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The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement

In 1976, in the township of Soweto in South Africa, police units opened fire on massive crowds of unarmed student protestors, who were boycotting government schooling and protesting the mandate that forced classes to be taught in Afrikaans. The government responded to these protests as if they were an armed rebellion, and the police presence at the protests used tear gas and live ammunition on students, some of whom were younger than teenagers. One of the results of these crimes was a famous photograph that circulated the world, of a twelve-year-old boy, dead in the arms of an older student accompanied by his sister. The atrocities committed in Soweto sparked a year of riots and protests around the country and drew an unprecedented level of global awareness to the apartheid government. The Soweto Massacre especially drew attention in Ireland, where the Irish people had long-suffered colonial oppression and violence against civilians. For example, in 1920, in an event known as Bloody Sunday, a unit of the British military policing Ireland known as the Black and Tans drove an armored car with a mounted machine gun into the field during a Gaelic football match. In the roughly ninety seconds that followed, the British opened fire on both the players and the crowd with both the gun mounted on the vehicle and their rifles, killing fourteen and wounding hundreds. The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement evoked memories of these tragedies to rally support for their cause (Asmal 2011, 51).

A seemingly unassuming but fascinating ally of the anti-apartheid movement was based in Ireland, where a branch of the British Anti-Apartheid Movement (BAAM) developed into the independent Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM). The Irish have a long history of resisting colonial oppression and responding to acts of violence against their populace, and this experience

created the prime environment for a base of foreign resistance to apartheid. Ireland's unique status during the twentieth century as a state that was both Western and colonized put Irish activities in a position to counter apartheid with both educational awareness campaigns and more militant support of Umkhonto we Sizwe.

Ireland and South Africa: A Historical Connection

While the connection between Irish activism and South African apartheid may not be apparent on the surface, the two cultures actually have many shared experiences. Irish Republicanism as an ideology is staunchly opposed to colonialism, imperialism, and violent regimes. Many scholars, Irish or otherwise, claim that Britain's hold of Northern Ireland is the longest occupation by a foreign power in history, as the British have occupied Northern Ireland for over 800 years. Additionally, Ireland fought a war for independence against Britain from 1916 to 1921, followed by civil war that did not technically end until 1998. During this time period, the Irish citizenry suffered police and military attacks against non-combatants, an experience comparable to the suffering under apartheid control.

It is clear that there has been a historic connection between Ireland and liberation movements, for instance through shared experiences and feelings of solidarity between some Irish and black communities in the United States in the nineteenth century (Roediger 1991). Even more directly related to the anti-apartheid struggle is a specific historical connection between Ireland and South Africa. In South Africa, even decades after the Great Famine, the Irish arrived to a place already containing strong anti-Anglo sentiment. The First and Second Anglo-Boer Wars, the Anglo-Zulu Wars, and the continued years of the British Empire trying to

force the Dutch out of South Africa left the Dutch and Boer residents unfriendly towards the English. A famous unit of volunteer Irish fighters, allied with the Orange Free State, fought against British forces during both Anglo-Boer Wars (Akenson 1993, 128-129).

The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement: Origins and Diverse Base of Supporters

In light of this history, the IAAM began as an extension of the BAAM, but eventually developed its own organizational identity. It was founded by South African exile Kader Asmal, a third-generation South African of Indian descent. Asmal himself explained the natural relationship between Ireland and South Africa, writing: “the Irish people have themselves undergone the experience of imperial rule and in this century have had recourse to force to free their land and themselves from foreign domination” (Asmal 1971, 1). Other leaders of African liberation movements also found a shared history between Africans and the Irish. Amílcar Cabral, leader of the independence movements of Cape Verde and Guinea, once said during a speech in Dublin that the Irish solidarity movement was comparable “to the white foam on the top of a glass of black Guinness” (Asmal 2011, 62).

Asmal formed the group while holding a visiting lecturer position in the Law Department of Trinity College Dublin, and had experience in anti-apartheid organization as a founding member of the BAAM. His first major political success was when, through boycotts and protests, the BAAM aided in ending the British sale of arms and ammunition to the apartheid government during the 1970s. Without the same resources as the BAAM, or the pre-existing connections to cells of African National Congress exiles, Asmal and his wife Louise, an

Englishwoman, started the IAAM as a purely grassroots organization, so much so that the movement's first meetings were held in Asmal's living room at his Dublin residence.

The Asmals' basis of support was in the secular as well as religious spheres, as Irish bishops of the Catholic Church and most of Ireland's trade unions, as well as the Labour Party, supported the IAAM. While the movement started in Dublin, the group eventually spread to have representation in most Irish cities, including a presence in Northern Ireland. Asmal thought particularly highly of the trade unions, writing that "the relationship between the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Irish trade unions was a remarkable axis of support and mobilization for several decades" (Asmal 2011, 49). In addition to the clergy and unions, leftists and socialists, college students, and academics were all groups that largely supported the IAAM. The latter two groups apparently responded primarily to Asmal himself, who was an energetic, charismatic, intelligent figure who was well-received at Trinity College, serving as Dean of Arts by 1980. Asmal also publicly encouraged members of the Dail—the houses of the Oireachtas (Parliament)—and Sinn Fein—Ireland's primary liberal party and the party of the independence movement—to join the IAAM, to create a base of support in Ireland's political realm.

One of the most interesting aspects of the IAAM was the broad base of support it generated, crossing vast ideological boundaries. By the time the group disbanded after the end of apartheid, it had collaborated with Irish republicans within Sinn Fein, students and intellectuals, Irish communists, the Oireachtas, and the freedom-fighter/terrorist organization the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Of these groups, the background of the IRA may be the most intriguing. Communists had a long history of opposing apartheid policy and many members of the African National Congress were communists, but the general view of most Western democracies was anti-apartheid.

The IRA was the militant republican wing of Sinn Fein, and was Ireland's primary fighting force during the War for Independence between 1916 and 1921, in addition to other militia groups like the Irish Volunteers. The IRA orchestrated the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916 and were a mostly-unified group until the end of the war, where they periodically began to split into smaller groups all categorized under the umbrella term "IRA" (McKearney 2011, 28). By 1969, the IRA had split into two main factions: The Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Irish Republican Army. The PIRA maintained its old beliefs: free, republican government, independence from Great Britain, Catholic values over Protestant ones, and the reunification of Northern Ireland with the Republic of Ireland. The IRA, while agreeing with Irish self-rule and the reunification with the North, saw a Marxist future for Ireland and believed themselves to be a communist revolution (McKearney 2011, 13). While the IRA waged legitimate guerilla warfare during the War for Independence, their activities in the later twentieth century included planting car bombs, bombing pubs and bus stops, and assassinating agents of the British crown, Irish and British alike, including locally-affiliated police officers. While Asmal's memoir did not specify which group of the IRA aided in anti-apartheid efforts, understanding the background of the IRA shows how wide the ideological gap was between different IAAM supporters.

Social, Political, and Militant Actions of the IAAM

In their efforts to both educate the populace about apartheid and be an effective part of the global movement to end it, the IAAM attempted to establish bases in the socio-cultural, political, and militant spheres of Irish life. The IAAM staged several successful protests, had representatives in institutions of higher learning, and swayed many important local leaders to the

cause, but there was one essential enemy that the IAAM never defeated: The Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU). While an American audience may not immediately recognize the importance and influence of a rugby club, rugby has been a cornerstone of Irish culture for decades. To this day, Irish counties are fiercely loyal to their local rugby teams and fans are known for inciting riots or gang violence based on the result of rugby matches. If the brain of Ireland is the Dail, and the Church is its spirit, then the IRFU is its heart and passion. For years, the IAAM was unable to break the ties between Irish and white South African rugby teams.

The IAAM protests against both the national Irish rugby team and club teams earned them more enemies among Irish people than any of their other efforts. The efforts to stop rugby travel branded many IAAM members as unpatriotic, with one critic describing them as “pale-pink ideologists of the unwashed, workshy hippy brigade” (*Irish Times* 2017). White South Africans were a wealthy and available demographic for rugby, and passionately supported the South African rugby team, the Springboks. Therefore, the IAAM was working against not just a source of entertainment, but part of the cultural identity two nations, and reliable revenue.

Despite difficulties, Asmal considered much of the campaign to be a success, because

“individual sportsmen and rugby clubs were extensively circularized and 50,000 leaflets were distributed through Dublin letter-boxes. A declaration to be signed by those boycotting the match was made available and this enabled us to carry the campaign into a wider field than that of purely sporting interests. Press conferences, press statements and a huge public meeting ensured the Movement a steady amount of publicity and it was extremely successful in drawing public attention to the issue. A large-scale boycott of the international match did in fact take place” (Asmal 1971).

But not only did Irish teams keep visiting South African venues, neither the Irish government nor the IRFU stopped the Springboks from playing in Dublin in 1970, despite massive controversy and protests in both Ireland and Britain. The South Africans visited Dublin after a two-month tour of Britain, during which they sparked protest in each city they played in, resulting in several arrests. When they were finally able to play in Dublin, the field was protected by barbed wire fence and an armed security group. The IRFU maintained its relationship with the South African rugby organizations through the entirety of apartheid. The inability of the IAAM to influence the decisions of the IRFU is an excellent example of a success in their information campaign, but not in their effort to reap tangible results or policy changes. However, the attention generated by the campaign is what Asmal credited to the rapid growth of the organization by the late 1970s.

Asmal believed that the publicity generated by the rugby boycotts were what drove up the IAAM's membership and relevancy, but it was after the Soweto Uprising of 1976 that the IAAM received more official political support. The cultural aspects of the movement were useful for building membership and having a base of support made up of dedicated individuals, but the IAAM needed to be in the mind of political leaders in order to make an impact. Due to the similar crimes that the Irish experienced at the hands of their oppressors, the violence in Soweto against unarmed citizens captivated the Irish people. It was here that the IAAM became more connected to other global anti-apartheid groups, as it "responded by operating still more-closely with solidarity movements in countries like Britain, the Netherlands, Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Japan" (Asmal 2011, 62). After 1976, the IAAM was launched into the global relevancy that it was previously lacking, sparking the interest of Irish political groups.

As the IAAM increased its presence through globalization, it found allies in the United Nations. The group was an integral part of the U.N. Special Committee Against Apartheid. By 1979, Ireland was the chair of the European Economic Community (EEC, renamed the European Community after the creation of the European Union in 1993), launched a special inquiry into relations with South Africa, and established the UN Special Committee against Apartheid (Asmal 2011, 64). This was Ireland's second rotation as the chair of the EEC; it had first held the position for the first half of 1975. In Ireland's second rotation as chair, in addition to leading the foundation of the anti-apartheid UN Special Committee, it was also part of The World Campaign against Military and Nuclear Collaboration with South Africa, and, in response to reports of an illegal nuclear explosion in the Indian Ocean by the South African government, the EEC/UN expelled South Africa from the annual General Conference of the International Atomic Energy Agency (SAHO 2018).

In addition to attention from and participation in the UN, the IAAM also attracted the interest of the IRA by the late 1970s, who were needed to train Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) operatives. As the MK was to the African National Congress, the IRA was to Sinn Fein. By the late 1970s, IRA members were experienced guerilla fighters and sometimes terrorists, who had the backing of more around fifty years of systemic structural support since its founding. Therefore, through secret collaboration between the IAAM, the Irish Communist Party, and at least one member of Sinn Fein, MK agents flew into Dublin where they met with IRA members for two weeks of "intensive training" in combat, sabotage, stealth, and urban guerilla war tactics (Asmal 2011, 65).

On June 1, 1980, MK operatives bombed a major oil refinery plant in Sasolburg, after receiving a reconnaissance report from two IRA members sent to South Africa for the task.

Using IRA intelligence and training, which was achieved through forces within the IAAM, MK successfully destroyed a major source of government revenue. This act, as well as any other operations conducted by MK members that trained in Ireland, is probably the most impressive example of Irish-South African collaboration to damage the apartheid government. The involvement of the IRA was not public information until Asmal's 2011 memoir, but its addition to the history between Ireland and South Africa is an incredible development in the scholarship of the IAAM. In this extraordinary act of cooperation, a violent IRA action was carried out overseas, while sanctioned by the Ireland's largest political party—Sinn Fein—and sponsored by the Irish Communist Party. A collaboration of such wildly different ideologies was not seen in Ireland since the earliest days of the War for Independence. Aside from the improbable ideological collaboration, the mere logistic of the attack are incredible. Details are not known, but somehow the IRA, an (arguably) illegitimate paramilitary group without a navy or air force spent the time, money, and manpower to conduct an overseas operation totally unrelated to their success at ending the Irish partition. Their willingness to cooperate shows how recognizable the situation in South Africa was to Irish people who themselves felt the yoke of oppression.

Conclusion

In summary, the IAAM used Ireland's unique status in the West to its advantage. Ireland, at the height of the IAAM, was a Western, democratic nation with a developed (though struggling) economy. It was in the midst of civil war, with religious groups in Northern Ireland living in total segregation, and still dealing with the realities of living under British colonization. Ireland's social circumstances meant that it had the resources and culture to harbor an anti-apartheid group with multiple avenues of support: educational campaigns and protests common

in the West, in addition to active militant support common of African states and communist regimes. These mixed forms of support were united by intelligent, charismatic, able leaders, primarily Kader Asmal, who were able to initiate collaboration among Irish political groups that seemed impossible. In short, the IAAM may have impacted Ireland even more than it impacted South Africa. It was the embodiment of political differences being put aside to address a common cause, and it united the social, political, and militant aspects of Irish society in a time when the nation was otherwise divided. Ultimately, as evident in the bombing of the oil refinery in Sasolburg, the mass protests of Irish-South African rugby cooperation, and Ireland's participation in the European Economic Community, as well as the contribution of smaller factors, the IAAM was a successful and vocal member of the global effort to end apartheid.

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