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**"Robbing at the point of a gun as an alternative to decent work": Exploring armed robbery in Dublin during the Irish civil war**

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**Abstract**

Throughout the Irish civil war, a popular narrative emerged within the media and government circles describing the lawlessness and breakdown of society that was proceeding around the country. Kevin O'Higgins, in particular, came to embody this dour outlook upon Ireland, while his government colleague George Gavan Duffy also urged the Dáil to ensure the fledgling Irish Free State was seen as a "nation and not a rabble." The pressure upon the new state was multifaceted, comprising of not only open warfare, but also labour disputes and land grievances. The availability of weapons also brought other issues to the fore, namely armed robbery, which this paper intends to explore. This stems from the minimal attention given to the topic within the existing historiography surrounding the civil war, seeing it subsumed within a broader discussion regarding crime, if mentioned at all. In this regard, the paper will be based upon the utilisation of archival material, particularly crime reports, compensation claims and contemporary newspapers to construct a picture of armed robbery in the capital. This will include an examination of the available data relating to armed crime to shed light upon the foundations of the contemporary narrative of increased social unrest which emerged. Specifically, the paper explores its extent, the discrepancies which emerge regarding those accused of perpetrating armed robbery, and the success of the government responses to the issue.

**Keywords**

Armed robbery, crime, civil war, Ireland.

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## Introduction

The paucity of effective law and order during the Irish civil war saw its symptoms manifest in a multiplicity of ways. The ready availability of firearms, for instance, provided a new dimension to social issues such as robbery and land grievances. Much of the rhetoric surrounding the conflict from the media, government and other sectors focussed upon this, and a belief that the fabric of society was being eroded. Kevin O'Higgins, as Minister for Home Affairs, held an austere outlook which put "local social unrest, agitation and indiscipline on a par with widespread armed resistance to the government."<sup>2</sup> In addition, the Catholic bishops urged the population to "consider religiously our solemn teaching on the fundamental maxim of social morality."<sup>3</sup> Such comments connected with the concerns of many communities, fearful of the emergence of a tyranny of armed men who refused to settle "back at his plough" following the Irish revolutionary period.<sup>4</sup> It has been argued that unrest such as this flourished in the vacuum of civil authority following the Anglo-Irish Treaty, which saw the lack of a police force in many parts of the country and the army being unsuitable surrogates.<sup>5</sup> However, Dublin city was distinct in this regard. The capital had the benefit of an established police force in the Dublin Metropolitan Police (DMP) and the newly formed Criminal Investigation Department (CID), whose sole purpose was to tackle armed crime. A swift military defeat of anti-Treaty IRA forces by the National Army within the city, though considered weak and ineffectual by some, further reduced the burden placed upon civil authorities within the capital.<sup>6</sup> This paper intends to explore the basis for claims by

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<sup>2</sup> Eunan O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland: The Irish state and its enemies since 1922* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 33.

<sup>3</sup> Statement issued by the Cardinal Primate and the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland on the present condition of the country 26 Apr. 1922, University College Dublin Archives (UCDA), Fitzgerald papers, P80/279.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Dolan, ""The shadow of a great fear": Terror and revolution in Ireland," in *Terror in Ireland 1916-23*, ed. David Fitzpatrick (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2012), 34.

<sup>5</sup> O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland*, 32; Complaint from the Postmaster General, Minutes of the Provisional Government 3 Nov. 1922, National Archives of Ireland (NAI), TSCH/1/1/3/1

<sup>6</sup> Unsigned letter from 'Irish Afrikaners' to Archbishop Byrne regarding weak 'Dublin Jackeens', Dublin Diocesan Archives, Archbishop Byrne papers, Box 466; Michael Hopkinson, *Green against green: The Irish civil war* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2004), 145-47.

the government and media around the level of social unrest during the civil war, with a focus upon armed robbery in Dublin city. This will incorporate an examination of the available data relating to armed crime to shed light upon the foundations of the narrative of increased social unrest; in particular exploring its extent, discrepancies regarding those accused of perpetrating armed robbery, and also the success of the government responses to the issue.

Within the historiographical discourse surrounding the civil war, much of the analysis regarding social unrest focusses upon land and labour disputes, rather than the issue under consideration here.<sup>7</sup> Gavin Foster, for example, argues that the renewal of IRA violence and the state's response to it, allowed underlying local issues around land to come to the surface, and take on a new violent dimension.<sup>8</sup> This placed the issue to the forefront of concerns of government ministers such as Patrick Hogan and Kevin O'Higgins.<sup>9</sup> However, despite the parallels between the violence exhibited within land disputes, and that within armed robbery, the latter receives only minimal attention within scholarship. To address this lacuna, it is necessary to weave a variety of primary source material together to facilitate this exploration. However, some difficulties can arise within this. Contemporary newspaper reports prove valuable in not only identifying instances of armed robbery, but also mapping attitudes and perceptions regarding its prevalence; however, heavy press censorship employed by the government raises questions around the accuracy of these reports. In this regard, the post-Truce damage to property claims are an invaluable resource when examining the extent of armed robbery within the capital.<sup>10</sup> The majority of these files are terse in their description of events, necessitating employment of newspapers reports to supplement the lack of detail. However, the rigorous breakdown of the goods taken

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<sup>7</sup> For examples, see Diarmaid Ferriter, *The transformation of Ireland* (New York: Profile Books, 2005), 256-58; G. M. Foster, *The Irish civil war and society: Politics, class and conflict* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 138-41; J. J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-85: Politics and society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 71-72.

<sup>8</sup> Foster, *Civil war and society*, 131-32; O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland*, 31.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Post-Truce (Damage to property (compensation) Act 1923) Dublin City, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/28.

and their monetary value provides insight into commodities most valued by raiders, their demographics and *modus operandi*. However, it is worth bearing in mind some of the pitfalls within these files. To qualify for compensation under this scheme, the loss to property must have been directly caused by either side within the civil war. This creates difficulties regarding drawing conclusions regarding perpetrators as crimes committed by persons unknown during this period are attributed to members of the IRA, in order to increase the likelihood of compensation. There is also little interrogation of this by the Department of Finance within the correspondence contained in the files, with it being taken as given that the IRA were responsible. Having said this, bearing these challenges in mind, the compensation files prove a valuable source to examine armed robbery within the capital during the civil war.

### Establishing a Baseline

Within contemporary media and government reports, a sense of moral and social collapse is present throughout. Newspapers carried glaring headlines asserting that the "Dublin robberies epidemic" was fuelling a booming "hold-up industry," recounting in almost gleeful detail the scourge of armed robbery throughout the capital and country at large.<sup>11</sup> They also spoke of a "recrudescence of predatory activity in Dublin and the provinces," drawing parallels with the actions of the British army in the preceding years.<sup>12</sup> These pronouncements reflected those of Kevin O'Higgins who claimed that the country was going through a total moral and social collapse with "greed and envy and lust and drunkenness and irresponsibility" rife throughout.<sup>13</sup> Assertions such as these were indicative of his view of social unrest, and creates a narrative of a pronounced increase in social unrest and armed robbery. However, identifying a proliferation of armed crime during the civil war years is not easily ascertained due to the scarcity of accurate records. The primary difficulty lies in establishing a basis for comparison between the civil war and preceding years. The

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<sup>11</sup> *Irish Independent*, 31 Oct. 1922; *Sunday Independent*, 26 Nov. 1922.

<sup>12</sup> *Irish Independent*, 7 Sep. 1922.

<sup>13</sup> O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland*, 32.

exceptionally detailed statistics of the DMP can go some way to establishing a pre-civil war baseline of armed crime levels. However, establishing a common unit of comparison is difficult. DMP records do not mention armed robbery specifically, but rather grouping activities such as housebreaking, robbery of shops, sacrilege (robbing places of worship) and assault with intent to rob into one category of “offences against property with violence,” separate from acts including embezzlement and minor larcenies.<sup>14</sup> However, these records do not exist past 1919, leaving an absence of reliable and centralised crime data for the civil war period.

To attempt to circumvent this gap in statistics, the post-Truce compensation files referred to earlier can serve as a partial and imprecise surrogate for official crime data. Within the 2,387 claims filed for Dublin city, 401 files cite armed robbery specifically as the basis for their loss.<sup>15</sup> Included within this number are certain files which may contain multiple robberies on a single premises, such as the case of Thomas Fallon whose drapery shop on Mary Street was raided by armed men no fewer than five times between May 1922 and January 1923.<sup>16</sup> Taking this into account, it can be presumed that the level of armed robbery is slightly higher than the number of files. By contrast, the DMP statistics from 1908-19 inclusive show an average of 296 incidences of “offences against property with violence” within the metropolitan area. Within these twelve years, there is a general pattern of decrease, despite two spikes of 321 in 1917 and 389 instances in

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<sup>14</sup> For example, *Statistical tables of the Dublin Metropolitan Police for the year 1911*, [Cd. 6384], H.C. 1912-13, lxix, 631.

<sup>15</sup> 301 files citing armed robbery specifically are found within the 2,127 claims filed under the Post-Truce (Damage to property (compensation) Act 1923) Dublin City, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/28. The remaining 100 armed robbery claims are drawn from the 409 files within the Post-Truce (Damage to property (compensation) Act 1923) Dublin County series, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/6. However, of these 409 files, only 260 relate to cases that occurred within the Dublin Metropolitan area. In this regard, the 100 armed robbery claims here have only been drawn from the cases occurring within the metropolitan district, to aid comparison with the DMP statistics. The apparent higher proportion of armed crime relative to the total number of claims within the Dublin County series can possibly be explained due to the significant majority of claims within the 2,127 Dublin City files referring to property damage during the July attack on the Four Courts.

<sup>16</sup> Claim for compensation by Mr Thomas Fallon, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/28/465

1919.<sup>17</sup> However, the statistics for 1916 excluded any incidents relating to the Rising which, by the authors' own admission, may have skewed their figures.<sup>18</sup> The question remains: what can be gleaned from these statistics regarding an increase in armed robbery during the civil war? The lack of DMP records for the civil war years, and the imprecise comparative statistics offered by the compensation files preclude strong conclusions from being drawn. As such, until reliable indicators relating to crime levels during the civil war emerge, any clear proliferation of armed crime during this period is difficult to verify. What can be argued however, is that an element of moral panic was present during the period fuelled by rhetoric around violence emerging from media and government sources. This in turn had a self-fulfilling effect regarding perceptions of violence. Anne Dolan has argued that stories of violence and crime during this period can have an effect as terrifying as the event itself.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that the new focus within media and government upon armed crime provided it with a degree of pervasiveness in the public consciousness that it did not possess in reality. However, given the dearth of reliable data discussed above, this is a conclusion that currently cannot be fully advanced.

#### Patterns of Armed Crime

What does become clear through examination of compensation files and newspaper reports are patterns of armed robbery, particularly around popular targets and the tactics employed by raiders. The availability of arms during this period, and the lack of civil authority to prevent their misuse is clearly shown within the documentary evidence. Almost all the cases of robbery studied for this paper were committed with a firearm, with no evidence of other weapons such as knives or sticks. Revolvers were overwhelmingly the weapon of choice for raiders, likely due to their ease of concealment. A robbery in April 1923 of opera glasses from Castle Park Boarding School in Dalkey by

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<sup>17</sup> *Statistical tables of the Dublin Metropolitan Police for the year 1917*, [Cmd. 364], H.C. 1919, xlvi, 423; *Statistical tables of the Dublin Metropolitan Police for the year 1919*, [Cmd. 1318], H.C. 1920, xlvi, 377.

<sup>18</sup> *Statistical tables of the Dublin Metropolitan Police for the year 1916*, [Cmd. 30], H.C. 1919, xlvi, 403.

<sup>19</sup> Dolan, "The shadow of a great fear", 35.

schoolboys, armed with a rifle, saw them easily tracked down the same day, with the barrel protruding from the collar of one boy's coat.<sup>20</sup> Those blamed for armed robbery were also almost exclusively male, with only a tiny minority of files describing a woman as being among the perpetrators.<sup>21</sup> While there may have been a common weapon favoured by raiders, the targets and geographic spread of armed robbery were highly diverse. Establishments such as public houses and drapery shops were popular targets, but many raiders proved eclectic in their tastes. Some instances saw confectionary being stolen at gunpoint on Mary Street, Thomas Dockrell and Sons of South Great Georges Street being relieved of a tilting furnace, and an ice cream vendor being robbed of his watch and takings for the day.<sup>22</sup> A striking number of cases involved raids taking place as wages were due to be paid to employees, with raiders making off with large sums of money sometimes up to £300.<sup>23</sup> The frequency of such raids compelled an anonymous author to submit a letter to the *Irish Independent* advising employers to pay their employees by cheque to avoid becoming a target for robbery with the added benefit of stimulating the banking sector.<sup>24</sup> The frequency of raids such as these suggests that, at least in a number of cases, these were not opportunist robberies but rather contained an element of planning and observation so as to maximise their take. Another example of a daring and seemingly planned raid involved seven armed men holding up a car full of DMP officers outside Kevin Street barracks, in which £700 and the vehicle were taken.<sup>25</sup> Members of Dáil Éireann (Teachta Dála or TD) also were not beyond the reach of robbery under arms. On New Year's Eve 1922, armed men arrive at the Mountjoy Square home of W. L. Cole, TD for Cavan and, having

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<sup>20</sup> *Irish Times*, 21 Apr. 1923.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see "Claim for compensation" by Mr Thomas Fallon, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/28/465

<sup>22</sup> *Cork Examiner*, 6 Nov. 1922; Compensation claim by Thomas Dockrell and Sons, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/28/7; *Freemans Journal*, 25 Sep 1922. See also, cocoa stolen by armed men from the Dublin Chocolate Works, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/6/240/

<sup>23</sup> *Irish Times*, 14 May 1923; *Sunday Independent*, 26 Nov. 1922; *Irish Times*, 25 June 1923.

<sup>24</sup> *Irish Independent*, 9 Nov. 1922.

<sup>25</sup> *Connacht Tribune*, 27 Jan 1923.

doused the property in petrol, stole £40 in cash.<sup>26</sup> While these examples may elucidate some of the popular targets and methods favoured by armed raiders, identifying those responsible is somewhat more problematic.

In this regard, interesting discrepancies emerge surrounding the perpetrators of armed robbery as reported within newspapers and official documents. Due to heavy state censorship of news reports, the trope of "armed men" were blamed within the media for the robberies within the city. Piaras Béasláí, in his role as press censor, instructed the media in this respect, asserting that the anti-Treaty forces should not be referred to as "forces or troops," but rather "bands or simply armed men."<sup>27</sup> Further to this, every compensation file consulted laid the blame upon "an organisation engaged in or purporting to engage in armed resistance to the provisional government of Ireland."<sup>28</sup> However, it can be argued that this is a simplification of the situation. The implication of the IRA allowed the government the justification it needed for harsh measures against anti-Treaty republicans in some cases, and provided a more solid basis for a compensation claim.<sup>29</sup> When examining the details of robberies within the city, several factors emerge that challenge the belief that robbery was solely an IRA pursuit.

Firstly, many raiders fled empty handed when challenged by their victims, or else panicked and fired wildly often with little accuracy even at close range. An example is that of two would be armed robbers foiled by the young daughter of a postmistress who grabbed a raider's hand as he pointed a gun at her while calling for her mother, causing them to flee.<sup>30</sup> Peter Rooney, having heard commotion in the shop he lived above on Dorset Street, challenged three armed raiders, managing to overpower and kill one of them.<sup>31</sup> On the 4<sup>th</sup> November 1922, Denis Mordaunt was alerted at breakfast by a shop

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<sup>26</sup> Newspaper Cuttings, UCDA, Mulcahy papers, P7/B/115.

<sup>27</sup> General instructions on censorship, c. Jul 1922, UCDA, Mulcahy papers, P7/B/53.

<sup>28</sup> Compensation claim of Denis Neary, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/28/26.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, cabinet approves limiting access to letters to Republican prisoners until 'outrages' in Dublin reduce, Cabinet Minutes of the Executive Council 29 Dec. 1922, NAI, TSCH/1/2/1.

<sup>30</sup> *Irish Times*, 21 Apr. 1923

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

assistant that a robbery was underway in his grocery shop. He subsequently challenged one assailant, while being fired upon by a second, disarmed him and caused the men to flee.<sup>32</sup> He is also credited with resisting a similar robbery attempt by two British soldiers a few years previously, whereby he took one soldier prisoner.<sup>33</sup> These examples could suggest that perhaps the people of Dublin were not totally intimidated by the 'tyranny of armed men' mentioned earlier, or that the preceding years of war and upheaval had removed the shock factor of guns. Alternately, perhaps the population wished to return their business towards a semblance of normality, and resented further intrusion. Having said this, however, not all robberies were as easily foiled. Patrick Cosgrave, uncle of President of the Executive Council W. T. Cosgrave, was killed while trying to resist raiders at his sister-in-law's pub.<sup>34</sup> Taking these cases, and others like them, it can be argued that the assertion that armed robbery and the anti-Treaty IRA were synonymous is a reductive one; as it equates every person with access to a weapon, and an inclination to use it with an active IRA member. More pressingly perhaps, it ignores the fact that there are also examples of armed robbery being perpetrated by those instructed to prevent it. Examining the role of state actors, namely the National Army and CID, as perpetrators of armed robbery is essential, as to absolve them of their part precludes a thorough examination of the issue, while also ignoring the ill-discipline present within them.

#### Protectors or Perpetrators?

While the IRA were the targets of much vilification regarding their moral standing from Church, government and media, similar sentiments towards state forces were not forthcoming, at least not publically. However, Diarmaid Ferriter has argued that neither side in this conflict had a "monopoly on virtue," and while the anti-Treaty forces appeared more likely to force their will upon the population,

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<sup>32</sup> *Irish Independent*, 6 Nov. 1922; Compensation claim by Denis Mordaunt, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/28/171.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Struggle with robbers, 3 Oct. 1922, Newspaper cuttings, UCDA, Mulcahy papers, P7/B/218.

heavy drinking and indiscipline was also a feature of the National Army.<sup>35</sup> A report by the army's head Chaplain, for example, reported that alcohol was breeding recklessness within many divisions, and suggested that there is currently "a lower standard of morality [within the Free State army] than is generally accepted."<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, while reference to armed robbery committed by members of the National Army and CID is not widespread within official documents, a number of cases do emerge. Dr Conn Murphy wrote to Archbishop of Dublin, Edward Byrne, to complain that he had been robbed and threatened with death by a party of Free State soldiers, wearing trench coats over their uniforms, who forced their way in to his solicitor's house, and stole his watch, money and cheque book.<sup>37</sup> Joseph Owens, former commander of W. T. Cosgrave's personal bodyguard, is another prime example. Owens was known, during his time in the army, to commit armed hold ups of cars and raids for alcohol. Following his dismissal from his post with Cosgrave, he went on a spree of robberies around the city, including his hometown of Dún Laoghaire, with two members of CID, before later being interned under the Public Safety Act.<sup>38</sup> Members of the army and CID were also implicated in an armed robbery in April 1923 at the home of the South Dublin Coroner, Dr Brennan, where papers relating to the inquest into the death of Robert Bonfield were stolen.<sup>39</sup> Bonfield, a young member of the Dublin Brigade of the anti-Treaty IRA, had been found shot dead following his arrest by CID the previous month. Actions such as these by the National Army were well known to many within government, with several Dáil

<sup>35</sup> Ferriter, *Transformation*, 264

<sup>36</sup> Report from the Head Army Chaplain, Dublin Diocesan Archives, Archbishop Byrne papers, Box 467.

<sup>37</sup> Dr Conn Murphy to Archbishop Byrne 3 Feb. 1923, Dublin Diocesan Archives, Archbishop Byrne papers, Box 466; Murray was imprisoned the following month and went on hunger strike, which followed on from the arrest and imprisonment of three of his four children, Darrell Figgis to General Mulcahy, 12 Apr. 1923, *Dáil Éireann Debates* (searchable online:

<http://oireachtasdebates.oireachtas.ie/debates%20authoring/debateswebpack.nsf/yearlist?readform&chamber=dail>).

<sup>38</sup> Commandant Joseph Owens, NAI, TSCH/3/S2209; O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland*, 41-42.

<sup>39</sup> Minutes of the Executive Council, 9 Apr. 1923, NAI, TSCH/1/2/1; Compensation claim by John Cole Chalomer, NAI, FIN/COMP/2/6/74.

questions emerging around commandeering of property, and the usual destruction of same.<sup>40</sup>

With this knowledge of National Army indiscretion, it is perhaps surprising that little outrage was shown by the public compared to that exhibited towards the IRA. It can be argued however, that wearing the uniform of the army of the state, this gave Free State soldiers a legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Furthermore, the use of language in this regard is also important to note. By couching the actions of National Army troops within the language of necessity, it created a narrative that suggested any liberation of property was for the express purpose of defeating the "Irregulars," thus affording the army a legitimacy that the IRA did not possess.<sup>41</sup> After all, "commandeered by the army of the Irish Free State" sounded more convincing than "stolen by armed men" despite the outcome often being the same. This was a narrative which fit within the wider framework of discrediting the IRA, portraying them as robbers and brigands and of dubious moral standing; which resembled Republican discourse regarding the British army in the preceding years.<sup>42</sup> However, despite the clear connections drawn between the IRA and armed robbery within government and media narratives, little direct attention towards the problem was forthcoming from the Executive Council.

### The Government Response

In this regard, within the minutes of the Executive Council during the civil war armed robbery is mentioned only three times, exhibiting a seeming lack of concern regarding the problem at cabinet level. Within this, there emerged two primary attempts to combat the problem within the capital, namely the establishment of CID, and a more obscure plan to arm members of the public throughout Dublin. Firstly, CID, also known as Oriel House, was originally established to combat

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<sup>40</sup> See Claim for destruction of motor car, NAI, FIN/1/2564; Ceisteanna: A commandeered motor car, 15 Nov. 1922, *Dáil Éireann debates*; Ceisteanna: Claims against the army, 7 Feb 1923, *Dáil Éireann debates*.

<sup>41</sup> Ceisteanna: Commandeering of bicycles by the army, 11 Oct. 1922, *Dáil Éireann debates*; Ceisteanna: Compensation for motor car, 18 Oct. 1922, *Dáil Éireann debates*.

<sup>42</sup> Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life 1891-1918* (New York: Gill & Macmillan, 1999), 164-65.

armed crime within the Dublin metropolitan area. However, throughout the period of their existence, their reputation for brutality and ill-discipline grew, forcing Kevin O'Higgins to regularly defend Oriel House within the Dáil. In one instance, O'Higgins explains that discipline could not be expected from them when there was a lack of discipline throughout the country.<sup>43</sup> During another exchange with George Gavan Duffy, he explained drily that CID men "may not handle a cup of tea as delicately as the deputy but they have saved the state at a time when the deputy's efforts were in a rather contrary direction."<sup>44</sup> Despite Oriel Houses' reputation for torture, propensity to commit crimes, and O'Higgins's wishes to disband the organisation entirely, they were tolerated as one of many necessary evils, carrying out dirty work that the state would rather not concern itself with.<sup>45</sup> However, by virtue of this task and the methodology Oriel House employed, it left them lacking many of the skills required for investigative police work, and their effectiveness as a force was blunted as a result. Any success CID enjoyed in suppressing armed crime in the capital was done through brutalisation and terror as opposed to sophisticated intelligence gathering, the previously mentioned case of Robert Bonfield being but one example.<sup>46</sup> However, Oriel House was just one of the government's attempts to combat armed crime in Dublin. O'Higgins was becoming increasingly concerned about the moral and social "disintegration that [was] proceeding apace in this country," and his belief that the army was unable to adequately deal with it.<sup>47</sup>

In this regard, he devised a scheme whereby the public within Dublin could apply to the government for firearms to be issued to them to protect their property against armed robbery.<sup>48</sup> Under this initiative, any person resident in Dublin could apply to the government, along with a letter of recommendation from a priest, soldier or TD, and be issued with a weapon to protect their own and their neighbours' property. Upon acceptance, the applicant was then required to pay a

<sup>43</sup> Hopkinson, *Green against green*, 140.

<sup>44</sup> Conor Brady, *Guardians of the peace* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1974), 127.

<sup>45</sup> Brady, *Guardians*, 125-27.

<sup>46</sup> O'Halpin, *Defending Ireland*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> Presidents address, 11 Sep. 1922, *Dáil Éireann debates*.

<sup>48</sup> Minutes of the Executive Council 15 Feb. 1923, NAI, TSCH/1/2/1.

fee of either £3 for a revolver and fifty rounds of ammunition, or £5 for a rifle and fifty rounds of ammunition. Further to this the applicant also must sign a declaration that the weapon would be surrendered to the government if requested, the firearm would be maintained, and each round of ammunition used would be accounted for by providing the empty shell casings.<sup>49</sup> O'Higgins accompanied this scheme by drafting the text of an advertisement intended for placement in the national press in which he declared that "with pistol, bomb and petrol can, cruel and unnatural warfare is being waged upon your most sacred rights" by "the ruffian who under cover of a political banner and with political catch cries on his lips is engaged in robbing his neighbours at the point of a gun, as an alternative to decent work."<sup>50</sup> While the scheme was broadly approved by the Executive Council, it was never enacted.<sup>51</sup>

However, the extremity of this proposal is evidence of the grave perception O'Higgins possessed regarding the state of the country, but also elucidates a lack of realism on his part. How would such a scheme be administrated and monitored? Would providing arms to untrained civilians increase the instances of injury and death during robberies? Could the presence of firearms in private hands increase the rates of armed robbery, as raids would not only be concerned with goods and money, but also stealing arms and ammunition? These questions are not evident within the discussion around this scheme, but the nature of the proposal is in keeping with the tough stance already seen in regard to combating armed robbery, CID's unsavoury methods being a prime example. When faced with a perceived total breakdown of society's moral fabric, O'Higgins and others within the cabinet appeared to believe that the ends would certainly justify the means.

### Conclusion

This paper has attempted look beyond the land and labour disputes which came to the fore during the civil war, which have been the primary focus within the historiography of social unrest during this

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<sup>49</sup> Confidential memorandum from Kevin O'Higgins, UCDA, Fitzgerald papers, P80/724.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Minutes of the Executive Council 15 Feb. 1923, NAI, TSCH/1/2/1

period. This leaves armed robbery to be subsumed within these wider discussions, if mentioned at all. However, it was individualistic manifestations of social upheaval such as armed robbery which did much to instil a belief, such as within Kevin O'Higgins, that the new Irish Free State was reverting to a Hobbesian state of nature. Further to this, this paper has also set out to challenge the contemporarily propagated narrative surrounding criminalisation of anti-Treaty activity, and the assumption that armed crime was inextricably linked to the IRA. However, it is difficult to identify a clear pattern of increase within levels of armed robbery during the civil war period, due to an absence of reliable data for the preceding years. Having said this, what does become clear through the archival sources are discrepancies regarding the propensity of the government, and the media at the government's behest, to associate all armed crime with anti-Treaty forces. This reductionist view ascribes a political agenda to anybody with access to a weapon and the inclination to use it; while also ignoring the proportion of armed crime perpetrated by those whose role was to suppress it, namely CID and the National Army. Finally, the official response to armed crime proved counterproductive and lacked foresight in many regards. The violence and unsavoury methods of CID made them ineffective at preventing armed crime in the city, as they focussed less on quality intelligence work and rather on summary raids attempting to brutalise it out of existence. Further to this, Kevin O'Higgins's blinkered perception of the conflict and the problems it manifested within society affected his judgment regarding the course of action needed to tackle the issue of armed crime, leading to a propensity towards favouring the more extreme course of action.

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