



Decade of Centenaries grant report

Recipient name:	Patrick Mulroe
Amount and year awarded:	€7,920 in 2022
Title of project:	The Ulster Special Constabulary (USC) in the Central Border Area: From Treaty to Civil War

Summary of project:

The time between the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921 and the shelling of the Four Courts on June 28, 1922 was perhaps the most violent period in the 100 year history of the Irish border. From December 6, 1921 to May 31, 1922, the Police recorded 236 killed in Belfast with 37 more fatalities in the northern border counties. The central border region which incorporates the frontier of Armagh, Tyrone and Fermanagh was especially disturbed. The violence here included notorious multi fatality incidents like the 'Clones Affray' and 'Altnaveigh Massacre'. While significant in their own right, these incidents had an effect beyond the locality. Border violence featured prominently in media reports and often led to sectarian disturbances in Belfast. The Bureau of Military History records and Military Service Pension Collection (MSPC) give us some insight into the republican actions on the border. However, there is a glaring omission in relation to the role of the Ulster Special Constabulary. Who were these men that guarded the northern side of the border? Were they exclusively six county Protestants? Were they UVF veterans? What was the force's exact role on the border in those first six months of 1922? This project addresses these questions.



Objectives of the project:

The research question for this project was quite simple: who were the USC personnel that policed the central border area in the first six months of 1922 and what role did they play? The aim was to draft a profile of that organisation and its role, then share findings with the local community, schools and the academic community. A particular effort was made to build links with minority communities affected by conflict.



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Methodology used in conducting the research:

The project began with trips to archives in Dublin. I applied for special access to the Ulster Special Constabulary Archive held in the Public Records Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI). This application required PSNI approval. Unfortunately, the access process delayed the start of the main phase of research by several months. Police approval was only granted in September 2022. It had been planned to have much of the PRONI research completed by then. After consultation with RIA and academic mentors, the research plan was amended with trips to PRONI rescheduled for Summer 2023.

My normal approach to visiting archives involves photographing records and analysing them at home. However, this was not an option with USC records as photography was prohibited under the Researcher Agreement with PRONI. This also slowed down the research process considerably.

The most complete USC records relate to County Fermanagh, so this county became the focus of the project. Each USC 'B' Special recruit completed an application form that included their name, age, occupation, address, military service etc. These files were not sorted or catalogued so retrieving each individual record was an incredibly laborious task. To my knowledge, only one other researcher has had access to these 'B' Special records. With regard to 'A' Special records, these are held in a Register, similar to the RIC or Civic Guard register. However, the information included here was less detailed than 'B' files and inconsistently recorded. Where possible, data retrieved relating to 'A' & 'B' Specials was cross-checked with Census records to get further data on religion, literacy and knowledge of the Irish language. The individual records of 100 'A' Specials of officer rank were also accessed. No researcher has previously accessed any 'A' Special files. A log book detailing 'C' Special records was also analysed. Irish Distress Committee and Irish Grants Committee files viewed at the National Archives in London contained details of southern loyalists, some of whom were USC members. Data on individuals was cross checked with local newspapers and sources like Findmypast.com. Newspaper and RIC reports were also used to track the role of the USC in border violence. The data was stored on a password protected device and analysed using basic Spreadsheet software. Once data was gathered, collated and analysed, it was compared with findings from other scholars of the period.

Findings of research and milestones achieved:

Findings

I am satisfied that the project's research question, 'who were the Ulster Special Constabulary?' has been addressed. The records of tens of thousands of USC personnel were reviewed to create the sample of over 1,500 USC personnel. Uniquely, the sample includes data on 'A', 'B' and 'C' Specials. It was found that 'A' Special Constables were young (median age 23), meaning that many were unlikely to be pre War UVF veterans. Typically, recruits were from the county they were based in or urban areas of Northern Ireland. However, about 10% of the 'A' force were from south of the border. Some of these were loyalists driven north, others were former members of the Crown Forces, or simply individuals attracted by the generous wages.

Most of the officer class was made up of Auxiliary officers (Auxies) that served further south in the Royal Irish Constabulary in 1920-21. It may surprise some that there were Catholic recruits to the 'A' Specials but these represented less than 5% of the force. 'B' Specials were older (median age 28) but remarkably few (just over 10%) had any military experience. This challenges the popular (as opposed to academic)



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view that 'B' Specials were veterans of World War I. A sample of 500 'B' Specials was cross checked with the 1901 and 1911 census and no evidence of any Catholic recruitment could be found.

The 'C' Specials included recruits from age 14 to 84, the median age being 54, indicating the extent of Unionist mobilisation in 1922. County Fermanagh is used as a case study for much of this data and it is calculated that 40% of the adult male Protestant population in the county was a member of one of the branches of the Special Constabulary.

There is significant information on the afterlives of recruits. Astonishingly, there is evidence that a number of USC members served from 1922 right through to the start of the more recent Troubles.

In some respects, the findings reinforce traditional views of the Specials as a largely Protestant force, but there are complicating factors.

The presence of southern and Catholic recruits to the 'A' Specials is noteworthy. Similarly, the role of Auxiliaries as an officer class in the Specials is important new information. The study also confirms what others, such as Timothy Bowman in 'Carson's Army' have suspected: that very few 'B' Specials were World War I veterans.

Outcomes

As planned, I partnered with Monaghan County Museum to disseminate the research in the local community. As per the application form, I created Screencast presentations for second level students. These can be used by Junior Cycle students preparing for Junior Cycle Classroom Based Assessments. There will be at least one peer reviewed article (Irish Historical Studies) from this research. Moreover, this research will be incorporated in a longer term book project.

Dissemination of the project outcomes:

As planned, I partnered with Monaghan County Museum to disseminate my findings in the local community. The Museum Curator and I decided on a symposium event because it allowed me to network with other scholars with a view to further sharing the findings with the academic community. Speakers at the symposium included Professor Margaret O'Callaghan (QUB), Dr Siobhra Aiken (QUB), Dr Ed Burke (UCD), Dr Patrick Mulroe, John Dorney (The Irish Story). This event had a major impact in the region attracting a diverse audience. There was significant media coverage in local newspapers and on regional radio. Additionally, members of the local Caisleán Theatre Group attended and they now intend to produce a play exploring some of the issues raised at the event. I was invited to deliver a second presentation to this theatre group in the weeks subsequent to the symposium. I have committed to provide further support, should they require to make their production historically accurate.

As I noted in my application, it is important that my work reaches into the classroom. To this end, I planned to present at the Irish School's History Summit. However, this event did not take place in 2023. I did create Screencast presentations. These can be used by Junior Cycle students preparing for Junior Cycle Classroom Based Assessments. The videos were released outside term time, but the initial response from teachers and school managers was very positive. The videos have been uploaded to Scoilnet where teachers nationally share resources. I intend to add further videos. There will be at least one peer reviewed article (Irish Historical Studies) elaborating on the findings outlined above. Moreover, this research will be incorporated in a longer term book project.



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I used my X account @paddymulroe to publicise all these events and credit the Royal Irish Academy. I also used my own website: <https://theborderkitchen.blog/the-other-civil-war/>. I used YouTube to store videos for use by students: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLIU5Nwc4qu8eYXZ2BLtyJl-xXIIp2lfm>

I also uploaded further material on the teachers resource site Scoilnet.

Published work/plans:

One article forthcoming in Irish Historical Studies.

Lectures given/outreach activities:

Two lectures in Castleblayney June 17 (Symposium), July 5 (Theatre group), 4 Video Productions for schools.

Media coverage:

Two Northern Sound radio interviews, Four Northern Standard Articles.

Plans for continued communication of the project's results:

My immediate focus is on finalising a peer reviewed article. Then, I hope to present the research at academic forums, conferences etc. I am committed to sharing the research further with schools and to this end I will solicit feedback from teachers on the videos already released to ascertain ways of making such productions even more useful. I intend to continue to provide support to the Caisleán Theatre Group as they prepare to bring their theatre production to audiences in the autumn of 2023. My medium term aim is to produce a book on the early years of Northern Ireland. The research from this Bursary is central to that project.

Plans for furthering the project:

I intend now to switch the focus of my research to the experience of the nationalist community in 1922, looking at internment on the border. This research has again been funded by the RIA Decade of Centenaries Bursary. Hopefully, this research will be central to a book I plan to release in 2024/5 marking 100 years since the Boundary Commission reported.

How the bursary enhanced professional development:

The Bursary allowed me to further build my network of contacts in academia. Furthermore, the fact that the research was funded by the RIA reassured members of the public that the researcher was reputable. Given the continued sensitivities of some of the issues being discussed, this was an incredibly important outcome. As a result, I have been able to make contacts with groups and individuals historically associated with the Ulster Special Constabulary as well as families of those that were victims of USC violence.