

Book Review: Divided We Stand: The Strategy and Psychology of Ireland's Dissident Terrorists

Blog Admin

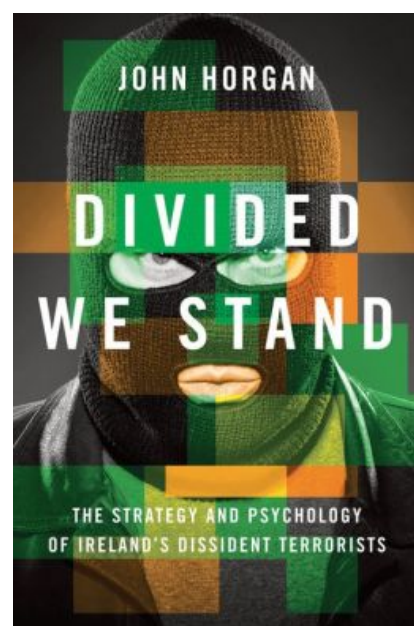
*Drawing on one of the largest open-source militant databases ever assembled, **Divided We Stand** aims to describe the activities, histories, motivations, psychology, and strategy of the small, dynamic, and rapidly evolving splinter groups that continue to erode peace, stability, and normalization in Northern Ireland. **Meg O'Branski** finds that this is an excellent choice for anyone interested in the study of political violence, particularly those concerned with the conflict in Northern Ireland, and with paramilitary organizations.*



Divided We Stand: The Strategy and Psychology of Ireland's Dissident Terrorists. John Horgan. Oxford University Press. March 2013.

Find this book:

The peace process in Northern Ireland remains ongoing. On the one hand, it appears that significant progress has been made, with Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party currently sharing power in Stormont; yet even as this review is written, squabbling between the two party leaders seems a potential threat to a tremulous arrangement. The change in the landscape from the problematically entitled period of “the Troubles” to the present day, coupled perhaps with an overly optimistic view of the 1998 Good Friday (or Belfast) Agreement makes the assumption of relative peace in Northern Ireland an attractive one. Yet an analysis of terrorist activity in the last two decades reveals that violence has not left Northern Ireland, but rather has instead increased since the mid-nineties (p.49).



Since the ceasefire declared by the Provisional IRA (PIRA) on 31 August 1994 through to 8 July 2011, John Horgan identifies three distinct waves of “Violent Dissident Republican (VDR) activity” (p.47) and analyses data collected during this period. He argues that “the core starting point for any good analysis of terrorism is data”, which he writes “allows us to generate hypotheses, look for patterns, and ask questions” (p.12). Horgan is interested in how VDR has changed over time, the level of activity that has emerged, and how groups create strategy, among other things (p.12). This book is divided into eight chapters, each dealing with a different feature of violent dissident groups, ranging from the history of splitting in Irish republicanism to potential strategies to limit said groups’ destructive potential. There is, however, considerable overlap among the chapters, which indeed mirrors the dynamic and overlapping characteristics of the groups with which Horgan is concerned.

kindle edition

amazon

One of the more surprising findings of Horgan's study is the level of feuding between the dissident groups, despite sharing core, fundamental principles: all "reject both the Good Friday and St. Andrews agreements. They do not accept the PSNI as a legitimate policing force...and consider Sinn Fein guilty of having strayed from the path of Republicanism" (p.13). Splintering is by no means a new feature of paramilitary violence in Northern Ireland, as even the PIRA was the result of an internal schism and was not representative of the entire republican community. The acceptance of the Good Friday Agreement by Sinn Fein was viewed as an abandonment of the Republican cause (i.e. a sovereign Ireland) and a betrayal by some members of the Republican community, and so the emergence of an opposing faction would not be unexpected. What is astonishing about VDR activity in this period is the apparent lack of cohesion and cooperation, despite the existence of a common goal between the groups – an end to what is generally cast as the colonial occupation of Ireland by Britain. This lack of cohesion leads various VDR groups to compete with one another for grass-roots support from an increasingly disaffected population.

In
the



Republican wall murals, Ballymurphy, Belfast, 1980s. Credit: [Burns Library](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

seventh chapter, Horgan begins to draw his work to a close with suggestions of strategies for dealing with VDR groups, aimed at curtailing the violence that they produce. He argues that a short- or medium-term strategy would require the involvement of police and prison services (p.159), the wider community (p.166), and Sinn Fein itself (p.167). I found these suggestions to be thought-provoking, and a bit problematic. The history of incarceration of paramilitary leaders in Northern Ireland is rife with both success and failure, and it would seem that any success in hindering these new groups would rely quite heavily upon the wider Republican and Nationalist community. This is potentially problematic, for as Horgan writes “although people may no longer subscribe to the tactical and strategic use of violence to achieve their aims, this does not mean that they no longer believe in the cause they were fighting for” (p.166). The impact of VDR activity on the wider community forms the backbone of another surprising conclusion to emerge from Horgan’s analysis, this time with regards to the strategies of the VDR group operations. Much of the violence appears to impact Catholic communities disproportionately (p.124), which seems counter-intuitive given the assumed need for popular support, which the dissidents deny (p.129). Horgan argues that “[a]lthough the dissidents wish to portray themselves as paramilitary Republicans, the reality is that their violent strategies more realistically call for them to be acknowledged as, primarily, vigilante groups” (p.124). Disruption of daily life appears again and again as the primary goal of much VDR activity, which in itself suggests an alienation of the wider Republican community.

Horgan concludes his book by asking whether or not VDRs in Northern Ireland are likely to endure. He ends by suggesting that their continued survival relies upon their response to the one hundred year anniversary of the Easter Rising, but cautions readers that “[w]henver we think they [VDRs] are starting to fade away, they bounce back to remind us that they are still here” (p.178). Overall, *Divided We Stand* is a thoroughly researched project that sheds light upon the activity of dissidents in the years leading up to and following the Good Friday Agreement, which investigations of political violence in Northern Ireland may be tempted to overlook. The suggestion in the title, that the work will present a coherent “strategy and psychology of Ireland’s dissident terrorists”, is, however, by necessity unfulfilled. Horgan admits that “[d]espite the best efforts of the analysis...it remains a challenge to accurately characterize the dissidents” (p.155). The VDRs that have emerged from the politicization of Sinn Fein and the PIRA photo-realistically represent the complicated cultural and historic moment from which they emerge. *Divided We Stand* would be an excellent choice for anyone interested in the study of political violence, particularly those concerned with the conflict in Northern Ireland, and with paramilitary organizations.

Megan O’Branski is a third year PhD candidate in the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University. She received her BA in Political Science from the University of Connecticut in 2009. Her research focuses on the intersection of performativity, gender, and the weaponization and brutalization of the body in ethnic violence. Further research interests include sexuality, security studies, and zombies. [Read more reviews by Megan.](#)

