



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

'Spies and Informers, Beware!'



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In earlier articles, we discussed the Irish War of Independence, including the battle for information fought by both the British Crown forces and the Irish Republican Army (IRA).

An important and often bloody aspect of that battle was the IRA's attempts to limit the damage caused by informers and to counteract perceived enemies among the civilian population: those who were suspected of spying on behalf of the Crown forces. Below, we discuss three cases that took place during 1920, all in the territory of the IRA's Athlone Brigade.

'person or persons unknown'

Martin Lyons was shot dead on 25 November 1920 at a place called Tinamuck (Tinnymuck or Tunnymuck in some accounts) near Moate. Lyons, who resided with a local farmer, was an ex-soldier in the British army. The Westmeath Examiner reported that Lyons was shot dead by 'masked men' but the paper did not ascribe responsibility to any group. A Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) report from November 1920 blamed the IRA for killing Lyons, stating that he was 'suspected by Sinn Feiners of giving information to the police.' A subsequent British army enquiry concluded that Lyons had been 'killed by some person or persons unknown.' It may be that local members of the IRA shot Lyons but, given the limited evidence, it can't be stated with certainty. It is possible that other factors were involved, perhaps a personal dispute.

A man named Maher was shot in December 1920 (the exact date of his death is uncertain). He was a British army veteran living in the Irishtown area of Athlone. Maher had one wooden leg and was, according to Patrick Lennon, a Summerhill-based IRA volunteer, known locally as 'slickfoot'. Lennon stated that Maher

'was shot as a result of something that was discovered in a raid on the mails.' More detail was provided by Seamus O'Meara, the former commanding officer of the Athlone Brigade. The evidence against Maher, as presented by O'Meara, was circumstantial: Maher claimed to be a beggar but was followed for a period of time by IRA volunteers who reported to their superiors that 'he was never known to have done any begging.' The implication they drew from this was that Maher posed as a beggar in order to spy on local activities.

Maher, according to O'Meara, was 'arrested by George Adamson and Ned Doolan' in Carrickbrien, Athlone, and sentenced to be shot after being 'found guilty by the courtmartial.' According to a later Brigade Activity Report, the group that shot Maher comprised O'Meara,

Michael Galvin, Thomas Halligan, George Adamson, George Cosgrove and two others, both named Edward Dowling. O'Meara, who 'personally took charge of the execution party', was keen to prevent knowledge of the execution leading to reprisals by the Crown forces and he ordered that the dead man's body be submerged in the Shannon. This was done but Maher's wooden leg brought the body back to the surface. Maher was then buried in an unmarked grave on the river bank.

Spy, or not?

A man named James Blagriff, a resident of Glasson, was executed by the IRA on 30 December 1920. Blagriff, who worked as a labourer in Coosan, had served with the Royal Field Artillery during the First World War. Seamus O'Meara stated that Blagriff 'personally knew a lot of the Volunteers and their activities.' He added that: 'Some letters, I believe, were found in a raid on the mails which indicated that this man was going away to join the R.I.C. and it was considered that his knowledge was too dangerous to allow him to do so...'

He was then shot 'by the local Volunteers as a matter of urgency,' Henry O'Brien, a member of the Athlone Brigade's flying column, claimed that Blagriff told his employer (a man named Whelan) 'about the



Athlone in the early 20th Century. Alleged spies were shot by the IRA in and around the town during 1920

work he was doing for the British.' According to O'Brien, Whelan also found some papers belonging to Blagriff 'which incriminated him.' Frank O'Connor, an IRA volunteer from Coosan, gave a similar account, stating that Blagriff divulged to his employer 'while under the influence of drink' that he 'was going to join the Tans'. Yet it is hard to gauge the accuracy of the above information and there is a discrepancy between O'Meara's account and those offered by O'Brien and O'Connor.

Blagriff denied being a spy. According to O'Connor: 'When we held him up prior to shooting him, he would not admit anything.' Certainly, there were doubts within the brigade regarding Blagriff's activities. Michael McCormack, who lived not far from Glasson, later stated that: 'I was never satisfied Blagriff was a spy.' Anthony McCormack, a Moate-based Volunteer, stated that although Blagriff was executed as a spy, 'in the real sense he was not one.' McCormack believed that Blagriff was shot because of his potential to cause damage to the IRA by joining the RIC. The RIC Inspector General's report for January 1921 did say that Blagriff was 'friendly to the

police' although it is not clear if such a statement meant that he was an informer or if he was about to join the force.

O'Meara seemed to be perturbed by this shooting, perhaps because Blagriff left a wife and family behind him. He later stated: 'This was an unofficial execution and had not my sanction'. Blagriff's body was left at Ballykeeran crossroads. The dead man's hands were tied together and hanging around his neck was a card bearing the word 'Spy'.

Claim and counterclaim

One factor that links the cases of Lyons, Maher and Blagriff is that each had been a soldier in the British army. The historian Pádraig Óg Ó Ruairc has shown that 'approximately 49 per cent' of the estimated 196 civilians killed by the IRA as spies were ex-servicemen, leading some historians and commentators to claim that there was a concerted campaign of IRA violence against ex-soldiers. Yet, as demonstrated by Ó Ruairc and others, the IRA was far from prejudiced against ex-soldiers, instead valuing them for their military experience.

Westmeath typified that wider

trend. First World War veteran James Tormey led the Athlone Brigade's flying column, in which at least five members had previously been in the British army. When local witness statements and brigade activity reports mention British army veterans it is mostly to highlight the skills that such soldiers possessed or to say that many IRA volunteers received their military training from such veterans.

Others sources from Westmeath likewise show no evidence of a campaign against ex-soldiers in the county. When discussing the cases of Blagriff and Lyons, RIC reports claim that the men were targeted because they were suspected by the IRA of passing information to the police. It is that relationship, not their status as former soldiers, that seems to have been the determining factor in those cases of alleged spying.

Overall, as is often the case when discussing aspects of the intelligence battles during the War of Independence, the documentary evidence does not provide conclusive answers. In a later article we will return to this topic and examine the case of George Johnston, shot dead by the IRA near Athlone in 1921.

