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THE KNOCKING GAME

a case study in propaganda

Neither faction of the IRA is so naive as to imagine that they can actually defeat the British Army, by killing them all, or driving them into the sea. The murders of soldiers in Northern Ireland are carried out mainly for cynical propaganda purposes, in an attempt to weaken British resolve to defend a part of the United Kingdom. Closely linked to this is the propaganda policy of discrediting everything that the Security Forces, and particularly the Army, undertake, originally so as to create the impression that they were incapable of defeating the IRA, and more recently (as the extent of successes have become obvious even to the most dedicated Republicans), to give the impression that tactical gains have been achieved at disproportionate cost in alienation of the Catholic Community. Hence the allegations of brutality.

Underlying these constant themes is the policy of undermining any individual, activity or organisation that threatens the survival of the IRA. Abuse is heaped upon any politician, civil servant, policeman or soldier whose efficiency and tenacity lead to effective counter-terrorist measures being applied. Security Force actions are challenged by a front organisation made up of lawyers, which sets out to harness the law to its own destruction. If there are no legal loopholes then moral objections are raised, often by clerics. Public opinion is thus misled into supporting apparently liberal causes which in fact promote terrorism.

Organisations that are particularly feared by the IRA come in for the same treatment. Several Regiments that have served in Northern Ireland have been subjected to abuse and lying accusations—Scottish battalions are favourite targets. But few units have been singled out for so vicious and sustained an attack as the battalions of the Parachute Regiment. This study examines the way in which this propaganda exercise was launched in Ireland, imported into Britain, and sustained in an attempt to rid the IRA of a feared adversary.

Before examining the build-up of the propaganda campaign, the role of the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment must be mentioned. Since Autumn 1970 the Battalion has been stationed at Holywood as part of 39 Infantry Brigade, which is responsible for Belfast. Its role has been that of brigade reserve, and considering the large number of units continually employed throughout the City itself, it is self-evident that when it is called for, trouble has been reported or is expected. When the reserve is committed, quick and resolute action is the order of the day. The Battalion is not confined to its own brigade area: sometimes it is detached to reinforce any trouble spot in Northern Ireland. It is thus that the Red Berets are often seen on television and reported on in the press; for by their very role they will more often than not be involved where trouble has already attracted the media.

The IRA propaganda campaign was in full swing after internment began in August 1971. The Army was being accused of all kinds of brutal acts during the large-scale arrest operation, and in subsequent screening of suspected IRA men. Almost without exception these allegations were disproved by the Compton Inquiry, and it is noteworthy that the great majority of those who had made allegations refused to repeat them before the Inquiry. It was while Compton was making his investigations that the IRA first turned its propaganda against the 'Paras'.

From 7th - 17th September companies of the 1st Battalion were rotated on attachment to the 1st Battalion Green Howards in Ardoyne area of Belfast after a particularly troubled time during which several soldiers had been killed and wounded. Strangely the press was empty at this time of any reports of the 'Paras'. Yet on 20th September, three days after their withdrawal, there were reports in both the Irish News and Irish Times of brutality in Ardoyne. The Irish Times stated that paras were revenging themselves during searches for gunmen, and went on: "The women's talk was of the Parachute Regiment", a quote which in happier circumstances would not have been surprising. The Irish News developed the same theme to better

effect: threats of castration and slit throats had been used by the soldiers and some of them had urinated on those they had captured. On 21st September the Irish Press stated that a strongly worded telegram condemning the actions of the "British Army Paratroopers" had been sent to the Prime Minister. The Ardoyne Citizen's Defence Committee stated that it could not be responsible for any action taken against the British troops in Ardoyne because of the vicious and brutal way they intimidated women and children. Considering the number of soldiers already murdered in this area, the responsibility of this Committee seemed already dubious, but this naturally went unremarked in Republican papers. The Irish News the next day issued a statement purporting to be from the First Battalion (Official) IRA that, if the "punitive force" was not withdrawn from the area of Ardoyne by midnight they would ensure the paras received the same treatment. "This war on the people will be turned into the people's war". In fact the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment had left the area five days before.

On 23rd September the Irish News reported that the Secretary of the Ardoyne Relief Committee, Mr. Cooney, compared the Paras with the Black and Tans. A complaints centre had been set up, he stated, and Mr. Cooney said he wanted thousands of complaints to go to Lord Carrington. Two days later this same paper included another report about the brutality of paratroops, in which General Tuzo was called on to withdraw them from the area. Teachers, it was reported, pledged support to the Association for Legal Justice in any prosecution brought against the Security Forces for assaults on civilians. Then the Irish Independent headed an article "Army abusing our women" and Mr. Cooney was again comparing the paratroops to the Black and Tans. All these allegations were strongly denied on the Regiment's behalf by a spokesman from the Green Howards.

The September outburst died away and it was not until 14th January 1972 that an article by Richard Cox in the Daily Telegraph warned that the paras



were once again in the sights of the IRA propaganda snipers. Headed, "IRA Plan to Split Army" the article reported that some Irish reporters had been trying to obtain critical statements from soldiers about the tactics of the paratroops. The purpose of such an article, Cox explained, would be "to alienate soldiers in eight of the Belfast battalions from the paratroops of the reserve "quick reaction" there, the 1st Battalion, the Parachute Regiment". His article seems to have embarrassed the journalists concerned, because the knocking piece was shelved until a more appropriate moment.

On Saturday, 22nd January, a company from the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment was involved in operations near Magilligan Internment Camp where a large, determined and hostile crowd had to be stood off from the camp area. Obstinate disobedient in all its actions, this crowd had, after repeated warnings, to be driven away forcibly. Television cameras were at the scene and were able to film soldiers dispersing the unruly mob that was threatening to break the military cordon. In the course of the melee one soldier was seen to kick a demonstrator, a foolish and improper act - and one for which disciplinary action was later taken - and this incident was seized upon by Republican spokesmen and sympathisers as proof positive of para "brutality". Immediately, accusations of brutal treatment of youthful demonstrators began. A story appeared of a broken baton being found with a nail driven in the end. Mr. Cooper, MP, stated to the Irish News on 24th January that "he saw an officer batoning his own men because they were being so brutal".

Evidently disturbed, the Guardian on the Tuesday following the incident printed an article attributed to Simon Hoggart in Belfast. Headed dramatically 'Army call bar to paratroops' it quoted various statements allegedly made by officers from other units. "The paratroops undid in 10 minutes the community relations it had taken four weeks to build up". "They are frankly disliked by many officers here, who regard some of their men as little better than thugs in uniform". The Commander Land Forces' rebuttal was quickly reported in the papers: "I have every confidence in the unit which has an excellent record and which I will employ anywhere in the Province as the occasion demands". The Times contributed: "Senior officers at 39 Brigade, of which the Battalion is part, and the Security Forces General Headquarters at Lisburn, emphatically denied that any complaints had been received from other units. One officer said: 'No commanding officer would make such a complaint about another unit, especially the paras. The emphasis here has always been on teamwork and this has been a vital factor in our recent successes against the IRA.'" But no denial has the impact of a sensational "disclosure", and the Guardian article must have given satisfaction to the Republican propaganda service, who had long been trying to sell their wares to the British Public.

Six days after the article was published the Guardian journalist Simon Winchester appeared on a BBC 24 Hours programme and agreed that he, with Hoggart, had written the anti-para piece. But by now it was 31st January, one day after 13 people had died in Londonderry in circumstances that were being dis-

torted and lied about to provide the IRA with a propaganda bonanza that would lead to the burning down of the British Embassy in Dublin, the callous murder of seven people in Aldershot and terrible atrocities in Northern Ireland.

Liberal opinion in Britain must have been influenced by Winchester in his front page "eye-witness" account in the Guardian of 31st January. "Soldiers, firing into a large crowd of civil rights demonstrators, shot and killed 13 civilians"....."the streets had all the appearance of the aftermath of Sharpeville."....."and while it is impossible to be absolutely sure, one came away with the firm impression, reinforced by dozens of eye witnesses that the soldiers, men of the 1st Battalion the Parachute Regiment, flown in specially from Belfast, may have fired needlessly into the huge crowd." Irish newspapers went berserk. Demands for an inquiry were combined with a fierce determination to believe only whatever story was most hideously anti-British Army. The Army provided as accurate an account of the shooting as could be obtained at the time and this was helpful in reassuring British public opinion. In the Irish Republic the IRA forced a week-long boycott on the import of UK papers so that true accounts would be excluded. Nevertheless there were such obvious contradictions in the initial theme - such as the unlikelihood that all those killed would have been men of military age had the shooting been indiscriminate and into a dense crowd - that they switched to a completely new story.

Eamonn McCann's booklet "What Happened in

Derry" published in England by the International Socialists, sets out the revised theme in detail. Far from the shooting being indiscriminate and undisciplined it arose from the accurate and cold blooded execution of a plan to draw the IRA into action and then shoot "all men of military age who tried to cross these lines." The quintessence of this version came in the Sunday Independent of 6th February. The tactic of shooting "any male of military age within the vicinity of a shooting incident", readers were told, had been successfully applied in Belfast and was used for the first time in Londonderry on 30th January. This foul plan was alleged by the Sunday Independent to have been hatched by three officers, whom the newspaper was pleased to name, and it is scarcely surprising that two of the names chosen were from the Parachute Regiment. Filth of this kind was the unbroken diet of readers in the Republic and Catholics in the North for week after week.

Perhaps the most disgusting aspect of the Londonderry propaganda campaign is the manner in which the "Derry Martyrs" have been deprived of all credit for what were, by any standards, brave and determined attempts by some of them to defend the Bogside against a parachute battalion. It was foolhardy for amateur gunmen to take on some of the best trained regular soldiers in Europe. Nevertheless they seized whatever weapons were to hand and died in the attempt. Only the most corrupt and cynical organisation would deliberately set out to deny them a proper measure of respect for their sacrifice.



".....human alsatians"

On 8th February a really inspiring article appeared in the Irish Press written by a Michael O'Toole. In this piece someone who claimed that he had served with a British parachute regiment was reported as returning his Old Comrades' Association Card via the British Ambassador as a protest against the Derry shootings. "Paratroops are like human alsations, and any experienced officer will tell you it is almost impossible to keep up morale in the ranks when they are out of action". He went on to describe some of the combat training prescribed for paratroopers: "Never to fight with fists but to use the most brutal methods of killing known to man - trained to gouge out opponents' eyes with one deft blow; can rip a man's nose off using a single blow from the back of their hand".

It was into this atmosphere of bitter accusations and high feeling against the Regiment that the 2nd Battalion arrived in the New Lodge area of Belfast for their third four-month tour. Their arrival was greeted by 'anti-para' slogans painted on the walls, but apart from a small number of incidents no special welcome appeared from the IRA. However, it was not long before allegations started in the Press about the behaviour of the troops. On 24th February the Irish News published a statement written by the New Lodge Republican Club: "a 10-year old boy was spread-eagled on the stairs whilst soldiers trod on him and religious objects were thrown into the garden, and articles used by a blind woman in the Workshops for the Blind in Belfast were destroyed during a two-hour search by the Parachute Regiment". The father whose house had been searched wrote both to the Irish News and to the 2nd Battalion, Parachute Regiment disclaiming any truth in the account of the search. Needless to say, the Irish News did not publish this letter.

On 9th March in the same paper, a report concern-

ing 2nd Battalion, Parachute Regiment appeared, again written by the Republican Club: "A paratroop officer who took part in beating a young Belfast man told him: 'We know Heath doesn't allow us to do this, but he is not here to stop us'....." "When the paratroopers were putting him into a saracen one of them hit him across the stomach with his rifle. The man in charge of a foot patrol had punched him in the face..." In fact Fogarty was apprehended one afternoon in the New Lodge because the NCO in charge of the patrol wondered why someone from Ballymurphy should be in that area. Fogarty told the section commander and the medical officer that the blood staining on his shirt resulted from a fight at work. He signed certificates when handed over to the RUC for questioning, and when released after questioning, to the effect that he had no complaints. There was not a shred of truth in the newspaper allegation.

The whole nature of IRA propaganda is best summed up by a Belfast housewife whose house was searched by 2nd Para without causing any offence. The Irish News printed a story that soldiers had first broken the toilet and then urinated on the woman's son. The next day she came to collect some articles which had been taken for examination during the search. The Company Commander drew her attention to the articles and, after agreeing that it was without foundation, the woman commented cheerfully "Oh, never mind, that's just our propaganda!"

If it was never more serious than that, we could afford to laugh about it. But the seven men and women in the Brigade Officers' Mess and scores more innocent people died at the hands of vicious IRA killers because a whole community was taught to hate, and through hatred, to condone or encourage murder. Propaganda is as dangerous and evil a weapon in the hands of terrorists as a gun or a bomb.

