



HEADLINES FROM HISTORY

Seeking information on the enemy



IAN KENNEALLY
Historian and Author

During the War of Independence, the Athlone Brigade of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) suffered from a shortage of weapons and was dependent upon a relatively small core of volunteers.

In an attempt to counter the British Crown forces, the brigade made numerous efforts to gather information about the activities of the British army and the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) in and around Athlone.

Annoying Michael Collins

After the War of Independence, Seamus O'Meara, one of the Athlone Brigade's commanding officers (O/C) recalled that: 'Our intelligence service in the area never reached the high level of organisation desired.' O'Meara's statement was backed up by fellow officers, such as Henry O'Brien, a captain in the Coosan Company and a member of the brigade's flying column. He was one of the IRA's most active officers, taking part in high-profile incidents such as the Parkwood ambush in 1920 and the burning of Moydrum Castle in 1921. Yet he later stated that: 'I have no knowledge of how our intelligence system in the area was worked other than that we were all supposed to be intelligence agents and to report everything we observed and heard about the enemy forces.'

During the conflict, Director of Intelligence Michael Collins was frustrated with the Athlone Brigade's intelligence operation and its O/C's lack of attention to detail when returning reports. In November 1920, he admonished O'Meara for not directing communications to the correct department in IRA General Headquarters (GHQ). It is clear from the Collins Papers in the Military Archives that the Athlone Brigade continued to perform poorly with regard to intelligence gathering.

Four months later, Collins wrote to the brigade, saying that 'he was anxious to know what you are doing about intelligence work in Athlone'. Elsewhere in the county, the Mullingar Brigade similarly struggled to gather relevant information, with Patrick McCabe, brigade O/C until his arrest in late 1920, saying that: 'Intelligence officers existed in the brigade and battalions but were not of much value except for local intelligence purposes.'

The IRA and its sources

While the county's IRA did not have a structured intelligence service, it did have access to a variety of potential sources, including the British army. During 1919, the IRA made contact with British soldiers stationed in Athlone from whom they were able to obtain information, as

well as a small numbers of weapons, and it seems that this arrangement persisted throughout 1920 and 1921. O'Meara stated that the Athlone brigade kept in contact with 'soldiers from the barracks who would leave messages with my brother'. Those soldiers were 'always compensated' for their information, which usually consisted of 'impending raids and round-ups'. Frank O'Connor, a Coosan-based officer in the IRA's Athlone Brigade, described how 'some of our men actually worked in the military barracks and were able to get information sometimes about impending raids, particularly when big round-ups were being planned. They could see transport and other equipment being mobilised.'

The IRA also had contacts within the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC). O'Connor recalled that there were 'a couple of R.I.C. men' in the Athlone area 'who were inclined to be friendly and to pass out little bits of information about people who were on the wanted list and suchlike'. Elsewhere, snippets of information came from sympathetic policemen such as: Constable Guinan in Castlepollard, Constable Kelly in Kinnegad, and Constable Woods in Mullingar, among others.

According to many later accounts – witness statements, pension files, newspaper articles – Cumann na mBan was one of the Athlone Brigade's most reliable sources of



Members of the IRA's Athlone Brigade in early 1922

intelligence and its members were routinely tasked with ferrying documents between IRA battalions. Unfortunately, many of the details of Cumann na mBan's work were never recorded, particularly with regard to intelligence gathering. David Daly, a volunteer who was based in Athlone and later Mullingar, stated that intelligence work in the county was done 'verbally' since 'records were a dangerous thing to keep'. Patrick Lennon, a member of the IRA's Athlone Brigade, named Nellie Galvin, Cissie Tully and a Miss Connolly as particularly important to the IRA in the Summerhill and Athlone areas: 'They often carried dispatches for us and were able to get through hold-ups and cordons of the enemy.'

Mary Halligan, of Carricknaughton near Athlone, was another who took on this role, as did her sister. According to Mary's obituary in the Westmeath Independent in 1954, she 'was a most active member' of Cumann na mBan, who 'risked her life on many occasions carrying dispatches.' At times, Cumann na mBan members such as Bridget Reynolds from Athlone were deployed as scouts for IRA units. Annie O'Connor (later Dowling), noted for her skills as an organiser, was another who supplied information to the Athlone Brigade.

Post offices and priests

The IRA had some success in establishing links with staff in post offices. Frank O'Connor recalled that a clerk in Athlone's office 'used to tap the code messages passing through to the enemy posts and send them to G.H.Q.' However, Thomas Costello, who replaced Seamus O'Meara as the Athlone Brigade's O/C in late 1920, was dismissive of this source, saying that the deciphered messages 'were always so outdated that they were of no value'.

The IRA remained watchful for new sources of intelligence and Seamus O'Meara stated that the Athlone Brigade was 'able to pick up useful bits of information through the clergy'. For example, O'Meara recalled that on one occasion he was warned by a priest named Gallagher 'not to sleep at home' as he was being sought by the RIC. It is not clear how many of the local clergy provided the IRA with information but there are some documented examples of Catholic priests offering assistance to the Athlone Brigade. According to O'Meara, the brigade's flying column 'billeted in a shed, the property of Father McGee [John Magee, local parish priest] at Tober' in the days before the Parkwood

ambush of October 1920. Magee was not the only priest in the area to provide material support to the IRA. The historian Brian Heffernan has listed Thomas Langan of Moate as another member of the Roman Catholic clergy who provided such assistance. Perhaps those priests were among the intelligence sources mentioned by O'Meara.

One important feature of the intelligence battle between the IRA and the Crown forces is the question of spies and informers. In an earlier article, we discussed in detail the shooting of alleged spies by the IRA in Westmeath during 1920: Martin Lyons, James Blagriff and a man named Maher. It is certain that Blagriff and Maher were shot by members of the Athlone Brigade and it is likely that brigade members also shot Lyons, although it is often hard to untangle the details of those events. For example, in the case of James Blagriff, at least some local IRA officers doubted that Blagriff was a spy. Another supposed spy was George Johnston (sometimes referred to as Johnstone), a farmer in his mid-thirties who was shot dead by the IRA near Athlone in April 1921. In a later article, we will discuss the circumstances surrounding that event.

