

**Michael Collins and the Anglo-Irish War: Britain's
Counterinsurgency Failure. By J.B.E. Hittle. Washington, DC,
Potomac Books, 2011.**

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***Michael Collins and the Anglo-Irish War: Britain's Counterinsurgency Failure.* By J.B.E. Hittle. Washington, DC, Potomac Books, 2011. ISBN: 978-1-59797-535-3. Photos. Appendices. Notes. Index. Bibliography. Pp. xxv, 297. \$27.50.**

The subject of Michael Collins and his role in the Anglo-Irish War of 1919–1921 has become increasingly well-trod ground over the past decade or more, but J.B.E. Hittle attempts to blaze a new trail by examining the war not so much from the perspective of Collins's successes, but from that of failed opportunities on the part of the Crown's intelligence services. A retired thirty-one year veteran of the U.S. intelligence community, Hittle earned an MA in History from LSU and is considered an expert on many aspects of insurgency and counterterrorism. His stated intent in this work was to use the war "as a case study of intelligence management under conditions of low-intensity conflict" (p. xiii). Hittle's Preface first provides a useful primer on the state of the historiography on the war, and he acknowledges the transformation from an Irish nationalist-centered, heroic view of events to one more tempered by modern critical analysis such as that provided by Peter Hart, whose works have provoked much debate among nationalists and academics alike. The rancor of that debate has somewhat marred the study of the subject from an Irish perspective, and Hittle acknowledges the difficulties of working within that troubled environment. Conversely, historiography on the British side has been much improved of late through new scholarship such as Christopher Andrew's 2009 history of MI5, reviewed in this publication in Vol. III, No. 4, Winter 2010.¹

In addition to the problems with historical treatments of the war, Hittle further cites the issues that attend the fact that few of those who have written about the war had any kind of practical experience with professional intelligence functions. This, he contends, has led to a lack of solid analysis of the intelligence struggle. While such an argument might be well received in the intelligence community, it is not likely to draw applause from academicians trained in the complexities of historical analysis. Whether or not such rigor has been applied to this subject is one story. Asserting that academics are incapable of doing so, however, is quite another story entirely. It is one that seems rather unkind at best, and vaguely unprofessional at worst. With Hittle's having so tweaked the nose of academe in view, readers of his work will no doubt be anxious to

discover whether his approach lives up to its stated goal, which is to analyze "Britain's counterinsurgency performance ... through analysis of known events measured within the context of professional intelligence standards" (p. xx). Only through the eyes of one steeped in the methodologies and tradecraft of intelligence, he claims, can such an analysis successfully avoid the "polarizing debates" (p. xx) that have characterized the study of this topic—at least thus far.

Hittle's book contains many elements of the sort of analysis he alludes to in his Preface, but, by and large until his concluding chapter, he too falls victim to the very pitfalls for which he criticizes his colleagues. Perhaps it is unavoidable, but the storytelling aspects of the book bear striking similarity to and reliance upon the very same sort of nationalist hagiography he derides in his opening remarks. Moreover, the raw material that Hittle might have used to advantage in a fresh analysis seems conspicuously absent. There is little reliance on primary sources and much reliance on works like Christopher Andrew's *Defense of the Realm*, which is an admittedly ground-breaking work, given Andrew's exclusive access to hitherto-classified materials. It is not a critical failure of Hittle's work that he does not examine the sources himself, but it seems odd that an author intent on a new perspective has chosen to rely on the interpretations of others as the basis for making new conclusions, perhaps mimicking the way an intelligence operator relies on an analyst's product. Nonetheless, it is an interesting and well-written account, interspersed with some enlightening gems that mark the author as a true intelligence professional.

The real meat of Hittle's book, however, lies in the Conclusion. That is where he truly wears the mantle of his expertise and where his early claims show some evidence of coming to fruition. His analytical focus in that chapter uses a "military-centric approach" (p. 218), meaning an acknowledgement that Britain's primary aim was to defeat the Irish insurgency militarily. For a variety of reasons, the British army and its paramilitary forces never fully gained control or stabilized the battlefield, thus preventing them from proceeding to the next phase of their counterinsurgency mission, which should have entailed "pacification and restoration of civil institutions" (p. 221). Hittle next lists an array of British intelligence failures in the areas of tactical or operational errors and strategic or administrative ones. He goes on to provide an evaluation of the IRA intelligence system, crediting Michael Collins with making a sound assessment of his opponent's intelligence apparatus and then developing means to attack its vulnerabilities. The British are labeled as arrogant, culturally insensitive, disorganized, inept, and plagued by bureaucratic fratricide. Collins' strength was to exploit all those weaknesses, yet the War for Inde-

pendence was a near-run thing. Despite the incompetence of the British administrators on whom Hittle places much blame, the rank-and-file intelligence officers risking their lives on behalf of the Crown did yeoman's work that led to a number of great successes. Still, there is no conclusive evidence presented that Collins succeeded largely due to British difficulties and the mishandling of the efforts brought to bear against him. There is ample evidence that those problems contributed to Britain's failure. Whether the result would have been vastly different had the Crown's servants been more efficient is merely speculation that cannot be supported by any fact. In the end, Hittle seems to agree that Collins' direction of the war must receive high marks, while the British can be said to have been their own worst enemy in many respects.

Hittle's Conclusion, as befits his billing the work as a case study, wraps up with a section entitled "Lessons of the British Counterinsurgency Effort." He first points out the differences between short-term, reactive antiterrorism measures and long-term, proactive counterterrorism measures. The latter, due to their long-term nature, are highly dependent on good intelligence collection. Second, he notes that the conventional military effort on the part of the British Army was a doomed strategy that failed to recognize that it was not a war between the Army and the IRA, but a war between the Army and the Irish people—a war that could not be won by conventional means. Next, Hittle explains that disorganization and infighting in the intelligence bureaucracy is a debilitating handicap that affects morale and operational effectiveness. In this case, MI5 was hamstrung for much of the war and was unable to contribute its developing professional competence to British efforts in Ireland until too late in the game. Hittle ends his lessons with the observations that "terrorists" need not exist in great numbers to accomplish their goals, and that native-born informants (whom he graciously terms "agents" after the British fashion) are the most effective means of penetrating insurgent or terrorist groups.

In sum, then, it appears that Hittle does not quite fulfill the expectations he sets forth at the start, but that is not to say that it is not a solid and useful work. In fact, it is quite good for a number of reasons. It does lay out in organized fashion a clear, concise, and factual tale of the respective flaws and merits of the British and Irish intelligence systems during the Irish War of Independence. His prose is clear and his conclusions and analyses insightful. It is probably the best single source of information on the topic and is most certainly worth a close look. The book would be useful in providing an historical example of an insurgency that established a long-recognized and well-used roadmap for success. It is instructive to have to acknowledge that those on the counterinsurgency side of affairs have yet to fully crack the code on battling these kinds of

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efforts. Books of this sort enable us to rethink events and our approaches to them. Hittle has done us a favor by presenting a provocative analysis that will undoubtedly stir more new approaches in considering what might have been. Extending those approaches to current events is not an unreasonable stretch.

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1 See the full text available online at: <http://scholarcommons.usf.edu/jss/vol3/iss4/>.