

SSM(72)

CAMPAIGN TO DISCREDIT THE ARMY
(A Note by the GOC)

1. The discrediting of the Army, along with the RUC and all concerned in maintaining law and order, has been a prime aim of Republican propaganda since about mid-1971. We refer loosely to such a campaign as "IRA propaganda" because the only people who stand to gain by it are the IRA. In reality much of what is alleged arises out of anti-British or anti-authoritarian sentiment not directly linked to support of the IRA. Nevertheless it is the IRA who stimulate and direct popular attitudes so as to bring pressure to bear to curtail effective counter-terrorist methods. In so far as Army activity to diminish the power of the IRA bears heavily on the civil population part of the campaign is self-generating, since people who resent our activities are never slow to report their sufferings, real or imagined. Honor Tracy described the special Irish talent in this sphere in these words:

The charitable might say that the Irish tend not to minimise their sufferings; the candid that they are shocking old cry babies. If anyone lays a finger on them the world must hear of it with embellishment. And like children they believe in their own fantasies..... Furthermore, nothing that happens, no action of troops or police, relates in any way to anything done by themselves. Nothing is ever their fault, nor do they ever do wrong.

Because the world at large is unaccustomed to this style of behaviour, complaints and allegations by Irishmen against the Army are apt to shock and disturb and even the most outrageous stories such as the activities of "Army assassination squads" create doubts and unease amongst those brought up in the belief that "there is no smoke without a fire".

2. The IRA are aware that their own stock is low, even amongst their erstwhile supporters, and propaganda overtly supporting terrorism or directly attributable to the organisation has small impact. Consequently they attach greater importance to front organisations such as Sinn Fein and Republican clubs, whose statements on news events are, however, mainly directed at Republican audiences and fuel Catholic grievances. The greatest importance is attached to organisations which claim to be fighting for justice and civil rights. The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association and the Association for Legal Justice are particularly active, the latter being a propaganda/pressure group that has made effective use of its "justice" cover to inject stories alleging brutality, etc into the British and foreign media.

3. Throughout the three months following Operation MOTORMAN -- August, September and October -- the IRA's attempts to generate public pressure for the removal of the Army from the Republican areas of West Belfast achieved little. People in these areas remembered too vividly how unpleasant life had been under Provisional IRA domination; they appreciated the reduction in the level of violence; and as our intelligence improved and we arrested many of the men who had intimidated and bullied, they acknowledged that our methods were evidently effective. Three factors seem to have combined during November to resurrect the full-scale campaign of anti-Army propaganda that has been muted since the introduction of Direct Rule.

4. The first factor is the law of diminishing returns, which dictates that once the Security Forces have picked up the worst and the majority of the terrorists, the effort necessary to arrest the remainder increases, with fewer successes to show for it. The second is the instinctive fear among many Catholics of seeing the IRA decisively beaten, a fear that effects many who were glad to have them off their backs after MOTORMAN. The third is the near desperate attempt by the IRA and their supporters to find ways of applying pressure on authority for the ending of effective counter-terrorist tactics; as the efforts of NICRA, PD and other committed groups had failed, the need arose to find uncommitted and influential people who might convince public opinion that the Army was misbehaving.

5. The press conference organised by the Revs Brian Brady (St Joseph's College), Desmond Wilson (Ballymurphy) and Alex Reid (Clonard Monastery) in Belfast on 20 November probably owed something to all three factors. Be that as it may, the following are our observations:

a. Selected journalists only were invited but others who got to hear about it and turned up were welcomed.

b. Only ten priests besides the three named above were present.

c. At one stage a sheet of paper was waved on which signatures were visible. So far as we are aware, these 65 names have not been made public, which may be thought strange.

d. It might not have been difficult for the Revs Brady and Reid to have collected signatures from 65 of their seminarists. These would hardly be representative of Belfast parishes.

e. Father Wilson's views on the Army are not new. At Annex A is an extract from a book published early this year which expresses opinions formed long before Operation MOTORMAN.

f. The printed statement issued before the conference and embargoed till 11.00 am strikes us as being the work of an experienced propagandist, rather than a cleric. It is copied at Annex B, and an analysis of the Republican propaganda themes contained in it is at Annex C.

6. We do not of course suggest that any of the priests concerned with the press conference intended to assist Republican propaganda, let alone the IRA. What does seem possible is that, in a sincere effort to demonstrate their concern at the plight of people in Catholic areas, the priests allowed themselves to be used by others with sinister motives. Certainly the news conference was effective. The Church is regarded as being above trafficking in propaganda and the suggestion that half the priests in Belfast had come out in condemnation of the Army, on humanitarian grounds, attracted wide attention. In a balanced and reasonable leading article on 22 November the Guardian nevertheless referred to the conference thus: "The allegations are horrifying; doubtless some of them are true." No smoke without fire.

7. To counter some of the allegations made at the conference and in TV interviews with the three priests afterwards, an Army spokesman made a number of points. Next day in the Irish News there appeared a letter signed "One of the 65" which set out to discredit the Army spokesman by quoting the Rt Hon Richard Crossman as having said on RTE, "I must admit British officers DO lie in Northern Ireland and, under the circumstances, feel they MUST lie!" On the same day the Irish Press led its account of the news conference with the same "quote", using it in an identical manner to discredit the Army's remarks. These propaganda tricks tend to confirm the likelihood that the conference was manipulated for purposes far removed from those intended by the priests. (We understand that Mr Crossman has written to both newspapers denying having said the words quoted.)

8. Meanwhile the generalities aired by the priests are backed up by particular allegations. The Irish News on 23 November described the plight of Mrs Margaret Loudon, of Unity Flats, against whom "the British Army conducted a 24 hours-a-day programme of terrorisation and intimidation against her and her six-month-old baby," involving visits by troops "three or four times a day". Enquiries revealed that the woman's house has been searched once, on 15 November, with permission, in a follow-up operation after a bank raid. No damage was done; no complaint made; Mrs Loudon impressed the soldiers by her reasonableness. They are convinced that she had no part in inventing the allegations made in the report. Several times in the past householders have told troops that reports in the Irish News about their own "experiences" had astonished them as much as us. In Ireland, it is no rare thing to see smoke without fire.

Northern Ireland
Lisburn

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