

Reflections on the Troubles and the IRA in ‘The Secret Army’

Written by Martin Duffy

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MARTIN DUFFY, MAR 31 2024

The Secret Army (BBC 2024) unmask a lost documentary from 1972 based on a book of the same name written by J Bowyer Bell – an academic and sometime advisor to the American intelligence community. A snippet of the film appeared shortly after completion on veteran broadcaster Walter Cronkite’s CBS News Feature and shows Martin McGuinness, who would later become Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland, committing an act of terrorism. It also shows active IRA bombing units in Belfast and Derry in the early 1970s. The documentary footage presents McGuinness, sitting in a car handling a rifle and a revolver close to children. The film’s director, Zwy Aldouby, appears to have had links to Israeli intelligence Mossad, and was (probably) himself being monitored at the time by the CIA.

Up until now, researchers have only seen fragments of this footage. The Cronkite clip was aired in 1972, and some snippets from the film were discovered and broadcast in 2019. This bizarre story, the unusual way the film was made in 1972, and its unexplained disappearance poses a rare conundrum. How did such a film ever get made at a time when the nationalist community were subjected to large-scale internment without trial and the most intense security in every aspect of their daily life? The BBC’s part of the story started almost six years ago, when original reels were discovered in Belfast.

The extensive footage of leading IRA figure Martin McGuinness and IRA army council members in the film may also raise uncomfortable questions for the republican movement going forward. One other angle which The Secret Army, looks at, is the mysterious co-operation between Romanian-born Zwy Aldouby and terror groups. The film notes it was elsewhere alleged that Zwy was a Nazi-hunting Israeli intelligence officer. In the film he is shown interviewing senior IRA members – some of them unmasked – for what he said was a documentary film. Zwy had no previous film experience and hence the quality is amateur at best. Martin McGuinness, without any apparent fear of prosecution, moves guns and bombs in the footage which was filmed between March and June 1972, the deadliest year of the Troubles. The IRA agreed to take part in a film by a US crew, in which Aldouby was the director, even though he had no certified camera experience.

Former IRA members have since told the BBC they believe it was a “huge mistake” for Aldouby to be given such high-level access. Some of those who spoke to the BBC now suspect Aldouby was a spy, but none of the British, American and Israeli intelligence agencies contacted by the filmmakers admitted involvement in the IRA documentary. Aldouby was born Herby Dubinsky in Romania in 1931. Members of his family died in the Holocaust, and Zwy made it to what was then Palestine. After joining the paramilitary organisation Hagenah, he then joined the Shin Bet, the Israeli intelligence service, according to declassified FBI files uncovered by the BBC. Entering journalism, he moved to the US in the 1950s. Aldouby had served three years in jail after a failed plot to kidnap Belgian Nazi Leon Degrelle in Spain in 1961, though Israel denied being behind the operation. Degrelle had a death sentence hanging over him in Belgium but was living freely under the protection of the Franco dictatorship. Aldouby then abruptly arrives in Northern Ireland with his film crew with suspicions that he may have been supplying intelligence to the Mossad on Libyan support for the IRA.

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also giving arms to the IRA, and Israel at this point was in a very precarious state," his son Ilan Aldouby said. "So, my father, if he worked with or collaborated with the Mossad, or Israeli intelligence, it would be a clear fit...He's really, I'm tempted to say, like Austin Powers, the international man of mystery." The Mossad has denied that Aldouby ever worked for the organisation, but retired CIA deputy director Richard Kerr believes he was still sending information back to Israel. "Mossad, they have long ties and connections," Mr Kerr told the BBC. "They maintain those. I don't think many of them have left it totally....They're still involved, supporting Israel."

From a legal point of view, such footage must be assessed for potential prosecution. Ulster Unionist MLA. Doug Beattie believes detectives should review all footage and refer to the PPS. The documentary also captures IRA attempts to shoot down helicopters in Derry; a Belfast IRA meeting led by Seamus Twomey (later the organisation's chief of staff); extensive interview material with former IRA leader, Des Long, and the funeral of IRA member Colm Keenan. While Mr Beattie was not critical of police for any failure to obtain footage at the time of the violence, he said it is imperative that action is taken now in a bid to track down anyone involved in terrorist activity. Beattie adds:

The RUC was overwhelmed at the time, dealing with ordinary crime at the same time as investigating terrorism, while also dealing with attacks on their own lives as they went about their business...However, I do feel there is a duty on the police to look at this evidence, for that is what it is....We are seeing footage of crimes being prepared and carried out, so that footage must be assessed to ascertain whether there is anything substantial, to establish whether the people in the footage are still alive, and if they are then police must take action.

The Spotlight reporters also interview Jacob Stern who composed the music for the film. Stern was a close friend of Bell's and it becomes apparent from the interview that while Stern himself was sympathetic to the IRA, he had not fully considered the manner in which such filmography could contribute to the war in Northern Ireland. Stern was (however) obviously aware that while the film was being made, the film crew were being shadowed by British and American intelligence operatives. One is inclined to suggest that for some strong intelligence motivation, this film was being created out of wider international intelligence motivations which the IRA may not have fully grasped. If that argument is correct, from the security side, it may constitute a form of implicit collusion with crimes of terror.

Bell's friend, Roberto Matotti suggests that the professor may have "wanted to be a character in his own movie" suggesting that Bell was more of a "Walter Mitty" character. Leon Gilden, the film's producer, had no illusions that the preparation of the final cinema reels in London made it an open secret that British intelligence was aware of the scenes filmed therein. In this production we are told that the film crew faced an IRA death warning that the final copy be delivered to the USA for release in unedited form. This report suggests the film was purchased by at least one major American distributor, but its release was mothballed without explanation.

This film points to the complexity of Northern Ireland's conflict, and its continuing capacity to raise more questions than we are able to answer at this time. It appears that British intelligence made a deliberate decision to cultivate Martin McGuinness and perhaps to encourage peace-making among the IRA and Sinn Fein. More crucially, it is apparent that an evidential threshold for prosecution was apparent, and yet no action was taken at the time. This film will surely spark international-level discussion about the conflict. The capacity of such material to be commissioned, the backgrounds of the production crew, the filming of real-time episodes of terror, and for it to be produced but then to vanish, demonstrates the enigmatic nature of the historical events of the Troubles.

About the author:

Martin Duffy has participated in more than two hundred international election and human rights assignments since beginning his career in Africa and Asia in the 1980s. He has served with a wide range of international organizations and has frequently been decorated for field service, among them UN (United Nations) Peacekeeping Citations and the Badge of Honour of the International Red Cross Movement. He has also held several academic positions in Ireland, UK, USA and elsewhere. He is a proponent of experiential learning. He holds awards from Dublin, Oxford,

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