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Asmal and the Irish connection to the bombing of Sasol in 1980

THE MK ATTACK ON SASOL

THE 1980s opened with a spectacular *coup de main* against one of South Africa's most strategic installations. Although the Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM) as an organisation had no part in it, the attack did involve an Irish connection, a fact which till now has not been public knowledge.

To tell what happened, I need to go back a little in time. In the late 1970s, I was asked if it was possible to arrange military training for some MK combatants. I wanted very much to undertake this task, but it was a delicate one because it would of necessity involve the IRA. None of us wished to place the ANC office in London in any jeopardy nor fuel the allegations of connivance between the ANC and IRA.

I went to see the general secretary of the Communist Party of Ireland, Michael O'Riordan, who was a man of great integrity and whom I trusted to keep secret the information at his disposal. He

in turn contacted Gerry Adams of Sinn Fein, and it was arranged that two military experts would come to Dublin to meet two MK personnel and take them to a safe place for two weeks of intensive training.

On the date arranged I was to be away, so I instructed Louise as to what she was to say when the MK men rang. In secret service style, nothing was to be written down. Whether through my inadequate instruction, or Louise's utter terror and fear of somehow betraying the operation, the wrong answer was given and the two MK men went back to London without meeting their contacts.

Later, however, we did arrange a successful meeting, the training was conducted, and I believe the expertise the MK cadres obtained was duly imparted to others in the ANC camps in Angola.

Then, on June 1, 1980, South Africa was shocked by one of the most daring and audacious acts of military insurgency in the struggle

against apartheid. On that day the country's major oil refinery plant in the town of Sasolburg was bombed by explosives. Black smoke billowed over the Highveld. Every newspaper and television station carried pictures, footage and stories.

Yet only Louise and I knew that the attack on Sasolburg was the result of reconnaissance carried out by members of the IRA. I had again been approached by the MK High Command, who wanted us to find two people to conduct a reconnaissance operation and report back on the feasibility of attacking Sasol, South Africa's major oil refinery, vital to the maintenance of the apartheid state.

Located on the Vaal River, Sasol was a perfect target. It was highly strategic but relatively undefended. There were

also few people wandering about the plant at night, so the chances of inflicting civilian casualties were small.

I undertook this task quite separately from the IAAM. This was partly to protect the organisation and partly for reasons of security. We knew too that right-wing British intelligence services and right-wing British media would use the information to undermine the ANC and the broad anti-apartheid movement. Once again I arranged the task with Adams of Sinn Fein, through the mediation of O'Riordan. Though I no longer recall the names of the persons who volunteered, if indeed I ever knew them, they laid the ground for one of the most dramatic operations carried out by MK personnel.

Some months after we'd set arrangements in place, Louise rang me at work to say that I must come home immediately. Not knowing what to expect, I excused myself from

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an important academic meeting at Trinity College and drove as fast as I could in the Dublin traffic.

Unlike today with satellite television, there were no news channels as such, and I had to wait a while before the news came round again. There on the television was the extraordinary spectacle of Sasol in flames, lighting up the sky for miles around.

We cheered and felt we had made a major contribution to the struggle. It was a huge morale booster.

In great excitement we phoned our fellow committee members of the IAAM, who came to gape and cheer with us at the spectacular explosion that had hit a vital South African installation. It was evident to all of us that the regime had suffered a demonstrable loss and embarrassment. At the time the ANC accepted responsibility for the coup and much later the three active participants, all MK cadres, applied for and obtained amnesty from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

Over the years Louise and I had been requested by the ANC in London to help with a number of tasks, which we undertook quite separately from the IAAM. Indeed, not long after we settled in Dublin, I was asked by Joe Slovo to return to South Africa secretly. I had a British passport and there were some urgent messages he wanted carried home.

I thought long and hard about the request. Of course it was total madness, suicide. The South African authorities knew well enough who I was by then. They would have picked me up the moment my foot first alighted on South African soil. But what was my moral duty? I had been requested to perform a task, a foolhardy task maybe, but an official ANC task nonetheless, and one for which there were at that stage few comrades available. Could I say no? In the end, I refused. I am not sure Joe ever forgave me completely.

At the time of the Sasolburg attack, I was very much in tune with Ireland and with

Irish needs and aspirations. I was a strong believer in Irish independence and in a united Ireland. But I never supported the IRA. The attack on Sasolburg had nothing to do with the IAAM, and nobody knew about the story behind it except Louise and me.

Incidentally, a few months after the attack, in January 1981, Sinn Fein – the IRA's political parent – applied to the IAAM for affiliation. This provoked intense discussions within the movement, not only in Ireland but in Britain and beyond.

The position of the IAAM executive committee was that any organisation could affiliate on condition that it supported the three basic objectives of the international anti-apartheid movement: the isolation of South Africa, support for the liberation struggle

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gle (which after the Rivonia Trial meant support for the armed struggle) and the provision of humanitarian assistance. Sinn Fein supported all of these objectives and was duly affiliated.

This caused some furore in the media. I was not at home when the press started calling and a weary Louise, still recovering from a bout of flu, had to field endless calls. Sinn Fein had no representation on the IAAM's executive committee and played no part in policy formulation. It was merely one of some 90 affiliates. Nevertheless, at the September 1984 annual general meeting, a motion was introduced for Sinn Fein's expulsion. The motion was withdrawn after it was agreed to refer the issue to a meeting of the executive, where the issue was subsequently discussed at length and Sinn Fein's affiliation was reaffirmed.

For me, the connection with Sinn Fein and the inten-

sifying armed campaign in South Africa highlighted the whole question of the role of violence, and the morality of war, in the struggle for freedom. Of course there were people who declared that the ANC was a terrorist organisation. Our argument, on the contrary, was that the armed struggle was legitimate because we had no other recourse: every other opportunity for protest and opposition had been closed.

This argument succeeded in Ireland.

Whereas anti-apartheid movements in other countries may have downplayed the armed struggle, we never compromised our stance.

Our consistent position was that the struggle to end apartheid was three-pronged and comprised the resistance of the South African people inside South Africa, international sanctions and boycott campaigns, and the armed struggle.

I myself struggled to accept the absolute prioritisation of violence in the struggle for which some of my colleagues in the movement were pushing.

My own view, like Nelson Mandela's, was that South Africans are not by nature a violent people. We have a long history of non-violence which is deeply ingrained. It was crucial that we didn't turn the anti-apartheid struggle into a racial bloodbath. There would have been no recovery from that.

When Albert Luthuli, as president of the ANC, accepted the need for the formation of MK in 1960, he did so on condition that MK was kept separate from the ANC. This was enormously important, for since the 1920s the ANC had led the campaign for a rights-based approach to the struggle against apartheid.

At the same time I acknowledge that symbolic military actions, such as the Sasolburg attack, were necessary.

The armed struggle – always under the control of the political forces – played a strategic part, but a distinctly unique part, in our drive for liberation.