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# **“The mask is off at last!”: Propaganda discourse in the Irish Civil War**

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## ABSTRACT

Propaganda has generated sustained scholarly interest over the past few decades. While, however, historical research and argumentation studies on propaganda tend to fall short of in-depth examinations of discourse against the backdrop of a sound data base, this paper focuses on the discourse of propaganda through a comparative study of two well-known propaganda sheets from the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). Based on the *ICW\_Corpus* designed for the project, the main discourse strategies are identified through which the (respective) enemy and their actions were represented, their moral credibility was questioned and, vice-versa, how the actions of the respective in-group were both justified and/or openly advocated as the appropriate ones for the country. Findings show that *Poblacht na hÉireann* and *The Free State* are closely comparable in using discourse to get the Irish people to endorse the aims and policies of a specific group or faction, by ensuring compliance with the actions of the group itself.

Keywords: propaganda, Ireland, Civil War, discourse strategies, argumentation.

## **1. Introduction**

Propaganda has generated sustained scholarly interest over the past few decades (Zienkowski 2021; Wodak 2022). At the outset, a number of works conceptualise it as a misleading and manipulative form of communication. Thus, it has been defined as “the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist” (Jowett – O’Donnell 2015: 3) and, similarly, “the use of persuasive information to

manipulate a target audience into a behaviour desired by the propagandist" (Wanless – Berk 2020: 86). Definitions such as these share a lot of common ground. First of all, they shed light on propaganda as a highly deceptive practice. Secondly, they reiterate the point that propaganda is inherently goal-directed, because it is specifically aimed to trigger a reaction advancing the propagandist's interests.

From the perspective of argumentation theory, Walton (1997) disputes that every argument used in propaganda should be viewed as critically defective and of little (or no) argumentative value. He agrees, however, that propaganda implies using argumentation in a way that is in principle not geared towards uncovering the truth of a matter: accordingly, while arguments put forward in this context are not necessarily fallacious, care should be taken to identify any dialectical shifts behind their use. At the outset, Walton (1997: 394) sees propaganda as an instance of persuasion dialogue, where "the proponent's goal is to use the commitments of the respondent as premises in order to persuade the respondent to also become committed to some particular proposition he previously had doubts about accepting". In this vein, the ultimate aim of propaganda is to lead respondents to follow a certain course of action and eventually act, or to consent to and assist in a particular policy.

Propaganda, Walton (1997: 400) further argues, "is most visible and has been most studied as used in war. In time of war, the participants become caught up in an emotional attitude of hate and bitterness" that hardly ever gets people to consider and weigh up evidence from both sides of an issue. Not for nothing does Sevillano's (2009) study of propaganda focus on a dark period, namely the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). In his research on Spanish newspapers from both sides of the conflict, Sevillano (2009) notes that journalists often engaged in stereotypical representations of the enemy in order to undermine their moral credibility and vilify their character as criminal and inhuman. Railing against Republicans, Spanish nationalists therefore laid the foundations of a narrative through which these could be excluded from the national community on the grounds of their subservient role with respect to Soviet interference in the country's affairs.

Sevillano (2009) draws on a wide range of contemporary materials that enable him to discern consistent patterns in the stigma attached to "red" enemies in Franco's Spain. As a historian, nonetheless, he is less interested in the discourse of Spanish propaganda sheets than a major historical reconstruction of the Civil War itself. Likewise, Walton's (1997) investigation of the distinctive characteristics of propaganda is thorough and provides

a solid basis for a more systematic analysis of discourse features underlying propaganda machines. Insightful though it is, the author's reading of propaganda results in no in-depth examination of it at the level of regularity in terms of discourse strategies against the backdrop of a sound data base.

In an attempt to bridge such gaps in knowledge, this research focuses on the discourse of propaganda, which is unveiled through a comparative study of two well-known propaganda sheets of the Irish Civil War (1922-1923). For this purpose, the rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 briefly outlines the historical background of the war with a view to explaining the rationale behind this work. In Section 3, corpus design criteria are discussed, and the methodological tools are introduced: this will allow for a presentation of the dataset as well as a preliminary review of the procedure through which the data were studied. Section 4 then presents the findings of the study, which are eventually discussed in the light of the relevant literature in Section 5.

## **2. "...a policy of wanton destruction": The Irish Civil War**

In the early hours of 6 December 1921, the British and Irish delegations who had entered into formal negotiations after two-and-a-half years of war between Britain and the Irish Republican Army (IRA) signed what became known as the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Although the efforts and ambitions of Irish nationalists were to be thwarted by the British Government's objection to granting Ireland Republican status, the Treaty gave 26 of the country's 32 counties substantial internal autonomy under the name "Irish Free State". This was no mean achievement because it afforded the Irish people an unprecedented opportunity to run their own affairs to a degree that was far greater than would have been the case under the Home Rule settlement produced by the British Parliament in September 1913.

The Treaty, however, contained the seeds of discord. To begin with, the Articles of Agreement required members of the prospective Irish Parliament to swear allegiance to both the Free State Constitution and the British Monarchy, "in virtue of the common citizenship of Ireland with Great Britain and her adherence to and membership of the group of nations forming the British Commonwealth of Nations". In addition, the Treaty conferred on Northern Ireland the right to opt out, which it did soon after the Free State was formally established (Mohr 2023). As a result, the conditions were created for the partition of the island of Ireland, which continues to this day.

On these grounds, both the IRA and *Sinn Féin*, its political counterpart, split down the middle. On the one hand, those who supported the Treaty saw it as a stepping stone to full Independence to be achieved through peaceful constitutional means. On the other hand, those who objected to the Treaty viewed it as a sell-out, the oath of allegiance and partition betraying the Republican ideals behind the Easter Rising (1916) and the War of Independence (1919-1921). The Treaty was ratified by *Dáil Éireann* (the Irish Parliament) and subsequently carried by popular vote. As a result of the election of 16 June 1922, the Provisional Government claimed a mandate to implement the Treaty and the Catholic Hierarchy strongly backed the Government (Ferriter 2005).

When “the anti-treatyites rejected majority rule as a basis for adjudicating the treaty issue” (Kissane 2020: 26), the prospect of Civil War became more immediate. The war effectively broke out in late-June 1922 as the anti-Treaty IRA was confronted by the new Free State Army, which sought to regain control of the Four Courts building seized by Republicans. After their campaign in the Capital failed, anti-Treaty forces retreated to the countryside, notably behind the imaginary line between Limerick and Waterford. Not only had the IRA “made a mistake by leaving Dublin in the hands of their enemies, thereby allowing the Provisional Government to present itself as the lawful government in overall control of the situation” (Kissane 2021: 50). The landing of Government troops in Counties Mayo, Kerry and Cork also enabled the Army to establish entry points behind the Limerick-Waterford line, which would in due course cut IRA brigades in the south-west, south and north-west off from one another. Benefitting as they did from a constant supply of arms and ammunition from Britain, the Army swept to an outright victory in the war’s conventional phase, although the conflict was to drag on until the spring of 1923. After claiming the lives of about 1,300 Irish people, the Civil War was brought to a close by the anti-Treaty IRA’s unilateral ceasefire on 24 April 1923.

The Civil War has been thoroughly analysed from a variety of angles. These include military strategy (Kissane 2021), a comparison with similar conflicts in Europe (e.g., Kissane 2020 on a parallel between the Irish and Finnish civil wars), or, more recently, gender-based violence (Connolly 2019; Clark 2020). At the same time, while historical research has raised the public’s awareness of the role of propaganda during the War (O’Brien 2017; McCarthy 2020; Ferriter 2021), the idea of investigating propaganda from both sides of the Civil-War divide (“Free Staters” as opposed to “Irregulars”, as they were often referred to by the pro-Government press) from a discourse

perspective is novel and was a strong motivation for this research. The next section is intended to lay down corpus-design criteria and describe the methodological approach adopted in the study.

### 3. Materials and methods

The study was based on the *ICW\_Corpus*, a small collection of 116 news texts compiled for the project from two propaganda sheets published during the Civil War. As such, the corpus is subdivided into two sections: the first one includes 69 texts from the Southern edition of *Poblacht na hÉireann* (‘Republic of Ireland’), a prominent anti-Treaty news outlet; the second encompasses 47 texts from *The Free State*, a pro-Treaty newspaper with a large circulation (Gandon 1985). All texts were extracted from the Irish Newspaper Archive (INA), the largest most up-to-date collection of news texts from the island of Ireland (Mazzi 2019, 2020). The Archive was searched according to the following criteria. First of all, *Poblacht na hÉireann* (PE) was researched by using “Provisional (Government)”, “Free State” and “Treaty” as search words, while texts from *The Free State* (FS) were retrieved through the search terms “Republican”, “Irregular” and “rebel(s)”. These terms were selected in order to produce an output of texts which, for each newspaper, could bring insights into how the enemy, their actions and possibly their mind set were represented. Secondly, the Archive was searched between June 1922, when the Civil War broke out, and 31 December 1922, for the purpose of covering the period where violence from both sides was at its most extreme.

The INA’s search engine displayed a series of texts (or whole newspaper pages) ranked through a relevance coefficient. The first 50 items on the list were individually accessed for the purpose of including the most relevant in the respective section of the corpus. With the exception of very few items that did not in fact meet the search criteria – i.e., news texts that were hardly legible or limited to a short headline with no text to follow – all items were eligible for inclusion. The reason why the corpus section from *Poblacht na hÉireann* is larger than that from *The Free State* is that the pages from PE often included more than one piece, in contrast to FS where most items lay in individual texts. Nonetheless, the corpus strikes a fine balance between the two newspapers in that the texts from *The Free State* are on average longer than those from *Poblacht na hÉireann*.

From a methodological point of view, the study implemented a qualitative approach. Jackson et al. (2007: 23) refer to “qualitative enquiry”

as research encompassing “all forms of social enquiry that rely primarily on non-numeric data in the form of words, including all types of textual analyses such as content, conversation, discourse, and narrative analyses”. It is significant that, among the types of research they associate with the concept of qualitative enquiry, the authors also feature discourse analysis, which they describe as “a way for examining language as it is used in specific contexts [...], highlighting the practices that comprise the ideologies, attitudes, ideas, and courses of action that systematically constitute the subjects and objects of which people speak” (Jackson et al. 2007: 24). As far as this study is concerned, the emphasis was not so much on pre-determined sets of language tools such as word forms or phraseology: in fact, the idea was to design a small corpus allowing for a more fine-grained analysis and greater appreciation of news discourse in the historical context under investigation. Accordingly, the “analysis was based on a close reading of the texts, not a key word search” (Mueller et al. 2019: 3).

In more detail, the research was aimed at identifying patterns in terms of the discourse strategies (Mazzi 2022) through which the enemy and their actions were represented, their moral credibility was questioned and, vice-versa, how the actions of the respective in-group were both justified and/or openly advocated as the appropriate ones for the country. This was meant to make a contribution to providing a firmer empirical base for Walton’s (1997: 396-400) comprehensive overview of propaganda characteristics.

These include, first of all, the dialogue structure associated by the author with propaganda discourse. At the outset, Walton (1997: 396) postulates that propaganda takes the form of discourse between two participants. One of these, called the “proponent”, is the sender of the message: whether an individual speaker or, as in our case, a writer, the proponent tends to communicate on a broader agency or organised group’s behalf. The other participant is known as the “respondent”, whom Walton (1997) describes as a mass audience of people.

Walton (1997: 397) further argues that “propaganda is essentially goal-directed as a type of dialogue exchange. The proponent’s goal is to get the respondent to carry out a particular action or to support a particular policy for action”. In this context, the discourse of propaganda provides multiple instances of one-sided argumentation, along with the use of emotively charged words and phrases.

One-sided argumentation, to begin with, can be observed where partisan argumentation is deployed by propagandists “to advocate one side of the issue, and to present the arguments in favour of that side as strongly

as possible" (Walton 1997: 398). In other words, far from being "an attempt to rationally deliberate on the wisdom or prudence of a course of action" (Walton 1997: 398), propaganda by definition precludes the possibility of "looking at all the alternatives and weighing them judiciously or fairly". An "essential part of all propaganda", Walton (1997: 399) finally notes, "is the use of emotively charged words and phrases that make the advocated viewpoint take on a highly positive coloration, and any opposed viewpoint take on a highly negative coloration".

In the upcoming section, Walton's categories are used as an entry point to approach the texts in the *ICW\_Corpus* and identify the defining traits of the discourse of propaganda from the two sides of the Civil War.

#### **4. Propaganda of this kind is, of course, errant hypocrisy...": Discourse strategies of propaganda in *Poblacht na hÉireann* and *The Free State***

Following Walton's model of dialogue structure for propaganda discourse, the two news outlets in the *ICW\_Corpus* undoubtedly act as proponents. While the Irish people are the intended respondents targeted by the respective propaganda message, data indicate that PE and FS writers can also be identified as each other's respondents. This is typically the case when the two newspapers ostensibly respond to each other in relation to key issues on the Civil War agenda. For a start, an egregious example is shown by the passages where the sensitive question of the treatment of respective prisoners is discussed. In (1),<sup>1</sup> *Poblacht na hÉireann* describes the situation in Free State gaols as "scandalous", with prisoners being "beaten, kicked and threatened with death", while priests' decision to absolve them appeared to be subordinated to their pledge never to take arms again.

- (1) The treatment of prisoners in the Free State Gaols is still scandalous. Complaints pour in from everywhere – Dublin, Maryborough, Kilkenny, Waterford, Galway. A prisoner in Portobello writes that on the night of the 12<sup>th</sup> five prisoners in the guard room were beaten, kicked and threatened with death. A similar report comes from Wellington Barracks, where C.I.D. men have tried to extort information by brutal

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<sup>1</sup> For each of the numbered examples, the source is reported in brackets at the end of the passage (PE for *Poblacht na hÉireann* and FS for *The Free State*). Wherever present, the headline of each piece is also reported.

violence. Priests frequently refuse to give Absolution unless prisoners sign the form promising never to take arms again. [...] The food itself is as bad as before, the bedding filthy and the sanitary conditions abominable. (PE, Untitled)

In (2), on the other hand, *The Free State* is adamant that prisoners were treated with dignity: not only were they supplied with cutlery and anything they needed to rest properly (“mattress, pillow and three blankets”), but they had “no lack of fresh air” and were entitled to receive as many parcels as they wished:

- (2) The prisoners are supplied with knife, fork, spoon, plate and mug. Their bedding consists of a mattress, pillow and three blankets, and each has soap and a towel. Two prisoners occupy each cell, and the cell doors are never closed. The doors leading to the recreation grounds are open all day, so that they have no lack of fresh air. They are allowed one letter in and one letter out per week. They can have as many parcels as are sent to them, and their own representatives are present when these are examined by the censor. (FS, “The Mountjoy prisoners. The truth of their case”)

The fact that the Civil War was also a conflict of opinion is even more apparent from the tendency of the two newspapers to flatly deny each other’s claims. Thus, while *The Free State* averred that the Army should be acknowledged “to carry out the will of the Irish people” (“Ireland’s best. A tribute to the Dublin Guards”), *Poblacht na hÉireann* retorted that “it was not the Will of the People, but the Will of Churchill which triumphed” (“Another vital disclosure”), the British Government sanctioning the Free State Constitution by checking on its consistency with the terms of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Similarly, PE referred to the anti-Treaty IRA as “the men who stood true to the Republic”, those who “believed what they said, who meant what they swore, and who will never lay down their arms while the King of England is allowed to claim allegiance and a vote in the Irish Parliament” (“Much ado about nothing”). Conversely, FS counterargued that theirs “is not a war for the Republic; it is a rebellion against the Treaty. It is not holy; it is criminal. It is not just; it is unjustifiable” (Untitled). Throughout passages of this kind, one frequently comes across a sentence structure of the kind “This/it is not *x*, it is *y*”, as we have just seen.

With the Irish people as the respondent, the two newspapers went to considerable lengths to garner support for the policy promoted by the

respective side. This was achieved at two levels: first, by shedding good light on one's own actions; secondly, by discrediting the enemies' policy. On the one hand, PE presented IRA fighters as "gallant Republicans" ("War news") whose manoeuvres to assault and recapture places or buildings could be accounted for as "a gallant exploit" (Untitled) worthy of those remaining loyal to the Republic. Moreover, the paper often accused Free Staters of deliberately turning Ireland into "a reign of terror" ("Looting in Cork City"), whereby as "they hold destruction necessary, the Free State troops relentlessly destroy" (Untitled).

On the other hand, endorsing as it did those obeying the will of the people, FS did more than just treat anti-treatyites as "prisoners of war", "despite their treachery" ("Treachery of the Irregulars"). In fact, the Free State's policy as enforced by men such as General Mulcahy, Minister for Defence of the Provisional Government, was construed as one that "restored order, established the reign of law, and reduced to submission the internal enemies of the Free State" ("The ways and means of freedom"). At the same time, die-hard Republicans were invariably blamed for a policy variously described as "a policy of wanton destruction" ("A word for every Irishman") or "a systematic programme of wanton destruction" ("The Mountjoy prisoners. The truth of their case"), "devoted to wrecking Ireland's facilities for an important place in international commerce" ("Sinister activities") and whose "object" it was to have "as many as possible of the civilian population killed" ("Tactics of the Irregulars").

Going back to Walton's conceptualisation of the one-sided nature of propaganda (see Section 3), nowhere is Irish Civil War propaganda's one-sidedness more evident than in the several passages where writers from both news outlets in the corpus exposed what they viewed as each other's mendacity. Hence, readers were warned by *Poblacht na hÉireann* that the Free State press published reports about "imaginary 'great captures' and 'many killed and wounded'" (Untitled), stories that were "wholly fictitious" ("Murder!"), "grotesque accounts [...] deliberately and officially concocted for propagandist purposes" (Untitled), and "vague statements" ("The Ballivourney victory!"). Likewise, *The Free State* was persistent in drawing the public's attention to the anti-Treaty press as "removed from facts" ("The problem of the Irregular") or, at best, "errant hypocrisy" ("Hypocrisy. The Irregulars' pretence"), publishing nothing other than "fantastic accounts" and "circumstantial stories" ("Notes. On Irregular propaganda in Munster"), or even "excuses" ("Civilians as combatants") of all sorts.

The extensive use of one-sided argumentation should be seen as going hand in hand with a notion of propaganda as discourse justified by

results. As Walton (1997: 398) suggests, “propaganda as a socially organized activity is justified by the results it is supposed to achieve”: more specifically, propaganda is recurrently justified “by citing a danger to the group, and then stressing that the adoption of a particular point of view is needed to combat or guard against that danger. Such a justification balances the costs of engaging in one-sided or even deceptive argumentation against the danger or loss of life”. *Poblacht na hÉireann* thus articulated the argument that anti-Treatyite actions were not only motivated by consistency with the Republican ideal (as opposed to the Treaty as a sell-out), but also justified by the need to react to the brutality of the Free State Army as well as to respond to the arbitrary powers wielded by Free State authorities more generally, as in examples (3) and (4) below:

- (3) They [the Free Staters] have copied, and even exceeded, the crimes of the Black and Tans: they, too, have their murder gang; they, too, torture their prisoners, and shoot them while in custody. (PE, “A contrast”)
- (4) Horrified juries, mostly Free Staters, have brought in verdicts of wilful murder on evidence which admitted of no other verdict for honest men. Following the example of their English masters in a similar position after the murder of Tomas MacCurtain, the “military authorities” have now abolished Coroners’ Inquests, and the usurping Partition Parliament have passed a resolution legalising the murders and have given themselves power to authorise still more. (PE, “The Murder Bill”)

In (3), attention is drawn to the putative callousness of Free State troops, whose methods were said to remind people of the random violence of the Black and Tans, the constables notoriously recruited into the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) as reinforcements during the War of Independence. In (4), in addition, emphasis is laid on the dubious legality of the verdicts returned by Free State courts, along with the abolition of Coroners’ inquests, which the newspaper read in conjunction with recent legislation as licence to murder.

In contrast, *The Free State* justified the Provisional Government and Army’s zeal in the restoration of order and the submission of internal enemies with a twofold strategy. To begin with, the danger posed by Republicans was illustrated with examples of their senseless violence and extreme treachery, as in (5) below:

- (5) The main position occupied by the Irregulars was Brittas Lodge and the troops closed in around this point, and when quite close to it poured

rapid fire upon the buildings. Soon a white flag was seen fluttering from a window and the National soldiers were given the order to cease fire [...]. The troops then moved into the farmyard and were fired upon from several points, including the building from which the White Flag had been flown. Two National soldiers were killed after the White Flag had been put up. (FS, "Treachery of the Irregulars")

In this passage, a report is given of an incident between Free State soldiers and anti-treatyite Irregulars in Brittas, Co. Dublin. Soon after the building was shelled where Republicans had taken shelter, so the report goes, a white flag was waved by the IRA fighters in Brittas Lodge. As the National soldiers made their way into the courtyard, they were fired upon despite the white flag, two of them being fatally injured. Secondly, *The Free State* resorted to a subtler tactic to highlight the dangers presented by the Irregulars. In more than one piece, FS propagandists discussed the Republican mind set, as can be appreciated from the excerpts in (6) and (7):

- (6) Being presumably idealists they would think less of personalities than the general weakness of the immediate result, than the trend of national development. [...] National greatness is measured by national strength, and I have tried in vain to discover the true relationship between the preaching of idealism and the practice of wholesale destruction. [...] Passion uncontrolled by reason can produce mental derangement in individuals; it can produce similar results in groups and movements. (FS, "The 'Irregular' Mind")
- (7) In all the developments that have taken place since the approval of the Treaty, the Irregulars have shown a singular incapacity to see their own position. They have for a long time – perhaps since the beginning – intended to destroy the Treaty by armed action. [...] It is obvious how mistaken they were. Public opinion has never swung towards them. It is every day hardening against them. [...] The Irregulars miscalculated entirely when they thought an open insurrection against an Irish Government would affect the people in the same way as an Insurrection against a foreign Government. Just as they despised the will of the people, they despised the intelligence of the people. (FS, Untitled)

The aim of both passages was arguably to demonstrate the inconsistency between the ideals they professed and the policy of wanton destruction they pursued ("I have tried in vain to discover any true relation between

the preaching of idealism and the practice of wholesale destruction" in example 6), as well as the wholly unsustainable position of men and women incapable of estimating the potentially devastating effects of their utter lack of self-restraint (cf. "a singular incapacity to see their own position" and "the Irregulars miscalculated entirely" in example 7).

Evidence of the prototypical one-sidedness of propaganda discourse finally comes from the liberal use of emotively charged words and phrases. This was undoubtedly the case with Civil War propaganda in Ireland. Of the discourse strategies established in the *ICW\_Corpus*, two appear to have been comprehensively adopted. The first is name-calling (Gustainis 1990), namely the use of offensive names or pejorative terms to arouse the respondent's indignation in order to win an argument more easily. In an attempt to draw the Irish people's condemnation for the Free State political and military authorities, therefore, *Poblacht na hÉireann* referred to *Dáil Éireann* as "Churchill's Provisional Parliament" (Untitled). At the same time, the Anglo-Irish Treaty became "that act of treachery to the Republic" ("Much ado about Nothing") and the Free State Army turned into "murder gangs" ("The Murder Bill") at the behest of W. T. Cosgrave, Chairman of the Provisional Government, and Richard Mulcahy, Minister for Defence. Furthermore, while the State's new military courts were soon dismissed as "Mulcahy's licensed-to-murder courts" ("Impartial Judges!"), National soldiers were labelled as "ignorant lads [...] equipped with rifle and bayonet to hound down old comrades" (Untitled). In *The Free State*, on the other hand, the main focus was predictably on the anti-Treaty IRA themselves: as one goes through the corpus texts, Republicans are referred to as "the rebels, or irregulars" ("Prolonging the Irish agony"), "the destroyers of the hope of a Republic" ("What is the use? Republican Propaganda"), "the Outlaws" as well as "our undisciplined friends [...] posing as Republicans" (Untitled), and "the fomenters of the Reign of Terror and anarchy" ("War notes").

The second strategy also involved using emotively charged language through which the enemy's views and indeed their deeds could take on a negative coloration. In particular, it is interesting to note that the two sides to the war almost systematically accused each other of implementing the same methods as the British would use in the past. In his theorisation on propaganda as discourse, Oddo (2018) notes that propaganda is successfully used, borrowed and recycled through operations of recontextualisation marked by a high degree of intertextuality. The latter is viewed by Oddo (2018: 21) less as a static relationship between texts than as a communicative

process, so that "when two texts share the same meanings, it is because the person who designed the second text recontextualized a meaning from the first – knowingly or unknowingly extracting some element from the 'original' and repurposing it in a new context". In the *ICW\_Corpus*, the recontextualisation of meanings from previous discourse, namely that from the War of Independence, seems by all means deliberate. More specifically, the decision to brush and repackage anti-British rhetoric in order to attack the (new) enemy was certainly aimed at breeding the Irish people's resentment against them. Following Oddo, therefore, information about the British system in force in Ireland until recently was repurposed in order to fit the narrative that the enemy was distinctively anti-national in outlook. In *Poblacht na hÉireann*, references to the British system being reintroduced were extensive, as shown in example (8):

- (8) The proceedings were, of course, like that of the British during the Terror, and following the same example. Inquests will probably be abolished under the R.O.I. Act. While Harry Boland's assassination unarmed in bed is shielded, two packed Coroner's juries in the country have brought in verdicts of murder against Republican Soldiers engaged in an ordinary fight. The British system again. (PE, "Faked Inquests")

The passage is taken from an article decrying the inquests on the death of prominent nationalists such as Harry Boland and Cathal Brugha. These were defined as "a shocking farce", held as they had been by "servile" coroners and juries packed with Free Staters. In the final part of the text, the proceedings are discredited as following the example set by the British authorities not long before ("The British system again"). Elsewhere (example 9), the journalists' claims were substantiated by clear hints that the British Government was siding with the Provisional Government, as they did in facilitating the naval landing of troops in the west and south-west of the country, which resulted in IRA brigades being cut off from one another (Section 2):

- (9) The Free State penetration of the South and West, leading to the capture of cities and towns, would have been impossible without the command of the sea and the landing of troops at a large number of points in rear of the Republican Army. These landings were only feasible by the direct co-operation of the British Navy which not only prevented the use of the sea by Republicans, but covered the disembarkation of the armed forces. (PE, "The Treaty Ports")

In *The Free State*, propagandists responded with comparable fervour. In more detail, they tapped into the popular feeling of revulsion against the British as a deep reservoir from which to bring Irregulars into disrepute. This was achieved at various levels, as shown by examples (10) and (11) reported below:

- (10) This policy of starving out the country, of effecting a blockade, was put into operation by the soldiers of Elizabeth and Cromwell. It is the first time that Irishmen have used the weapon on their own country. It failed before, and thanks to the courage of our Army and to the whole-hearted co-operation of the civil population, employers and workers alike, it will continue to fail. (FS, "Civilians as Combatants")
- (11) The diabolical cunning of Major Erskine Childers, D.S.O., should not be under-estimated. He has been a consistent English Imperialist all his life. He is always ready with plausible excuses. Recently in the Dail [sic], he admitted having volunteered and fought under the British flag to destroy the Boer Republics; also to having spied on Germany and helped to bring about the war on Germany [...] pretending to help Ireland to throw off the British yoke [...]. (FS, "Sinister Activities")

In (10), the writer insinuates that the Irregulars' actions were on a par with Queen Elizabeth I and even Cromwell's policies, while elsewhere the nationalist credentials of key figures from the anti-Treaty IRA were questioned, the truth of their imperialist sympathies being fully exposed wherever possible. A prime target was Erskine Childers, formerly secretary of the Irish delegation that negotiated the Anglo-Irish Treaty, then on the run with the anti-treaty forces in retreat to County Cork and County Kerry. In example (11) Childers, whose English origin was well known, is depicted as "a consistent English Imperialist all his life", a man who had "volunteered and fought under the British flag" and was therefore only "pretending to help Ireland" free itself from "the British yoke".

## 5. Discussion and conclusions

This study was aimed at identifying patterns in terms of the discourse strategies through which, in the context of Irish Civil-War propaganda, the enemy and their actions were represented, their moral credibility was questioned, and vice-versa, how the actions of the respective in-group

were both justified and/or openly advocated as the appropriate ones for the country. In order to achieve this aim methodically and systematically, Walton’s (1997) framework for the investigation of propaganda as argumentative discourse was employed to provide a sound theoretical basis, which was integrated here with empirical qualitative evidence from a small corpus of propaganda sheets from both sides of the war. The findings presented in Section 4 showed that the two news outlets considered for the project, i.e. *Poblacht na hÉireann* and *The Free State*, are closely comparable in terms of the strategies through which the relevant audience – namely, the Irish people as the mass respondent, following Walton (1997: 398) – is invited to endorse the aims and share the interests and policies of a specific group or faction, by ensuring compliance with the actions being contemplated, undertaken or advocated by the group itself.

The evidence reviewed in the previous section chimes with influential work from other approaches to the interplay of discourse and manipulation. From the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis, for instance, van Dijk (2006: 369) rightly points out that “the general goals of manipulative discourse are the control of the shared social representations of groups of people because these social beliefs in turn control what people do and say in many situations and over a relatively long period”. Indeed, there is close similarity between the corpus data analysed here and a great deal of the “structures of many discourse levels” postulated by van Dijk (2006: 373) to be inherent in manipulative discourse: among others, “overall interaction strategies” associated with positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, “semantic macro-structure” aimed at (de-)emphasising negative/positive topics about Us/Them, and lexicon with a view to the selection of “positive words for Us, negative words for Them”.

From a broader argumentative viewpoint, there is truth in Walton’s (1997: 402) view that propaganda is neither necessarily nor invariably “dishonest, deceptive, or against the aims of rational discussion”. Going back to the results from the present research, accounts about the “scandalous” treatment of prisoners in Free State Gaols (example 1 above) may well have been accurate with respect to a number of prisons (Murphy 2017), while the contention that prisoners were treated fairly may at times have been hard to dispute in relation to Mountjoy prison (example 2, but cf. McInerney 2023). Likewise, there is no denying Erskine Childers’s own (and indeed his family’s) former allegiance had lain with Unionism and the British Empire (example 11). As an instrumental type of discourse that is not directed towards the truth of a matter, nonetheless, propaganda “selects out the facts

it presents to an audience, and although it may present some true statements, it may ignore other true and relevant statements that lack propaganda value, even though they are relevant, in a logical sense” (Walton 1997: 402).

With reference to the above, accordingly, *Poblacht na hÉireann* concentrated on the cruelty inflicted to Republican inmates in other gaols across the country as it best helped it push its own anti-Treaty agenda. Similarly, *The Free State* might have been fully aware of the whole story of Childers’s involvement in the nationalist movement. After all, this was a man who both kept calm dignity in politely talking to the firing squad that would execute him in late-November 1922, and showed great humanity in insisting with his son that even after and despite his own death, the best way to treasure his father’s memory would be to promote reconciliation within Ireland (Ferriter 2021). Nevertheless, *The Free State* only seemed to pursue the line that, as a former Imperialist, all Childers was committed to was the backstabbing of Independent Ireland, in keeping with the paper’s anti-Irregular campaign.

While historical research can (and no doubt will continue to) make a contribution to ascertaining facts and discerning truths, the preliminary findings presented here could be fruitfully integrated with more research into how meanings are recontextualised and intertextually repurposed in propaganda discourse (Oddo 2018). In particular, it would be interesting to see how propagandists selectively and strategically drew on Irish history in order to persuasively define (or redefine, as the case may be) the meaning of landmark events such as the Easter Rising (1916) or the highly contentious issue of what a ‘Republic’ was supposed to be (Mazzi 2024). Such an analysis would help shed light on the rhetorical strategies through which the two sides of the Civil War claimed the heritage of Ireland’s “old tradition of nationhood”, as celebrated by the Proclamation of the Irish Republic in the eventful days of 1916.

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