



**Citation:** Thomas Earls FitzGerald (2022) “I thank God that I have been in the very big push for the motherland”: The Role of Violence and Society in the Correspondence of IRA Commander Liam Lynch. *Sijis* 12: pp. 149-169. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-13745

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**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

# “I thank God that I have been in the very big push for the motherland”: The Role of Violence and Society in the Correspondence of IRA Commander Liam Lynch

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## *Abstract:*

This article is a thematic examination of the Irish Republican Army’s (IRA) relationship with both violence and social issues in the War of Independence (1919-1921) and Civil War (1922-1923) through an interrogation of the writings of Irish republican leader Liam Lynch (1893-1923), specifically, looking at Lynch’s understanding of the role of violence, social issues, and his crucial role in Civil War. Lynch went from a position of local leadership in the Cork and then Munster IRA in the War of Independence to one of national leadership by going on to become Chief of Staff of the whole IRA in the Civil War, before dying in combat in April 1923. Lynch was a highly religious and shy man but who also displayed a much remarked devotion to the republican cause, together with a natural gift for organisation. In contrast to his quiet and sensitive persona though, throughout his revolutionary career Lynch consistently called for an escalation of violent measures and often envisaged both military and social solutions which were never fully thought out and if implemented could well have done more harm than good. Issues around the dynamics of violence have recently been explored by Gemma Clark and Brian Hughes, while Gavin Foster has added further layers to our understanding of class conflict in the civil war but this article is the first systematic analysis of these issues from the perspective of the leading IRA figure during the latter stages of Ireland’s revolution. The article argues that while Lynch’s organisational talents and devotion are unquestionable, he lacked the leadership skills necessary in the civil war and often envisaged impractical solutions based on what was often his still local or regional rather than national viewpoint, or inability to consider the ramifications of his ideas. The article contends that an exploration of Lynch’s perspectives reveals much about revolutionary activism and of the War of Independence and Civil war era IRA. The article hopes to further the understanding of the motivations of activists during the revolutionary period, the ramifications of the implementation of political violence together with the interplay and tensions within the republican movement between social issues and the national question.

*Keywords:* Irish biography, Irish revolution 1916-1923, Local History, Society, Violence

## *1. Introduction – Lynch’s Life*

The career of Irish war of independence and civil war IRA leader Liam Lynch (1893-1923) represents some of the points of

interest together with contradictions that helped define the Irish revolution. Lynch was a man of great devotion, patriotism and idealism but also of brutality and frequent impracticality. He was pious, considerate and rather quiet but who also proved increasingly willing to implement greater ruthlessness to achieve his goal of an Irish Republic. Lynch was a senior figure in the IRA: an organisation whose use of violence, motivations and social attitudes have been closely scrutinised in extensive levels of academic scholarship. Lynch's own long correspondence from 1917 up until his death provides historians with an interesting insight into not only his personality and leadership methods. These letters also give insight into Lynch's own views on issues so carefully analysed by historians such as the use of force and social questions: which in turn reveals much about the motivations of his generation. This piece is not intended as a biography but rather as a thematic attempt to contextualise and explore issues related to violence and society through the prism of Lynch's own contemporary writings. Lynch was a frequent letter writer to both his military and political colleagues and family: the material on which this piece is based on, comes from the deposited papers of his colleagues and sometimes enemies Richard Mulcahy, Ernie O'Malley and Moss Twomey at the University College Dublin (UCD) archives and a smaller collection entirely made of his own correspondence in the National Library of Ireland.

Lynch deserves such analysis due to his significance for the period and because he was one of the most divisive figures of the era, thanks largely to his tenure as leader of the anti-Treaty IRA in the Civil War (1922-1923) for which he is best known. Though he is primarily identified as a civil war leader, that position only came about thanks to years of tireless dedication to the Irish republican cause from 1916 onwards.

He was born in Angelsboro, in County Limerick, where he enjoyed a quiet rural childhood, followed by a period working as a clerk in the town of Fermoy in north Cork (Ryan 2012 [1986], 21-27). He was originally sympathetic with the constitutional nationalism of John Redmond's Irish Parliamentary Party, however, the Easter Rising of April 1916 had a profound effect on Lynch. Lynch, like many people of his generation in Ireland, experienced a "Road to Damascus" conversion thanks to the Rising, which resulted in a newfound commitment to the Irish Republic: a commitment which would remain with him until his death from wounds at the hands of Free State soldiers in 1923 at the age of only 30.

His earliest biographer Florence 'Florrie' O'Donoghue, who had served as Intelligence Officer for the Cork No.1 Brigade, would write in 1954 that Lynch's opposition to the Anglo Irish Treaty of 1921, which resulted in his going into direct conflict with his superiors in the IRA and Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), was driven by a sense of "duty" to the Republic, and that Lynch had effectively decided as early as 1916, he would "live under no other law" (O'Donoghue 1954, 193-194) than that of the Republic. Indeed, it is this loyalty to the Republic, which is crucial to understanding Lynch.

Lynch quickly became a full-time activist with the resurgent Irish Volunteers in Fermoy (Ryan 2012 [1986], 25-27). Through hard work, diligence and an unquestioning devotion to his cause, together with a penchant for organisation, he enjoyed a meteoric rise through the ranks of the Volunteers. Like many other Volunteers he became known to the Crown force, and lived on the run for most of the conflict. For men such as Lynch this new life resulted in a precarious existence, and in the words of one of his colleagues spurred on greater levels of resistance as "we had to be active" simply to stay one step ahead of the crown forces and avoid arrest<sup>1</sup>. Within a short space of time, he was appointed Officer Commanding of the Fermoy

<sup>1</sup> Thomas McEllistrim, MSP, MS 34, REF840.

Battalion, before being promoted to Officer Commanding of the 2nd North Cork Brigade area, which encompassed all of north Cork. His meteoric rise in the IRA, was also matched by a quick ascent up the ranks of the more clandestine Irish Republican Brotherhood.

Lynch, despite being born in Limerick, spent most of his life in North Cork, an area which he strongly identified with and preferred to operate in. It was perhaps this sense of identification with the local, which as will be seen throughout each section of this article, hindered his leadership abilities as he was rarely able to envisage how his orders and intentions would manifest outside both his own immediate concerns and locations.

Nonetheless, despite his decidedly north Munster outlook, he readily accepted positions of national leadership. Thanks to his organisational skills and proactive and aggressive attitude, Lynch's reputation grew to the extent that by the spring of 1921, in the context of an escalating conflict between the IRA and British crown forces, he was appointed overall commander of the newly formed 1st Southern Division. This division comprised of all IRA units in Cork, Waterford, parts of west Limerick and Kerry. IRA organisational strength and resistance to British rule was strongest in these counties between 1919-1921 so, in effect, Lynch had been put in charge of the most active and aggressive IRA units in the entire country.

Lynch's 1st Southern Division denounced the Anglo-Irish treaty of December 1921 before any other individual or organisation. However, throughout the Spring of 1922, through contacts in the Irish Republican Brotherhood, of which Lynch was now one of the most senior and important members based outside of Dublin, and despite his loyalty to the Republic, he worked tirelessly to prevent the widening split in the republican movement. In doing so, he opposed the less conciliatory anti-Treaty IRA executive based in the Four Courts, in favour of working with the pro-Treaty elements.

Despite these efforts after civil war broke out and the collapse of anti-Treaty resistance in Dublin, he rose further to become Chief of Staff of the IRA, making him the *de facto* leader of the anti-Treaty resistance in the civil war. Once the civil war started, he abandoned his more conciliatory stance and refused any moves towards seeking a ceasefire or compromise with the Free State, instead preferring to maintain his steadfast commitment to the Republic.

Florrie O'Donoghue who had served as Intelligence Officer for the Cork No.1 Brigade, would write that Lynch's opposition to the Treaty, which resulted in his going into direct conflict with his superiors Michael Collins and Richard Mulcahy, was immensely difficult as, despite his loyalty to the Republic, he was also a firm believer in adhering to the IRA chain of command, and a believer in military discipline (O'Donoghue 1954, 193-194). Throughout his revolutionary career, we can see this manifesting in a clear gift for military organisation and belief in following orders. In this, Lynch is in stark contrast to other IRA leaders such as Tom Barry, who were driven more by initiative and taking advantage of situations rather than sticking to structures.

By the spring of 1923, his hard line stance was resented as unrealistic and damaging by many other senior figures on the anti-Treaty side. Figures who went on to have long and successful careers in southern Irish politics such as Éamon de Valera, Frank Aiken and P.J. Ruttledge considered that the civil war was a lost cause and new measures were now necessary to sustain the republican movement. Lynch was killed in action in April 1923 in County Tipperary. His death paved the way for the end of the conflict, and allowed these more conciliatory elements to take over the IRA and declare a ceasefire with the Free State. Many of these more conciliatory voices went on to form Fianna Fáil, and had long and distinguished careers as constitutional politicians.

Lynch's career was unique in that, through sheer force of will, he moved from a position of local leadership to one of national leadership. For someone without a pre-1916 record in

separatist politics, his rise can reasonably be described as meteoric. His career bears some resemblance to that of his colleague Ernie O'Malley, who like Lynch did not have a pre-1916 record but would go on to be a leading figure in both the 1919-1921 conflict and civil war.

Since O'Donoghue's 1954 publication, a number of other historians have examined Lynch's life and work, has elicited strong feelings often based on either sympathy or dislike. For instance, Meda Ryan's useful *Liam Lynch: The Real Chief* published in 1986, shows a deep admiration for his life and work describing him as having led the IRA in the civil war "fearlessly", and that he never had any feeling of "malice" towards old comrades now turned enemies (2012 [1986], 236; 248). Ryan's book is a useful introduction to his life but as a short narrative and sympathetic biography it allows room for a more thematic analysis of Lynch.

On the other hand, he has also been depicted as the demagogue of anti-democratic Irish republican militarism. Tom Garvin, Professor Emeritus of Politics at UCD, in his 1996 influential *1922: The Birth of Irish Democracy* described him unapologetically as "profoundly anti-democratic and authoritarian" and these sentiments he espoused "dominated" the politics and actions of the anti-Treaty movement in the civil war – which Garvin characterises as a largely regressive force (1996, 148). Lynch in many respects is key to Garvin's overall theory of the anti-Treaty side being made of anti-democratic militarists fighting against the democratic wishes of the people as represented by the nascent Free State, as Garvin contends. This reading has however been criticised as simplistic and undermining anti-democratic and militarist elements within the Free State (Regan 2013).

The late Canadian historian Peter Hart (1963-2010), while a highly polarising figure and one whose conclusions on questions relating sectarianism and his methodology sparked intense debate and criticism (Regan 2013), also wrote in depth on Lynch. Hart provided an interesting analysis of Lynch in terms of his motivations and as a man, and one that seems to chime more with a more sympathetic reading of his life. In 1998 in his landmark, but controversial, analysis of the Cork IRA, Hart wrote, in fascination, and more than a little sympathy that:

Lynch was possessed by a sense of mission and by revolutionary ardour and remained so until his death in 1923. Many IRA men ascribed him as being 'like a priest' in his attitude and manner. He was an exceedingly shy man and 'it must have cost him a big effort to start appearing in public'. However, Lynch's utter commitment drove him to take a lead in organising the Fermoy area. When he died he was chief of staff of the entire IRA. Lynch made himself a leader out of the force of his own convictions. (1998, 205)

For Hart, Lynch was a man who possessed a simple desire to free Ireland, and this alone sustained him. Instead of either demonising or lionising Lynch as hero or villain, this article seeks to understand Lynch the man in terms of his beliefs, his motivations and his intentions. In recent years much research has focused on the IRA's relationship with violence – particularly arson, intimidation, alleged sectarianism, and the murder of civilians as spies and informers together with their relationship with social issues particularly on issues connected to class and their relationship with civilians. Accordingly, this article considers Lynch's views on these issues. The article first looks at his private personality before exploring his aggressive but often impractical views on the use of violence, his equally not entirely practical views on social question before finally looking at his failure of leadership during the civil war, and poor understanding of how that conflict developed.

In recent scholarship on issues around violence, Gemma Clark and Brian Hughes have explored these issues within the prism of a particular incident or area rather than from an individual perspective (Clark, 2014; Hughes, 2016). The study of individual leaders and their approach to violence is not without precedent however. Lynch's colleague Michael Collins's

attitude to violence has recently been explored by Anne Dolan and William Murphy (2018), but studies of how regional IRA leaders considered these issues are relatively uncommon.

Hughes, Clarke, Dolan and Murphy have set high and effective metrics, but looking at these issues from new angles, such as that of a regional leader in both the 1919-1921 and 1922-1923 conflicts, can also prove useful and highlight previously unexplored avenues. Hart Lynch was emblematic of his overall reading of the IRA, as being politically noncomplex. Hart's reading of the IRA and their motivations was that it all quite simply coalesced around a desire to free Ireland. In this political paradigm other considerations had a limited role. Hart wrote that whether in 1920 or 1922 the IRA "wanted to fight for Ireland [...] but they did not want to run Ireland" (Hart 2003, 97). He famously described the IRA of the period as a-democratic rather anti-democratic (198).

This is not to say that Lynch was somehow not politically motivated – joining and fighting for the IRA between 1918 and 1923 was by definition a highly political act. However, like many republicans of his generation, Lynch's politics effectively amounted to an embrace of physical force republicanism alongside a strong distrust of electoral politics. In his letters Lynch, as will be demonstrated, is largely uninterested or even resentful of the counter republican state being created by Sinn Féin which he saw as a distraction from the national struggle. This is not however an endorsement of Hart's conclusion on this issue: joining and fighting for the IRA, whether in 1920 or 1969, was an inherently political act, so "apolitical" is perhaps an oversimplification. Rather, Lynch was representative of an element of the continuing Irish republican tradition which is largely *suspicious of electoral politics* and which contends physical force alone is necessary to secure full national independence.

Hart's reading was, as said, uncomplicated which can be interpreted as a simplification. Hart wrote of the Cork IRA that they simply considered themselves, and indeed wanted themselves to be, "the hard working and respectable heart of the nation" (Hart 1998, 142). The IRA according to Hart, for all the issues around killings and violence, appears to have been preoccupied solely by an unadulterated nationalism rooted in rural respectability, almost gleefully unaware of issues beyond the national question; but as will be shown, Lynch's correspondence reveals that he did occasionally consider issues not strictly linked to the national question, which in turn brings up Lynch's views on issues not strictly connected to the national question.

Recently, conceptions of the revolutionary period regarding social issues not connected to the national question have been changing, particularly in regard to the civil war. Gavin Foster's meticulously researched *The Irish Civil War and Society* being case in point (2015, 51). Anti-Treaty supporters and activists, Foster observes, tended to be more economically deprived, and represented a potentially revolutionary social movement. Foster in conclusion contemplates the social "revolution that could have been" if there had been a more unified front on the anti-Treaty side that embraced a broader political front (142). Indeed, the more left leaning elements of the anti-Treaty side, embodied particularly in the role and work of Liam Mellows, have been emphasised recently and in preceding decades (Greaves 1971; McNamara 2019).

Lynch's own role and views as the leader of the IRA in the civil war, regarding both the more socially orientated analysis of the IRA and debates around violence, however, has not been addressed in recent studies. His correspondence with other IRA officers and private letters show he was willing to employ increasingly brutal measures to achieve his goal. They also show how he was not entirely militaristic and did have some concept of addressing social concerns. The article does, however, argue that in relation to these issues his judgement was often flawed or not fully thought out.

Lynch was someone rooted in his own local area – Lynch's views and intentions were accordingly often so fixed in the local that he rarely fully considered national implications. The

article concludes by looking at how this attitude proved particularly disadvantageous in the civil war, when he more generally seems to perhaps have lost his sense of judgement.

Rather than focusing on what was written about him after his death, the source material for this article is made up of reference to Lynch's own contemporary letters and directives drawn predominately from four collections. *The Letters of Liam Lynch* (1917, 1920-1923, MS 36, 251) and Joseph McGarrity papers (MS 17) both housed in the National Library of Ireland, the Moss Twomey papers (P69) and Richard Mulcahy Papers located in the archives of University College Dublin. *The Letters of Liam Lynch* is a particularly small collection of 28 letters predominately addressed to Lynch's brother, Father Tom Lynch, and Joseph McGarrity, and was compiled by Florrie O'Donoghue as part of his research for his 1954 biography of Lynch and then donated to the National Library of Ireland. This small collection is particularly useful in charting Lynch's early career in the Volunteers from 1917-1919 and for his reflections on the conflict as it began to escalate in early 1920. These letters to Father Tom Lynch, are also used to chart Lynch's own emotional and religious life, which Lynch reflected on in these letter in conjunction with political developments. As 1920 progressed and the conflict intensified however, Lynch found less time to write to his brother and began to predominately correspond with other IRA officers. Accordingly for the military elements considered, this article analyses Lynch's letters to the IRA Chief of Staff Richard Mulcahy, in the latter's papers, for the 1920-1921 period, and various letters and directives to IRA officers under Lynch's own command in the papers of IRA leader Moss Twomey's papers for the 1922-1923 period. During the Civil War, Lynch also began a correspondence with Joseph McGarrity, the leading figure on the anti-Treaty side in Irish America, and these letters are also analysed in the 1922-1923 section as they are invaluable in charting Lynch's increasingly unrealistic analysis of how the civil war was progressing.

Scholars should be grateful for the fact that the Irish Revolution is easily one of the most well documented struggles for national independence not least thanks to the recent release and now digitization of the Bureau of Military History (BMH) files and Military Service Pensions (MSP) records. However, both of these bodies were set up to create a state approved history of the revolution in the case of the former, and as a means for veterans of the period to create a verified record of service for financial support in the case of the latter – allowing for exaggeration, self-indulgence and settling of old scores in both. Regardless of this however, this article is primarily interested in analysing and contextualising Lynch through his own contemporary writings, rather than considering reflections produced on him by others after his death. Accordingly, an emphasis is placed throughout contemporary documents he himself produced. There are however exceptions such as reference to C.S. "Todd" Andrews' excellent *Dublin Made Me* which gives perhaps the most nuanced and emotionally complex description of Liam Lynch, in term of Lynch as a man and not just as a revolutionary soldier, and is therefore referenced throughout.

It is perhaps first necessary to briefly consider his private life and how it contrasted so strongly with his revolutionary life.

## 2. *Personality and Religion*

Dublin IRA man C.S. Andrews, who acted as Lynch's adjutant in the civil war, wrote perhaps the most moving and vivid description of Lynch in his autobiography *Dublin Made Me*, first published in 1979. Andrews looking back at Lynch believed him to have been a straightforward man with a rustic vision of Ireland:

He seemed to regard farming as the ideal mode of life for an Irishman. Like most of the other leaders of the IRA, he gave little thought to economics. His aim in life would, I think, have been the 'frugal comfort' of which Dev(alara) long, long afterwards, spoke so feelingly as the economic norm to which Ireland should aspire. (2001 [1979], 291)

Andrews also viewed him as having possessed a particular type of innocence. He was, according to Andrews, "not only without guile but also unconscious of it in either his opponents or his friends" (287). During the Civil War, Andrews believed Lynch's innocence manifested in only being able to understand what he saw as the betrayal and brutal tactics of his former comrades as being the result of a literal "diabolical influence" (291).

Much of his correspondence to his family confirms this reading and suggests his having an approach to activism sustained by a deep religious faith. In a letter to his brother Father Tom Lynch, to whom he was deeply attached, in June 1920 he wrote "I thank God that I have been in the very big push for the motherland ... say a few prayers for me some times that I may be able to do my duty to God + country. I am after breaking my rimless glasses"<sup>2</sup>.

The reference to prayers, the motherland and breaking his glasses implies a piety, patriotism, and perhaps a certain innocence that goes along with Andrew's view of him. The description of breaking his glasses is case in point; he was "after" breaking his glasses, suggests mild annoyance rather than, for instance, complaining about the difficulty of how he as an active guerrilla fighter, might get a new pair. His religiosity is evident in the conclusion to another letter written at much the same time, again to his brother "I hope that you and all the family will enjoy the Easter Holiday, sorry that I must miss you this time"<sup>3</sup>.

Throughout his life he could also be magnanimous and kind even towards the men who killed him. On his deathbed, one of Lynch's last wishes, allegedly, was to thank to the "boys", in the Free State Army, who after shooting Lynch carried his mortally injured body down from the Knockmealdown hills to a bed in a nearby farmhouse (Ryan 2012 [1986], 237). If true, this reveals a remarkable generosity of spirit in the midst of a particularly brutal civil war.

For all his mild-mannered niceties or innocence, he could also be, perhaps unsurprisingly for someone so deeply religious, more than a little priggish. Indeed, throughout his public life a certain pietistic asceticism is evident. In May 1920, just as the level of violence in the 1919-1921 conflict was beginning to become more intense, he was horrified that the Fermoy horse races were going ahead when "local volunteers were in prison"<sup>4</sup>. Under his direction, the IRA managed to stop the races. However, the enterprising and mysterious Michael Lynch, an IRA leader from outside of the Fermoy area (and no relation to Liam), appeared and somehow managed to let the races proceed, with the help of other less puritanical members of the Fermoy IRA. This was much to Liam Lynch's chagrin. He fumed "It is clear that he [Michael Lynch] ridiculed the movement in the eyes of the people"<sup>5</sup>. Lynch obviously believed in maintaining a certain level of decorum during an IRA hunger strike, but here his concerns about horse racing can also be interpreted as reflecting a dislike of gambling which is so intrinsically linked to horse racing. Not to mention British military and ascendancy connections with horses.

This ascetism, austerity or perhaps even self-denying aspect is evident in other aspects of his life. Strict abstinence from alcohol or temperance was not uncommon within the IRA in this pe-

<sup>2</sup> Liam Lynch to Tom Lynch, 28 June 1920, NLI, MS 36, 251/11.

<sup>3</sup> Liam Lynch to Tom Lynch, 31 March 1920, NLI, MS 36, 251/8.

<sup>4</sup> O/C Cork No.2 to C/S, 24 May 1920, MAI, CP A/0495.

<sup>5</sup> O/C Cork No.2 to C/S, 24 May 1920, MAI, CP A/0495.

riod. During the truce, between July 1921 and the outbreak of Civil War, Lynch wrote to Richard Mulcahy, IRA Chief of Staff, that he believed that if hostilities were resumed with the British, the IRA should close all “pubs”<sup>6</sup>. By the civil war, when he was in overall charge of the IRA, he issued an order that “In the future cases of drunkenness, boisterous conduct while under the influence of drink [...] will be dismissed from the army”<sup>7</sup>. Admittedly, particularly during the Truce, problems with IRA men over-indulging in drink were common, nonetheless, this order has a rather Spartan tone<sup>8</sup>.

The vision of Lynch so far is of an uncomplicated, religious but also rather innocent man. Andrews wrote that “he had little opportunity to acquire a broad knowledge of men or affairs” (2001 [1979], 305), suggesting he knew little of the world beyond Ireland. There is no evidence of him having ever left Ireland, but this was not uncommon for men who did not emigrate.

Meda Ryan does mention his having a fiancée, Bridie Keyes who he met at an Irish language class in 1917, who he seemed to be able to catch up with occasionally when time allowed (Ryan 2012 [1986], 39).

What we can ascertain so far, is that Lynch was seemingly quite a gentle and modest individual, however the sentiments he expressed so far in his letters, and in Todd Andrews’ recollections, are of a man who expressed feelings of devotion, duty and temperance all of which can be seen as also informing his sense of duty, and discipline as a leading figure in the IRA.

### *3. Lynch and Violence*

If he was innocent in his personal life, he was certainly not in his revolutionary life. Lynch acted in a senior military capacity for a guerrilla army in two brutal conflicts, a brutality he readily encouraged. Since Hart’s 1998 publication, questions around the nature of violence, arson and alleged sectarianism have been debated and disputed by historians of the revolution (Hughes 2016; Clark 2014). Interestingly, most of the discussion has focused on ground level acts of violence from which the national IRA leadership were at a remove. On one level, this is highly logical as the IRA as a guerrilla army was sustained by local initiative, and its leadership had, at best, a tenuous control over its most active guerrillas. But still, it might now be necessary to consider how figures in leadership positions, within the IRA, considered issues around the killing of civilians and arson, and here Lynch’s rhetoric proves revealing.

The measures he called for in the latter stages of the 1919-1921 conflict, reveal if not guile then a willingness to encourage a drastic escalation to the conflict. In reaction to initial and largely low level IRA activity throughout 1920, the crown forces operated an unofficial reprisal policy of arson on the homes of alleged IRA supporters, and people with no links to republicanism. The violence of the crown forces was also usually more violent, larger and long drawn out than the IRA action it was in response to. In fact, such incidents were often not even in reaction to an IRA incident, but entirely unprovoked (Earls FitzGerald 2021, 139).

In retaliation by 1921 the IRA began a counter campaign of killing civilians deemed to be spies, and the burning of property belonging to people believed to be in sympathy with the crown forces. Both arson and the killing of spies was implemented most aggressively by the Cork IRA, while in much the rest of the country – particularly Connacht and Leinster – this kind of violence was uncommon.

<sup>6</sup> O/C 1st Southern to C/S, 2 November 1921, UCDA, P7/A/28.

<sup>7</sup> C/S to O/Cs all Division: General Order No.4, 24 August 1922, UCDA, P69/25.

<sup>8</sup> C/S to O/Cs all Division: General Order No.4, 24 August 1922, UCDA, P69/25.

Lynch not only believed in this policy, but believed it needed to be stepped up. In May 1921 Lynch wrote to IRA General Headquarters (GHQ) in Dublin suggesting that for each republican prisoner shot by the crown forces in response “we shoot one local loyalist, Prominent Freemason”<sup>9</sup>. Notably, he does not mention that they be shot for having *actually acted* against the IRA, rather a critical historian could suggest that here he is suggesting that the political or even cultural identity of simply being a loyalist or unionist justified an individual’s execution. Indeed, another critical reading might suggest that Loyalist and Freemason were thinly veiled reference to Protestants. However, Lynch never seems to have made an openly sectarian remark, which perhaps supports the belief that Peter Hart’s view of the IRA as being partially motivated by sectarian feelings cannot be fully substantiated (Earls FitzGerald 2021, 217). Indeed, another interpretation could be that he was simply referring to political loyalty rather than religious denomination. Whatever his actual intentions were, however his suggestion of giving local IRA commanders what seems to have been a free hand to execute anyone who came under suspicion, could have resulted in a blood bath. This, in turn, could have been highly damaging to Sinn Féin government’s efforts to ensure the IRA were Ireland’s legitimate armed forces, against the murderous gangster image of the IRA then being presented by British propaganda. But this is perhaps the first instance of Lynch lacking the vision to see the ramifications of his ideas and solutions.

His rhetoric around arson is also noticeably similar. Lynch believed that the escalation of arson produced the needed results. He noted that in the Cork No.2 IRA brigade, his own stronghold, the IRA had been burning a loyalist house for every republican house burned “with the result that the local loyalists approached the enemy authorities immediately asking them for God’s sake to stop reprisals”. Lynch suggested that this policy be extended to a national level<sup>10</sup>.

Though he was sometimes unclear about how far he believed these measures should be extended, he often came back to this idea when the conflict was at its most intense in the spring of 1921. In May 1921 he again wrote that the “enemy seems inclined to burn out every house (of those in sympathy with the republican movement), we may as well have our share of it” seemingly suggesting burning every loyalist house<sup>11</sup>. Interestingly, Lynch came back to this concept of burning numerous “loyalist” houses, at least twice in his correspondence in the spring of 1921. Suggesting that he was committed to the idea and that at the height of a brutal guerrilla conflict he was oblivious to large scale concerns these acts would have and was primarily concerned with more immediate short term advantages.

On one level, if these measures of largescale execution of known loyalists and burning of their property had been implemented it would have decreased civilian or “loyalist” co-operation or potential co-operation with the crown forces but, more importantly, it would have been irrevocably damaging in the longer run. Sinn Féin propaganda had consistently used arson, and other acts of violence, conducted by the Black and Tans as tangible evidence of British misrule, it also allowed the Black and Tans to be depicted as invaders and further validate Sinn Féin’s claims for independence. If the IRA began to engage in widespread indiscriminate arson and shootings of anyone believed to have been a “loyalist”, it could well have again acted as a major boon to allow British propaganda to portray the IRA as a criminal rather than military force.

Similarly, in areas where IRA activity was limited, it was unreasonable to advocate for Volunteers to begin engaging in arson and shooting of spies. Such actions would have only brought down the wrath of the crown. Indeed, it was the fear of such reprisals that often-discouraged

<sup>9</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 4 May 1921, UCDA, P7/A/20.

<sup>10</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 4 May 1921, UCDA, P7/A/20.

<sup>11</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 20 May 1921, UCDA, P7/A/21.

IRA units in quieter parts of the country from engaging in military operations of any kind (Earls FitzGerald 2021, 134). Though, it is important to contextualise Lynch's remarks. He was also clearly reflecting a concern for those suffering at the hands of the crown forces and he believed the burning of loyalist homes would stop the suffering of the nationalist population.

But his pre-occupation with the advisability of arson persisted into the Truce of 1921 which again shows a lack of awareness of larger political sensibilities. In November 1921, at the very height of the Treaty negotiations and during the uneasy truce between the crown forces and the IRA, Lynch fearing that Lismore Castle in County Waterford was about to be occupied by the British military, asked Richard Mulcahy, the then Chief of Staff of the IRA, permission to burn it<sup>12</sup>. Lynch wrote that

we fear Lismore Castle will be occupied by the enemy [British Army] in the near future, we got this information from a family reliable source and at present owners are auctioning off all of their property. We are fairly certain of definite information a few days before this is occupied, can you give permission to have this building burned.<sup>13</sup>

Mulcahy was more careful, writing "by the terms of the truce the destruction of a castle would not be permissible"<sup>14</sup>.

In an already tense situation, in which stand offs between the IRA and crown forces were creating a fear of a breakdown in negotiations, the burning of Lismore Castle would have only made matters worse if not even have precipitated a resumption of fighting. Lismore Castle was the Irish country seat of the staunchly unionist Cavendish Dukes of Devonshire who were part and parcel of the British establishment as Liberal party leaders. The advisability of burning the castle at that moment seems more than a little foolhardy.

During the Civil War, as Chief of Staff, he was eager to call for the same methods that had been used in the previous conflict. In August 1922, in the early stages of the civil war, the IRA published a general notice that declared they had no "desire to interfere with individuals holding opinions opposed to them" but that any person who conveyed information to the Free State forces "prejudicial to the safety of our forces will be regarded as spies, and will be liable to the same penalty meted out to informers previous to the truce July 1921"<sup>15</sup>. This is referring to the IRA's controversial policy of executing civilians they believed to be spies between 1920 and 1921.

Similarly, in the civil war he began calling for press censorship, issuing the following instructions to all IRA commanders:

As almost the entire press is at present used as the medium of enemy propaganda, you will see that the "Irish Independent", "Freeman's Journal", "Irish Times", or any other hostile newspapers are prevented from being brought into your area are for sale or circulation. Any which are brought in should be seized and destroyed.<sup>16</sup>

Lynch's Adjutant General also issued the following instruction to all commanders:

<sup>12</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 2 November 1921, UCDA, P7/A/28.

<sup>13</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 2 November 1921, UCDA, P7/A/28.

<sup>14</sup> C/S to O/C 1st Southern Division, 4 November 1921, UCDA, P7/A/28.

<sup>15</sup> Irish Republican Army, Public Notice, 28 August 1922, UCDA, P69/25.

<sup>16</sup> C/S to O/Cs all Divisions: Operation order No.7 – Destruction of hostile newspapers, 7 August 1922, UCDA, P69/25.

You will order any local representative for the hostile home or foreign press that they are cease forwarding reports on any matters relating to the I.R.A. on the present war. If they to comply with this order you will have them expelled from your divisional area.<sup>17</sup>

From a military perspective the crisis necessitated such measures and this is an example of Lynch considering national implications. However, in the civil war these calls for harsh treatment of informers and the suppression of the freedom of the press would have been detrimental to anti-Treaty side. The anti-Treaty movement was already unpopular with many and struggling to assert its democratic credentials against the relentless demonisation from the propaganda of the Free State. Such measures would have done the movement no favours and again could have been easily exploited by enemy propaganda. The IRA between 1919-1921 had not tried to suppress the press either.

This represents a pattern seen throughout his revolutionary life of showing a lack of concern for broader political concerns, in favour of potential short term military gains. This sometimes could affect his judgement regarding the people for whose independence he was fighting.

#### 4. Views on Civilians

Indeed, this foolhardiness and desire for increased violence is made more interesting if we examine his views not strictly connected to fighting for the Republic, but connected to society more broadly, beginning with his views on Irish civilians.

It was not uncommon for IRA Volunteers, particularly after the signing of the Treaty in 1921, to express a desire that the Republic should be maintained at all costs. Humphry Murphy, the *de-facto* leader of the Kerry IRA, gave an example of this train of thought, when he told a meeting of the Kerry Farmers Union in July 1922 that:

If the provisional (Free State) government continue to fight with English guns, English bullets and shells, English armoured Cars and the Ex-Soldiers of the English army... I am certain they are going to fail as the Black and Tans failed, because the war did not come properly until it came to Cork and Kerry. We will defend every town to the last. You will have towns in ruins and famine finishing those who have escaped the bullet. We will stop at nothing, and we are going to win even if it takes years. (Murphy in Doyle 2009, 112-113)

Murphy's rhetoric may seem extreme but it was not that unusual. As the civil war dragged on into 1923, Liam Lynch famously went so far as to describe the people of Ireland "merely [as] sheep to be driven anywhere at will" (Lynch in Garvin 1996, 46). At this point, the civil war for republicans was coming to an ignominious and tragic end, so it is possible that Lynch made these comments in despair or haste rather than from deep reflection, but this was far from an isolated remark.

A frustration towards those who did not contribute fully to the republican war effort, for instance, was a complaint he often made. It is also crucial to note that such sentiments were expressed by Lynch long before the grim days towards the end of the civil war. During the Truce, in October 1921, he reflected that:

<sup>17</sup> Adjutant General to O/Cs all Divisions: General Order No.5 Press representatives and correspondents, 25 September 1922, UCDA, P69/25.

During the war (1919-1921) it was only in a few instances ... that levies had to be insisted on, and people paid it freely. The situation is certainly different now during the Truce times in areas where some of the population have not developed a war mind – on the other hand a peace at any price group of Shoneens – and who put a few pounds before the Nation’s honour and Freedom. Such an attitude as adopted by these people would not win us freedom.<sup>18</sup>

In his correspondence, he would frequently come back to this theme of the lack of support during the previous conflict. In March 1922 he wrote his brother “During the war I remember at one time in the next area where it was next to impossible to find a bed to his own”<sup>19</sup>.

It is in regards to this issue that his localism is particularly evident. Lynch wrote that unlike the rest of the country “when people here [in Cork] realised there was a war on that they were part of the Irish nation they paid up freely”<sup>20</sup>.

This is perhaps an example of how Lynch’s pride in Cork could reach exaggerated or unrealistic proportions. After the arrest of Séan MacEoin, County Longford’s proactive and aggressive IRA leader, Lynch reflected that “Cork will have to fight alone now” (Lynch in Hanley 2010, 15). Cork, undoubtedly, possessed the most aggressive IRA units, but Lynch’s comments here seem to disregard the work of IRA units in Limerick, Kerry, Tipperary, let alone Dublin or units in Connacht who were becoming increasingly pro-active and aggressive, particularly in the Spring of 1921 (Townshend 2013, 293).

It is wrong to characterise Lynch’s attitude as entirely dismissive of civilians though; for all his hostility towards those non-active supporters of the IRA, his correspondence also shows interesting more semi-sympathetic or even metaphysical approaches to non-active supporters of the IRA. In October 1921 he wrote that “furthermore we realised we were fighting for them [non-active supporters] as well as for active supporters even if they [the non-active supporters] did not realise”<sup>21</sup>. Here, he seems to almost echo an understanding, similar to that often expressed in the post-revolutionary period of Irish republicanism. Ruairi Ó Braidaigh an IRA Chief of Staff in the 1950s and 1960s and President of Provisional and then Republican Sinn Féin, and a great admirer of Lynch, for instance believed that there was only ever a small minority who would fight to free Ireland. However, Ó Braidaigh also felt that actually most Irish people *did want* complete separation, and could sometimes be moved by events such as 1916 or Bloody Sunday, but that these feelings rarely resulted in mobilisation or activity and that it was therefore up to a relatively small number of IRA volunteers to in effect fight on behalf of the people (Hanley 2013, 452).

On this occasion, Lynch makes a rare conciliatory gesture to non-republicans, but he was usually uncompromising on such issues. This brings us on to how Lynch approached or considered social issues, not strictly linked to the use of force.

### 5. *Social Issues*

Lynch produced a memorandum “Civil population in war time” on 24th November 1921, which envisaged an almost total war type scenario if hostilities with Britain were resumed. Writing that martial law should be “declared on our side when enemy declared it on theirs”

<sup>18</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 27 October 1921, UCDA, P7/A/29.

<sup>19</sup> Liam Lynch to Tom Lynch, 6 March 1922, NLI, MS 36, 252/24.

<sup>20</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 27 October 1921, UCDA, P7/A/29.

<sup>21</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 27 October 1921, UCDA, P7/A/29.

and “If hostilities are resumed the whole support of the civil population should be organised behind the army”<sup>22</sup>.

He then brought up a familiar theme: contempt for the non-military sides of Irish life. “We must admit that all civil organisation, County Councils, District Councils, Urban Councils, Corporations, Urban Councils, Sinn Féin clubs and all other organised bodies were an absolute failure during the last phase of hostilities”<sup>23</sup>. Considering the success made in establishing the counter-state through 1919-1921 thanks to the efforts of W.T. Cosgrave, and in establishing Sinn Féin dominance in local government and Austin Stack in establishing a separate republican judiciary, Lynch’s remarks here seem unnecessarily harsh and narrow minded (Townshend 2013 121-126) – his views even seem to represent a lack of awareness of the non-military elements of the republican state building project.

It is important to stress that he was not unconcerned with the fate of normal people, and in this memorandum he envisaged a system to aid poorer people affected by the conflict:

Distress in towns is likely to become very serious in next war and a definitive machinery is necessary, even to the extent of removing those in distress to country district(s) where they would be cared in twos and threes by well to do people ... Employers could give a certain allowance to employees who have gone in active service and give a definite promise of re-employment at any later time.<sup>24</sup>

So far, Lynch has appeared to be militaristic, capable of making situations more volatile and dismissive of anyone who did not share his politics. But curiously here, Lynch envisaged an elaborate and perhaps characteristically impractical system whereby wealthy rural dwellers would have to house victims of the crown forces, and employers needing to make guarantees of continued employment to their employees. This suggests an egalitarian approach of equal distribution where the wealthy would need to care for those who suffered on account of the conflict, and more broadly that the wealthier needed to carry their full burden if hostilities resumed.

As established earlier in the view of a scholar like Hart, Lynch and his colleagues were pre-occupied solely with freeing Ireland rather than running it. However, the last document would suggest Lynch was actively contemplating ways to alleviate the distress that would be caused by fighting for Ireland. But does this document suggest his having more of an advanced social vision?

Which now begs the question as to whether Lynch held left wing or egalitarian views alongside his dedication to the Republic: Lynch’s closest friend Michael Fitzgerald, who he knew during his early days with the Fermoy Volunteers in 1917-1919, was an activist with the radical Irish Transport and General Workers Union together with the Volunteers – demonstrating that Lynch almost certainly came into direct contact with labour issues (Hart 1998, 146). Fitzgerald was arrested in October 1919, after an attack on British troops in Fermoy led by Lynch. Fitzgerald would die on hunger strike in October 1920. Lynch’s concerns for horse racing going ahead when there were republicans in prison, must have been influenced by the fact that his friend Fitzgerald was then on hunger strike.

Lynch’s links with Fitzgerald may have been exaggerated on following Lynch’s death by anti-Treaty propagandists in order to strengthen his connections with martyrdom and heroic sacrifice to the cause. Whatever else knowledge of the connection between the two spread fast. In 1923 Dan Breen, or his ghost-writer, wrote in *My fight for Irish Freedom* in suitably emotionally charged language:

<sup>22</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 27 October 1921, UCDA, P7/A/29

<sup>23</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 27 October 1921, UCDA, P7/A/29

<sup>24</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 27 October 1921, UCDA, P7/A/29.

When Liam fell in battle on the Knockmealdown on 10 April 1923, his last request was to be buried with Michael Fitzgerald in Kilcrumper. 'Place me near my loyal and faithful comrade, Michael Fitzgerald,' he asked. And there those two faithful soldiers of the Republic lie side by side. (1989 [1924], 106)

Lynch however does not seem to have been affected by Fitzgerald's trade union activism. Indeed, In the Autumn of 1921, when the cessation of hostilities was resulting in an upsurge in trade union agitation, he expressed an obvious frustration with trade unions:

There are instances especially in Waterford where I.T.G unions organisers are antagonistic to Ireland's National demands and more drastic action has been taken by us for less offences. We cannot let any civil organisation interfere with the Army, especially at a time when Enemy is taking desperate efforts to crush us. My experience is that certain organisations try to put labour before freedom, this may go on for some time but even their own individual members will not stick this.<sup>25</sup>

His remarks here, again reflect his belief, expressed earlier, that most people, seemingly regardless of class, were potential supporters of the IRA. However, it also clearly echoes a view held by Fenians and dating back to the late 19th century that political issues not linked to the national question such as trade union activism, and the land question, were distraction from the all-important national question (Townshend 1983, 319). It has also been suggested that for many of Lynch's generation the belief existed that once the British were removed from Ireland class harmony would emerge (English 2006, 301). This attitude may well have informed Lynch's apparent hostility to trade unionism.

Lynch's view that all sections of society needed to rally behind the army and put aside sectional interests was not uncommon among republicans of this period (Laffan 1999, 258). In the early stages of 1920, as a result of the declining influence of the Royal Irish Constabulary, an upsurge in agrarian agitation occurred which Sinn Féin and the IRA responded to by trying to mediate between landowners and tenants and landless rural labourers. Nonetheless, IRA volunteers, particularly in County Kerry, often operated in favour of landed interests, indeed since the 19th century agrarian agitation was seen by many republicans as a distraction from the more important national question (Earls FitzGerald 2021, 73).

However, issues particularly around land agitation became a particular problem for Lynch during the Civil War. The Civil War created a strange hybrid of new political rhetoric created from chaotic conditions in which old certainties were challenged and new loyalties and identities were created. Gemma Clark in her 2014 work *Everyday violence in the Irish Civil War* demonstrated the frequent occurrence of the use of arson against big houses and other forms of intimidation, often over land, during the Civil War. Clark notes that such acts of violence were the product of class tensions often motivated by historical and sectarian grievances. Clark's notes it is often impossible to establish whether those behind these acts of arson were in the anti-Treaty IRA or opportunistic largely agrarian agitators (98-154).

The sheer frequency of arson together with increasing land agitation, prompted a fear of social collapse among certain Free State government ministers in the later stages of the Civil War, particularly Kevin O'Higgins and Patrick Hogan. Hogan and O'Higgins created and put into effect a Special Infantry Corps of elite troops, within the army, to break up land agitation, strikes and suppress other forms of "outlawry". Gavin Foster considers that O'Higgins' belief that Special Infantry Corps represented the most valuable branch of the army, "highlights how important members of the government believed the force to be and how seriously they took the forms of social conflict it was designed to suppress" (Foster 2015, 130-133).

<sup>25</sup> O/C 1st Southern Division to C/S, 13 October 1921, UCDA, P7/A/34.

Historical discourse on the Irish Civil War is, in keeping with the nature of civil wars, divided. The “democrats vs dictators” narrative as espoused by Garvin (1996), has been challenged, often on the basis of the Free State’s conservatism and frequent circumvention of the rule of law. The counter argument of the Civil War as a type of counter-revolution in which a conservative bourgeois elite, as epitomised by Kevin O’Higgins, destroyed the actual revolution, exists in opposition to the “democrats vs dictators” narrative (Regan 1999).

Similarly, as noted earlier, Gavin Foster has added further layers to this counter-revolutionary narrative by emphasising the considerable class tensions that existed during the Civil War, and how it manifested in pro-Treaty contempt for the anti-Treaty activists who were condemned for their apparent lack of social worth and low standing in society (2016). Roy Foster has also recently suggested that for many of the “revolutionary generation” the personnel, background and mentalities of the Free State government looked “uncomfortably close to Home Rule” as they lacked any type of republican vision or idealism and took on the manners of the British (2014, 285).

The conservatism of the Free State side however, did not result in the anti-Treaty side embracing more radical social politics. The arson and land agitation occurring at the time was being picked up on by some in anti-Treaty movement as something with which the IRA should identify with more, and that it was a sentiment the IRA could galvanise for their benefit. Revolutionary anti-Treaty radicals like Peadar O’Donnell and Liam Mellows called for the division of larger estates. Historian Michael Hopkinson, however, has noted they were the “lone voices” in the anti-Treaty movement (1988, 91). O’Donnell and Mellows spent the Civil War in prison, so it could be argued that had they been at liberty they may have been in a greater position to influence the conflict. However, they would have *inevitably* encountered opposition from their more conservative colleagues – like Lynch. In the early stages of the Civil War Roddy Connolly, son of James, approached Lynch’s headquarters; Connolly advised Lynch that the only way to beat the Free State was to establish a republican government in Cork and implement the socialist Democratic Programme of the first Dáil. Lynch was not interested in Connolly’s proposals (Ryan 2012 [1986], 185). Again, perhaps suggesting a fairly non-complex Hart like vision of Lynch as a typical non-politically complex IRA man.

However, at other times Lynch’s reaction to such issues may be interpreted as more complex. In his most intriguing directive, to Liam Deasy, who had replaced him as head of the 1st Southern in September 1922, Lynch considered ways in which to deal with the emerging land agitation crisis:

What are your views on the advisability of we confiscating demesne lands, and ranches immediately as we had been doing last May when the truce intervened. We should begin by taking over estates which are some distance from enemy bases so that it would be quite impossible for him to protect these people or reinstate them.

You could start by taking over 10 or 12 estates in the 1st Southern, say places like Kingston’s, near Mitchelstown. The problem must be tackled some time, and I hold that the settlement of the fighting men on the land should be made a condition of a peace which may be made.

If we decide on this policy we should guard against giving the “land hunger” a fresh start, as it may divert a good deal of attention away from the fight for independence. This would apply particularly to the west.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> C/S to O/C 1st Southern Division, 1 September 1922, UCDA, P69/25.

This is easily equally one of Lynch's most intriguing but also difficult to interpret directives, and as such is worthy of close analysis. In the first paragraph, he suggests the necessity of confiscating larger farms and making sure Free State forces would not be in a position to "reinststate" the original owners – suggesting he envisaged stripping the wealthy of their wealth. He then goes on to suggest "the settlement of the fighting men on the land" as a condition of peace. Lynch here is quite clearly outlining a belief that anti-Treaty IRA men, "the fighting men", be awarded for their service by being awarded these large tracts of land in any potential peace settlement. However, he then goes on to raise concerns about a new rise in "land hunger" if this policy is introduced, and that it could divert attention away from the struggle for independence, particularly in the west of Ireland – where land problems were most acute. There appears to be two potential interpretations here.

On the one hand, it could be interpreted as suggesting that IRA veterans be granted land but that the ramifications and technicalities of such a scheme could prove complex and result in an upsurge in "land hunger" among IRA men fighting over the exact nature of the new allocations of land. And that Lynch feared that this would become a distraction for IRA men from their main role as fighters for independence. If the Civil War had been won and independence achieved, and with the new republican dispensation being in a position to allocate land surely, would not the national question have been resolved? This consideration leads to the next interpretation.

The second reading is that the "land hunger" Lynch feared "in the west" would be as a result of landless labourers engaging in agitation in reaction to IRA men being awarded land. Land which the poorer rural dwellers felt they had more of a claim too. His suggestion that there would be a need to "guard against" land hunger, could even be interpreted as suggesting he thought it could be necessary for IRA to protect their new holdings from land hungry agitators by force of arms.

However, the document is in itself vague and Lynch may well have been expressing not fully developed ideas. But regardless of his intent, it is again a typically impractical document as the settlement of IRA veterans on viable plots of farm land would have proved difficult to administer. And both the wealthy and poor of rural Ireland could well have been resentful and resisted such a scheme. However, as said, the uncertain wording of this directive make it difficult to be certain of his exact intent.

Lynch's belief in the break of larger farms and the holdings of the residual Anglo-Irish ascendancy was a common theme in this period. Indeed, the idea of breaking up landed estates was even a sentiment shared by his opponents. Emmet Dalton, who commanded Free State troop in Cork noted that the officers under his command envisaged "hunting all the old ascendancy out of the country and dividing up their estates amongst the despoiled relatives now alive"<sup>27</sup>. In fact, since the late 19th century various commissions had been set up to facilitate land redistribution, whose work as the Land Commission continued in independent Ireland. Lynch was unique in considering that the redistributed land should go primarily to the IRA though.

Lynch's judgement seems often to have wavered. Like many republicans of his time he was wary of land agitation (Séan Moylan, BMH, WS, 838) or trade union activism as distracting from the struggle for the Republic, but also clearly felt for poor people who suffered as a result of the conflict – and that the wealthier should make more allowances to share the burden. Nonetheless, together with the burning of Lismore castle, his suggestion of the need for massive land redistribution in favour of IRA veterans at the successful end of the Civil War was Lynch

<sup>27</sup> Intelligence report on Cork, G.O.C Cork to C/S, Adjt General, Director of organisation and Director of intelligence, 18 November 1922, UCDA, P17a/164.

at his most impractical and clearly unable to see national implications of such an idea. He may simply have only been envisaging how such a scheme would play out in his own north Munster stronghold, rather considering how it manifest nationally.

However, his idea expressed in the last document that the anti-Treaty IRA would come out as winner of the Civil War, moves on finally to Lynch's unrealistic vision of how the conflict was progressing.

### *6. Lynch's Leadership in the Civil War*

The outcome of the Civil War was initially not a foregone conclusion. The late Michael Hopkinson demonstrated that at the earlier stages of the conflict the anti-Treaty side had more men, equipment and controlled more territory than the nascent Free State, who had few outposts outside of Dublin (Hopkinson 1988, 127). Lynch was aware of this and on 29th July he issued a directive to all units in which he wrote that "we hope to have made control towards complete control of west and southern Ireland" (Lynch in Ryan 2012 [1986], 175). In those few weeks in the summer of 1922, Lynch was in control of an IRA who had more influence and capabilities than ever before – enough capabilities to defeat the Free State.

Despite the fall of the Four Courts and O'Connell Street garrisons in Dublin in the early stages of the conflict, Lynch was still in effective control of most of the south and west of the country. However, he never made any concrete efforts to follow up on these tactical advantages by going on the offensive: instead he moved his headquarters to his own traditional north Munster stronghold, where he would continue to be based until his death (with some intervals elsewhere), and let any advantages drain away while the Free State took the initiative. By the end of August 1922, the IRA had lost all the territory they had previously controlled.

Indeed, in the summer of 1922 Lynch for all that his concerns were often military, however, his tactical ability or the quality of his military thinking can be best be described as limited. Lynch's former colleagues turned opponents; Richard Mulcahy and Michael Collins had launched a simultaneous offensive of troops by both land and sea. Lynch was attacked in his front at Limerick and Tipperary and in his rear by sea-based troop landings in Cork and Kerry. A similar picture developed on his Connacht front. By August, all the various IRA garrisons had been driven back into the hills. Lynch was not that dispirited as he advocated for the guerrilla tactics which had previously worked so well for the IRA (Townshend 2013, 416).

The conflict then descended, with a few exceptions such as in Kerry, into a low scale conflict. The Free State's decision to execute republican prisoners, decreasing morale and a lack of widespread popular support meant the anti-Treaty side possessed no reasonable chance of success after the Autumn of 1922, a fact DeValera had long since recognised (Ryan 2012 [1986], 216).

Yet for all this, it is at this point that Lynch's rhetoric becomes increasingly focused on both the practical military situation improving for the IRA and the *inevitability* of victory. He wrote to Joe McGarrity, the leading anti-Treaty figure in Irish America, in December 1922 that "The home situation generally is very satisfactory, and generally is immensely improving from week to week [...] the people in the country are now in the same position as in the last war"<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, he wrote to McGarrity as late as February 1923 that:

<sup>28</sup> Liam Lynch C/S to Joe McGarrity, 21 December 1922, NLI, MS 17, 455 (1).

The general situation here up to a few days ago was most satisfactory, and were it not for the Deasy incident, which Moylan will explain to you, I am sure we would have matters all our own way within a few weeks. Owing to this incident it may take us some time to recover from it, but I am certain all will be right again.<sup>29</sup>

Liam Deasy, a close associate of Lynch, had been captured by Free State forces and avoided execution by publicly calling on all remaining anti-Treaty units to surrender (Hopkinson 1988, 230-232).

Perhaps, is this in fact where we see Lynch at his most political or *even* manipulative? Was he recognising that Irish America would be vital to the survival of the republican movement, and in fact feeding McGarrity false information to make the chances of receiving aid greater? The answer appears to be no: as in both private and public correspondence for audiences at home and abroad he stuck to the same message.

In his last written message to all officers and men under his command he announced “I am certain that if we stand united that victory is certain, and that in a short time” (Hopkinson 1988, 238). Again, this may have been a case of simply trying to be pragmatic, to boost morale, encourage greater resistance, unity in the ranks, or indeed for propaganda purposes to show that the IRA were still active. Such more pragmatic concerns may have influenced his thinking but he seems to have always earnestly believed in such pronouncements.

He had in fact been writing variants of the same idea for months – including to his own family, which suggests he earnestly believed in inevitable victory. On 28th October 1922, he privately wrote to his brother that “We are absolutely confident that the Free State is beaten” (Ryan 2012 [1986], 200). This, admittedly, was at a time before the execution policy of anti-Treaty prisoners had been so ruthlessly implemented but still when any practical advantages for the anti-Treaty side were negligible. Also, why would he lie or exaggerate to his own brother? Surely Father Lynch had other sources of news other than his brother’s letters. The tone in this message is also remarkably close to that of other messages such as that to McGarrity or in messages to the men under his command. Perhaps, here is a good example of him being without guile or capable of manipulation if in both private and publicly his views were effectively the same.

He was also not surrounded by flatterers reinforcing his flawed vision of inevitable victory – rather he was under increasing pressure to end the conflict. However, he refused to alter his position (Townshend 2013, 446). Indeed, it appears that Lynch believed that the fortunes of the war could be reversed if IRA efforts, then being made to purchase artillery in Germany and America, were successful (Hopkinson 1988, 236-237).

While the arrival of several pieces of artillery for use by the anti-Treaty side may have altered the dynamics of the conflict slightly it would hardly have resulted in the Free State – suing for peace. The Free State army already having sufficient artillery. Perhaps, Lynch continued to take succour from the results of the previous conflict and earnestly believed that the Free State, like the British, would ultimately be worn down and come to terms. But here Lynch’s logic could not have been more wrong. The British in 1920-1921 clearly had to eventually come to some form of terms with the Dáil Government – as the legitimate representative of the majority of the Irish people – and they also had options: the British were not fighting for their very survival. Not so for the Free State – who were fighting to maintain the existence of their new state. In 1922-1923 the Free State, for all the problematic issues of having been created under the threat of force, was also now considered as legitimate by most Irish people. Lynch, may have been a case of a general fighting the last war.

<sup>29</sup> Liam Lynch C/S to Joe McGarrity, 5 February 1923, NLI, MS 17, 455 (5).

When things were at their worst on 10th April 1923, and under increasing pressure to end the conflict from within the IRA, Lynch on route to a meeting of the IRA executive to discuss ending the conflict, was shot and mortally wounded by Free State soldiers on the slopes of the isolated Knockmealdown Mountains in County Tipperary.

## 7. Conclusion

Lynch occupies a curious position in Irish revolutionary history mainly due to his role in the Civil War. Though he did his utmost to avoid the Civil War of 1922-1923, he is attributed with almost singlehandedly being responsible for its unnecessary longevity. For all this, he is probably not as well-known as anti-Treaty left wing theoreticians such as Liam Mellows or Peadar O'Donnell, let alone next to his comrade turned opponent Michael Collins. Indeed, there are striking parallels between Lynch and Collins.

Like Collins, he died young, and with Collins, and Richard Mulcahy, he formed part of an IRA triumvirate that acted as the effective *de facto* head of the IRA between 1919-1921. Like Collins he was capable of violent rhetoric, and called for acts of extreme violence – the murder of civilians deemed spies, press censorship etc. He also led the military side of his movement in the Civil War. But while Collins was tall and broad, boisterous, convivial and often couth, on the other hand, Lynch was shy, quiet, tall and skinny, and rarely drank. It is hard to imagine him swearing. Collins' name is recognised outside of Ireland, while there are many people in Ireland who have never heard of Liam Lynch. One might say this is because Lynch does not have a 1996 blockbuster film about his exploits, but it might also simply be the case that he was not as dynamic or charismatic a figure.

That is not to say that Lynch was not a clearly a very accomplished man. Without any formal military training he rapidly rose through the ranks to become the commander of the IRA, he also was an effective organiser and administrator. His fellow Cork man Sean Moylan thought he was a simple pen pusher and not a soldier (Hopkinson 1988, 12), but Lynch was under fire several times – he was mortally wounded in combat. He successfully led the IRA party that captured the arsenal at Mallow barracks (O'Malley 1936, 212-217). Lynch through most of the years 1919-1923 also lived a precarious existence on the run for a cause to which he was genuinely devoted. As a national military leader, he was lacking though. In the summer of 1922, his troops had the potential to change the outcome of the Civil War, but he never seized the moment. He did nobly try and prevent the war, but once it started he remained seemingly genuinely committed to the belief in the final republican victory – but did little to ever try and make that victory a reality.

Bill Kissane has argued that in civil wars “the intensity of conflict is a reflection of the importance the actors attach to the issues dividing them” (2016, 6). And as we have seen from his declaration that he would “live under no other law”, the issue of maintaining the Republic is intrinsic to understanding Lynch, particularly in the Civil War, and explains the “intensity” of his feelings in the Civil War. But it is important that the depth of his commitment did not materialise into effective leadership.

If we look back, he clearly possessed a personal innocence, but his political actions also seem to have stemmed from an innocence that fed into unrealistic and potentially damaging expectations. In the 1919-1921 conflict he called for the widespread executions and use of arson against anyone who disagreed with the IRA, he wanted to burn castles during the 1921 truce, in the Civil War he envisaged a future Ireland in which IRA men would be settled on larger farms without thinking of the ramifications of this policy, and finally, despite; all evidence to

the contrary both publicly and privately, he earnestly believed as late as the spring of 1923 that the anti-treaty IRA were winning the Civil War.

History and what should evaluate all sides of him rather than either simply castigate or uncritically celebrate him. On the one hand, while his critics should recognise that he was clearly a man of energy, talent and integrity, his defenders should also recognise the validity of criticism of him.

He was perhaps finally a person who had responsibility thrust upon him thanks to the unique times in which he lived; a responsibility which he could not entirely master or control. Lynch is key to understanding both how the 1919-1921 conflict and subsequent 1922-1923 Civil War developed, and the motivations and world view of the republicanism of his time. Simultaneously he was no great military strategist, leader or even planner. His analysis on many issues was simply incorrect and either made things worse or could have made things worse. Perhaps, the latter points are crucial as these elements were crucial for a republican victory in the civil war, and these were the key features he lacked.

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