2023). Likewise, in deliberately seeking membership acceptance for both leaderships and strategic directions, organisations are at less risk of producing dissention around topics, including the navigation of substantive strategic change. Moreover, encouraging local autonomy and allowing for strategic flexibility seems deliberately designed to foster engagement and sustain commitment within these organisations.

It also further demonstrates the cultural and organisational diffusion dynamics outlined in Chapter 2 (around a republican tactical repertoire). It is striking to note the parallels of organisational structures and decision-making dynamics between the Provisional Movement and groups within the AMF: including the navigation of strategic change (see Ashour & Clubb, 2021; Clubb, 2016, 2017; Hepworth, 2023, 2024; White, 2010, 2017). Though hardly surprising given the origins of most of these groups from the Provisional Movement in terms of structures and memberships, nevertheless, formally including network structures of organisations within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism offers genuine contributions to understandings and analysis of these organisations in ways which goes beyond the monolithic images of these groups.

~

Beyond these contributions, in outlining for each organisation the origins of change for each organisation within a similar timeframe, this Chapter also touches upon what appears to be a common underlying mechanism at the heart of the change process: a

widespread perception of organisational misalignment with the environments in which they are embedded—defined here under the concept of *decline*.

4

Adapting to Decline: Explaining Strategic Change

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People within communities don't care about politics, [they] care about surviving... republicanism as an ideology isn't really relevant to people's lives.

RNU-2

4.1. Introduction

What explains why three different organisations within the AMF have undergone a similar process of strategic change, with a shared outcome of community activism, within a common timeframe?

The argument posited at the end of the last Chapter is that such convergence can be explained by an overarching causal mechanism: that of perceptions of *decline*. Decline is understood here as a label of what is more accurately definable as a belief that organisations and their existing strategies are maladapted to their operational environments, with such maladaptation having both internal and external components (Mckinley, 1993).

Among the organisations comprising the AARM, decline appears to be occurring in two different ways:

1. **Organisationally specific decline:** This pertains to both the Unity and Sovereignty Movement, for whom strategic change can be seen to be tied closely to sudden setbacks in organisational capability notably through splits, resignations, and arrests.
2. **Longer term, movement wide decline:** Visible across all organisations and which itself can be split into four distinct (but overlapping) sub-processes:
 - a. a belief that state-directed violence as a method of achieving organisational objectives is ineffective at doing so,

- b. a claim that all organisations are struggling to remain relevant to communities whose support is vital for continued survival,
- c. a perception that groups are suffering in relation to how they are perceived within this community linked to paramilitary activity, *and*
- d. a concern that groups are struggling to recruit among a cohort vital to ensuring wider organisational survival: young people.

This Chapter focuses on both facets as they relate to strategic change. For both the Unity and Sovereignty Movements, the impetus towards strategic change appears to have been what are essentially periods of organisational collapse and the need to rebuild. Yet, in the search for how to do so, these two groups believe that continued state-directed violence is no longer advantageous (and actually maladaptive) in the current socio-political climate. Moreover, these groups (alongside the IRSM) argue that anti-agreement Irish republicanism has become irrelevant and detached from communities for whom some level of support is required not only for resources and the achievement of objectives, but as a fundamental part of a wider collective Irish republican identity.

In response, community activism is positioned as an advantageous response to both these organisationally specific components of decline, and what are movement-wide, and longer-term issues within Irish republicanism, with the adoption of new strategic directions understood to be an adaptive response to this decline.

4.2. Organisationally Specific Decline: The Rebuilds

As noted in the previous Chapter, it is inescapable that for two of the three groups, moves towards increased community activism are tied directly to significant detrimental events. For both the Sovereignty and Unity Movements, the move towards community activism has overlapped with arrests, defections, and resignations within both paramilitary and political wings. Alongside a quantitative loss of members within groups, such losses have also occurred at a leadership level, with the removal of senior members within both factions. The result is that groups have been suddenly faced with *endogenous shocks*: that is, a rapid change within the capability of groups to persist with a current strategic direction. Such changes pose a genuine threat of organisational collapse.

Yet, these groups did not cease to exist. Rather, members were open in directly tying strategic change (or at least the impetus for this) to these immediate, organisationally specific events, with strategic change a deliberate attempt to "rebuild" their groups.

~

This section explicitly focuses on these two organisations individually, building up a timeline of change, evidencing change as a response to navigating challenges through the adoption of a new strategic direction, though a more detailed study of why groups have chosen community activism and understandings around the state of Irish republicanism are explored more the following section.

The Unity Movement: "Rebuild, Regroup, and Move Forward"

The loss of the executive body of RNU in 2017—alongside what those departing claimed to be 'RNU's Dublin and Derry cumainn as well a significant number of activists in Belfast, Cork, Tyrone, and the Fermanagh-Donnegal border' (The Pensive Quill, 2017)—posed a considerable challenge for RNU and its ability to function politically.

Throughout interviews with RNU members, the decision to pivot towards community activism was tied directly to the walkout of 2017 and the search for a new strategic direction. Indeed, the term used internally to refer to this "the rebuild" (used throughout interviews) understands this as a concerted effort to rebuild organisational capacity and strength in an attempt at "political transition" (RNU-4). One participant noted that, immediately following the walkout, those who remained recognised that "we were going to be sat looking at the same faces. Had to recruit new faces" and to do so, "had to get out and do something for them" (RNU-3). For this participant, such a change has been specifically understood as the need to "rebuild, regroup, and move forward."

~

Such a rebuild, and a radical change of direction was not straightforward: "Started reaching out to people again... it was hard. People were fed up" (RNU-3); with a recognition of the time and resources required to fully rebuild the group: "if a group like RNU is going to do this, need to be trained" (RNU-1). Despite being identifiable from at least 2018, members of the organisation were frank that the group would recognise that the rebuild of the organisations is "very much in an embryonic stage" (RNU-1). This same participant also candid that in rebuilding the group will be a

"significant body of work" (RNU-1). Others in the group conceded that the organisation is involved in "small scale projects" (RNU-2).

Moreover, members of ONH opposed to the ceasefire are believed to have left to create their own grouping, the Irish Republican Movement (IRM), though, despite statements to target "crown forces" (the term used by armed-force republicans to refer to the PSNI), the group has not been linked to any current attacks (Belfast Telegraph, 2018), and it is unclear to what extent this group still exists as a viable organisation. Additionally, what is believed to be at least partly an ONH splinter, Arm na Phoblactha (ANP; Irish for "Army of the Republic"), founded in 2017, has conducted attacks on the PSNI, other bombings, and murder (Young, 2023b, 2024) and was noted by mediators to be a heavily involved in PSAs in West Belfast (MED-1).

Overwhelmingly, however, the rebuild has been understood positively within the organisation. Members expressed genuine belief in the benefits of such a change, with an increase in membership figures particularly from "non-traditional" backgrounds (RNU-3), explored later in the Chapter. Moreover, as will also be discussed later in the Chapter, when discussing the need to transition, interviewees explicitly tied community activism to a process of rebuilding and organisational survival:

We believe that you can't exist if you don't have the support of the community... very much community based at the moment.

RNU-3

At the centre [of the rebuild] is social and community activism.

RNU-1

Interviews also demonstrated that community activism was being understood as a longer-term process of political and community reorientation in order to grow the group

further. Alongside training (including from the trade union movement in Northern Ireland), the organisation noted that it was attempting to modernise policy positions, and to "gain a good stronghold back in the 26 counties" (RNU-3). And participants expressed the belief that a ceasefire by ONH was advantageous in providing "more routes for the organisation to explore" (RNU-2), with this participant arguing that in response, the rebuild "has created an RNU presence that's never been seen in the city" (RNU-2).

The Sovereignty Movement: The "Springboard"

The collapse of the Sovereignty Movement—both the reasons for this and the emergence of the New Movement, and how this happened—is still something which is difficult to fully ascertain. The landscape of the group as of writing is certainly considerably reduced from its organisational high point during the early stages of the Peace Process. Members were open that they were not recruiting in Northern Ireland, and similarly explained that in one location (seemingly consistent with other locations that the organisation once maintained a clear and strong presence within), the group which once had 50 active members split into multiple cumainn would now number 9-10 (32CSM-2):

[Membership] is much reduced from the early days due to a number of splits and schisms [which has produced] quite a number of groups.

32CSM-1

When discussing strategic change, those interviewed, like participants within RNU, again tied both organisational collapse and the need to find new ways of ensuring continued existence and growth as strong driving forces.

One interviewee described that following the "absence of activity" caused by what they termed the "amalgamation", following the commemoration of Liam Lynch (an IRA officer during the Irish War of Independence killed in the Irish Civil War) in 2016, the organisation began to reconstitute, describing this as a "springboard" and a "rebirth", and demonstrated that the group "hadn't gone away" (32CSM-4).

As with RNU, members of the group conceded that such a change was relatively recent and nascent, with the organisation "just getting [back] on our feet" (32CSM-2).

Members also argued that the absence of an armed campaign produced a "pivot towards politics and community activism" in which members expressed the following line of reasoning (32CSM-2):

At present, our absence of armed activity allows for an examination of the political sphere and can explore this...with the fall in armed activity, how do we use this to our advantage?

32CSM-2

Of course, as previously outlined, this "absence of armed activity" has considerably less agency than the above quotation suggests, with this largely a result of the emergence of the New Movement. But, unlike other instances in which seemingly debilitating splits occurred within the RIRA²⁷, what was left of that organisation did not attempt to retain a paramilitary grouping. Indeed, members of the group noted that they are be the only group within the AMF to not possess a paramilitary wing (32CSM-3).

~

²⁷One of these was the loss of a significant population of the RIRA in both 1998 and 2002 in a split which resulted in all five RIRA prisoners in England and 36 out of 39 prisoners in the Republic of Ireland—including at a leadership level—departing (Frampton, 2011: p. 144, 172–176), and the arrests of senior members of the group in 2008. Something noted by interviewees to have badly affected the organisation.

The forms of engagement that the group is now involved in, and how it does so, is different from the 32CSM before 2010. Participants in Northern Ireland noted that the organisation would now understand itself as a "pressure group" which is looking to "galvanise" Irish republicanism more broadly (32CSM-2). The same participant noted that the organisation is also less centralised than prior to the split, conceding that "centralised organisations make arrests more debilitating" (32CSM-2), and instead arguing for the need to operate a "broad front" across republicanism. This is something discernible in the statements of the group since at least 2013 and particularly in the group's 2017 Bodenstown address (32CSM, 2013; 32CSM, 2017). In Cork, however, the group can still be seen to be adopting community activism as a method of specifically rebuilding the group in the area, and the membership freeze in Northern Ireland is thought to be temporary.

4.3. Long-Term Decline: The Movement Plateaus

Yet, organisationally specific drivers of decline only go so far in explaining strategic change among *all three* groups within the AMF in which such a process can be observed. Indeed, contained in the interviews with both RNU and 32CSM members that a shift in strategic direction was necessary for organisational rejuvenation, recruitment, and *relevancy* is an implicit statement that previous activities and strategic pathways were understood to be unsuitable in doing so. That is, it can explain the impetus for moves to change, but not the outcome itself. Additionally, it does not explain why such commonality can be observed across all three organisations within the same time period.

Both suggest that there is a longer-term, and intra-movement, driver of organisational change. Indeed, the following quote from a member of RNU neatly surmises a feeling

which emerged with considerable regularity across the dataset, from those inside and outside of the AMF: that anti-Agreement Irish republicanism as a movement is—and the groups within this are—experiencing what is believed to be *long-term* processes of decline:

If republicans were being honest with themselves, they would have realised that they plateaued a while ago.

RNU-1

Interviews across this project's dataset outline what are discernible as four components of this longer-term decline (outlined at the start of the Chapter), which, can be observed to have a strong degree of overlap. Certain components are more relevant to some groups than others—a reality of attempting to understand common processes of change among distinct organisations. But together, there is clear evidence that such change *is* being motivated by a fear of organisational and even wider movement *collapse* around perceptions of irrelevancy, and even backlash, towards anti-Agreement Irish republicanism as a totality.

Community activism is also clearly understood to be an advantageous method of reversing these perceptions, and increasing engagement, relevancy, and recruitment from the communities in which groups are embedded, while paramilitarism (and for those until recently involved in state directed violence), is seen as disadvantageous in meeting goals of spoiling, achieving community relevancy and support, and recruiting. Together, the perspective of those within the AMF who have moved towards community activism—and those within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism who are pushing more broadly for this transition to be made—is that there are currently two pathways in which groups are faced with. On the one hand lies increasing engagement with the community, while on the other lies a continued adherence to state-directed

violence and continued community alienation and isolation. For these participants, the choice is clear: adapt or die.

If [republicanism] continues in the trajectory of these two groups [the New and Continuity Movements] it will go into oblivion.

IND-1

Republicanism is changing... [there's a] schism within republicanism coming... those who won't change will be left behind.

RNU-2

"Standard Militarism Doesn't Cut It Anymore": The Effectivity of State-Directed Violence as a Spoiling Tactic

There is a particularly interesting discursive shift occurring among groups within the AMF which have recently jettisoned state-directed violence. For organisations which have, as described in previous Chapters, long based a central component of an Irish republican collective identity around the usage of state-directed violence, the continued application of "armed force" is now being veraciously positioned as being *incompatible* with the current socio-political landscape of Northern Ireland:

[While] not taking away the Irish people's right to armed struggle [state-directed violence is] counterproductive in the existing climate. [This is] the widespread position as we speak.

32CSM-1

We supported a call from ONH when they called for a ceasefire against attacks on the state. We commended them for releasing such a bold statement... young lads getting locked up. There's no war, put them [weapons] away. No situation presents itself to armed force, that's why we've made the call.

RNU-3

The reasons behind why this change in position is occurring *now*, and what lies behind perceptions of why violence is no longer regarded as acceptable in "the current climate" is explored in Chapter 5. But across organisations involved in this shift, the following argument is discernible regarding state-directed violence: that this strategy is an ineffective method of post-conflict spoiling.

~

Effectivity is a subjective metric, but the argument made by groups surrounding the decision to suspend violence (and to not attempt to re-engage in this), is that paramilitary groups have lost the ability to conduct meaningful levels of state-directed violence. RNU's statement on the reasons for ONHs ceasefire is remarkable in directly tying what it acknowledges is the failure of its "military campaign" to its own ceasefire decision:

If a military campaign fails to achieve its aims, the campaign has to be called off, the failures and weaknesses analysed, and the movement prepared for the future.

RNU, 2018

The 32CSM have additionally argued that there is a lack of capability within anti-Agreement republicanism more broadly to conduct a sustained effective campaign—what members from within the organisation characterise as: “sporadic activity which

doesn't have any impact whatsoever" (32CSM-1)—effectively negating the use of this as a strategy:

Serious questions continue to be posed concerning the current use of armed actions and the negative repercussions, not only on the broader republican struggle, but on the struggle of individual families who have members imprisoned. The right to use disciplined armed struggle is not in question; its irresponsible use is. That is a nettle which republicans need to grasp if other forms of effective resistance are to emerge.

32CSM, 2021

As the above quotation notes, tied to this perceived ineffectiveness of state-directed violence is a moral component, something well outlined in the language of RSF's former president Des Dalton in his comments with *The Observer* (McDonald, 2021):

There is the immorality of sending out young men and women either to take a life or else lose their own. Or to possibly face spending, 10, 15, 20 years in jail. I think morally that is not justifiable at this present moment in time. I just think that it can't be justified when the reality is there is no campaign and more so because those armed sporadic actions are working against traditional republicanism... I look at the jails and see young people facing down 10 or 20 years of their lives and then I think about something that is not an effective campaign, that isn't something leading towards some kind of significant breakthrough. In those circumstances I don't think it's justifiable to ask people to make those kinds of sacrifices and, obviously more significantly, to take a life.

Moreover, as will be further explored in the next Chapter regarding the damage caused by the murder of Lyra McKee, groups also noted that instances of civilian deaths were further evidence that such a campaign had effectively failed:

Is the level of thinking within that organisation that they don't care if there are casualties? Would question their capability and way of thinking.

32CSM-1

Here, groups are not arguing about the *right* to use state-directed violence, which they still understand as inalienable, but rather that violence itself falls far below the threshold required to effectively challenge the state and to disrupt the Peace Process and the acceptability of doing so.

Rather, this difference—what McGlinchey (2019: p. 4) terms "principles versus tactics"—has a longer history within Irish republicanism, which is explored in more depth in Chapter 6. In contrast, community activism is already understood within Irish republicanism to be an effective method of achieving core organisational objectives.

Certainly, as demonstrated in Chapter 2, community activism is already regarded as an effective method of post-conflict spoiling, previously utilised within an existing repertoire common to the AMF. This understanding that community activism is well placed to demonstrate both the failure of the State, the Provisionals, and narratives of a "peace dividend", and that such activism strongly corresponds to salient issues (see Chapter 3) has already been covered in extensive detail above.

Groups appear to increasingly recognise that community activism is an effective method of achieving this as an objective. Importantly, for the Unity and Sovereignty Movements, the saliency of community activism appears to be directly tied to what these groups now argue is the comparative ineffectiveness of state-directed violence.

As noted by one member of the 32CSM:

No-one wants to go back to the way it was but need resistance... need to stop getting people to do what Brits want us to do... and look at new ways of resistance... this is the resistance now... have to offer an alternative and show there is an alternative.

32CSM-3

Detached Either by Design or Self-Imposed: Community Relevancy:

While measuring support for violence and paramilitarism within Northern Ireland is both complex and controversial (something previously discussed in Chapter 2 and discussed further in Chapter 6), and despite Irish republicanism having other sources of legitimacy outside of the community, organisational acceptance *is* important for groups which have community protectionism as a core component of organisational identity—"they're our communities" (RNU-4)—*and* in terms of resource aggregation including the ability to operate, gain support, and recruit (see below).

A central component of perceptions of decline is a belief that groups within the AARM (and the movement more generally) have failed to demonstrate the importance of Irish republicanism to these communities:

People within communities don't care about politics, [they] care about surviving... republicanism as an ideology isn't really relevant to people's lives.

RNU-2

[those within the community] not worried about high politics, [they are] worried about their benefits being cut.

32CSM-2

Preaching history or abstract ideology will fall on deaf ears because our people have more immediate concerns... The challenge facing republicans is to integrate our objectives with the daily objectives of our people's lives.

32CSM, 2017

This argument will be explored in further depth in Chapter 5, which ties this to the success of Sinn Féin in particular and narratives around a united Ireland which groups have been largely absent from and perceived as impotent in the face of larger exogenous

events. But there is also the belief that groups have more broadly failed to convince these populations of their arguments around the failure of the GFA and attempts to tie the post-conflict status quo to a frame of second-class citizenship and oppression which was active during "the Troubles" (see Chapter 1):

Whether we like it or not, the Irish people believe that the Good Friday Agreement offers a peaceful route to a united Ireland. This does not mean that they are wrong. It means that we as republicans have failed to convince them that we are right.

32CSM, 2017

It is an argument not only limited to the Unity and Sovereignty Movements. The charge, as one member of the IRSP framed it, was that anti-Agreement Irish republicanism more broadly had failed to engage with issues "closest to the knuckle" (IRSP-6). Indeed, characterising the detachment from communities, one independent republican described this in the following terms:

Years ago, you would have known who these people are. Now no one gives a fuck. A reflection of the obscurest world in which they live... a remote island.

IND-2

~

In contrast, community activism was noted across cohorts to be better positioned to demonstrate the relevancy of republicanism to the community. Groups noted that a hyper-focusing on community salient issues, and an effort to "empower" communities would be understood as a core method of achieving "socialism in practice", as a method of recentring the community within republicanism, and the benefits that this will have for wider community buy-in. As outlined by the 32CSM:

Social politics itself contains many national questions to answers to which demands the removal of partition. Therefore, it is imperative that republicans and socialists integrate social and national struggles in order to achieve both... The importance of our objectives to the Irish people demands their inclusion in any strategic framework in pursuit of those objectives. We can no longer view the republican struggle as a struggle *for* the Irish people but rather as a struggle *with* the Irish people.

32CSM, 2017 (my emphasis)

While groups still maintain that the GFA is "flawed" an argument across interviewees was that existing anti-Agreement republican activism (particularly those associated with militarism) "is not simply enough" (RNU-1):

Simply marching to gravestones and laying wreaths cannot be a reason for existing.

RNU-1

Instead, among groups which "are detached either by design or self-imposed", organisations are "looking to be as relevant as possible with the community and building up from there" (RNU-1). Community activism is understood as a viable and advantageous method of both organisational growth and improving perceptions of legitimacy within operational areas: "Gaining support from it... attracts new members and attracts the community" (RNU-3). And, as will be demonstrated in the next Chapter, there is an increased understanding that as "ideological conditions have dovetailed with issues in Ireland", it offers an "enhanced ability" to conduct activism (IRSP-6).

Not Just Berets and Sunglasses: Community Perceptions

The second component of perceptions of community alienation is that of what was noted by those within the AARM of the need to improve perceptions: both of themselves and the wider republican movement.

There are two components to this. At one level, participants directly tied perceptions of a lack of community support to militarism: the actual use of violence or performative spoiling tactics tied to a focus on militarised displays—what one member of the RNU referred to as "marching to gravestones and laying wreaths" (RNU-1):

Standard militaristic posturing on its own doesn't cut it anymore... [Paramilitarism] actually alienates the community now... Communities understand now that the "Brits Out" stuff wasn't getting anyone anywhere.

RNU-4

Armed struggle destroys the image of republicans... tarring us all with the same brush... media and the public see us all as one and the same...

32CSM-3

Though not tied to state-directed violence directly, those within the IRSP also argued that a perceived community backlash to militarism was also being felt within the organisation, something which may help to explain decisions taken by that group to explicitly recentre the work of Ta Power. Indeed, despite having long abandoned violence against the state for broadly the same arguments noted by the RNU and 32CSM above, those within the organisation were similarly critical of continued paramilitarism by the INLA, and the perception that this is damaging to the organisation, including through challenges with community alienation:

What's the point [in maintaining the paramilitary wings]? Gives the state less to control without... [Within the organisation] on the same wavelength. Very hard to justify in 2021 the presence of paramilitaries.

IRSP-3

As discernible from the above statements, such arguments have multiple components:

1) that a perception of actual state-directed violence by other groups within the AARM is having negative social and political repercussions more broadly for anti-agreement Irish republicanism; and 2) that paramilitary activity by paramilitary wings of groups themselves is understood to be negative in regards to community perceptions, tied to perceptions of irrelevancy and alienation overlapping with arguments within the last section.

Beyond this, damaged community perceptions are also notable in allegations of criminality tied to anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. Fundamental to the notion of Irish republicans as defenders of working-class CNR communities is a cultivated image of groups as being implacably opposed to organised criminality—and in particular, drug dealing. From the early days of the Provisional Movement, recreational narcotics have been held as a particular bogymen within working-class CNR communities, partly due to the PIRA's hard-line position—especially around heroin and opiates—within their operational areas, in which use and dealing of drugs was "policed" violently (Lindsay, 2012). Though the organisation has been heavily implicated in significant criminality for fundraising, including the examples of "kidnap-for-ransom" in Chapter 1, and instances such as bank robberies, smuggling, racketeering, theft, and links to foreign criminal organisations, and while there have been allegations of protection rackets around drugs, for the most part, this does not appear to have been an organisationally sanctioned activity (in-depth reporting on the topic, see Horgan & Taylor, 1999; Woodford & Smith, 2017).

Moreover, as noted in Chapter 2, anti-Agreement Irish republicans, keen to take on this mantle of guardianship, have sought to involve themselves in a similar extra-legal policing role, particularly following the PIRA's disengagement from this following the Provisional Movement's acceptance of state-policing through the PSNI. Yet, throughout interviews, two narratives around drug dealing and criminality were raised with notable regularity, both from community workers and anti-Agreement Irish republicans themselves: 1) that drug dealing and usage has become increasingly prevalent in working-class CNR communities, and 2) that anti-Agreement republican paramilitary groups are alleged to have some form of involvement in organised criminality associated with this.

Virtually all interviewees from across interviewee cohorts, when asked about issues within their communities, raised drugs almost immediately, occasionally tying this increase to organised criminality from the Republic of Ireland as moving into working-class CNR communities:

[Drugs are] a major issue within communities... if you'd told people about heroin being an issue here you would have been laughed at... 20 years ago a heroin dealer from Dublin would have been shot or tied to a lamppost.

IRSP-1

The perceived prevalence of drug dealing in republican strongholds which continue to have some degree of paramilitary presence have raised questions over how serious organised criminals can operate seemingly without impediment in these same areas. More damning were open accusations made about organised criminality and drug dealing tied to anti-Agreement Irish republican paramilitaries in areas of Northern Ireland in which they are based—a perception most prevalent among community

workers and figures. Here, participants argued that such criminality would range from perceptions of acquiescence, to taxation, to even active participation themselves:

At the local levels, you get paramilitaries who turn a blind eye to one [criminal] group or another.

COM-1

If someone's drug dealing, if they pay them off, they'll be okay. If not, they'll be shot.

POL-1

[There is a] perception within the community that certain groups are taxing some drug dealers and shooting others.

MED-1

[Organisations are a] cover for gangsterism and drug dealing...masquerading under the flagpole of republicanism.

COM-2

Like half, don't like the other half... some want to be community workers, some want to be drug dealers.

COM-3a

These are charges most explicitly levelled against the INLA. The group has been designated a core priority by the Paramilitary Crime Task Force—a unit within Northern Ireland's Department of Justice established in 2017 to oversee police activity and investigations into organised criminality by paramilitary groups (GOV-1). Publicised arrests around narcotics and criminality have also been tied to alleged members of the organisation (Belfast Telegraph, 2024).²⁸ Though the organisation denies this as "black propaganda" (IRSP-2) and argues that this is "political policing"

²⁸ Similarly, this perception may also be fuelling tensions between the IRSM and New Movement in Derry, as noted by participants (YOUTH-3).

aimed at damaging them due to their position as an anti-GFA political party, (IRSP-4), they also appeared to concede that it was potentially damaging to their organisational image:

[The police] will raid housing, arrest two or three well known heroin dealers, smear them as members, and then tie them in [to the IRSM] to look like a drug dealing party.

IRSP-4

Links also appear to extend beyond the INLA. The police investigation and trial into the attempted murder of DCI Caldwell by the NIRA has been particularly notable, with the State alleging that the conspiracy was jointly comprised by both senior paramilitaries from the NIRA *and* members of a cross-community organised crime group (Morris, 2023; O’Neill, 2023a; Young, 2023). While, as discussed in Chapter 1, the RIRA in the Republic of Ireland was badly damaged by claims of alleged criminal involvement in Dublin in particular.

Any direct link between groups and organised criminality is very difficult to make. Participants expressed uncertainty over *what* explained criminal elements within the group. Competing hypotheses were presented included recruiting those motivated by financial gain to strengthen groups, being sanctioned by organisational leaderships, or being established by criminal elements within the organisation without organisational approval (often within the same interview)—characterised as a "continuum" of criminality (MED-1):

When you talk to the leadership, they will say that they're organisationally not involved, but seeing quite significant people within the organisation doing this.

MED-1

It is certainly plausible that these links have been exaggerated or seized upon by the State to help discredit organisations within communities. Undermining support for paramilitaries by exposing criminal links is a core mandate and purpose of the PCTF and the wider Tackling Paramilitarism Programme that it sits within, and a foundational understanding behind the Fresh Start Agreement and the subsequent panel report on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups (see the next Chapter for more information). Regardless, perceptions of criminality do appear to have damaged anti-Agreement republican organisations, as noted by one participant within the 32CSM in the Republic of Ireland who argued that,

Republicans have suffered down here [due to] criminality and protection... used as a tool to beat you with.

32CSM-OMMITTED

~

In response to these widespread negative perceptions surrounding paramilitarism (both political and criminal), participants from inside groups which have jettisoned state-directed violence noted that community activism was part of an active effort to shift their perceptions within the community, explicitly linking community activism to a push to change the image of the group and to challenge negative stereotypes of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism more broadly:

[Community activism helps to] break the stereotype of baseball cap and the bomber jacket... [demonstrate that the organisation is] not just berets and sunglasses.

32CSM-4

Interviewees within the RNU noted that such efforts were a deliberate effort to distance themselves from other groups still engaged in state-directed violence, referring to such

a move explicitly as a "rebranding process", and that explicit training was being undertaken including on media presentation to improve organisational perceptions:

Training is very important... how to present yourself when doing something for RNU [demonstrate] you're not a slouch, not a thug. Image is important.

RNU-3

Though members conceded that the organisation is still suffering from perception issues tied to ONH:

Not as well-known [as community activists]... [seen as] hardcore Dissidents...still in that Dissident brand.

RNU-2

And members of the IRSP too argued that openness, and public engagement in community activism offers the best methods of dispelling the image of groups as violent organisations somewhat separate from the communities that they are claiming to represent:

The days of blurring faces, that conspiratorial approach, its done. If you want to be a force for the working-class, you can't do it from the shadows.

IRSP-6

One participant involved in youth work expressed that their involvement stemmed from INLA violence around young people in which suicides linked to attacks had caused backlash from the community. "Horrified" and coming to the belief that this violence had "backfired" relating to organisational attempts at winning community support, they described that their involvement in youth activism was motivated by an effort to

"demonstrate that the Republican Socialist Movement isn't about beating kids" (IRSP-2). As a result of this activism, the participant noted that such activism was now being positively reported on, something that they conceded is in contrast to media reporting on criminality, and that further activism was required to improve the perception of the organisation within the community: "this is where we need to be" (IRSP-3).

Another member of the group argued that community activism had "revitalised" the organisation in Belfast, with both a growth in membership (explored below), but also that while the organisation had traditionally been seen as "headers [crazy]", such activism was important in increasing positive perceptions of the organisation among the community (IRSP-1).

Indeed, of all of the groups, community workers in areas of operational presence for the IRSP specifically tied the group to genuine community activism which was being positively received, a narrative most common in Belfast. One participant, who argued that increased community activism was a method of "trying to come out from what they used to do" and noting that the IRSM "had a bad reputation 10 years ago" (tied to perceptions of criminality), the difference in organisational perception now is "massive" with members of the IRSP seen as genuine political activists: "can't knock them for that... to be applauded" (COM-3a). Another participant believed that the group was increasing favourable perceptions due to their "really strong" activism around housing and landlords (YOUTH-2b).

"Fishing in the Same Pond": Membership Stagnation and Decline

This perception of a lack of resonance within the community and the need to increase community acceptance ties directly to the last process of organisational decline cited by interviewees across interview cohorts: a notion of stagnating and/or decreasing memberships, particularly among a key demographic that organisations within the AARM are attempting to recruit—young people (defined here as between 16–30). Interviewees from within the groups which have transitioned away from state-directed violence all expressed a growing need to recruit younger people from "non-traditional" backgrounds, into their political organisations. Members of all organisations interviewed for this project noted that young people are a particularly sought out recruitment demographic: "you're hoping for youth; they're the ones with the energy" (32CSM-4).

The motivations for targeting young people for recruitment seem obvious: they provide a new generation of members able to sustain organisations over long periods of time, as well as allowing for more engagement in activism. Yet interviewees noted two challenges around recruitment.

First, those within and close to organised anti-Agreement Irish republicanism expressed concern over *who* is drawn to contemporary Irish republicanism, a topic previously outlined in Chapter 1. One participant who had left a grouping over a divergence in armed force expressed a frustration that within the organisation,

There's no politics in recruitment which is dangerous...people who want to wear the balaclava... [recruits who want to] shout up the 'Ra [IRA] and march in colour parties... that type of political person, you're not getting now.

IND-1

Again, the charge here corresponds closely with a perception of alienation, not just from the community, but among young people in particular:

What is there to be gained from armed struggle? Call it a war, that they're keeping the flame alive for the next generation—they've lost the next generation.

32CSM-3

Certainly, a common perspective among interviewees within the AMF who had recently transitioned noted growing concern across anti-Agreement republicanism over a difficulty in recruiting young people in particular into political wings, something exacerbated by the landscape of the AARM and competition for recruitment:

Difficult to break in and convince young people to get involved in republicanism... all groups [are] fishing in the same pond... Trying to get young people involved is a challenge.

32CSM-4

As it stands, the republican Movement is not an attractive proposition for our youth. This is a self-inflicted wound, readily exploited by those who oppose us. This needs to end.

32CSM, 2016

The concern here is obvious. Recruits are a necessary component for organisations in simply maintaining their groups. For organisations which are actively looking to rebuild, recruits taken on an even greater importance for groups. Young people are particularly important. Alongside being more engaged—the “hands and feet of the movement” (IRSP-1)—(a typical understanding was that members slow down when they get older, start families, and thus have higher costs imposed on activism, both in

regarding time constraints and in the genuine potential for arrest), young people offer positive perceptions that they can continue to recruit among this demographic, and they can be trained and moulded as political activists and future leaders—all points noted by participants within the IRSP, which does operate an active youth movement, the Republican Socialist Youth Movement (RSYM).

~

Across organisations, community activism was positioned directly as being understood as the best method of increasing recruitment, particularly from what one member of the RNU referred to as the "lily whites": those with "no real republican background" (RNU-3):

[the] biggest thing [driving recruitment] would be the work that we're doing.

RNU-3

Those within RNU argued that while prior to the rebuild "99%" of members were ex-prisoners and former combatants (RNU-1), following strategic change the membership would now be split between this grouping and this non-traditional cohort. During interviews, participants from this organisation all explained that their new rebuild around community activism was contributing to increased numbers of women joining the group, with new members being "female, young, or both" (RNU-4), that that "women are involved at every level" (RNU-4), and that, based on current recruitment trends, women could soon outnumber men in the organisation (RNU-1; RNU-2).

Though difficult to independently verify, interviews with this group did corroborate such a claim. Such a process, if it is happening, would be significant. Women, despite their role in the republican movement, have been significantly omitted from much of

the republican narrative, which often portrays itself as hyper-masculine and male-driven (for a sample of work which has sought to reorient the importance of women within Irish republicanism, see Bloom et al., 2012; Gilmartin, 2015; Reinisch, 2019). Despite not having recently transitioned, the IRSP too argued that the organisation had recently witnessed increased youth recruitment and recruitment from those from "non-traditional republican backgrounds" joining around community activism (IRSP-2). In Dublin, interviewees argued that the party is now predominantly comprised of younger members, with a ceiling age of early 30, and an average membership within the mid-20s, with those joining the organisation doing so "always around social and living issues, not just about 'Brits out'", who have sought the group out for its community activism (IRSP-6). This was a sentiment echoed by other interviewees within the group, with one participant noting that that while historically, in the IRSM, people would have "come in through the other side of the house [the INLA]", recruits are now joining the IRSP due to the party's activism and activist work, alongside left-wing ideas and disenchantment with mainstream Northern Irish political parties (IRSP-1). In locations where the group had been engaged in youth issues, participants in that location similarly noted that—like RNU—the majority of members are female, something which would "stand out" both in terms of republicanism and the IRSM.

Finally, though the 32CSM is currently not recruiting in Northern Ireland, in the Republic of Ireland where the 32CSM continues to recruit, representatives from the group argued that the group had reversed its membership decline in locations such as Cork, contributing to the group reaching a pre-split high of around 50, largely new, members, with these recruits: "coming to the organisation due to community activism" (32CSM-4).

4.4. Discussion: Mechanisms of Strategic Change

This Chapter has demonstrated that perceptions of decline can be identified as the primary mechanism behind strategic change across the AARM. At one level, organisationally specific setbacks have been clearly experienced by both the Unity and Sovereignty Movements in ways which map well to two of Cronin's (2009) six pathways of decline: *decapitation* and *implosion/factionalisation*. Of the first, for the Unity Movement, such change (both the adoption of community activism and the jettisoning of state-directed violence) corresponds closely with the arrest of members in senior positions within both the political and paramilitary wings of that grouping. Moreover, RNU has also suffered from the loss of the organisation's entire Ard Chomhairle.

Considerable attention has been paid within Terrorism Studies to the role that decapitation can have on the fortunes of clandestine, violence-utilising groups, a strand of literature which increased following the "Global War on Terror" in which targeted top-level arrests and killings were (and remain) a core component of counter-insurgency campaigns (Jordan, 2009; Price, 2012). But there is limited evidence on the actual impact of decapitation on violence-utilising groups and their campaigns (Jordan, 2009, 2014; Milton & Price, 2020). Indeed, while Cronin notes that the March 2001 arrest of Michael McKevitt—then head of the RIRA—resulted in a genuine degradation of that organisation's capacity and attributed attacks, with the highpoint of the organisation's violence declining sharply following this event, the RIRA persisted as an organisation and continued attacks over a decade later (Cronin, 2009: p. 22–23). This is also true of the RNU, which despite the loss of its executive body, also managed to rebuild.

Second, both of these groups have experienced schisms—or what Cronin (2009) describes as organisational 'implosion'—which have both predated and followed strategic change. Chief among these is the emergence of the New Movement, which resulted in the loss of a significant portion of memberships of the Unity and Sovereignty Movements (even seemingly entire structures).

Certainly, the impact of schisms on organisational decline is something which considerable literature has focused on even outside of violence-utilising contentious political actors. Zald and Ash (1966), in their seminal work on Social Movement Organisations, note that 'schismogenesis'—which, among other factors, can be brought about by a concern over 'doctrinal purity' (see also Chapters 1 and 6)—is a core component of SMO 'decay', and that 'exclusive organisations are more likely than inclusive organisations to be beset by schisms' due to the limited membership sizes, tight 'doctrinal understandings', and the 'inability to weather schisms through membership increases' (Zald & Ash, 1966: p. 336–337).

Combined, these two organisationally specific processes of decline (which have considerable overlap and can be broadly understood as the loss of organisational capability), do offer salient suggestions for at least the impetus for strategic change and the search for alternative direction. In the case of the Sovereignty Movement, it is that the loss of the RIRA in particular essentially precluded this as a continuing strategy, it does not explain in of itself why the group did not try to regroup, or why members remaining did not defect to other, violence-utilising organisations. For both, the loss of a significant portion of the membership of political wings was noted to have brought about democratic, organisational-wide discussions around the future of these organisations.

~

Yet, while this is undoubtedly a core component, organisationally specific factors appear to be a necessary but insufficient part of explaining how perceptions of decline are translated into tangible action, and why community activism has been specifically adopted. Instead, the argument which arises from the data presented in this chapter is that perceptions of both decline and the need to manage this through the adoption of community activism as a pivot in strategic direction is instead grounded in longer-term, and movement wide perceptions amounting to the loss of community support.

This maps well to what Cronin terms as *marginalisation*, another of their key pathways of organisational decline: perceptions of irrelevancy, and loss of contact with "the people".

A diminution of active or passive public support, or even a popular backlash against the violence.

Cronin, 2009: p. 95

This poses, at one level, a challenge for groups which are tied within their collective identities closely to working-class CNR populations in Northern Ireland in particular, and have, as a central guiding objective, the notion of some form of community vanguardism or leadership. A perceived loss of support within these constituencies may produce significant organisational soul searching, even for groups which, as Chapter 6 will demonstrate, have other sources of legitimacy.

There is also a clear resource component to this. The role of civilian populations to violence-utilising non-state groups has predominantly been understood within both the literature and within these organisations themselves as a central method of resource aggregation, both of support and recruitment. The loss of community support (and noted challenges with recruitment, particularly for important demographics) is a concern of sustainability.

During the lifecycles of any organisation, memberships ebb and flow, with those leaving a group for a variety of reasons needing to be replaced. Without this replacement, there is a serious challenge to organisational maintenance, which, if exacerbated by internal challenges such as arrests and defections, may result in organisational *collapse*. Clandestine groups have an even greater need for recruitment, in which there exists both a genuine threat of organisational loss through arrests, something noted across interviews within the Chapter, and the challenge and predisposition in relying on existing pre-organisational social ties as to reduce the likelihood of infiltration posing a challenge of how groups can weather the loss of members—be they from arrests, individual demobilisation, or fracture (della Porta, 1992).

Work from Stevenson and Crossley on the PIRA suggests that the organisation's longevity was due to the high turnover of memberships on the periphery of the group, with constant recruitment replacing those arrested, killed, or who had left (Stevenson & Crossley, 2014). Yet, building on the findings of membership outlined in Chapter 1, this Chapter has provided evidence that many of these organisations are concerned with what they believe are stagnating memberships which skew older in age, with a challenge in recruiting younger activists from a very different generation. In contrast activism was explicitly positioned as an antidote to reversing organisational fortunes, particularly in being more resonant to audiences and a desired cohort of younger recruits.

~

Taken together, the wider argument made here is that groups understand both themselves (alongside the use of state-directed violence) to be misaligned with their environments, a central understanding of organisational decline:

Decline occurs when the organization fails to maintain the adaptiveness of its response to a stable environment, or when it fails to either broaden or increase its domination of a niche which has diminishing carrying capacity.

Greenhalgh, 1983: p. 232

On the one hand, that groups are seeking differentiation between themselves and rivals which remain engaged in state-directed violence could be seen as analogous to the search for an organisational "niche" (Carroll, 1985; Hannan et al., 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Hermans et al., 2013). Indeed, while all groups look to be competing for resources (both broader legitimacy and direct recruitment), there are competing methods in which they are now doing so. Combined with findings in Chapter 2 and 3 around the deliberate decision not to engage across organisational structures around community activism, such an argument takes on greater plausibility.

The adaptive advantages are twofold: not only do they enable the survival of the group by being more palatable to the community, but they also allow the intergenerational reproduction of the group in the recruitment of new members from beyond the traditional cohort primarily motivated by these new strategies.

However, there remain outstanding questions of the timing of these changes, and the saliency of perceptions of decline to the extent that they have forced strategic change, particularly given the fact that arguments now made by these groups as a justification for change could have occurred at any point during their organisational life-histories.

These groups have never enjoyed particularly strong relations with the wider constituencies in which they are embedded, have never been able to recruit numbers comparable to the PIRA, and violence within these groups has always been sporadic with limited "success". Moreover, for groups which are arguing that state-directed violence is maladaptive in the current climate, and that community activism is more

advantageous, there is a question of what explains what is understood to lie behind this change in perception?

The next Chapter looks to explain *where* these wider perceptions of decline have emerged from, couching these within relevant processes and events within the broader operating environment.

5

Altered Landscapes, Shifting Opportunities? Environmentally Situated Actors

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In these changed times, Irish republicanism must have the courage and foresight to adapt to the political environment we find ourselves in. A fundamental recognition of these changed times is an essential prerequisite to political advancement. Our objectives remain the same. It is our strategic approach to their pursuit which must change.

32CSM, 2017

5.1. Introduction

The last Chapter has put forward the argument that organisations within the AMF have embarked upon processes of strategic change in which community activism has been selected both as a method of reversing perceptions of decline *and* due to a belief that this is more effective in meeting intra-movement objectives including community support (and recruitment tied to this), demonstrating the failure of the GFA, and disrupting narratives around a post-conflict Northern Ireland.

But there remains an outstanding question which emerges from this: where has such a perception change emerged from, and why has this occurred now, so late into the life-histories of these groups?

~

This Chapter argues that the answer lies in changes within the *environments* in which these organisations are situated. It begins by outlining what is argued to be the main exogenous process surrounding change: that of perceptions around the increasing likelihood of a united Ireland. Yet it is not the only change which has further incentivised community activism and disincentivised continued state-directed violence. As such, the Chapter then explores what is argued to be the significant impact of major environmental events and changes which have clearly occurred early within

the change process: the murder of Lyra McKee in 2019 by the NIRA and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic one year later.

Both these longer-term changes and shorter term "exogenous shocks" have push and pull dimensions. At one level, they have deepened perceptions around organisational and wider movement stagnation, and at another level they have also provided an *opportunity* for increased community activism.

~

Together, the Chapter creates a picture of organisations as heavily intertwined with, and responsive to, stimuli within a wider socio-political context, an immediate local environment which groups are operating within (and the communities found within these), and within the AARM itself.

It should be made explicit at the start of this Chapter that the examples provided here are likely just a snapshot of factors behind both these changes and the motivations for a change in strategic direction. It is very plausible that there are others—both movement wide and organisationally specific—not made explicit during data collection. Actual perceptions of longer-term feelings of alienation are, in reality, longer term processes. As noted by one mediator: "it takes time for the winds of change" (MED-2). Often participants tied strategic change to conversations which had been ongoing for "a number of years" (RNU-1). Moreover, it is probable that the impact of a given event or perception will vary in its importance between groups.

But in their frequency in both interviews from those inside and outside the AMF, and in the public statements of the Unity, Sovereignty, and Republican Socialist Movements, all offer plausible suggestions around the alteration of perceptions of decline felt inter-organisationally and are helpful in illuminating this organisational-

environmental interconnectedness and how changes in the environment can have real impacts on group understandings and decision-making processes.

5.2. "The Conversation is Elsewhere": Sinn Féin, Brexit, and the Discourse of an "Inevitable" United Ireland

Of the four symptoms of movement wide decline outlined in Chapter 4, all are indicative of longer-term causes. This "stagnation", as sketched in the introduction to this Chapter, is primarily one between organisations and their environments. Though internal factors contributing to decline are visible within all three case studies—particularly within the Sovereignty and Unity Movement—that change is observable across three distinct groups suggests that common processes *outside of and not specific to* organisations have been particularly important in contributing to this organisational-environmental disconnect and inertia.

From interviews and statements made by the groups engaged in the move towards community activism, and interviews with those with close working knowledge of the broader landscape of the AARM, one talking point emerged that emerged with striking regularity across interviewee cohorts of what can be understood to be a wider, longer-term environmental change which has contributed, and continues to contribute to changing organisational perceptions of decline and the importance to recentre community activism: narratives around the likelihood of a united, independent Northern Ireland.

~

Discourse around Northern Ireland's political future and potential unification *is* increasing. In 2022, Sinn Féin became the largest party in Northern Ireland (Tonge,

2022b), granting it (after a power sharing agreement was reached almost two years later) symbolic primacy within the Northern Irish government (Carroll, 2024). This is not just a remarkable shift in fortune and position for what was (for the bulk of its organisational existence) the political wing of the PIRA, but it also poses genuine questions about Northern Ireland's constitutional future. Sinn Féin made the calling of a border poll a central part of its 2022 manifesto (Tonge, 2022), and has subsequently kept the topic in the broader national conversation, including arguing that a border poll is required by 2030. The concept of the border poll—baked into the GFA—which allows for a referendum to be held if there exists a belief from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (a cabinet position within the British Government; Tonge, 2022a), is not only a core aim of Sinn Féin, but its central argument for the decision to accept the GFA in which the achievement of a united Ireland is most likely to occur through legal constitutional change. Sinn Féin has not only increased its fortunes in Northern Ireland. In the Republic of Ireland's General Election of 2020, the party won the highest percentage of first preference votes, and the second highest number of seats—a pattern of success visible in the 26 Counties since 2012 (Field, 2020).

The increased electoral fortunes of Sinn Féin have overlapped with other events and trends. The 2021 census demonstrated that Catholics now outnumber Protestants in Northern Ireland—a remarkable shift in the demography of the six counties originally set up with a PUL majority (Tonge, 2022a). This shifting demographic and political landscape has also been exacerbated by the United Kingdom's vote to withdraw its membership status from the European Union in 2016. "Brexit" had, and continues to have, profound affect for the Island of Ireland, which contains the only land-border between the UK and an EU members state—the Republic of Ireland.

Not only did a majority (55.8%) of those inside Northern Ireland vote to remain in the EU (BBC, 2016b), but voting intention also coalesced around ethno-nationalist positions, with a majority of those identifying as being part of the CNR community voting to remain in the EU and a majority of those identifying as being part of the PUL community voting to leave (Garry, 2017).

Brexit at one level provided a narrative that in forcing through the UK's exit from the EU the British government has continued to ignore the will of the Northern Irish people. But the resulting fallout around how to navigate required personnel and customs checks between EU and non-EU member states has also created significant disruption within political unionism. Concern regarding the imposition of a customs border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (a significant reversal of post-GFA normalisation), resulted in the eventual agreement to impose customs checks *between* Northern Ireland and mainland Britain. This produced significant anger within political unionism and loyalism who not only felt betrayed given their support of Brexit and their confidence-and-demand agreement with the Conservative government in 2017, but who argued that in treating a constituent part of the UK as different, Westminster had effectively sold out the PUL community—a slippery slope towards an eventual united Ireland (Cowell-Meyers & Gallaher, 2021; Murphy & Evershed, 2020).

~

These events contribute to what is an increasing narrative *across* Northern Ireland around the increased possibility of a united Ireland—including, as data from this project demonstrates, from within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism.

Indeed, across this project, interviewees from all three groups involved in the move towards community activism conceded that now, compared to any other time, the possibility of a united Ireland was more probable than not:

Don't see a united Ireland happening in the traditional republican sense... [however] could see the six counties coming into the commonwealth [Republic of Ireland].

32CSM-4

At one level, groups conceded that Brexit offered an opportunity for change, something also noted in findings from McGlinchey (2021: p. 734) during her interviews across the AARM. While noting that though 'radical republicans have been keen to emphasise that Brexit doesn't actually alter anything for traditional republicanism', in reality, the profound instability that this has caused offers not only 'a renewed focus on the border in Ireland' but that it also ushers 'in a new political environment which is significantly different from the one in which the Good Friday Agreement was conceived.' (McGlinchey, 2021: p. 734). Certainly, this was a point echoed by participants for this project. Though anti-Agreement Irish republicans are by no means in favour of the EU—which they see as a neo-liberal project—nonetheless, arguments were made consistently that Brexit is seen as advantageous in the potential for its accelerating effect on Irish unification: "Brexit offered an opportunity... why wouldn't you exploit that?" (RNU-1).

This opportunity chiefly lies in the perceived abandonment of the PUL population, who groups concede have "been shafted" (IRSP-4)—a perception that Britain does not regard Northern Ireland as an equal partner and that both communities would benefit from a united Ireland:

Brexit has probably taken 5 to 7 years off us... dragged them [unionists] into the realisation that a united Ireland is within the next 10 years...realisation that their future lies in an all-Ireland economic system.

IRSP-4

Additionally, given the close links (both contemporaneous and historic) between Scotland and Northern Ireland and the PUL communities of both, talk of a future independent Scotland was also noted to be increasing perceptions and changing dynamics around the PUL's community's desire to stay within a UK which would consist of England and Wales. Certainly, the 32CSM in Derry has been involved in discussion groups with members of loyalist political groups around the potential of a post-unified Ireland—something which was confirmed by both participants within the PUL community and the 32CSM itself. For these participants, Scotland is the "unionist link" with Northern Ireland, with Brexit offering the ability to question this, particularly if another referendum in Scotland were to occur: "we could explore that route" (32CSM-2):

Both Brexit and the real possibility of Scottish independence have dramatically changed the constitutional politics on these islands.

32CSM, 2017

Moreover, with the renewed focus on the Irish border, groups note that an opportunity has been provided to focus on republican talking points and arguments, something which has overlapped with significant centenaries for Irish republicanism, including the 100-year anniversary of the Easter Rising (in 2016), and the 100-year anniversary of Irish partition (in 2021) (32CSM, 2017, 2021).

This is most explicitly observable in the decision of the IRSM to launch its policy document *Britain out of Ireland, Ireland Out of the EU* (IRSP, 2018a, 2018b), and the argument that:

A socialist United Ireland is no longer an abstract aspiration of the few. The fundamental contradictions that exist within British occupied Ireland, the push for Scottish Independence, Brexit, mixed with the inherent exploitative nature of capitalism, all combined are making progressive Irish Unity a distinct possibility.

IRSP, 2018b

Alongside the opportunity offered by Brexit offers is a recognition that Sinn Féin's increased success likely offers the best opportunity for a united Ireland: "an inevitable outcome of the vote [of Sinn Féin]" (IRSP-6). Indeed, in a striking admission by a representative from the IRSM, while noting that the group remains opposed to the GFA due to its recognition of the separation of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, the challenges to sovereignty in requiring the approval of the British government, and the idea of consent which "leaves the vote in the North winnable by unionists at all times... unionists could win by staying at home", the organisation recognised that the increased success of Sinn Féin raised the possibility of engaging with,

... political parties north and south who may be forced to operate outside the Good Friday Agreement if the British Government refuses a referendum. It would be a bitter pill to swallow.

32CSM-1

~

Aside from the *Yes for Unity* campaign from the IRSP, and the 1916 Societies' activism around mock referenda—in which both organisations are attempting to demonstrate popular support in core CNR areas across the border regions of Ireland and to pressure Sinn Féin to call a border poll—there is a lack of direct observable Irish unification specific-activism:

[Lack of engagement around a border poll] it's a missed opportunity. If you can shift even a tiny bit towards slowly pushing the Brits out should be supporting it. Instead, they sit on the side-lines showing "how pure we can be". Who's listening? The conversation is elsewhere.

IND-2

Despite this lack of direct activism on Irish unification, the perceived likelihood of this *can* be shown to have had a substantial impact on wider strategic change. At one level, the impact of this perception appears to have contributed to the understanding that state-directed violence is no longer acceptable or advantageous in the current socio-political climate: the "changing environment" which has been mentioned across the previous two chapters. In such a landscape, as noted in the previous Chapter, state-directed violence is both ineffective, unnecessary, costly, and immoral:

People are being told by Sinn Féin that a united Ireland will occur within the next 20 years, but people are facing 20-year prison sentences—"why should we go to prison?"

MED-2

Moreover, it also appears to be contributing towards the need to recentre themselves within the community. Again, such arguments about the possibility of a united Ireland *despite* the impact of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, and due to arguments long made by the Provisional Movement in their contention of the need to transition politically, is a significant blow, and one which has clearly impacted issues of community alienation and resonance, something well outlined by the statements of the 32CSM:

In these changed times, Irish republicanism must have the courage and foresight to adapt to the political environment we find ourselves in... political change is all around us, yet republicans have been redundant as regards influencing these changes. Despite our objections, despite our take on history, the voice of Irish republicanism is a whisper on the wind.

32CSM, 2017

Narratives around a united Ireland, and the perception that this will occur, however, is argued to provide an opportunity to reinsert republican objectives and principles into the debate *through* community activism. Members of RNU tied community activism directly to what they argued was a realistic opportunity that Ireland will be united in the next 30 to 40 years. One participant within the organisation expressed the belief that community activism should be understood as a vital component within a new three-stage approach to a united Ireland, providing a "middle ground" between now and the calling of a Border Poll: something that the organisation believes will lay wider foundations for government "on behalf of the community, by the community" (RNU-2). This was echoed by members of the IRSP who argued that community activism should be understood as part of a process "of building infrastructure for a united Socialist Ireland", and that activism could be understood as the equivalent of "planting the seeds" for this process, "regardless of the immediate transformative effect"—with the organisation looking to "build a platform" for this national transition (IRSP-6). And the 32CSM too argued in statements that integrating community and political activism should explicitly be undertaken to achieve this:

An Irish Republic will not fall from the sky, nor be yielded from a so-called border poll, but will be built on the foundations of established rights secured by republican and socialist activism.

32CSM, 2017

Finally, the argument that a united Ireland is within grasp also poses a challenge for survival for groups whose central aim is the achievement of this goal, and who have long argued that their reasons for existing is due to both the continued partition of Ireland with the GFA having cemented this partition. As a result, organisations need to find new ways of surviving in what would be a radically altered socio-political environment, and the challenges posed to core components of organisational and movement identity:

[Post-unification] Groups would need to go fully into politics, otherwise what existence would they have? They'd end up like the loyalists... [they'd become] wee voices in the wilderness.

MED-1

5.3. Exacerbating 'Shocks': Murders and Pandemics

The impact of an increasing narrative around the likelihood of a united Ireland is taken here to be *the* underlying cause of what groups argue is a changed operational environment necessitating this change.

Yet discourse around a united Ireland is not the only change which appears to have had (and in some cases, continues to exert) strong pressures on the need to alter strategic direction. Within a roughly one-year period, two unforeseen events occurred outside the control of the three case studies of this project: The murder of the journalist Lyra McKee by the NIRA, and the onset of the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The timing of these events is significant. While participants were keen to stress that both occurred *after* organisational decisions to embark upon strategic change, these rapidly onset exogenous "shocks" came during very nascent stages of this process.

~

This section explores both these events in turn and the impact of exogenous unforeseen events on organisational understandings and the selection of activities to better fit changed environments, with each having a fortifying, and even accelerating effect on the move towards community activism. Such events have had different impacts for different groups. But together, they offer salient push factors away from state-directed violence for those previously involved in this activity, and moreover, offer strong pull-factors towards community activism in radically altered operating landscapes.

The Murder of Lyra McKee and the search for "Clear Blue Water"

If there is one event which has impacted both anti-Agreement Irish republicanism and how it is viewed more than any since the 1998 Omagh bombing, it is the murder of Lyra McKee in 2019 by the NIRA.

The murder of McKee is just one of several attributable to anti-Agreement Irish republicanism since its emergence which can be characterised within the bracket of political violence.²⁹ These include: Mark Quinsey and Patrick Azimkar, two off-duty soldiers shot in March 2009 as they collected a pizza outside their barracks in County Antrim; PSNI officer Stephen Carroll, shot (just two days later) as he responded to a hoax emergency call; PSNI officer Ronan Kerr, killed by an under-car bomb; prison officer David Black, shot in his vehicle while driving to work; and prison officer Adrian Ismay, who died of wounds following another bomb affixed to his car in 2016 (BBC, 2023).

²⁹ Many more civilians and Irish republicans have been murdered by anti-Agreement Irish republican paramilitaries, though these murders are not characterised as separate to attacks on representatives of the State.

Yet while all of these events produced repercussions which helped to isolate anti-Agreement Irish republicanism—indeed, Martin McGuinness' characterisation of those who murdered Quinsey and Azimkar as "traitors to the island of Ireland" has remained a significant fracture point between the Provisionals and those within the AARM—all were regarded by the groups which perpetrated them and supported state-directed violence, as "legitimate" targets due to their positions (McGlinchey, 2019: p. 133). For these republicans, the framing of these killings as acceptable was no different from those perpetrated by the Provisional Movement during "the Troubles" (Whiting, 2015: p. 112–114).

The killing of McKee—a respected young journalist who had won considerable praise for her work on identity, sexuality, and post-conflict Northern Ireland—was different. During a riot organised by the NIRA in the Creggan estate, McKee, covering the event, was shot while stood next to fellow journalists by gunmen as they attempted to target nearby police (Young, 2019).

~

The impact of the murder of Lyra McKee on the wider landscape of Irish republicanism, and its contribution towards strengthening the strategic change process, is multifaceted. At one level, the event appears to have significantly reinforced the existing schism between how groups understand the acceptability of violence, something also noted by McGlinchey (2021, 2024) in her interviews with those within the AARM on the topic, and something focused on in more detail in Chapter 6). It is also notable within the arguments of groups which had recently jettisoned state-directed violence. In comments made about the murder, representatives of the 32CSM were particularly scathing:

The shooting of Lyra raises some serious questions over the thinking of leadership within that organisation which perpetrated the shooting... it shouldn't have happened.

32CSM-1

Such an event contributes to the narrative made that armed force is counterproductive, ineffective, and morally wrong.

More impactful is what groups note is the backlash caused by the event on republican perceptions within operating areas. Certainly, community workers argued that the event had caused significant backlash against the NIRA in Derry. Saoradh *was* subject to a considerable sustained campaign at a local level, with friends and family of McKee plastering their offices in the city in red handprints, while throughout Derry—including Creggan, deemed to be the group's stronghold—graffiti proclaimed the end of the NIRA (McClements, 2019a; The Irish News, 2019). Community workers interviewed for this project believed that the organisation had been taken aback by the level of hostility directed against the group, with an awareness of how the community "can turn on them like that" (YOUTH-3a), and following this, messages from the NIRA began to appear around Creggan warning residents not to give evidence to the police regarding the group and stating that "informers will be executed" (BBC, 2019b; Irish Republican News, 2019). Saoradh, meanwhile, denies that the event created any meaningful backlash, and that following the murder, recruitment actually increased (McGlinchey, 2021: p. 732).

But participants also noted that this backlash was being felt more broadly across anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, something particularly notable for groups who were until recently associated with state-directed violence. Members of RNU—noting that they are still seen as "hardcore dissidents... still in that dissident brand"—expressed that it had become increasingly imperative following the murder to put "clear blue

water" (RNU-2) between themselves and groups still utilising state-directed violence and to redouble efforts to demonstrate to the community that "we're not the bad guys" (RNU-3). Tied to this, one independent participant who had left a group over its continued use of violence noted that killings, including Lyra McKee, were more broadly damaging the position of groups and the acceptability of their messaging:

[there is a] conversation that traditional republicans can have but this can't be heard over the sound of gunfire.

IND-1

~

Additionally, the impact of McKee's murder appears to have increased costs associated with state-directed violence. Of course, the involvement in state-directed violence has always had significant costs for those involved. The vast majority of participants across the AARM acknowledged that they had previously been subject to arrest and in many cases served prison sentences regarding involvement in a paramilitary wing. It is also less physically dangerous now to be an Irish republican compared to during "the Troubles", in which a "shoot to kill" policy is alleged to have been enacted by elements of the British military, primarily the special forces (White et al., 2021), and members of groups also faced the threat of loyalist paramilitary groups *and* other Irish republican groups, with a number of violent factional conflicts occurring.³⁰ Moreover, despite the murder of RIRA member Joe O'Connor by the PIRA in 2001 (Frampton, 2011:137–8) the threat of retaliation by the PIRA has now passed. In fact, despite a number of killings and threats by the NIRA directed at those which had stayed within the Sovereignty Movement (see Chapter 3), and the killing of individuals associated with

³⁰ This is particularly true of the INLA, with a number of members being killed by the OIRA and the INLA splinter group the Irish People's Liberation Army (IPLO) (see McDonald & Holland, 2010).

the breakaway of ONH in 2018 and claimed by the group in 2022 (Reinisch, 2022), any significant inter-organisational violence currently looks unlikely.

Yet, the murder of Lyra McKee does appear to have produced significant State changes towards violence-utilising anti-Agreement Irish republicanism in Northern Ireland. Such changes were in effect prior to the murder. In 2015, following the collapse of power-sharing tied to the murder of Kevin McGuigan by elements of the PIRA (McDonald, 2015), Sinn Féin and the DUP, along with the British and Irish States, began a period of intensive negotiation around a renewed political framework and strategy, for tackling paramilitarism in Northern Ireland, culminating in the *Fresh Start Agreement* in November, and the resumption of government following its formal codification. The Agreement, and the subsequent *Fresh Start Panel on the Disbandment of Paramilitary Groups in Northern Ireland* (2016), established a new strategic direction for the State's response to paramilitary presence and activity in arguably the most significant way since the GFA.

It combines prosecutions with targeted funding programmes designed to support transition for those within paramilitary organisations, and to challenge criminal activity by paramilitary groups; along with addressing systemic socio-political-economic issues in what would become "Community in Transition" areas, including the improvement of PSNI's legitimacy and building community support capacity (Alderdice, 2016). Additionally, the Agreement created new statutory bodies designed to assist prosecutions, including cross-border policing operations, and a new body within the Department of Justice called the Tackling Paramilitarism Programme which has considerable remit. The Programme coordinates with the police around investigations into criminal involvement through the Paramilitary Crime Task Force and runs a number of programmes and funding initiatives alongside other partners

including the Department of Communities, the Department of Health, and the Department of Education. This work is particularly oriented toward youth recruitment in areas identified in both CNR and PUL communities identified as having elevated levels of paramilitary activity—the B4 areas, of which a subset were outlined in Chapter 1.

But a strengthening of this effort *can* be observed post-2019 and was noted by interviewees working on related topics to have been heavily influenced by the murder of Lyra McKee. Community workers and those close to the police stated that following this, and the outpouring of anger directed at the government in failing to tackle violent paramilitarism, a renewed effort was placed around bolstering both police responses and funding programmes, something noted with irony among community workers who have long been directly involved in efforts within communities they believe have been neglected and left behind, omitted from the so-called 'peace dividend': "shouldn't be on the back of a tragedy—shouldn't take a tragedy" (COM-5).

Within this, participants pointed to the adoption of what was often classed as a public health model by the State, which includes the creation of wrap-around services in an effort to identify young people at risk of paramilitary exploitation and recruitment, and to improve life-outcomes and wider public health within B4 areas (YOUTH-4).

This change also includes what interviewees noted as an effort within the PSNI after Lyra McKee's murder to shift policing approaches towards a lower-impact model in which the organisation was looking to "minimise footprint" within working-class CNR communities, with increased police patrols undertaken outside of vehicles; and whereby raids would occur at different parts of the day in operations with better risk assessments, and in-cases where targets have children, involvement with schools (GOV-2; GOV-3; YOUTH-4).

Moreover, McKee's murder appears to have shifted the British government's approach to anti-Agreement Irish republican paramilitarism. While this is difficult to accurately assess due to this project's lack of engagement with the British State and the intelligence services which are responsible for the disruption and investigation of politically violent groups in Northern Ireland, this is observable both through interview data with other cohorts and secondary materials. There has certainly been a notable uptick in arrests associated with the NIRA in particular which have proved damaging not only due to the impact these have had on the group (see Chapter 3 and Operation Arbacia), but as McGlinchey (2021: p. 732) notes, the revelation that these arrests had been led by an MI5 agent within the senior leadership structure of the group pose genuinely challenging perception issues tied to alleged infiltration by the intelligence services. During interviews for this project, this was a perception strongly noted at the community level and those within non-violent anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, as one member of the 32CSM noted,

[On continued violence] is there another agenda at play by our enemies? Spooks within the secret services have always been involved at some level of republicanism over the past 40 years.

32CSM-1

~

Again, the killing of Lyra McKee should not be regarded as a direct cause of strategic change. Though it has contributed to perceptions of environmental-organisational misalignment in the form of community backlash and alienation, for all three organisations which have embarked upon a move towards community activism, the given start period of this change is identifiable *before 2019*. And, though it clearly had a considerable impact on the New Movement, it has not altered the direction of the NIRA, which is still actively engaged in state-directed violence.

Moreover, the actual impact of changing State responses is harder to discern because of what was routinely argued by community workers to be both a lack of improved outcomes *and* continued negative perceptions around the police, including frustration that, in practice, the decision by the PSNI to take a lighter-footprint approach to policing had resulted in youth workers taking a more central role, despite having little money, concerns around funding, and the damage that this is having to their own reputations: what one interviewee described as akin to "trying to keep a lid on a boiling pot" (YOUTH-3a):

[The] police have sort of not stepped up to the mark to be honest... [we are expected to] fill the gap. We shouldn't be standing in the middle of a riot... I can't put my staff at risk... if young people see youth workers engaging with the police you're saying goodbye to your relationship.

YOUTH-11

But the event does appear to have *strengthened* internal understandings for groups already engaged in the move towards community activism which have previously been engaged in, or supportive of, state-directed violence, around the need to move increasingly in a political direction.

COVID-19

The other major external event which appears to have had an outsized role on an increase in community activism is that of the onset and continuation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of COVID-19 was directly noted by interviewees to have quantitatively increased levels of community activism undertaken in operational areas. The IRSP, for example, was involved in the delivering of personal protective equipment (PPE) and

hand sanitisers to care and nursing homes and hospitals (IRSP-2). Likewise, the group was particularly active in signalling their involvement with pandemic related activities on social media, with the party creating a Republican Socialist Aid banner which features the stary plough (a key socialist republican symbol and one particularly used by the IRSM) overlaid over a red star and above a green and white medical cross (Figure 19 - Republican Socialist Aid Logo).



Figure 19 - Republican Socialist Aid Logo
Note: Image taken from IRSP social media profile.

Members of RNU also pointed to the impact that the pandemic had on the levels of community activism undertaken by the organisation. Again, while noting that the onset of community activism had occurred prior to the onset of the pandemic—"if only just" (RNU-2)—interviewees accepted that engagement around community activism had increased during this period. Importantly, the timing of the pandemic was specifically mentioned as significant, with members noting that the occurrence of lockdowns so

early into the rebuild of the group posed a challenge with these efforts: "the pandemic put everything on hold" (RNU-1).

Members of the 32CSM also noted community activism was undertaken in response to needs posed by COVID-19, with examples of activism including distribution of food parcels to members of the community in Derry.

Further reinforcing the argument that the pandemic was influential in increasing activism are interviews with members of the community sector in AARM operating locales. While imperfect as a form of ensuring validity—interviewees from this cohort were often reluctant or refused to name exact organisations, instead referring to them collectively—interviewees from this cohort argued groups *had* become more visible around community activism: "had Erps [IRSP] all over the area" (YOUTH-2b).

Pointing to increased involvement, around food parcels and lobbying around community salient issues such as streetlighting, participants here argued that such activism was positively received within the community:

Over covid these groups came across so well... would love to know where they got the money from [for activism]... groups responded to community needs... perceptions are important: there's the perception that they helped the community.

YOUTH-1

Others went further, believing that this type of activism conducted by anti-Agreement republicans over the pandemic would be entirely new for some of these organisations, though this is difficult to verify and there is the possibility that interviewees were simply more aware of activism due to a visible increase in these types of activities.

~

At one level, it is hard to separate community activism from understandings (outlined in Chapter 2) of the importance of community activism to Irish republicanism and republicans. When asked about an increase in community activism, one participant from within the IRSP responded with the argument that republicans, as part of the community "all saw the need to help ourselves - nobody's coming to do it for us" (IRSP-5); a sentiment concurred with by another participant in the community sector:

Whether you were an Erp [member of the IRSP] or whatever, needed to fight together.

COM-3b

Within this, some plausible suggestions can be noted. There is, of course, the meeting of spoiling and outbidding objectives in which perceived lack of State-involvement and the failure of statutory and non-statutory bodies to effectively look after the community can be contrasted with activism undertaken (and signalled through social media). Certainly, comments made by mainstream community workers that these organisations were active and with this activism positively received offers credibility to such an argument. In this way, the benefits of increased community activism were noted in real-time to organisations which were embarking upon early processes of strategic change in which they were looking to become more resonant within the community.

But it also appears to have offered an increased ability to *conduct* activism. It is important to stress the number of charitable and statutory agencies working across the areas of focus for this project. In just one location, the TRIAX area of Derry containing the Creggan, Brandywell, and Bogside areas of the city, a sample of groups within the mainstream community sector include:

1. The Creggan Neighbourhood Partnership,

2. The Old Library Trust,
3. The Gasyard Development Trust,
4. Creggan Enterprises (which operates the Ráth Mór shopping centre),
5. The Bogside and Brandywell Health Forum,
6. St Mary's Youth Club,
7. North West Youth Services, *and*
8. Pilots Row Youth and Community Centre.

Alongside these groups, statutory and public bodies are also operational and provide services across the area, either on their own or through partners in the charity and community sectors. For example, the Education Authority has its own community workers in the area and runs multiple programmes with community partners, with funding from organisations such as Northern Ireland's Tackling Paramilitary Programme (YOUTH-4). This includes programmes such as SPARK aimed at diverting young people away from bonfires tied to paramilitary activity (for an example, see the Methods Chapter), and RAPID, aimed at engaging quickly with young people engaged in street violence to prevent escalation into paramilitary involvement (YOUTH-4). In the words of one mediator, such a holistic array of services and groups—many of which have been operational for considerable amounts of time, with deep resources, and in some cases operated by those within the Provisional Movement who are well respected—pose genuine challenges for groups within the AMF to enter to community sector in a substantive way:

Groups are operating in areas which have existed here for 50 years—
where's the space for them to operate?

MED-2

Likewise, there are significant resource costs associated with community activism which often requires accreditation, training, and the physical space to operate (see the Discussion and Conclusion).

The impact of the pandemic changed this. Groups were suddenly faced with a radically changed operational landscape, in which relatively lower cost activism could be taken on a highly salient topic at a time when mainstream bodies did face a difficulty in operating.

5.4. Discussion: The Environmental Onset of Decline

If the last Chapter sought to demonstrate perceptions of decline as the primary mechanism for understanding strategic change, then this chapter has attempted to underpin decline specifically as a *relational* process between organisations and their environments.

Many of these events intersect and overlap, blurring the line between long-term and short-term trends. Narratives around the increased likelihood of a united Ireland are clearly long-term in their origins, but the acceleration of these narratives following Sinn Féin's successes both north and south of the Irish border (and particularly the election of 2022) are distinct events which have occurred relatively recently. Moreover, these events have different impacts for the three groups in which strategic change can be observed, with the Unity and Sovereignty movements more impacted by events surrounding the continued use of state-directed violence. They also can be seen to have push and pull components, respectively. The murder of Lyra McKee, for instance, has strengthened narratives around the unacceptability of violence, while COVID-19 has provided a strengthening role for community activism.

But together, these findings fit within existing understandings of environmental pressures on decision-making processes, in which organisations are situated within: 1) a broader socio-political environment, 2) a specific operational environment, and 3) a movement environment containing other groups, potential supporters, and adversaries within these (see Zald & Ash, 1966). Fligstein & McAdam, (2011: p. 8), for example, in their overview of the importance of shifts within movement fields note that change occurs when at least one actor within an existing field recognises 'some change in the field or external environment constituting a significant new threat to, or opportunity for, the realization of group interests'. In the case of all of the examples provided above, these changes are observable as both threats *and* opportunities.

~

For the three organisations within the AMF who have undergone strategic change, suggestions of an altered socio-political landscape primarily as a result of longer-term trends is less direct and immediate than argued by Feinstein and McAdam in their understanding of environmental changes as caused by events, and more akin to "stagnation" or "inertia" (Van Witteloostuijn, 1998; Whetten, 1980, 1987). These alterations have been relatively gradual and incremental, but evidence provided in this Chapter (particularly when combined with findings from the last) suggest that nonetheless they pose powerful challenges to organisational resource aggregation, be these wider cultural resources such as legitimacy and community support, or recruits. More direct, however, appears to be changes which have occurred early on into the strategic change process of these groups. The impact of these two events conform to existing understandings of political opportunities and the role of "exogenous shocks", or "critical junctures" within this—understood as,

... windows of opportunity... which places pressure on [an actor] which can influence a change in direction to sociotechnical niches. Shocks are thus moments in which different options may become available to [actors] that were previously hard to consider due to path dependencies.

Johnstone & Schot, 2023: p. 2

As noted in the above quote, in much of the literature on exogenous shocks, such events are conceptualised as the facilitator to change, forcing groups to think outside of their learned patterns and responses, though,

... the degree to which an opportunity arises can be influenced by the institutional context... that existed prior to a shock, but, nevertheless, a shock affords agency to particular agendas.

Johnstone & Schot, 2023: p. 2

This appears to be the case with the two examples provided here. The murder of Lyra McKee, for example, has reinforced intra-organisational understandings around the ineffectiveness and maladaptiveness of state-directed violence and the need for differentiation. This also meets understandings within organisational ecology of the need for organisational differentiation from others within their field to win resources (including support, recruits, and material) for their specific organisation (Chewinski & Corrigan-Brown, 2022; Hannan et al., 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Langton, 1987; Olzak & Noah, 2001; Zucker, 1989).

Meanwhile, the onset of the pandemic appears to have strengthened understandings of the advantages of community activism. It may have also created what has been referred to within the organisational governance literature as a "functional hole", in which a perceived or real absence of the State provides an opportunity for sub-state engagement (Flanigan, 2007, 2008; Hall & Biersteker, 2002)—a topic overviewed in both the Introduction and Chapter 2. Importantly, this phenomenon of COVID-19 offering space

to violence-utilising groups to engage in increased levels of community activism is not only observable in Northern Ireland. There is significant body of research and media reporting offering global examples of this, from insurgent organisations to organised crime groups, providing social safety nets and services targeted at the communities in which they are embedded, from cartels in Mexico, to the mafia in Naples, and Jihadist movements in Pakistan, the Philippines, and Lebanon (Ackerman & Peterson, 2020; Arianti & Taufiqurrohman, 2020; Aziani et al., 2023; Basit, 2020; Cattivelli & Rusciano, 2020; Tamayo Gomez, 2020). The example provided by anti-Agreement Irish republicans in the context of Northern Ireland offers contributions not only to this literature, but to how exogenous events can foster the opportunity for service-engagement by political non-state groups in areas of existing and sophisticated levels of service-provision.

6

Variation within the AARM: Contesting Collective Identities

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The Irish people have the right to employ armed struggle to end the violation of our national sovereignty. But this right, like any other right, is not a blank cheque. Possessing a right does not automatically infer that right to be discharged, nor does it automatically confer an ability to properly discharge that right.

32CSM, 2017

6.1. Introduction

If perceptions of decline—themselves produced from movement wide, longer term environmental alterations—have caused strategic change, then there remains the outstanding question of why *some* but not *all* organisations within the AMF have made the shift to community activism while others have not. It is a perplexity which is further exacerbated by clear evidence that both the New and Continuity Movements have themselves experienced organisationally specific setbacks which mirror those experienced by other groups within the AMF who *have* altered strategic direction.

As briefly discussed in the last chapter and in Chapter 2, the New Movement has been impacted by sustained arrests by the State, including the arrest of nine senior members of the political party Saoradh on terrorism charges, including multiple on directing terrorism charges (Reinisch, 2020b). Following these arrests, media reports from this time period does seem to demonstrate some form of dispute among those arrested, with a number of those arrested claiming to disavow violence, including those alleged to be central to the organisation who were granted bail, and who either left or were expelled from Saoradh (Erwin, 2022; Lee, 2021)—seemingly confirmed in the group's 2022 New Year Statement (Saoradh, 2022).

Yet, despite the fallout from the murder of Lyra McKee, the group does not appear to be on the cusp of any ceasefire statement. No significant internal haemorrhaging has

been seen within Saoradh, and the attempted murder of DCI Caldwell is indicative that the NIRA remains firmly involved in state-directed violence and retains the ability to engage in operations. Saoradh, for its part, continues to be able to mobilise supporters for commemorations and parades.

An accurate read of the Continuity Movement is more challenging due to the lack of engagement by the group in this research. Despite this, interviews undertaken with those with knowledge of the organisation gave as less than favourable assessment. More than one interviewee in Belfast claimed that the CIRA is significantly internally divided, with multiple groups using the name in the city; while others involved in dialogue with the group stated that the organisation has been fractured—seemingly a reference to a split in the organisation in 2010 of which members in Lurgan (County Armagh), walked out of the organisation (McGlinchey, 2019: p. 52). The tempo and scale of CIRA operations has also significantly declined, and in November 2020 seven members of the CIRA were sentenced to a combined 33 years in prison following an MI5 bugging operation of the group (BBC, 2020). McGlinchey (2021) notes that in interviews with representatives of the organisation, there was a recognition that the organisation is in not engaged in any large-scale campaign (McGlinchey, 2021: p. 720). Yet in 2018, the CIRA publicly refused to commit to a ceasefire following ONH's declaration (Young, 2018). It has also claimed both a series of attempted murders on PSNI officers in 2019 in the Armagh/Fermanagh area (where the group is thought to have its largest support), and a failed bomb lorry bombing in 2020 (Breen, 2019; McDonald, 2020a), and was noted by mediators to be particularly active in PSAs in the Belfast area despite maintaining a smaller presence there (MED-1). Moreover, as previously covered, adherence to state-directed violence has even resulted in the suspension and resignation of a senior member of RSF in 2021.

~

The cleavage within the AMF over strategy despite similar internal and external issues points to an important caveat when explaining group change and transition: the malleability of organisational identity (and the norms, understandings, and cultures within this).

The argument, continued from Chapter 5, is that groups involved a strategic change away from violence and towards community activism have substantially altered their understandings (based on the processes of decline, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, and the wider environmental changes, as discussed in Chapter 5) around the positioning of state-directed violence as a fundamental component of both Irish republicanism as an identity, the identities of the organisations themselves, and where groups draw legitimacy from. Moreover, the Chapter argues that as a result of this shift, organisations which have altered strategic direction, faced with altered membership cohorts brought in on the strength of community activism, are subject to internal changes which are further strengthening understandings around strategic change.

6.2. Changing Internal Understandings: Sources of "Legitimacy" and Seeking a Mandate from the Living

The term "legitimacy" has so far been largely avoided by this project. It is a thorny concept at the best of times for violence-utilising non-state contentious political actors, and particularly so for groups which do not represent a given population within a clearly defined territorial dimension, or/and which are broadly unpopular, proscribed, or engaged in contentious forms of politics which themselves may fall into one or all

these categories. For these groups, legitimacy cannot simply be equated with popular support (Tonge, 2012).

In anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, as noted in Chapter 1, legitimacy is similarly multifaceted. As Chapter's 1 and 2 discussed relating to positions of identity, groups at one level argue that their support is drawn from the community, of which their "defence" is a core and central component. Then there is violence. McGlinchey (2019, 2021) also notes this tension around where "mandates" for existence should be drawn from, and the use of violence as either a tactical consideration or a position of principle (McGlinchey, 2019, 2021).

~

This section explores what is argued to be changes within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism around where legitimacy *should* be sought: both around the role of violence and the need to win further support from the communities that they are seeking to increase relevancy within. In the process the subsection highlights the importance of concepts of legitimacy to organisational identity, and how, for groups looking to significantly alter this, transitions are framed to internal audiences in ways which facilitate such processes while keeping members engaged (Clubb, 2017). And in altering organisational sources of legitimacy, it also demonstrates a move, well-trodden within Irish republicanism, from ideological and smaller cohorts to that of the wider "community" (Clubb, 2017).

Organisational "Red Lines": Violence

Violence, or what is termed as the "armed struggle" within Irish republicanism, is both synonymous and with, and a fundamental part of, the identity of Irish republicanism. Indeed, *the* acceptability of violence as a method of achieving organisational objectives

is a core component (McGlinchey, 2021: p. 719). Even for groups which have now begun processes of organisational transition, the *right* for violence to be used sometime in the future is something which is retained:

That's not to say that if something comes up along the line, not taking away the Irish people's right to armed struggle.

32CSM-1

Historically—with the exception of the IRSM which jettisoned state-directed violence in 1998—for the AMF, violence has been both the primary method of achieving organisational objectives and understood as an integral part of Irish republicanism, with both the Unity and Sovereignty movement portraying the decision by the Provisional Movement to enact a ceasefire and decommission as a fundamental betrayal of both Irish republicanism and communities (Frampton, 2011: p. 202).³¹

But for these two groups now, state-directed violence is framed and understood as a *tactic*, with this contrasted sharply with what interviewees described as a dogmatic, ideological approach to violence by the Continuity and New Movements.

One independent anti-Agreement republican noted that despite historical precedence throughout Irish republicanism for ceasefires and the cessation of armed-force, including the 1923 order to "dump arms" after the Irish Civil War, for the groups which remain engaged or supportive of state-directed violence, these have:

³¹ This is not true of the wider AARM itself, with a number of organisations and independent groups, though critical of the GFA and the decisions by the Provisionals, disagreed with continued violence, see (McGlinchey, 2019b; McGlinchey, 2021).

Made a dogma over armed campaigns... violence has become an ideology now... Focus on the principle of the right to take up arms... practice has become principle for these groups.

IND-1

Indeed, a common perception among interviewees was that despite a recognition that violence will be ultimately futile in bringing about a united Ireland, lacks community buy-in, and that there is limited organisational capacity to continue armed force, it is the duty of these groups to engage in violence as a central tenet of Irish republicanism:

For dissident republicans, they would say that they're keeping the flame for armed struggle alive... they believe that they're keeping that spark—or that flame—in existence.

MED-1

leadership of groups know they can't succeed...perception that it's their duty to pass on the flame.

MED-2

It is also something acknowledged directly by armed groups themselves. In 2019, in a statement made shortly after the murder of Lyra McKee, representatives of the NIRA in an interview with *The Sunday Times* noted that,

We fully accept we cannot defeat the British militarily, or even drive them from Ireland, but we will continue to fight for as long as they remain here. The attacks are symbolic. They are propaganda. As long as you have the British in Ireland and the country remains partitioned, there will be an IRA.

Mooney, 2019

~

This difference between what McGlinchey (2019: 4) terms "principles versus tactics" has a longer history within Irish republicanism. At each stage of change and rupture around previously agreed upon "red-lines" such as the use of state-directed violence, transition has been accompanied by different framing struggles between these two concepts, something again identifiable in the Provisional's own transition process which created splinter groups, the majority of which saw the utilisation of violence as central to Irish republicanism proper (McGlinchey, 2019: p. 4).

Clubb (2017), in his work on strategic change within the Provisional Movement towards political transition, argues that at each stage of disengagement, republican groups engaging in a transition process look to actively frame violence away from being an ideological "red-line" to a strategic decision, with this reframing essential to not only provide groups the space to transition but also to sell such a move internally to memberships (Clubb, 2017). From the early stages of the PIRA disengagement process in the 1990s, Clubb notes that the Provisional Movement began to adopt the slogan and discursive frame of "Tactical Use of Armed Struggle", something which would morph into moral arguments against violence, and lastly a discourse in which present violence (committed by anti-Agreement Irish republicans) can be contrasted against the past usage of violence by the PIRA.

These same arguments are now being utilised by the 32CSM and RNU, whose statements around their own strategic change and their calls for wider, movement wide disengagement from violence overwhelmingly portrays this as a tactical consideration, as exemplified by the following two quotes used in Chapter 4:

We supported a call from ONH when they called for a ceasefire against attacks on the state—we commended them for releasing such a bold statement... [it was] our opinion that there were very few attacks on the state... young lads getting locked up for these attacks—there's no war, put them away... no situation presents itself to armed force and that's why we've made the call.

RNU-3

[Violence is a] sporadic activity which doesn't have any impact whatsoever... it is counterproductive in the current climate to the republican project.

32CSM-1

Conversely, the move towards community activism is framed as a competing tactical consideration which outstrips the effectiveness of violence to further organisational and wider movement aims and objectives: [transition provides] more routes for the organisation to explore" (RNU-2).

~

Indeed, it is significant to note how this discursive shift mirrors framing processes and a change in organisational understandings utilised by the Provisional Movement, despite the previous and longstanding veracity of arguments made against these shifts by these groups. Likewise, as discussed in Chapter 4, it is striking to note how the acceptability of violence has been positioned in relation to public support, with a lack of this support given as a core reason for transition—despite the fact that state-directed violence has never enjoyed anything close to popularity, even within CNR populations during "the Troubles"; particularly after the 1998 Omagh bombing (Tonge, 2012).³² It

³² As, Hannigan (1985: p. 38) notes, though nationalist communities were sympathetic to many of the same issues motivating republicans (including the use of plastic bullets by the RUC, the use of no-jury "Diplock" courts, and the experience of republican prisoners (something which contributed to Sinn Féin electoral successes in the 1983 General Election), acts of violence by the organisation including the brutality of particular attacks and the randomness attributable to others effectively had an opposite effect of the Republican Movement's 'sympathetic momentum.'

is also something noted by groups themselves, with members of the 32CSM conceding that the organisation never recovered in relation to support, or managed to significantly further its argument following its linking to Omagh, and yet the RIRA still persisted with an armed campaign:

Everything [was] going our way and then you had the Omagh bomb.
Difficult to come back after that.

32CSM-3

Together, these statements and positions around how violence should be seen *vis-à-vis* increased community support is indicative of what is argued below to be a wider transition in legitimacy towards "the community", with their support now understood as the *necessary* component for continued existence.

From Republicans to the "Community": Elections and the Search for Broader Community Support

If these groups have sought to diversify their mandate towards populations within working-class CNR areas in which groups are operating within, then the ultimate demonstration of this shift from historical and ideological to contemporary support can partly be observed in stated and actual moves towards standing candidates for elections.

~

The acceptability of elections within Irish republicanism is somewhat complex, mainly due to the requirement to engage with the State, and in doing so, de facto recognising its legitimacy. But elections *have* historically been a fundamental part of achieving goals within Irish republicanism. As a distinct strategy, this has its origins in the all-Ireland election of 1918 whereby Sinn Féin won a plurality of seats, an event which

has become a core position within Irish republicanism and which most Irish republicans acknowledge as the only and last democratic vote in Ireland due to the cross-border nature, and with all subsequent votes, including referenda around the GFA, being void:

The legitimacy of the Republican position emanates from the proclamation of 1916 which was voted by the Irish people in 1918 democratically and led to the Declaration of Independence.

Sovereign Nation, 2006: p. 4

Likewise, elections were also pursued by Sinn Féin in 1922–1923 (as abstentionist—refusing to take up seats if elected) by standing candidates in the Republic of Ireland, and in Northern Ireland and Westminster (again both abstentionist) in the 1950s (McAllister, 2004). Most notably, it was the Provisional Movement which significantly transformed the role given to elections within an Irish republican tactical and strategic repertoire, identifiable from the emergence of their "Armalite and the Ballot Box" strategy. The Provisional's realisation of the power of elections is widely taken to be the recognition of widespread nationalist support around the 1981 republican hunger strikers, which resulted in a series of Sinn Féin electoral successes during the early 1980s—including the election of hunger striker Bobby Sands to the constituency of Fermanagh-South Tyrone while in prison shortly before his death on the strike (Hannigan, 1985: p. 33).³³

Where the divergent point lies around elections is the actual taking-up of seats won McGlinchey (2019: p. 6). For Sinn Féin, this has changed twice: in 1986 around Lienster House, the national legislative assembly in the Republic of Ireland (which produced the Continuity Movement) and Stormont in 1998 (which produced the

³³ Sands would ultimately be one of seven prisoners from the PIRA and three from the INLA who would die following their protest around the removal by the British State of special category status for those convicted of terrorism offences.

Sovereignty Movement). Indeed, all anti-Agreement Irish republican groups (with the exception of the IRSM, see below) remain opposed to both standing and entering these institutions (McGlinchey, 2024: p. 309).

Outside of this, however, organisations range from minimalist to maximalist positions on the matter, while others, like Saoradh, have no position on local elections at all, citing internal differences on the subject (SOAR-1). Other anti-Agreement groups, such as the 32CSM and 1916 Societies, have a more ambiguous view. These are opposed to running members under the banner of the organisation but allow members leeway in standing as candidates themselves (32CSM-1; 1916-1).

For example, Garry Donnelly of the 32CSM and a former RIRA prisoner stood successfully for election in the Moor district of Derry and Strabane (which includes the Creggan estate) in council elections in 2014, and won re-election in 2019 and 2023, topping the vote each time (BBC, 2023a; Belfast Telegraph, 2019; Deeney, 2014). Though as members of the organisation relayed during interviews, while tolerated due to the position that the 32CSM is not a political party, this was not sanctioned by the leadership but was “an individual decision” which produced both positive and negative reception internally (32CSM-3). Even RSF, perhaps the most ideologically traditional of groups within the AARM, has previously contested elections as a political party both north and south of the Irish border at a local level, and the party retains a seat through Tomás Ó Curraoin on Connemara County Council (IND-1).

The IRSP, however, again in contrast from much of the AARM, regard elections at any level as legitimate and acceptable within the norms of the organisation. This was something members conceded is the most significant point of difference between the IRSM and other anti-Agreement groups who are concerned that elections will "lead them down the garden path" (IRSP-1). Instead, the party subscribes to a view of

acceptable political action drawn up by key organisational thinkers, notably Ta Power and Seamus Costello (the former head of the organisation until their assassination in 1977)—"Ta Power and Costello's objectives guide us"—and that within the view of the party, elections would be regarded as legitimate under Costello's outlining of "Guerrilla Politics" (the notion that any action aimed at achieving political goals would be acceptable) with elections understood as "just war by other means...[even if this means] taking seats in Westminster or Stormont" (IRSP-1).

~

But understandings of electoral engagement appear to be changing within all of the groups which have transitioned towards community activism, particularly at a local level. Members of RNU noted that while they would remain opposed to elections at Stormont, Westminster, and Dail Eireann, the organisation was now actively looking towards elections at a local level (RNU-2). However, they conceded that being elected at this point is aspirational given the current state of the rebuild, and the challenges towards elections as noted by the failure of previous attempts:

[RNU] tried [council elections a number of years ago... don't think the time is right at the moment.

RNU-3

This focus can also be observed in narratives within the IRSP and 32CSM regarding what they refer to as the "independent model": a system of coordination among republican independent candidates and elected representatives (32CSM-1). One member of the 32CSM noted that,

There was a trend growing prior to covid that an independent model would assist existing independents and could help others... to have [this] developed across Ireland.

32CSM-1

Such a move appears to have been motivated by success and cooperation between independent councillors affiliated to the IRSP and 32CSM in Derry: Paul Gallagher and Garry Donnelly, respectively. Members within these organisations, and with working knowledge of this, noted that such a model has been regarded as advantageous, and an effective method of outbidding and pressuring Sinn Féin candidates, alongside damaging Sinn Féin's position by actively targeting council positions held by the party. One interviewee from within the IRSP with knowledge of this explained that independents will sometimes bring motions knowing that these will fail around republican salient issues just to highlight the refusal of Sinn Féin and the SDLP to back these: "not always about winning, it's about exposing why you lost"; and noted the importance of "pop-up" (unexpected) motions as an effective pressure tactic:

Pop-up motions hit them... nine times out of ten they fall in behind them... scared of being exposed.

IRSP-5

In its advantages for existing organisational goals, the participant argued that this approach was "better than any pipe bomb" and the success of both candidates and republican motions on the council and the success of inter-organisational cooperation was something which posed radical opportunity. Moreover, the participant noted that the destabilising opportunities would go beyond CNR politics and argued that there are ongoing efforts to assist with the election of PUL independent councillors, something

they believed would maximise the disruptive potential towards mainstream politics (IRSP-5).

And, in perhaps the most radical shift, in 2022, the IRSP stood candidates in three of its main operating locations and areas in West Belfast, Derry, and Strabane, to election at Stormont for the first time in its history (Cochrane, 2022).

~

Increasing conversations around the potential for wider political transition may be producing a reinforcing effect around community activism in which demonstrable engagement in community activism is understood as a springboard for further elections. Indeed, participants from within the IRSP and RNU did note the importance of community activism in achieving future electoral success. According to those within the IRSP, those selected for election in 2022 were chosen because of their recognisable positions as community-workers (IRSP-3). Moreover, others within the party believed that increasing conversations within the group around the saliency of elections were being motivated by increasing levels of activism (IRSP-3).

At a more conceptual level, such tangible moves towards elections are important as they illuminate a shifting argument that legitimacy should be drawn from the community, with elections being a demonstration of this community support. This is unusual among a cohort which has (primarily) sought its mandate from sources outside of "the living", which has contributed to perceptions of a lack of support within operational areas:

[Anti-Agreement groups] are so far removed that they're not even on the [electoral] register... [gives credence to] people who say they've no support.

IRSP-5

Certainly, electoral support as the *sole* method of demonstrating organisational support within Irish republicanism is something only really identifiable for the Provisional Movement post 1998.³⁴

Instead, where a "mandate from the living" has been sought within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, it is often specifically targeted at a "traditional" republican cohort. This clearly remains the case for groups still engaged in state-directed violence. Those supportive of such a strategy are a much smaller subset of the populations in which groups are operational, requiring far less community buy in and which may disincentivise wider appeals to broader constituents:

Those that support armed conflict tend to be in a very small group.

MED-1

Armed groups don't need massive amounts of support.

RNU-2

Such a shift, therefore, appears to illuminate this altered understanding of which "community" anti-Agreement Irish republicans should be winning. As noted throughout this project, there has long been a tension within Irish republicanism over where the balance between these two cohorts should lie. Sinn Féin portrays the actions of the Provisional Movement during "the Troubles" as legitimate, and it still couches the actions of the group during "the Troubles" as morally right—yet, as the organisation has become a mainstream and professional political party of government in Northern Ireland, the group has also softened and moderated both policies and standpoints,

³⁴ Sinn Féin never achieved during "the Troubles" anything close to its high-point of 43% of the nationalist vote share in the 1983 elections after the hunger-strikes, dropping to around 10–13% in the mid 1980s (Whiting, 2015: p. 544).

including apologies made by senior members of Sinn Féin for lives taken by the PIRA during this period (Alonso, 2016; McGlinchey, 2019a).

It appears that this tightrope between winning wider support and keeping the base membership is one that anti-Agreement groups involved in strategic change must also navigate, with members of organisations involved in this shift cognisant that appealing to a republican demographic is still important. One interviewee within the RNU noted that its traditional support block is "small" though important and motivated, and that the group is not seeking to alienate or squander this support (RNU-2). Ultimately, however, as this participant continued, community activism and appealing to a wider population within the community would come "first and foremost" (RNU-2). It is also a tension which is being felt *within* these groups themselves.

6.3. Paramilitaries to Politicos, Republicans to Activists: Changing Intra-Organisational Dynamics

The above section has introduced the idea that organisational identities—proxied through sources of legitimacy—are undergoing somewhat of a shift for those groups within the AMF which have jettisoned state-directed violence.

It is not the only example in which this can be observed. Interview data strongly suggests that for those which have altered strategies towards community activism, increased numbers of recruits from "non-traditional" backgrounds—who are primarily interested in community activism rather than what is sometimes referred to within Irish republicanism as "the national question"—bring their own interests and understandings of republicanism which is centred around this strategy. As a result, not only is a reinforcing process observable within community activism—i.e., groups are simply "doing more of it"—but additionally, how groups understand themselves, and identity dynamics between the "red star or the tricolour" (RNU-1) appears to be shifting.

~

This section explores this shift both in relation to its strengthening process of existing processes of strategic change *and* the idea that collective identity (both at an organisational and wider movement level) is relational and fluid—able to shift based on membership changes. In the process, it reviews evidence that at its strongest level, processes of significant change among groups possessing violent and non-violent wings can alter balances of power among where precedence should lie for factions with very different purposes.

Changing Memberships, Changing Priorities

For the organisations within the AMF involved in strategic change, a strong predicator overviewed in Chapter 4 is the perceived need to increase membership numbers, particularly among younger cohorts and those who have come from outside of the small world of existing anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. Groups are not interested in what one participant termed as "republican tourists" who move from group-to-group (32CSM-3), but rather those from outside existing republican organisations—what one member of the RNU referred to as the "lily whites": "those who haven't come from a staunch republican background" (RNU-3). They are, in short, interested in fresh organisational and republican blood.

As Chapter 4 also noted, according to members of organisations involved in the move towards community activism, strategic change enacted by these groups *has* increased recruitment among this desired cohort. In contrast with the "traditional" and "more militarily minded" recruits and memberships of groups prior to the shift, participants from RNU, the 32CSM, and the IRSP argue that instead, higher numbers of younger people and women are joining post strategic-change, with recruits more likely to be

"younger, female, or both" (RNU-1), "brought in on the strength of activism" (RNU-2) conducted by their groups.

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But this change is not merely cosmetic. Rather than passively accepting prior organisational identities and understandings within this, participants across all three organisations noted that these new members are instead actively looking to engage and contribute to activism that they were recruited by and are interested in furthering—creating a feedback cycle which positively reinforces the move towards community activism.

At one level, this increase in resources allows for a further increase in both the amount of activism that that party can undertake, and the sophistication of this. As one member noted about this positive reinforcement cycle between activism and recruits:

[Increased members] allows for strategic refocus... can do more of it [activism]. The shift in material circumstances allows us to do more.

IRSP-6

Similarly, the participant noted that the organisation has been able to increase the areas of focus in which it is engaged: "could do more with geographic spread" (IRSP-6).

Beyond an increase in activism, these new members also bring with them a challenge and an opportunity. If recruits are interested primarily in activism as opposed to "the national question" or "instinctive anti-imperialism" (IRSP-6), then what separates groups as different from other, left-wing political or community groups and what distinguishes these groups as primarily *republican* organisations?

It is a challenge noted by participants themselves who that these new members require education and training around core republican positions: "it's our job to educate them

to be a republican" (RNU-3). One member of the 32CSM in the Republic of Ireland noted that this new dynamic was so strong that the organisation has put considerable effort into organisational training and learning around what it means to be an Irish republican *beyond* community activism, and that a lot of new recruits would be unable to explain key organisational and movement positions:

Trying to develop basic republican principles [among new recruits]... trying to educate younger members... open their eyes... [demonstrate that] not a one trick pony... [but that Irish republicanism and community activism] has to go hand in hand.

32CSM-4

More broadly this idea of the need to "educate" newer members touches on what has been described as a "different dynamic" (RNU-4) within their respective organisations, following the "rebuild process" and the shift in strategic direction.

This dynamic around those motivated by "traditional" republican issues and those interested in community activism was noted by all organisations. When asked about if they saw a difference in the types of members being brought in by community activism, and those motivated by, or seeking recruitment for, other factors, one member of the RNU put it bluntly:

Without sounding cruel, yeah... seeing a more intelligent type of activist who can bring something new to the table.

RNU-3

At a practical level, as Chapter 3 demonstrated in its overview of strategic implementation, these new members do involve themselves in activism at a local level which can quickly change the profile of a group within a specific area. Members are encouraged to undertake activism either within or outside of the organisation, and the often small membership sizes of local groups means that particularly resonant activism for members can be easily carried and conducted by local memberships and cumann leaderships. Those within the IRSP and RNU both acknowledged that an increase of female members in particular *was* tangibly contributing to both changed internal understandings and activism undertaken in particular areas (IRSP-3; RNU-4).

Of this last point on changing understandings, different recruitment trends and an emphasis on changed activism may also be contributing towards tensions between the different factions between groups, and among those recruited pre- and post- strategic change. This was something most noted by interviewees within RNU— perhaps not surprising given the extent of the split which produced the initial move towards community activism and the specific divergence between militarism and social and community activism. One member conceded that the organisation was somewhat "fractured" between those who had left and who had returned, and that the organisation's leadership had been deliberately structured to ensure this composition was representative and in order to ease transition, something which had produced "the perfect mix of republicanism and community activism" (RNU-2). Another participant at a leadership level within the organisation agreed, and that, of this tension and the presence of different motivations and understandings within the group, "it's our job as the Ard Chomhairle to manage that." (RNU-3).

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There are, however, clear limits to this organisational shift in profile. It is doubtful that membership changes will shift to a point which will have substantial impactful effects on organisational identities. Despite claims that newer recruits require training and are more motivated by community activism, they are still choosing to join anti-Agreement Irish republican organisations which have specific and longstanding organisational and movement identities. Likewise, as statements by members suggest, groups are not seeking to "alienate" a core "traditional" Irish republican cohort" (RNU-2); and statements around training and member education demonstrates that there is no inclination for organisations to abandon these principles and identities, but rather to recruit non-traditional members to rejuvenate groups and Irish republicanism more broadly. Moreover, members of groups engaged in this shift argued that change of memberships takes time, as noted by one member of the IRSP when referring to a particular cumann with elevated numbers of young people engaged "[a particular cumann] didn't just change overnight to young lads"; "[older members] drifted away" (IRSP-6).

Yet, it is likely that if membership changes persist, wider, cross-organisational changes in understandings and identities around the role of community activism and state-directed violence *will* be solidified and exacerbated within these groups.

In Chapter 3, a model of organisational decision-making across the AMF was posited through mapping group networks, in which, while hierarchical, organisational strategies are vetted and driven by memberships voting on, and proposing, both motions and candidates. For the groups engaged in the move towards community activism, an increase in memberships brought in by, and motivated around, community activism, and not wedded to "traditional" understandings of republicanism and where mandates should lie and be sought, may result in significant changes within bounded

organisational parameters, including, potentially, alterations in dynamics of power between paramilitary and political wings.

Beyond the Balaclava: Changing "Precedence" Among Violent and Non-Violent Wings

A fundamental characterisation of groups within the AMF is that they share both political and paramilitary wings and are able to make strategic decisions collectively, and which impact both wings. Structures between paramilitary and political wings (including personnel) *are* tight, making it possible to determine common organisational decision-making processes across both, with these factions "as close as can be" (IRSP-3).

But there are also clear differences between the two factions, with those joining different wings seemingly cognisant of these differences and joining for "very different reasons" with "subtle differences" between factions (MED-2). Such overlap appears largely one-directional. Through the arrests detailed throughout this thesis, while those arrested on paramilitary charges usually claim membership of a linked political party, those within political wings and who are active in this faction are often clearly distinguishable as political activists and separate from paramilitary wings.

Just as membership links are close but not perfectly overlapping, neither are the dynamics between political and paramilitary wings. Nor are they completely harmonious. Instead, those within and close to organisations believed that while broad strategic decisions are agreed upon across sub-organisational leaderships, within these factions there is a clear power differentiation:

There's a tension in all republican groups between the politicians and the gun... has always been that struggle between the armed group and the political group—[it] will emerge again: Ta Power saw it and called it.

MED-2

Historically, within Irish republicanism, in the relations between the two factions "the paramilitary wing has always been dominant" (MED-2). Sinn Féin, for example, has existed in some form or another as the political, subservient, wing of groups calling themselves the IRA since the 1922 Irish War of Independence, with evidence that this shift—though with its antecedents in the changes to strategy and the increased importance of Sinn Féin from the 1980s—occurred *within* the early stages of the Peace Process (Hepworth, 2024; Richards, 2010). Meanwhile, within the history of the AMF there is strong evidence to suggest that political wings were originally created as "fronts" for paramilitary splinters, with founding members of these organisations drawn from senior positions within the PIRA (see Frampton, 2011).

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However, for organisations involved in strategic change towards increased levels of community activism, there appears to be an internal move towards a greater role and altered balance of power from paramilitary wings towards political arms.

This can partly be explained by the shifting internal memberships outlined in the last sub-section, with increased numbers of activists joining political wings explicitly and exclusively, bolstering these groups. Meanwhile, the loss of an identifiable paramilitary faction for the Sovereignty Movement means that such a shift has occurred automatically within that organisation.

More significantly, however, appears to be a change within the leaderships of these organisations to prioritise political wings themselves. One participant within RNU noted that while at one point the group was "oriented around paramilitarism" (RNU-3),

this has now shifted. Similarly, those with working knowledge of groups, including in mediation and dialogue roles routinely expressed the belief that strategic change was being led by those in command positions: "old heads" (YOUTH-3b) "political heads" (MED-2). The decision for the IRSM to consciously implement the writings of Ta Power in an attempt to "get rid of machoism within the party" and to put "ideology in command" (IRSP-1), additionally appears to be another example of this; with one participant stating that they believed there were ongoing talks within the INLA around disbanding (IRSP-OMMITTED).

Broadly, the move towards community activism and even further political transition is reliant on political wings having increasingly greater power. Perhaps the largest shift of where leaderships understand power to lie can be seen in the move towards community activism itself—particularly for organisations in which this has accompanied paramilitary ceasefires. In doing so, groups are deciding that organisational futures should lie with their political groups, with these bolstered to facilitate this process.

Such a move is not without precedence. Again, a comparison can be seen in historical changes throughout Irish republicanism. Changes in power dynamics between political wings and paramilitary ones are observable in the move within the Provisional Movement away from the PIRA, and towards Sinn Féin to the point where the latter is not only the dominant but realistically the sole faction within the group; and from within the Official Movement away from the OIRA to the Workers Party (Hanley, 2010; Von Tangen Page & Smith, 2000)

~

Yet, despite proclamations by groups themselves regarding political transition, for the most part (with the exception of the Sovereignty Movement), the paramilitary wing of

these organisations is likely still, the dominant faction (MED-2). One mediator characterised the relationship between factions within the AMF (outside of the IRSM) as the following:

Saoradh, RNU, RSF—it would be fair to say that the bulk of work is what the "army" [paramilitary wings] does and not in community activity.

MED-2

Even for the IRSM, according to this interviewee, "the 'Army' is still in control" (MED-2). Supporting this, members of that group were frank that it is "difficult to change the mindset" of those used to conflict (IRSP-1), and others expressing frustration of the continued existence of the group.

Moreover, in the words of one mediator, across groups which maintain paramilitary wings,

Those who push for the Ta Power line [supremacy of political wings over paramilitary ones have an uphill battle all the time because the people attracted to politics, and to paramilitary activity, are two different people.

MED-2

Certainly, paramilitary groups remain active even within the organisations which have shifted strategic direction, with only the 32CSM, (the only group *without* an active paramilitary wing), having ceased paramilitary-style "punishment" attacks within the communities they are operational within—including those attributed to ONH in Chapter 3.

But the influx of new members, and the primacy of community activism as a strategy, suggest that dynamics are shifting and indeed could change further in the future—

particularly if groups do transition further and place more emphasis on elections. Once more, the Provisional Movement stands as a possible example, whose split, Von Tangen Page and Smith (2000) note, was inevitable as soon as it made the move to engage in electoral politics:

The marriage of political violence and participation in democratic politics is not necessarily a compatible longer-term strategy because at some stage a decision must be made as to which path the organization should follow.

Von Tangen Page & Smith, 2000: p. 80

Certainly, the evidence provided within interviews did suggest internal dissatisfaction—given organisational moves towards community activism—for continued paramilitarism and paramilitary dominance. This was most evident within the IRSM. One member of the IRSP expressed real frustration over the continued presence and activism of the INLA, noting that there was a "contradiction" in the IRSM's failure to transition its paramilitary wing, and asked "what's the point" in keeping the group, arguing that it "gives the state less to control without" (IRSP-3). Mediators also pointed to "frustration among the politicians" within the IRSM regarding the INLA's position within the organisation (MED-2).

While there is identifiably paramilitary activity within groups who claim to have altered strategic directions away from violence, any further moves within internal balances of power are likely to be gradual at best, and shedding this completely will likely be a considerable challenge.

6.4. Discussion: Navigating Change and Contesting Identities

Strategic choices are not simply neutral decisions about what will be most effective... they are statements about identity.

Polletta & Jasper, 2001: p. 293

This quote by Polletta and Jasper encapsulates the main argument of this Chapter. Throughout this thesis, there has been a notable tension between the constraining effects of a collective identity rooted at an institutional/movement level, and what appears to be a divergence within this among its constituent organisations.

Across the previous two Chapters the move towards and selection of community activism has been portrayed—for the groups involved in this shift—as a both a viable method of reversing what appears to be genuine concerns around survival and decline and, as covered in Chapters 1 and 2, what can be understood to be a resonant component of a wider Irish republican identity. Yet, this Chapter has suggested that for two of the groups which have remained engaged in state-directed violence, the continued usage of violence (regardless of its effectiveness and even maladeptiveness given changing environmental landscapes) is a central and defining characteristic within this identity, and not subject to change.

Such a cleavage is analogous to the concept of a *frame dispute* (Benford, 1993). Here, the *diagnosis* of the problem remains shared across the AMF—that of Northern Ireland's continued position within the UK and the failure of the GFA and the Provisionals to change this and the position of the wider CNR community—but the *prognosis* (how to challenge this) is fractured (Benford, 1993).

~

The reasons for why this legitimacy has been flexible for those within the AMF which have moved towards community activism and inflexible for those which have not, is unclear. While decline (both perceptions of wider manifestations of this and more immediate organisational setbacks) and a recognition of altered environmental landscapes have produced change processes within three of the groups within the AMF (including for two the centrality of violence within this), for the remaining two, no discernible outward shift is observable. Such a question is compounded by the lack of insight across this thesis from the New and Continuity Movements, but it suggests specific internal dynamics and understandings have not changed within these two organisations.

But for the groups which have undergone this change, the suggestion is that organisational identities can be malleable enough when faced with the required impetus from the environment to allow for such significant change. But that in embarking upon strategic change in which a central tenet of an existing identity is jettisoned, such moves are themselves heavily couched in appeals for fidelity to this identity.

This echoes findings of disengagement from violence found in existing studies around "selling" and "accepting" organisational change and disengagement from violence. Both White (2010), Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh (2018) and Clubb, (2017) have all understood that the success of the Provisional Movement's transition away from state-directed violence was due to the ability for the organisation to ensure such moves were framed as *resonant* to existing understanding among the membership, ensuring "alignment between the meso-level goals of the movement leadership and micro-level motivations among the grass roots" (Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018: p. 44)

Organisations within the AMF also appear heavily engaged in frame *transformation* processes wherein 'new values' are 'planted and nurtured, old meanings or

understandings jettisoned, and erroneous beliefs or "misframings" reframed in order to garner support and secure participants' (Snow et al., 1986: p. 473). But they are also clearly an extension of an existing master-frame and identity of Irish republicanism, which is heavily couched in the "defence" of CNR communities and the perception that this is now best achieved through community activism.

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Social Movements and other forms of collective actors are not static entities in either composition or identities (and indeed the interplay between these), but are instead 'inherently dynamic, always evolving as a function of the interaction of their environment', (Stevenson and Crossley, 2014: p. 71), something which includes the addition of new members and the resignation of others, a finding Stevenson & Crossley (2014) noted in their overview of changing profiles within the PIRA:

Moreover, change to a network can itself be a cause of further change, as when an inflow of new participants changes the 'vibe' of a movement, attracting further new members but also prompting some members to leave.

Stevenson & Crossley, 2014: p. 71

It is a move which appears to be occurring within groups within the AMF which have shifted their strategic focus. At the most extreme level, such shifts may further alter organisational dynamics not only between the those motivated by "traditional" republican topics and community activism, but between political and paramilitary wings themselves, who may find that these increases and shifts in where these members understand activism and legitimacy should lie. Such increasing focus on community activism, and a reorienting of this within a collective republican identity, may come at the expense and marginalisation of paramilitarism—though it also seems apparent that,

for some organisations, the two are still understood to be mutually complimentary and can serve two different processes of community defence and engagement.

~

This Chapter has been significantly more speculative than the rest. Such change processes are ongoing, and it remains to be established what affect these membership changes or attempts to alter sources of legitimacy will have on wider organisational identities themselves and the understandings contained within these (something further explored in the Discussion and Conclusion, below).

But it does demonstrate that organisations and the values and identities contained within them are, to an extent, malleable, and clearly encapsulates the interplay between member-, organisational-, and movement-, identities. As groups look to change further in both understandings and memberships, some of the tensions between pre-existing and newer memberships around understandings may increase internal fracture or ensure coalescence around one of these pathways.

Discussion and Conclusions: "They Haven't Gone Away, You Know?"

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Introduction

This thesis began with a roadblock established in South Armagh by gunmen of the RIRA. Such an image has been the predominant one of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism: violent hangers on and obstacles to a peaceful, normalised Northern Ireland. Yet, as demonstrated over the past six chapters, though violence conducted by these groups (both political and non-political) remains a feature, Ireland *and* anti-Agreement Irish republicanism looks very different in the 25 years which have passed since this incident.

~

In February 2024, while in the final stages of writing up this thesis, news broke that Michelle O'Neill—the leader of Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland—had been inaugurated as Northern Ireland's First Minister. Such a title is largely ceremonial. The two major PUL and CNR politicians jointly share the premiership under the positions of the First and Deputy Minister, with the exact nomenclature reflecting the ranking in the Northern Ireland Assembly Election. But O'Neill's appointment has genuinely substantive symbolism for Northern Ireland, the Provisional Movement, anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, and the intertwining of all three.

As Northern Ireland continues to change, so too does the AARM and the organisations which comprise it. One of these changes—that of the strategic change by a subset of organisations towards the adoption of community activism (including in two instances the jettisoning of state-directed violence)—has been the primary puzzle of this project. Over the course of this thesis, it has been argued that such a change is an adaptive response to perceptions of decline, itself produced by altered socio-political dynamics in which groups find themselves—with each Chapter discussing a specific part of the change process.

Chapter 1 introduced the concept of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism as a contentious movement underpinned by a shared collective identity. Such an identity contains both ideological underpinnings and a physical component in relation to particular locations in which members are drawn from and which organisations are embedded within.

Continuing from this, **Chapter 2** delineated a subset of the five within this wider movement bound by common structures, objectives, and a tactical repertoire—the Anti-Agreement Movement Field, or AMF. Of the latter, it is argued that both violent and non-violent tactics are selected not only in their perceived advantage in meeting organisational goals, but as understood components and manifestations of this Irish republican identity.

Despite this broad commonality, **Chapter 3** began the primary focus of the thesis in outlining *strategic divergence* within this cohort—specifically in the recent adoption of community activism as the primary method of achieving organisational objectives for three of these five groups. In the process, by focusing on organisational networks, decision-making processes, and how strategies are implemented, the Chapter also posited a model of strategic action which explicitly incorporates intra-organisational meso- and micro- dynamics.

Having established and delineated this change, **Chapter 4** turned its attention to *why* such genuinely radical change is occurring—explicitly positioning this change as an adaptive response to widespread perceptions of decline at both an organisational and movement level. Here, groups concerned with a loss of support, recruitment, and stagnating memberships, have sought to reverse these different components of decline through the adoption of an existing tactic.

In exploring why such arguments around decline and the need to alter organisational strategies can be observed so long into the life cycles of organisations which have, in two cases, previously dismissed arguments about the ineffectiveness of state-directed violence, **Chapter 5** couched decline as the manifestation of organisational misalignment with the environments in which they are embedded, and the changes within these environments which have produced perceptions that prior strategic directions are now maladapted to these environments. Such maladaptation, it has been argued, is mostly the outcome of longer-term trends relating to perceptions that a united Ireland is within reach, and that this will be brought about by democratic processes in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. But the Chapter also demonstrated the important effect that exogenous "shocks" early into the change process can have on ongoing processes—in this case, by further demonstrating the potential benefits for community activism, and the futility of state directed violence. Together, it suggests the importance of environmental changes in decision-making processes and the relational, dynamic nature between organisations and their environments.

Lastly, in **Chapter 6**, the project returned to the importance of collective identity within strategic action in both its constraining and facilitating effects. It demonstrated that groups, in undergoing radical changes and in shifting recruitment profiles (a core aim of the change process in and of itself), can alter integral understandings and facets of both collective and organisational identities, and the potential balance of power *within* groups. Such a process can be understood to be a positively reinforcing cycle. Groups which are looking to increase community support—and which are arguing (partly through an increased emphasis on elections) that legitimacy should be sought from the community—are increasing levels of community activism as a response, in turn bolstering recruitment from those supportive and motivated by this, leading to a

continuation of this strategy at the expense of other activities. Moreover, a divergence within the AMF between those with now radically different understandings of legitimacy and strategy looks likely to result in the cleavage within the cohort becoming wider and deeper.

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In this last Chapter, findings in relation to wider theoretical contributions, limitations, and the avenues for future research endeavours are discussed. Finally, an assessment is made as to the likelihood of continued strategic change within the AARM, its success, and the scope and probability of wider organisational transition away from violence which, if sustained, would open a new chapter in both anti-Agreement Irish republicanism and post-conflict Northern Ireland.

Theoretical Contributions

In the process of making this argument, this thesis has drawn from, and made significant contributions towards, a number of literatures both empirical and theoretical. Most immediate are its contributions to the scholarship pertaining to anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. Of this, this project has introduced a number of new contributions. It is one of the few studies (with the exception of Sargsyan's 2016 doctoral thesis) to explicitly define this cohort as a social movement. Here a debt should be acknowledged to Sociologists who have applied social movement approaches (including Irish republicanism as a collective identity) to the Provisional Movement, particularly the works of Robert White, Lorenzo Bosi, Gordon Clubb, Rogelio Alonso, Niall Ó Dochartaigh, John Hannigan, and Nicolas Crossley.

Other firsts include the explicit linking of violent and non-violent tactics within the same repertoire of organisations sharing political and paramilitary wings, the

delineation of networks and decision-making processes of political groups within the movement, the importance of geographies and the communities within this to organisational identities and understandings, and—the largest contribution of all—the argument that a deliberate strategic realignment is occurring within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. Of the latter, findings from this project reinforce arguments made by Marisa McGlinchey (2021) around processes of change within Irish republicanism regarding the changing (and contested) understanding of violence by groups formally supportive of (and with paramilitary wings engaged in) state-directed violence. Moreover, it also supports McGlinchey's argument that such change is ultimately the process of both wider changes within Northern Ireland's socio-political landscape, and within anti-Agreement Irish republicanism itself. Though it goes further, not only by including the IRSM in analysis, but also in arguing that such a shift is not only discursive but *strategic*; and that the mechanisms behind change should be understood as perceptions of *decline*.

~

Most substantive, however, are the contributions made towards a greater understanding of strategic action (choice, change, and implementation) among politically contentious actors broadly, and violence-utilising groups specifically. Indeed, though this thesis has focused on case studies pertaining to a single cohort of contentious political actors, it should primarily be understood as an investigation into strategic action among this wider phenomenon rather than simply a study of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism. It is to these theoretical contributions that this section now turns its attention to.

Opportunity Knocks: Adapting to Change

What explains why organisations enact changes within existing strategic action? The mechanism of change provided in this project is that of decline: a perception of being maladapted to organisational environments. In doing so, it is one of a relatively small subset of work to explicitly discuss concepts of decline, adaptation, and survival in relation to social movements (see Ajala, 2021; Edwards & Marullo, 1995; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Minkoff, 1999; Zald & Ash, 1966) and within this a subset regarding decline as it relates to clandestine organisations (Bosi & della Porta, 2015; Cronin, 2008, 2009; della Porta, 2008a; Miller, 2012).

In the case of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, such misalignment has organisationally specific dimensions, but more widely it can be best understood as a longer-term break between groups and the communities within which they are situated, and with which their identities are closely intertwined. Not only does this contribute to research emphasising the relational nature of movements and their environments, but it also provides an interesting middle ground to debates on adaptation which either focus on the importance of longer-term trends and the slow-moving nature of organisations (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), and those which emphasise quick adaptation (Minkoff, 1999).

Lastly, regarding adaptation, these findings also emphasise the importance of events *within* the change process, and how these can have salient push and pull effects on existing and ongoing processes of strategic change; and the importance of timing within processes of change (something which has little academic insight). In the process it provides grounds for future research on components of political opportunities and beyond the value laden terms of Political Opportunity Structure with its heavy emphasis on the interplay between movements and governments regarding policy

changes, and which—has been dominated by a focus on mobilisation (Koopmans, 1999; Meyer & Minkoff, 2004; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996).

Collective Identities: Framing and Change

Yet, in adapting to perceptions of decline, this project has demonstrated that rather than constructing an entirely new repertoire, groups are choosing a replacement which is an *existing* tactic understood to be a core component of an existing collective identity. But in elevating this tactic to that their primary method of achieving organisational goals, it is both a statement and further cause of shifts within organisational understandings of where legitimacy should lie.

Indeed, a specific collective identity of Irish republicanism—and a particular interpretation of this—has been shown to help explain what is a significant degree of isomorphism around objectives, the activities used to achieve organisational goals, and even the selection of community activism for different groups looking to adapt to perceptions of decline and environmental change. Yes, organisations involved in strategic change are clearly motivated by more practical concepts of resource aggregation and survival, but a perception that groups are now adrift from communities of which a core component of Irish republicanism is based on their "defence" and representation poses a considerable challenge to this identity.

Finally, the thesis has also demonstrated the relational components between organisations and wider collective identities, and how organisational changes themselves, be they strategic or structural (in terms of both power within organisations and changing memberships) can have significant impacts on how identities are interpreted and, in the process, change themselves.

~

In doing so, this work draws upon and contributes towards a considerable literature on the role of identity within violence-utilising groups, be this understandings of mobilisation, or how disengagement from violence can be understood as acceptable within organisations formerly engaged in this process (see in particular Bosi, 2006; Bosi & della Porta, 2012,, 2015; Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018; Clubb, 2016, 2017; della Porta, 2008; Hepworth, 2024, White, 1989, 2010).

Moreover, the findings around contestation within movements around a shared collective identity (and how changes within strategies and memberships can alter identities in ways which may produce considerable effects on organisational understandings and directions) both provide an interesting example of the relational and dynamic nature of members, identities, and strategies, and offer scope for future research on change processes among contentious political actors.

Bringing Strategy Back-In

Perhaps the largest contribution is this project's deliberate attempt to model strategic action and change. Organisations are definable by what they do. Indeed, a great deal of the Social Movement Scholarship is concerned with the activities pursued in the achievement of held objectives, usually under the repertoire rubric. Yet, it seems somewhat of an oddity that, despite a great deal of focus on repertoires, strategic action—how groups make collective decisions and the mechanisms behind these—have received less explicit theorising. As Jasper (2004: p. 2) lamented almost two-decades ago,

If agency means anything, it would seem to involve choices. Individuals and groups must initiate or pursue one flow of action rather than another, respond in one way to events rather than in others. Participants in social movements make many choices, but you would never know this from the scholarly literature.

Jasper, 2004: p. 2

Strategic change is perhaps the clearest example of agency in action. Organisations, faced with a need to alter strategic direction, and bracketed by their institutional limitations, nonetheless undertake choices around replacements.

And, while focusing on the macro-level constraints and mechanisms which motivate change, this thesis, Chapter 3 has also attempted to outline the meso- and micro-components within this process. Strategies are not just blindly accepted by organisational members held in-thrall to the "iron law" of institutionalism and the power of dictatorial leaderships but are instead actively engaged at every stage of the decision-making process—from the election of organisational executives themselves and voting on organisational directions, to the implementation of these strategies.

In fact, one of the most surprising findings of this thesis is the amount of autonomy that local memberships have. In terms of clandestine organisations, this may be something unique to anti-Agreement Irish republicanism, but it does not seem likely. Research is now needed around formally delineating agency through focusing on organisational networks, real-world decision-making processes, and how strategies and tactics are implemented in other violence-utilising movements.

Limitations: Those Known and Unknown

There are of course limitations which have arisen from what was an ambitious project regarding multiple clandestine organisations pursued by one DPhil student during a much reduced data-gathering period.

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Some of these limitations are those which are "known"—that is, they are identifiable as being missing from the research, and which largely emerge from missing data. Of these, most notable in their absence are interviews from those within the State apparatus

in Westminster, Stormont, and the Republic of Ireland working directly around continued paramilitarism, and a lack of insight among the two groups which remain engaged in state-directed violence: the New and Continuity Movements. Though circumnavigation of these actors has been attempted through other forms of data-triangulation, this is no substitute for interviews with these groups directly. And their absence *is* felt within the thesis' findings. For example, there remains a lack of understanding about why some groups within the AMF and not the entire grouping has undergone strategic change, and why for some of these organisations the move towards non-violence has been understood as compatible with an Irish republican collective identity while for others it has remained a "red line." Likewise, alongside prohibiting a "policy implications" section, the lack of governmental voices makes delimitating the full range of potential sources of wider environmental changes harder to fully discern. Other "known" limitations arise from this last point: a challenge with mechanisms behind environmental changes themselves. Though Chapter 5 attempted to bring together the most pertinent of both longer and more immediate environmental changes, in all likelihood there are many more that are as yet uncovered.

Lastly, there simply remains the continued, inescapable challenge of discerning processes within groups which are secretive, suspicious of outside focus, and publicly deny linkages between political and paramilitary wings. Throughout this project, there were claims disputing the veracity of the extent to the quantity and quality of community activism among groups claiming to be heavily engaged in this, including groups within the AARM denigrating the activism of others: "some of what groups claim is bullshit" (COM-6).

There were, of course, more people I could have spoken to, which may have provided more insight around these issues. Yet, as previously outlined, a huge effort was made

to reach theoretical and empirical saturation. I have spoken to expert academics, those involved in mediation and dialogue with groups within the AARM, as many members of these organisations themselves, including interviews with representatives of six political organisations (the IRSP, 32CSM, RNU, Saoradh, Lasair Dhearg, the 1916 Societies), non-aligned anti-Agreement Irish republicans, community workers working within geographical areas in which AARM organisations maintain a presence and working directly on related topics (youth preventions, recruitment, threats), and statutory organisations; and with interviews undertaken in locations spanning the island of Ireland in Dublin, Cork, Derry, Belfast, Newry, Strabane, County Armagh, and County Tyrone. As such, this substantial dataset provides a comprehensive account which strengthens the arguments made throughout.

~

There are also more fundamental problems with studies of clandestine actors which are difficult to ever discern fully, as Robert White noted in his work on the PIRA,

Respondents with the best of intentions are subject to fallible memories; they may forget important information, associate events and behavior with the wrong time period, unconsciously rework facts to make them fit into a consistent, but unreal, sequence, or construct an account such that it is consistent with the movement's ethos.

White, 2007: p. 287

There are no easy solutions to the issues of memory and access, though they can be mitigated, including through concerted efforts at checking data reliability and validity (see the Methodology Chapter). Regarding generalisability, I argue that such a limitation is overstated. This project cannot and does not claim to make generalisations to all cases of violence-utilising, clandestine contentious political actors, but as the above theoretical contribution section delineates, and as the next section will

demonstrate, the findings of this project *do* offer contributions to wider theoretical and empirical literatures precisely through its detailed analysis of multiple case-studies and similar processes of change and its outcome within a shared movement-field:

This is something of a paradox. The more you learn in depth about the particularity of one person, situation, or context, the more likely you are to discover something universal.

Simon, 2020: p. 695

Beyond this, there are the "unknowns". I have attempted to create—to the best of my abilities and with the data that I possess—what I hope is a plausible attempt at answering my research questions. But such an argument is open to critique. More data may create new findings which sustain or challenge this argument. It is hoped that in publishing this work, many of these will be identified, while known limitations improved upon.

Beyond the AARMalite: Future Research Directions

In the overall introduction, the case of strategic change within the AARM was grounded within wider empirical literatures pertaining to violence-utilising contentious political actors: spoiler groups and their activities beyond the holding of cease-fires, non-violent tactics and strategies, and transformation. Of these, it is the latter category which the findings of this research offers the most direct contributions—that of decline as a *mechanism* of strategic adaptation.

Again, there is good existing research which has sought to overview decline among this cohort both as an *outcome* and a *process* in of itself (see Becker, 2017; Cronin, 2009; Miller, 2012; Nussio & Ugarría, 2021; Staniland, 2014). Of these, Cronin's work

remains pre-eminent, not only in the scope of the groups studied, but also in their explicit delineation of the pathways that decline can take and the outcomes that it can produce.

But far fewer of these have sought to understand changes within groups as a deliberately adaptive strategy to ensure organisational survival or have sought to understand the role of identity within the forms that strategic replacements take.

~

The two organisations, outlined in the "Who Cares" section which have different outcomes in regard to successful adaptation—ETA and the FARC—would be strong candidates for a comparative, social movement grounded, case-study on adaptation to decline. These groups have ultimately different outcomes in response to perceptions of decline, operate in very different locations, and possess(ed) different ultimate goals (ETA's aim of an independent Basque homeland, and the FARC's broader revolutionary objectives). But they also have commonalities including a similar operational period, ideological underpinnings (being on the far-left of the political spectrum), and wider political environments and structures: a changing political landscape to liberal democracies during and after the change process.

~

Outside of these two cases, however, there may be an opportunity to fill some of these gaps and test these arguments in a "most-similar" case-study, closer to the one explored in this project: what appears to be an effort within the largest of Northern Ireland's PUL paramilitary groups—the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF)—towards its own strategic change and organisational transition process.

In November 2023, media outlets began reporting on an internal putsch within the UVF tied directly to supposed efforts by the leadership of that organisation to formally transition into a non-violent, political group. (O'Neill, 2023b)

There are genuine reasons to be sceptical of this claim. The UVF has been engaged in "civilianisation" since at least 2007/8 when the organisation created the ACT community group which aims to help with the "civilianisation of volunteers [UVF members]"; but the organisation retains its structure and remains active in undertaking PSAs within the community (LOY-1). It has also been implicated in political-violence post-1998 including alleged involvement in violent civil unrest (including the hijacking and burning of busses, and riots), and most recently a hoax bomb incidence in October 2022 which targeted then Irish Foreign Minister, Simon Coveney (McKittrick, 2013; Preston et al., 2022).

Yet, such a shift *does* provide an interesting example to test the model of strategic adaptation outlined by this project. Firstly, loyalist paramilitarism shares some significant structural similarities with organisations within the AARM, including their origins in "the Troubles" and their embeddedness within working-class areas in which they had a prior operational presence pre-1998, which are areas of continued locations of economic deprivation, and which face common social issues such as substance abuse including among young people. Again, like CNR communities, there is also a widespread perception that the supposed "peace dividend" from the GFA has failed to materialise in these communities:

[The] "peace dividend" hasn't filtered down to communities... Young people feel left behind by politicians... loyalist communities have been forgotten about.

PUL/POL-1

Likewise, loyalist paramilitaries remain heavily engaged in community-directed violence, which were again noted—like their republican counterparts—to have strong degrees of tolerance and even support within operational areas: "there's a belief that they didn't get it [attacked] for nothing" (PUL/MED-1). Characteristics for those under-threat are also similar to those within CNR communities:

[There's] a trajectory you can predict... Paramilitaries will say by the age of 10 and 11 they know who's coming under scrutiny.

PUL/MED-1

Secondly, preliminary data collected during fieldwork *does* suggest the possibility of comparable mechanisms behind allegations of strategic change within the UVF and that of the AMF: that of decline and adaptation both in relation to organisational perceptions of direct community alienation and wider changing socio-political environments.³⁵ Loyalist paramilitaries, including elements of the UVF, have been significantly impacted by perceptions within loyalist areas relating to organised crime:

The dilemma is that people in the UVF in different localities have created criminal gangs.

LOY-1

Indeed, those with close working knowledge of the group argued that even before the purge of the leadership of the organisation in that location, the East Belfast UVF should be understood almost as an appendage of the organisation, with the group on the

³⁵ Though omitted from this project due to the need to focus directly on the AARM, data collection *was* undertaken in Belfast and Derry specifically around PUL paramilitarism. Interviews were conducted in the operational areas of the UVF and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA)—the other main PUL paramilitary group—including mediators, community workers, and those close to the UVF including its linked political party the Progressive Unionist Party (PUP) and its community affiliated group ACT.

"outskirts" of the organisation, and that the organisation is not part of the civilianisation process (LOY-1).

Moreover, there appears to be a seismic change occurring within the broader environment of political unionism and loyalism. Participants from across the PUL landscape pointed to longer-term deep frustrations from within communities of what was believed to have been the failure of mainstream PUL parties to represent these areas at both political and social levels, something which seems clear given the collapse of vote share of the largest PUL political party, the DUP, in the 2022 Stormont election:

The biggest issue is political representation [a lack of] adequate political representation... there's a perception that the DUP are finished.

PUL/YOUTH-1

Moreover, the political changes within Northern Ireland noted in Chapter 5 to be instrumental in producing processes of strategic change—conversations around perceptions of an increasing likelihood of a united Ireland—are not only producing reverberations within republicanism, but loyalism too. During interviews with PUL participants there was a genuine perception of the PUL community occupying a "second class" status, and deep concern about narratives of a united Ireland:

An erosion of Britishness...a chipping away of anything that could be perceived as Britishness... where is the place for me and my family? There's no fairness in a united Ireland.

PUL/YOUTH-1

Loyalism is also becoming less violent. PSNI security situation statistics from 1998–2023, reveal a downward trend in PSAs (see **Figure 20**). While this alone does not indicate changing strategies (this is aggregate data which includes *all* loyalist

paramilitaries, and as the uptick in assaults in 2022–2023 demonstrates these organisations remain considerably active in PSAs), nonetheless, taken together with the above, it does point towards *potential* change.

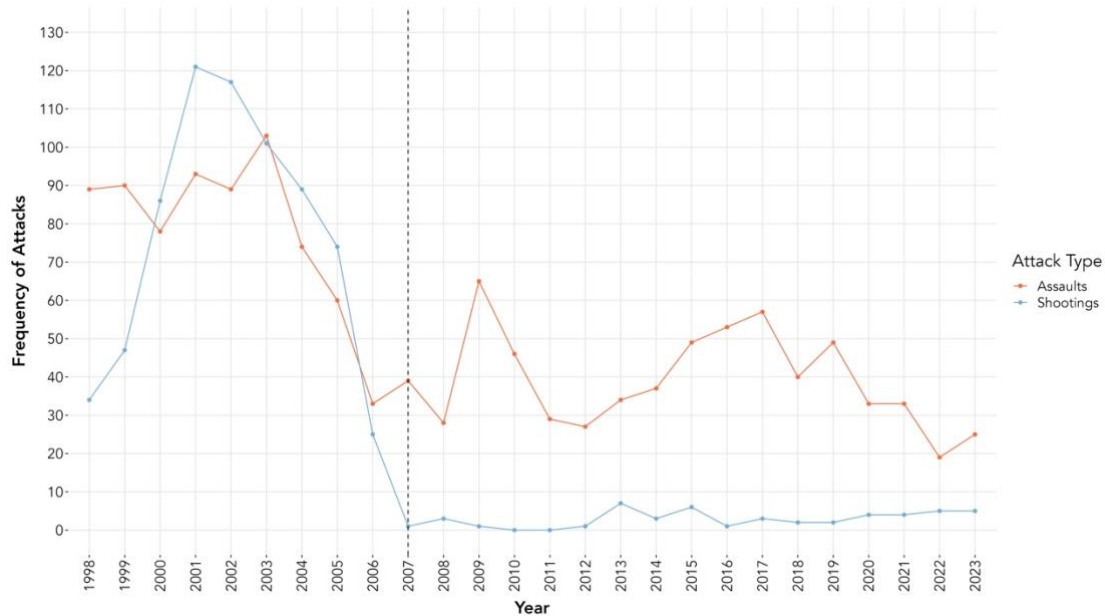


Figure 20 - Paramilitary Style Attacks undertaken by loyalist groups as recorded by the PSNI.

Note: The dashed line at 2007 indicates the year in which the combined Loyalist Military Command (LMC) of the UDA, UVF, and Red Hand Commando formally declared an end to their armed campaign.

Data visualised from PSNI ‘Security Situation Statistics’. <https://www.psni.police.uk/official-statistics/security-situation-statistics>

In such an environment, greater political and community engagement offers PUL paramilitary groups both the space to transition and to capitalise on some of these issues, alongside an opportunity to reverse organisational and wider movement trends. And it also allows for a continuation of a loyalist collective identity which again, like republicanism, emphasises the "defence" of working-class, ethno-nationalist constituencies (Bruce, 2001; Ferguson et al., 2018; Silke, 1999a; Smithey, 2011).

But it also poses the threat of what could be a counter-process of change within violent political loyalism. Loyalist paramilitary groups have not fractured outwardly to the same extent as republican counterparts, and there have been factions and breakaways,

are no discernible PUL "dissident" groups. The reason, as one participant noted, was that there did not exist the same pressure. But internally, groups are seemingly divided. There was an increase in political violence following the debate around the "Irish Sea Border", and the 2022 Stormont election saw a sharp spike in loyalist paramilitary political violence, including the hoax bomb attack against Simon Coveney which involved genuine physical force. Participants close to organisations noted that there also exists a tension between older members looking to transition, and younger members, frustrated by what they see as a lack of action:

[Loyalist paramilitarism] is in a really dangerous moment... getting more militant with younger people getting more drawn in... there's a feeling that British identity is slipping away... it's a bit of a tinderbox.

PUL/MED-1

If we create a vacuum, we're allowing men of violence to come into that vacuum... coming to a watershed very quickly... [can't allow] this political vacuum being filled with violence.

LOY-2

Not enough data were collected to draw any direct links or to assess allegations of change which occurred long after I had left the field. Despite this, the apparent similarities regarding the stimuli for change as the AMF, and even possible outcomes of what this could resemble, would complement not only this project with its obvious parallels, but also wider research on change within violence-utilising groups *after* negotiated settlements to conflict. In the process, offering further insight into both causal mechanisms and internal dynamics around the change process. Likewise, stemming from the limitations of this work, undertaking research on an organisation in the early stages of transition will perhaps lead to better understandings of the exact

dynamics *within* organisations around internal negotiation and the management of change, something which would invariably benefit research on power and agency within clandestine groups.

What Next?

This thesis has been concerned with two parts of organisational strategic change: 1) what drives the onset of this, and 2) what explains the forms in which this change takes? In other words, why do groups change and how? But this is only part of the story. There is a third component which has not been covered: its *success or failure*.

There are practical considerations for this omission. Strategic change within the AMF is both comparatively recent and ongoing. Any assessment as to the outcomes of the turn towards community activism for these groups would be speculative and premature. Nevertheless, as a way of closing, there are some preliminary observations and insights arising from interview data which hint at both the challenges that groups will face in continuing and moves towards wider political transition (and the impact that this will ultimately have on changing organisational fortunes), *and* the pressure groups will face for continued activism in the community.

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If success can be defined broadly as the attainment of organisational goals (Zald & Ash, 1966), then this project has provided a two-fold definition of how the success of the strategic shift towards community activism should be conceptualised:

1. The attainment of longer and medium term, movement-wide objectives (those outlined in Chapter 2).
2. The reversal of perceptions of organisational decline.

Certainly, groups have embarked on processes of strategic change in the *hope* that they will both reverse perceptions of decline (through increased recruitment and the strengthening of organisational-community bonds) and a belief that this strategy is more advantageous within the exact environmental conditions in which they are embedded.

There is no guarantee, however, that community activism will be successful in achieving either of these objectives. Indeed, there is significant evidence provided within this project which suggests the challenge that groups face in sustaining strategic change and developing this further. Organisations face issues around operational space and resources (material, human, and cultural), not to mention internal dynamics in which paramilitary groups are not just present but, in many cases, continue to exert powerful influence which has the potential to restrict change through backlash, alienation, and continued (costly) state scrutiny and repression. It is a challenge noted not only by observers of anti-Agreement Irish republicanism but by members of groups themselves—including those supportive of this process.

Take issues of operational space. The move towards community activism was often compared by those involved in ways analogous to that of the Provisional Movement, but the operational space groups find themselves in looks very different to the community landscape that the Provisionals saw in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, partly due to the development of that space by the Provisionals themselves.

As noted in Chapter 5, it is hard to stress the number of charitable and statutory agencies working across the areas of focus for this project. The presence of statutory agencies and charity groups poses a genuine challenge for groups to involve themselves in community activism in ways comparable to this.

Groups are operating in areas which have existed here for 50 years—
where's the space for them to operate?

MED-2

Tied to this are resource issues. In contrast to the sophisticated forms of activism provided by "mainstream" community groups; anti-Agreement republican groups themselves acknowledge that the forms of activism that they are engaged in are lower cost in terms of "materiel" (money and equipment), cultural insights (specialised knowledge), and personnel (labour, experience, skills, expertise; Edwards & McCarthy, 2004: p. 125–128), with participants conceding that groups "understand limits" (IRSP-3):

Have to be honest when you can't offer support... [get involved] where
and when you can... would pick one issue at a time.

32CSM-4

If you have a good day, and the Housing Executive [government agency
for housing] plays ball, you can help around three people—that's the
entire organisation in [LOCATION].

IRSP-3

Groups recognise the necessity of resources in developing and furthering community activism—"if a group like RNU is going to do this, needs to be trained" (RNU-1) — and certainly, some groups do look to tap into mainstream funding for activism and membership training.³⁶ The IRSP's Teach Na Failte ex-prisoner group is registered as a charity in Northern Ireland which allows direct engagement with mainstream funding

³⁶ Some, but not all. Members of Saoradh for example were keen to note that they did not have charitable status, and criticised groups who accept funds from bodies which are "answerable to nobody" and the danger inherent in this in the eyes of the organisation (SOAR-2).

groups such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Cooperation Ireland.³⁷ And RNU has previously received and continues to receive, funding and training from mainstream organisations such as elements of the trade union movement in Northern Ireland and funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation.³⁸

But for the most part, groups were open that such resource aggregation and development is difficult, summarised bluntly by one participant within the IRSP in the following, and who argued that as a result, the party was "naive" in believing that activism would help members of the group get elected to Stormont:

[Activism by the IRSP is] not really up there. Just getting started in the community...don't have the resources, don't have the infrastructure.

IRSP-3

There are also genuine questions over the ability to sustain activism to the point in which this can become established within the community, or in which genuine change can be made. Participants noted throughout this project that community activism takes time, something which those within the AMF also noted of their own attempts:

Don't want a party doing something that lasts six months, want something long term.

RNU-3

³⁷ These links were made explicit in backlash to two paramilitary displays by the INLA in 2018 and 2019 in which increased scrutiny was paid to the IRSM (IRSP-5; Vaughn, 2018; Barnes, 2019).

³⁸ The Unity Movement had close ties to the Conflict Resolution Services Ireland (CRSI), a former mediation group in West Belfast, which received money from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. This group had been raided multiple times by the PSNI in an investigation into the group—it was one of these raids which saw Reilly arrested on directing terrorism charges (Breen, 2018).

Those outside the Movement, however, were more scathing in their view of community activism which they characterised as being "sporadically" engaged in, with a quick and high "drop-off" rate:

Groups won't do the hard work... you don't build credibility on one issue for six months then forget about it, it's a long-term strategy [requires] at least 5 years on one issue... short termism is a waste of space.

MED-2

Even within groups, evidence outlined in Chapter 3 around a predominance of activism around salient "hot button" topics *does* suggest that sustaining activism around single campaigns will be challenging. Groups face a tension here. In looking to be responsive to the community on issues, they must do so in ways which prevent them from being seen as "opportunistic" (32CSM-2), or in a manner which precludes long-term engagement—a tension exacerbated by existing resource constraints. Groups, however, believe that they *can* square this circle. When comparing their activism to that of Sinn Féin, one member of RNU noted that while they recognise that creating a comparable community landscape could not occur within a year, the party was confident that they could do so in a quarter of the time (RNU-4). The practicalities of this remain to be seen.

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All of these issues pose genuine questions over both the development and sustenance of community activism as a strategy, and in-turn, strategic success. It is also a challenge to what is clearly a longer-term hope for organisational transition, something overviewed in Chapter 6.

Either directly or indirectly, the potential of wider organisational transition has been compared to the Provisional Movement's own transitional period. Yet, when the Provisionals began their political transition process it was in a very good place to do

so. The group had significant financial resources to fund change processes, including through established external allies and funding networks (including the Irish Northern Aid Committee/NORAIID, links with foreign governments such as Libya, and other insurgent groups including the FARC in Colombia), organised crime, and legitimate businesses (Horgan & Taylor, 1999, 2010; Woodford & Smith, 2017). Likewise, it was well-established within the community landscape through Sinn Féin and links to community groups, providing a source of employment for those demobilised (Bosi, 2016; Cassidy, 2005; Gilmartin, 2015; White, 2010). Tied to this, that an existing Irish republican identity placed so much weight on community defence and improvement allowed for the majority of members to transition away from violence in providing a frame-extension process of what this defence and support could look like (Ashour & Clubb, 2021; Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018; White, 2010).

Perhaps most importantly of all, it found a ready and willing partner in the British and Irish governments, not to mention a public eager for an end to the violence. Throughout the conflict, the British State kept an open line with the Provisional Movement, and negotiations through "back channels": covert discussions between opposing groups (Ó Dochartaigh, 2011). Negotiation and facilitation by the State has been well understood as one component in transitioning conflict (and violence-utilising groups) towards Peace Processes, beginning usually with recognition by the state and "de-proscription" in which the government looks to 'legalize the rebel groups as political parties or otherwise establish them as such' (Matanock, 2017).

No evidence was presented over the course of interviews that representatives from the British or Northern Irish government are engaged in any process of dialogue around

transition and the facilitation of this pertaining to anti-Agreement Irish republicans.³⁹ Instead, mediators noted that while groups "need the institutions of the State to facilitate" transition processes, current actions are having a negative effect in "weaning people away from the gun and towards politics", and contrasted this heavily with organisations who, in the past, were provided "significant funds to transition" (MED-4). This may reflect a perceived lack of need to negotiate with these groups which are small in number and pose relatively little threat, alongside mutual hostility to such a process—it would pose a challenge for any group to keep republican credentials given the critique these groups have made against the Provisionals for their own negotiations.

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These challenges do not mean that the success of community activism as a strategy and wider organisational transition for the groups involved is impossible. Interviews across organisations within non-violent anti-Agreement Irish republicanism did provide evidence of what appears to be embryonic developments within this cohort towards some form of policy realignment around core positions, and that such a process may be strengthening individual processes of this strategic change. Independent Irish republicans, members of groups within the AMF, and political groups within the AARM all expressed a belief that there is a better relationship between organisations which are pursuing a non-violent primary strategic direction, and that this is even producing talk of greater cooperation by organisational leaderships to cooperate more closely, what was referred to across groups as a "broad front approach" (32CSM-2; IRSP-2; IRSP-5), something already demonstrable in cooperation between independent

³⁹ This has been done in the past, notably the Irish government's (rebuffed) efforts to negotiate with the RIRA directly after the Omagh bombing (Frampton, 2011).

anti-Agreement aligned councillors (see Chapter 6).⁴⁰ When asked why this improved relationship is occurring, one member of the 32CSM was blunt in their appraisal: "Being honest? I think that we need each other" (32CSM-4).

Groups noted that the certain issues were too large for any one given group—"No-one will listen to one grouping. Need a broad front" (IRSP-4); the need to unify among a community which members portrayed as tired of factionalisation—"raison d'être has to be the community" (32CSM-2), and a recognition that many groups have limited memberships and resource requirements needed are better-off pooled. It is also a push and plea for cooperation visible in the statements of the 32CSM since their shift:

Republican focus must now be centred on building a policy platform around which republicans can fully engage not only with our people, but also with each other in pursuing these rights... we in the 32 County Sovereignty Movement are privileged to be working alongside republicans and socialists from other groups and those unaligned. We give our analysis as diligently as we listen and engage with the analysis given by others. We are not at this table simply to covert others to our point of view, but to merge our collective strengths of all groups to move this struggle forward.

32CSM, 2017

Likewise, considerable evidence throughout this thesis has demonstrated that internal changes (particularly altered memberships and dynamics within organisations) are, and likely will continue to, producing a further strengthening of the move towards community activism brought about by the reality that those brought in by this have a greater interest in continuing this shift—and as Chapter 3 has shown, the ability to both select this at an organisational level and implement this within the areas in which they operate.

⁴⁰ Though these same figures were often quick to note that such conversations were being held around the pooling of resources to engage in activism, and the aggregation of multiple organisational documents on overlapping policies, and not new structures.

~

But it does demonstrate the challenge that groups will face. At the most extreme level, the failure, or *perceived* failure, of this strategic shift could produce further splintering within groups, or even organisational collapse. At the most worrisome level, it could also strengthen the messaging and appeals of groups which remain wedded to state-directed violence, which could in turn lead to better recruitment and support.

Resultantly, the argument that this project makes about the continued nature of community activism is one which rejects the notion of path dependency: the idea that 'preceding steps in a particular direction induce further movement in the same direction' (Pierson, 2000: p. 252):

In an increasing returns process, the probability of further steps along the same path increases with each move down that path. This is because the relative benefits of the current activity compared with other possible options increase over time. To put it a different way, the costs of exit—of switching to some previously plausible alternative—rise.

Pierson, 2000: p. 252

The embarkment on, or the continued pursuit of, a particular strategic change process has no 'deterministic properties' (Mahoney, 2000: p. 507). There is no guarantee of strategic "lock in" (Garud et al., 2010; Schreyögg et al., 2011). Strategic change within this thesis has been shown to be contingent on a variety of factors, both internal and external. At no point was the move towards community activism inevitable, something also demonstrated by the failure of two groups within the AMF to jettison state-directed violence demonstrates.

Rather, the metaphor throughout this project—that of evolution—is most accurate. Change is slow, long-term, and dependent on a range of factors including internal understandings, resources, space, the actions of other actors both within and outside of

the AARM, and the whims of external events, which have all been shown to have significantly impacted the move towards community activism. These will also likely impact its future.

Conclusion

Northern Ireland has been in a post-conflict situation for almost as long as "the Troubles" lasted. Yet in the quarter of a century since the signing of the GFA, Northern Ireland looks unrecognisable. The political wing of the organisation responsible for the majority of the security instances during this conflict sits as a party of government in a legislature described by its first Prime Minister James Craig as "a Protestant Parliament and a Protestant State" (McMahon & O'Donoghue, 2011), next to those which the PIRA had targeted for assassination, within a political structure it had attempted to overthrow. The overall level and threat of violence is at its lowest ever point since the conflict has ended, and organisations once associated with political violence (both loyalist and republican) appear to be actively engaged in transitional processes towards non-violence.

Anti-Agreement Irish republicanism has changed and continues to change within this landscape. In 1995, Gerry Adams was giving a speech outside Belfast City Hall during which a member of the crowd shouted, "bring back the IRA", regarding the organisation's then ceasefire, ongoing since 1994. Adam's response of "they haven't gone away, you know?" could have just as easily been applicable to the AARM and the organisations within this (Tonge, 2004). Anti-Agreement Irish republicanism is not going away. What it will look like going forward, however, may in large part be dependent on the success or failure of the process of strategic change explored in this thesis.

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