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Sabotage! The origins, development and impact of the IRA's infrastructural bombing campaigns

1939-1997.

At various moments in the twentieth century the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in its various incarnations have used the tactic of infrastructural bombing, notably in their 1939 attacks in England on Electricity pylons and in the summer of 1971 in Northern Ireland on its electrical distribution network. In 1996 the British Security Service (MI5) foiled an attack by the IRA aimed at causing a total electrical blackout of the greater London area, a plan that would have seen major disruption in the capital for many weeks or months. Using recently declassified material (some, specially released under Freedom of Information legislation from this very article) this paper seeks to re-evaluate the impact of these IRA infrastructural sabotage campaigns, that have until now either been ignored or judged to have been derisory or incongruous failures, this paper demonstrates the historical development of this tactic from both the IRA's perspective, and that of those who were tasked with hindering it, highlighting the devastating potential of such tactics in the future.

While the IRA used attacks on electricity distribution infrastructure throughout the Northern Ireland Troubles, two particular examples will be highlighted in this paper. The first, a short campaign in the summer of 1971 against the 275kw main lines that circled the province almost completely cut Belfast's electricity supply. A second, in 1996 was an attempt by the IRA to do a similar job in London, cutting the lines at key points around the M25 that, had it not been foiled, would have had a profound and crippling effect on the capital's electricity supply for many weeks. The attacks would have followed a series of high-profile attacks on Britain that had included the massive 10 February Docklands bomb (that had ended the IRA's 1994 ceasefire) and the 15 June Manchester city centre truck-bomb attack on the Arndale centre. However, just as 1996 did not mark the first time that the IRA had attempted to move its bombing campaign to Britain, so too

was it not the first time that Irish Republicans had attempted to attack the electricity infrastructure in an attempt to damage confidence and instil public antagonism against its government. An IRA bombing campaign that ran throughout 1939 had begun with attempts to do just this as well, and, as in 1996, to do so without large amounts of bloodshed. The 1939 campaign has of course largely been forgotten due to the impact of the Luftwaffe's follow-up after 1940. However, it was a serious attempt by a terrorist organization to achieve their political ambitions through the tactical use of violence. This is not always apparent in the literature and, while the failed 1996 attempts were, at the time, eulogized by the British Press for their professionalism¹, this is curiously not usually the case with the 1939 campaign.

The S-Plan and the 1939 England Campaign

'Friday, in the evening, the landlady shouted up the stairs: 'Oh my God, oh Jesus, oh Sacred Heart, Boy, there's two gentlemen to see you.'

I knew by the screeches of her that these gentlemen were not calling to enquire about my health, or to know if I'd had a good trip. I grabbed my suitcase, containing Pot. Chlorate, Sulph Ac, gelignite, detonators, electrical and ignition, and the rest of my Sinn Féin conjuror's outfit, and carried it to the window. Then the gentlemen arrived.

A young one, with a blonde, Herrenvolk head and a BBC accent shouted, 'I say, greb him, the bestud.'²

The opening lines of Brendan Behan's 'Borstal Boy' have, since the 1950s, coloured views toward the IRA's 1939 bombing campaign in Britain. Carried out by young, idealistic, though hopelessly inept volunteers with little training and no backup, once they left Ireland they were easy prey for the British Police and arrested – in Behan's case – within hours of getting off the boat. Leaving Behan aside however, the statistics of the 1939 campaign are quite startling by today's standards. There were 61 separate bombing incidents in England in the first four months of 1939, and over

¹ "They were known as the A-Team, the most powerful squad of IRA bombers ever assembled." 'Blackout Bombers sent down for 210 years', Peter Rose and David Williams, *Daily Mail*, 3 July 1997.

² Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (London: Hutchinson, 1958); 11.

150 that year – equating to a bomb in or around a major British city every other day in 1939.³

Despite the intensity of the 1939 campaign few historians have given it more than a cursory glance. Richard English gave 1939 less than three pages⁴ and Eunan O’Halpin’s recent work⁵ devotes even less than this to a topic that cannot have failed to have fuelled British animosity toward Ireland in the early war years. Only Paul McMahon, in his recent work⁶ has provided a worthy historical analysis of the documents now available from 1939, however he does so exclusively from the point of view of British Intelligence and their burgeoning cooperation with their new Irish equivalents immediately before the war, neither of which, McMahon admits, had more than a very limited role with regard to the IRA in 1939. The 1939 campaign was however important for its own reasons. First, it demonstrated that violent Irish republicanism had not gone away and remained focused on pushing Britain toward a full political and military withdrawal from Ireland. Second, they showed that they were prepared to consider new tactics and strategies for the fulfilment of their unchanged aim. Third, they specifically set out to avoid gratuitous collateral damage to civilian life and lives and expressed an aversion to the loss of life both in Britain and Ireland – an aspiration however that inevitably failed, and on the very first day of the campaign, attacks in Manchester resulted in the death of one man, killed after a bomb exploded inside a manhole on Princess Street.⁷

³ Does not include non bombing incidents. Does include explosives that failed to go off. Statistics taken from 'List of places in connection with vulnerable undertakings etc. where outrages have occurred', (1939), Home Office (HO) 144/21357, The National Archives of the UK, Kew (hereinafter TNA).

⁴ 3 of 450, Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004); 60-62.

⁵ O’Halpin understandably gives ample treatment to German influence on the IRA in this time. Eunan O’Halpin *Spying on Ireland: British Intelligence and Irish Neutrality during the Second World War* (Oxford: University Press, 2008); 40-41.

⁶ Paul McMahon, *British Spies and Irish rebels: British Intelligence and Ireland 196-45* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008); 262-275.

⁷ The incident included bombs down electrical manholes at Hilton Street, Whitworth Street and Mosley Street, HO 144/21357, TNA.

While Behan's portrayal of his young self may or may not be characteristic of the IRA's 1939 volunteers, certainly in *Borstal Boy* he correctly portrays the attitude engendered in the British public as a result of the IRA's campaign,

'Outside as we got in the car, a few people shouted: 'String the bastard up. Fughing Irish shit-'ouse.' It was an Orange district, but I think some of them were Liverpool-Irish, trying to prove their solidarity with the loyal stock.'⁸

The planning for the campaign Behan, and hundreds of others took part in, began in the autumn of 1938. As Neville Chamberlain met Adolf Hitler in Munich, the IRA's Seamus O'Donovan began work on a plan to attack Britain – and specifically England – using a formulated and measured form of terrorism he described as the 'S-Plan'. Short for Sabotage, the S-Plan foresaw a campaign of Terrorism with a small 't', foregoing public violence and bloodshed, by deliberately attacking targets the public would neither see nor hear but, all the same, would affect their everyday lives in a way that would attune them better to the propaganda efforts essential to the success of the campaign. The bombs were initially to be timed to coincide with the renewed fear of war with Germany, and the Chamberlain government's perceived weakness toward Ireland (having just returned the Treaty Ports of Cobh, Berehaven and Lough Swilly to the Irish 'Free State'⁹ government).

O'Donovan's S-plan had the support of the IRA's Chief of Staff, Sean Russell and the head of the US based fundraising group *Clan na Gael*, Sean McGarrity¹⁰ and in November of 1938 the IRA began

⁸ Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy* (London: Hutchinson, 1958); 13.

⁹ The Irish Free State was established in 1922 under the terms of the Anglo-Irish treaty, until 1937 when De Valera's constitution renamed the state Éire. While the legal and constitutional status changed again in 1948 to The Republic of Ireland, the IRA, having consistently rejected the authority of the Irish state since 1921, continued to use the term 'Free State' derisively.

¹⁰ Sean Cronin, *The McGarrity Papers*, (Tralee: Anvil, 1972).

recalling activists based in England for training in Ireland with a view to beginning in the following month. O'Donovan took charge of the training as well, holding sessions at Killiney Castle, in an affluent suburb of Dublin. In fact, O'Donovan was the perfect originator of the S-Plan; he was a trained Industrial Chemist and had served as Michael Collins' 'Director of Chemicals' (i.e. Explosives) in the War of Independence¹¹. After the Civil War he had joined the Irish Free State's Electricity Supply Board, and had spent more than ten years working for the rural electrification of the country as a civil engineer.¹² This experience gave O'Donovan insight into many different types of engineering, and his papers include instructions on how to disable locomotive engines and destroy bridges without the use of explosives.¹³ O'Donovan was also in contact with Nazi Germany, and met with the Abwehr on three occasions in 1939, in 1940 aiding among others the German agent Ernst Weber-Drohl before being interned by the Irish government in 1941. O'Donovan's real contribution however was his insight into the disruptive effect damage to electricity distribution lines would have on England's cities.

O'Donovan believed that Northern Ireland could be reunited with the South if public opinion in *England* alone could be changed. O'Donovan wrote, 'The issue is complete national independence... which must be fought out between the IRA, representing the Irish Nation, and the British. This effort must have the dignity of a National Struggle and must not allow itself to be reduced to a local squabble as between the IRA and the Free State Government or between the IRA and the Northern Government, for the control of either part of the country... Civil War must be avoided at all costs.'¹⁴ O'Donovan's S-Plan thus represented a working-out of the means with which

¹¹ Uinseann MacEoin, *The IRA in the Twilight Years 1923-48* (Dublin: Argenta, 1997).

¹² Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (London: Pall Mall, 1970); 123.

¹³ 'Demotion of Bridges without explosives – instructions', James L. O'Donovan, Papers related to the IRA, 1930s and 40s, MS 21,155, Folder 5, National Library of Ireland, Manuscripts Department.

¹⁴ 'IRA Aims', Folder 4, *Ibid*.

the British mainland could be attacked without the need for the establishment of vulnerable supply lines from Ireland. In papers marked, 'IRA Aims' O'Donovan made it clear that IRA units, once present, would be left on their own to carry out their missions, 'There will be no transport of materials from this country to England.'¹⁵

Thus the targets in the plan were restricted to the public infrastructure surrounding the cities of London, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester. Most specifically electricity pylons, telegraph and telephone cables, post boxes and government offices, the object was to make life uncomfortable, to inconvenience ordinary people with the bombing campaign, while at the same time, dazzling them with a parallel propaganda campaign. The S-Plan ruled out attacks against vulnerable public amenities such as Water and Gas – specifically the pollution of public water supplies – were ruled out because, 'apart altogether from ethical considerations, the Hague Convention representing civilized international opinion and agreement condemns all such actions and we should be doing Ireland and our cause infinite harm by adopting any such means.'¹⁶ This principal applied generally to moving trains, where sabotage could take place at night, or at electrical junction boxes.¹⁷ The S-Plan categorically stated that rolling passenger trains themselves would not be targeted.

The campaign was delayed however by the death of the IRA's Officer Commanding England – killed by his own bomb at a border post on the Tyrone-Donegal border¹⁸, and, while McGarrity in New York declared that the first bombs had exploded in December 1938, in fact it took until 12 January 1939 for the ultimatum signalling the start of actions to be sent to the Home Secretary and the bombing did not begin until the 16th. Within three days, fourteen separate attacks had been made

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ London Metropolitan Police captured 'S-Plan', p.8, HO 144/21357, TNA.

¹⁷ 'This form of attack [against the rail network] is most desirable since it can inflict no personal injury' Ibid.; 11.

¹⁸ 'Two Killed in Irish Explosion' *The Times*, 30 November 1938.

against power stations, pylons and cables in and around London, Manchester and Birmingham.

The Police response was swift and quite measured. Metropolitan Police Special Branch called for the immediate arrest of the usual suspects. This was followed by the successful conviction of 18 in London, 10 in Manchester and 3 in Birmingham in the two weeks following the initial explosions.¹⁹ These arrests represented 40% of IRA members in these cities and 25% of the total number of IRA members resident in Britain at the time; certainly a satisfactory figure for a short month's work.²⁰ With these arrests came a copy of the S-Plan itself and the Home Office informed all the public utility companies of the situation and advised them to upgrade their security. With these two measures the IRA were forced to diversify their tactics prematurely. They had not caused the severe disruption to the electricity supplies of any city targeted and began instead targeting tube stations, canals, Post Offices, bridges and telephone inspection boxes. With their resident IRA groups gone, the volunteers being sent from Ireland had no opportunities to store or stockpile materials and often used contacts they met within the Irish community itself, or took risks and stored their explosives in their own digs, much of which was quickly sniffed out by the keen-noses of England's landladies. The tactical sprawl enforced by the sudden clampdown by the Met meant that the IRA campaign could no longer have any coherent effect. And, while in April a conference of Chief Constables, sought additional powers of arrest and detention from the Home Office, by this stage the campaign had already become little more than one of petty vandalism and arson. In March, noting the lack of attacks made against armaments firms and the armed forces, Vernon Kell of MI5 refused to be drawn into investigating 'these gangsters', noting that the Security Service

¹⁹ Memo for Sir Norman Kendall (Chief Constable) from New Scotland Yard Special Branch, 13 April 1939, HO 144/21357, TNA.

²⁰ Figures based on 1936, not counting IRA non-residents sent over for specific operations. Sean Cronin, *The McGarrity Papers* (Tralee, Anvil, 1972); 166.

'has had nothing whatever to do with this illegal organisation for over twenty years.'²¹

The campaign continued intermittently however throughout the summer of 1939 and in August a bicycle carrying a bomb exploded in Birmingham killing five bystanders. The arrest, conviction and execution of two men linked with the bomb's manufacture aroused ill feeling in Ireland and among the Irish in the United States. *Clan na Gael* used the Sacco and Vanzetti model of protest in their attempts to save Barnes and McCormack²² and *Time* magazine even covered their execution²³ and while this created something of a breeze of publicity for the IRA in early 1940, the world's attention had at this stage moved onto bigger things. The Birmingham bomb was an exceptional case, and most incidents after March 1939 involved the use of small incendiaries against post-boxes and the release of tear-gas in cinemas.²⁴ The campaign ended in early 1940 when two bombs exploded on London's Oxford Street, injuring more than twenty bystanders. Arguably these two bombs – the last of the S-Plan campaign were designed only as protests against the executions of Barnes and McCormack. Upon hearing the explosions while drinking in a bar on Edgware Road two former members of the Irish Police had shouted 'Up the IRA! and 'Up the Republic!' and were quickly arrested.²⁵

Until now, historians have been content to conclude that the 1939 England campaign was yet another example of the Fenian activist tradition that has periodically bubbled to the surface since

²¹ Kell to Alexander Maxwell (HO), 9 March 1939, HO 144/21357, TNA.

²² Peter Barnes and James McCormack (aka James Richards) *in memoriam* pamphlets contained in HO 45/25550, TNA.

²³ "Ultimate Cause" *Time Magazine*, 19 February 1940.

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,763505,00.html>

²⁴ Notably the IRA used women for the operations against cinemas. Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (London: Pall Mall, 1970); 127.

²⁵ One senior police officer commented, 'The two drunken Irish wasters... ought to be sent back to Ireland.' Minute Sheet, MEPO 3/1303, TNA.

1798.²⁶ This, and the fact that the campaign was an unmitigated disaster for the IRA. Both of these arguments are correct in their conceptions. A republican lineage *can* be drawn from the 1939 campaign back to 1916 as well forward to the Provisional IRA of the early 1970s. So too can O'Donovan's own judgment that the campaign 'brought nothing but harm to Ireland and the IRA'²⁷ be justified by the losses of man-power and momentum caused by so many IRA volunteers being imprisoned in both British and Irish jails, during the Second World War – a direct result of the bombing campaign. One can even go further however and say that the campaign, while easily mopped up by the British police, still resulted in the cornerstone of British counter-terrorist legislation in the June 1939 Prevention of Violence Act introduced by Home Secretary Sir Samuel Hoare.²⁸ This Act, though it was to expire in 1953, was the direct ancestor of the 1973 Prevention of Terrorism Act and arguably all proceeding counter-terror legislation in the UK, thus it had a major impact on how Britain has dealt with terrorism right up to the present day. Certainly the British government did not, at the time, treat the 1939 campaign with the same lack of interest as historians now. Significant steps were taken by the British in this time to improve security around perceived IRA targets and, beside the warnings given to the electricity companies, guards were reinforced around Downing Street and Chequers.²⁹ At Westminster, all the public galleries were closed by the Speaker despite being informed that, 'orders had been issued to these terrorists to avoid taking of human life.'³⁰

A final outcome of the 1939 campaign was in the British public's perception of the Irish in Britain,

²⁶ Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004) ; 61.

²⁷ Stephan Enno, *Spies in Ireland* (London: McDonald, 1963) ; 38.

²⁸ An act that would eventually evolve into the Prevention of Terrorism Act 1974, and more recently the Terrorism Act 2006.

²⁹ Enhanced protective security measures for Chequers and Downing Street during the IRA's 1939 campaign are described in MEPO 3/1908 and MEPO 3/1910, TNA.

³⁰ Metropolitan Police Commissioner, note of meeting with House of Commons Speaker (E.A. Fitzroy), 4 February 1939, MEPO 3/1909, TNA.

illustrated earlier by Brendan Behan (who was arrested in the weeks following the Birmingham bomb). It seems that, by veering off O'Donovan's original primary targets and moving on instead to targets of opportunity like left-luggage offices, tube stations or cinemas, the campaign began to have exactly the opposite effect desired, bringing to the fore again old anti-Irish and anti-Catholic feeling in parts of England that had not died out. In fact, British anti-irish prejudice was far more commonplace than one might assume; in a children's book of poems published in 1925 for example was still the verse,

'The Irish child can dance a jig,
And share its pillow with a pig,
And where we ask for pie or meat,
The 'pratle he is glad to eat.'³¹

Immediately following the start of the 1939 campaign there was a resurgence of supposed Catholic oaths as evidence of conspiracy. One contemporary note of a 'Hiberian [sic] Oath founded by Rory O'Moore 1565'³² was typically worded; 'I will wade knee-deep in Orangemen's blood, and do as King James did'³³ and vowing 'I will think it no sin to kill and massacre a Protestant whenever the opportunity serves.'³⁴ This particular publication met with the Home Secretary's personal response in the midst of the S-Plan campaign that, 'As a matter of fact I had seen it before. It has been circulated on various occasions in recent years.'³⁵ The destruction and deaths being caused by the IRA in Britain was not going to be conducive to ending Partition in the way O'Donovan had planned so long as British opinion continued to view Irish Republicanism as Catholic conspiracy.

³¹ John Archer Jackson, *The Irish in Britain* (London: Routledge, 1963); 157.

³² 'Hiberian Oath', enclosure to letter, Lord Ampthill to Samuel Hoare, 13 May 1939, HO 144/21357, TNA.

³³ *Ibid.* A Home Office reader of a very similar text that appeared in 1928, noted at this point in pencil, 'He ran away, I thought!'

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Samuel Hoare to Lord Ampthill, 16 May 1939, HO 144/21357, TNA.

Thus we can see that O'Donovan's S-plan was not the plan that was carried out in England in 1939, and the main focus of the plan – electrical infrastructure – was abandoned due to the arrest of key figures early in the campaign. The fact that the first wave of attacks had not caused the major blackouts and industrial disruption they had set out to achieve and was indeed met with a swift and devastating response by Special Branch was disheartening for those who remained and forced a premature re-think as to the S-Plan's effectiveness. Recent research has pointed out that 'The IRA's British units did not refer to the S-Plan, rather they improvised with the available explosives and lowered their sights accordingly... it did not create a situation that would force the British to negotiate'.³⁶ This aspect is not apparent in some of the older literature dealing with the 1939 campaign that, as recently as 1970, believed the main primary targets to be 'obvious military targets, communications centres, BBC transmitters, aerodromes, bridges and military installations'³⁷ and has led to some confusion over the objectives of the S-Plan in the first place. Richard English, for example remarked 'it is unclear precisely how the IRA anticipated that it *would* produce the desired result.'³⁸ In fact the plan was far more subtle than Coogan suggested back in 1970. O'Donovan had planned to disengage the people and the economy from the government temporarily in order to allow the propaganda message to get through. The government, losing its hold over its own people would quickly move to negotiate directly with the IRA rather than be embarrassed further. Propaganda would be used in combination with infrastructural bombing (and later some general mayhem) to force Britain to cancel its union with Northern Ireland by force, not of arms, but by removing its ability to govern effectively. But still, the assumption was that Britain's hand could be forced through the use of coercive violence in Britain – and of course this was also a

³⁶ Gary McGladdery, *The Provisional IRA in England* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006); 45.

³⁷ Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (London: Pall Mall, 1970); 123.

³⁸ Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004); 61.

plan that would fail for the Luftwaffe too in little over a year's time.

This may have been a tall order, but in many instances the basic assumptions were correct.

However, there was no propaganda campaign in Britain aimed at educating the British public as to the goals of the IRA's campaign (even had they been prepared to listen), and Sean Russell left Ireland for the United States in April where his attempted disruption of King George VI's visit earned him a spell in US custody before he travelled to Germany via Italy in 1940 to seek the assistance of Nazi Germany (he died famously in July 1941 on a German U-Boat on its way to Galway). Russell therefore, was not playing the S-Plan out in any way close to what O'Donovan (who had himself visited Nazi Germany) had made clear. Though this would not be the last time that the IRA would try out this tactic and, when used again with the right balance of other forms of disorder, infrastructural bombing could bring a government quite quickly to a state of breakdown.

Northern Ireland 1971

The IRA split in December 1969 created two different factions with very different ideas as to the types of operations an IRA should perform. While the 'Officials', became a primarily defensive force, the 'Provisionals' under Ruairí O'Brádaigh, sought to go on the offensive as quickly as possible and use attacks against British forces that now included the British Army, to demonstrate the colonial position of Northern Ireland. This tactic, the Provisionals hoped, would snowball their support base, forcing the British Army to identify the PIRA as their primary enemy and move them away from operations designed to keep Protestants and Catholics apart and into a counter-productive, counter-insurgency mode.³⁹

³⁹ Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, (London: Allan Lane, 2002); 100.

The problem was that it had been the Provisionals and not the Officials who had been the splinter group in late 1969 and the unevenness of the split meant that most of what remained of the guns, experience and know-how remained on the side of the Officials and, as the Provisionals were predominantly a Northern movement, on the wrong side of the border.

Thus, as the northern Provisionals in early 1970 lacked manpower, expertise and arms they were forced to improvise with tactics and materials very early on. Sniper attacks and erratic fire from Thompson guns on British troops became the hall-mark of the early Provisional IRA and it took them over a year and 100 such attacks to kill their first British soldier.⁴⁰ But these public attacks masked the training in bomb-making that was going on behind the scenes, and a reversion to the type of infrastructural bombing seen in the 1939 S-Plan.

This said however, it was loyalists and not republicans who fired the first shots of the infrastructural campaign in the early Troubles. In April 1969 the UVF temporarily crippled Belfast's water supply and the ensuing political fall-out resulted in the resignation of Terence O'Neill as Northern Ireland Prime Minister. It was not however apparent at the time that these attacks had come from loyalists rather than republicans and, while tactically well executed, they were one-off operations and not part of a concerted campaign (which arguably came later with the largely successful Ulster Workers' Council Strike of 1974).

The IRA soon followed the UVF's tactics, initially bombing electricity pylons sporadically in late 1969 and then stopping quite quickly and moving onto other targets of perceived higher political value, burning public buildings, shops, etc. and keeping the security forces spread out. With a

⁴⁰ Gunner Curtis, killed by a single bullet from a Thompson gun, 6 February 1971. Thomas Hennessey, *The Evolution of the Troubles 1970-72* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press); 66.

mounting campaign the IRA returned to infrastructural bombing in the summer of 1971 and within weeks had virtually crippled Northern Ireland's electricity supply in an offensive that continued despite the introduction of internment without trial on 8 August 1971.

Historians have thus far failed to describe the attacks on Northern Ireland's electricity infrastructure in the summer of 1971 as a concerted campaign.⁴¹ Indeed, excepting the statistical data, histories of this time mostly ignore this aspect of the early Troubles, preferring to deal with the urban guerrilla war that made headlines at the time and breaking the IRA's actions into two parts – against urban military and urban economic targets.⁴² Richard English's work on the IRA, for example when dealing with 1971 focuses mostly on the seething rage felt by many young Catholics that drove them into the Provisionals and in turn drove the Provisionals to become more fiercely anti-Army.⁴³ Bishop and Mallie, while they mention an explosion at a substation which killed the man planting the bomb,⁴⁴ make no attempt to highlight the idea that this might have been part of any concerted or separate sphere of IRA action. Even Thomas Hennessey's otherwise comprehensive new work on 'The Evolution of the Troubles' makes note only of a bomb in early 1970 outside the Belfast Corporation Electricity Club (one the PIRA's first ever bombs) and a particularly callous April 1971 attack on the Electricity Board's head office in Belfast, which injured many young female office staff. However, attacks on infrastructure were neither the classic military or economic targets (typified by fire-bombs in city centre shops and businesses which were designed to take security force pressure away from Catholic areas). Infrastructural attacks had both

⁴¹ There is no mention of the IRA's bomb attacks on Northern Ireland's electricity network in the following works, Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004), J. Bowyer Bell, *IRA Tactics and Targets* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1997), Martin Dillon, *25 Years of Terror: the IRA's war against the British* (London: Bantam, 1996), Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (revised edition, Glasgow: Fontana, 1987) and J Bowyer Bell, *The Irish Troubles: a generation of violence* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1993).

⁴² Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, (London: Allan Lane, 2002); 100, and MLR Smith, *Fighting for Ireland: the military strategy of the Irish republican movement* (London: Routledge, 1995); 96.

⁴³ Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA* (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004); 137.

⁴⁴ Patrick Bishop and Eamonn Mallie, *The Provisional IRA* (London: Heinemann, 1987); 138.

different modus operandi (using high-explosives as opposed to incendiaries) as well as a different operational goal – to further undermine the Northern Ireland government. Thus Ed Moloney also misses out on any reference to a 1971 infrastructural campaign when he writes, ‘the targets were not just military and police bases but increasingly included government and commercial premises.’⁴⁵ Infrastructural attacks were key as well as, by the summer of 1971, this was one of the only areas that the Stormont government continued to act without British interference.⁴⁶ The fact that no mention is made in any recent research to attacks made against electricity pylons or substations in the weeks before or after internment is therefore astonishing considering the impact these attacks had on Northern Ireland government thinking at the time.

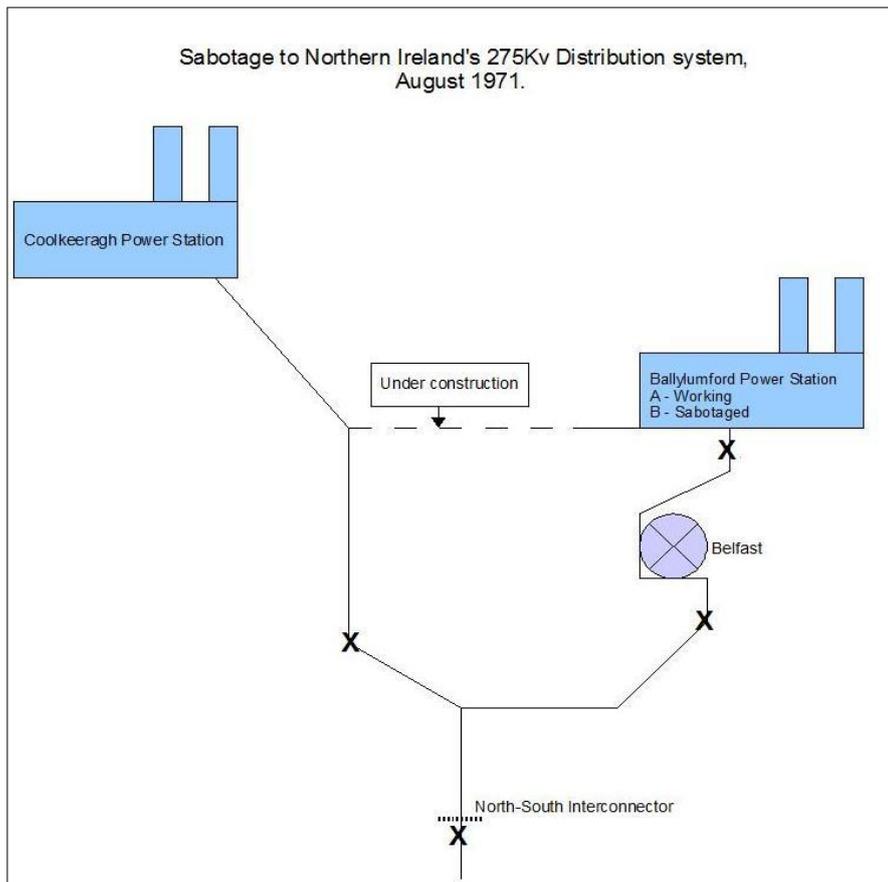
From May to November 1971 there were at least 13 successful attacks on the main electricity distribution system of Northern Ireland. Reports of pylon and transformer attacks are made in *The Times* on 21 May, 19 June, 13 July, 1 August, 13 September and 7 November, the Northern Ireland government mention additional attacks in June 1971 at Hannahstown and one south of the border severing the North-South interconnector in July. Additionally, on the 8 August the IRA managed to cripple Ballylumford's B-station, crucial to Belfast's electricity supply, particularly when faced with attacks being made to the main distribution lines south of the city that linked Belfast to the province's only other major power station at Coolkeeragh and the, already damaged, North-South Interconnector. Though most of these attacks failed to make any headlines, the Northern Ireland government nevertheless took them very seriously. A Ministry of Commerce memo for the Cabinet commented, 'While the Ballylumford B station remains out of service the whole electricity system

⁴⁵ Ed Moloney, *A Secret History of the IRA*, (London: Allan Lane, 2002); 100.

⁴⁶ Anthony Craig, *Intergovernmental relations between Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland 1966-1974*, (unpublished PhD Thesis, Cambridge, 2008); 162 & 184.

of NI is at very serious risk.¹⁴⁷ On 23 August, there was the attack on the Electricity board's Headquarters, on the 29 August, in another calculated attack, unreported in the British press, the IRA cut the 3 lines between Ballylumford A and Belfast; this was followed by an attack on the main Coolkeeragh line through Co Tyrone as well as other attacks on spur lines in the south of the Province. For the Northern Ireland Government the repercussions were very serious, the Minister A. C. Brooke told the cabinet:

'We are in a position that any further sabotage could break the integrated electricity system and we should be dependent on the engineers to get power from whatever generating stations through whatever lines are available. ... we may find ourselves at any time having to make power cuts. We may also have to consider whether we should be ready to declare a state of emergency.'¹⁴⁸



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⁴⁷ Memo on Electricity situation marked SECRET, 23 August 1971, Com 58/3/1, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (hereinafter PRONI).

⁴⁸ A. C. Brooke (Perm Sec) Min Commerce NI Memo to Cabinet, 1 September 1971, CAB 9F/227/3, PRONI.

⁴⁹ Reproduction of diagram showing IRA damage to Northern Ireland's electricity grid by August 1971, Com 58/3/1, PRONI.

The IRA seemed not to have realised how close they had come to crippling the Northern Ireland government, and, after early September, the attacks subsided quite dramatically. Such was the knife edge on which supply was balanced, however it was estimated that just a few more cuts in the supply lines would have cut off the entire eastern area of the province for between an estimated 2 and 14 days.⁵⁰ For Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, Assistant Cabinet Secretary at the time in Stormont, 'it was rather to our surprise that the thing died out. It was almost as if it had been the brain child of somebody or another and that somebody disappeared from the scene.'⁵¹ In fact, it is not certain why the IRA ceased their attacks – whether through arrest, or an inability to determine exactly how close these tactics were bringing them to their initial goal of bringing down Stormont by creating 'the perception of chaos and ungovernability.'⁵² Certainly, command structures within the Provisional IRA in 1971 were more fluid than they were later and it was still then possible for the campaign to have been conducted without the explicit backing of the Army Council. Thus, when one or more of the middle-ranking leaders were arrested, the entire project collapsed.

Of course all this took place within the context of the introduction of Internment, which must have played a key role. Introduced on 8 August 1971, Internment resulted in a massive increase in republican activity on all fronts as a knee-jerk, guttural reaction to the perceived repression of Catholics, and arguably this short campaign was deemed to be a part of this. The Northern Ireland government however saw the campaign as a cold, calculated attempt to usurp their governance, through the crippling of essential infrastructure. When looking at where and when the attacks were made, it is clear that, in this case, the Northern Ireland Government had escaped by the

⁵⁰ A. C. Brooke (Perm Sec) Min Commerce NI Memo to Cabinet, 1 September 1971, CAB 9F/227/3, PRONI.

⁵¹ Interview, Author with Sir Kenneth Bloomfield former Assistant Secretary to the NI Cabinet, 26 February 2008, c. 50mins.

⁵² MLR Smith, *Fighting for Ireland: the military strategy of the Irish republican movement* (London: Routledge, 1995); 98.

narrowest of margins, using the minor and spur lines to divert supply. In their own words;

'A serious threat was posed to the electricity supply by IRA sabotage of the highest merit [at Ballylumford]... in August 1971, which was followed by a two month campaign against the transmission system. Supply was not affected by this largely because it took place when the demand for electricity was seasonally low.'⁵³

So narrow the margins in August 1971 that one of the first priorities of the British Government upon imposing Direct Rule was the investigation of contingencies in case of further IRA sabotage campaigns.⁵⁴

It is unclear whether those responsible for the 'skilled sabotage'⁵⁵ particularly in August and September 1971 were ever caught or convicted. Research from the IRA's perspective does not suggest there was any great mastermind behind the campaign or any clear link to insider knowledge.⁵⁶ One of a number of possibilities is one John James Quigley a 30 year old electrician and IRA bomber imprisoned in October 1971 for the 21 May bombing of an electricity substation and a later July attack on a branch of BHS⁵⁷ but the IRA used a number of electricians as bomb-makers, any one of which, with the necessary experience, could have masterminded the plan. What is certain is that the attacks led directly to the abandonment of the North-South Interconnector in 1972, the abandonment of plans for a Northern Ireland Nuclear Power Station

⁵³ Memo on Public Utility Contingencies, Electricity Sabotage, (c.) January 1972, Com 58/3/1, PRONI.

⁵⁴ Memo J.A.G. Whitlaw, 'Electricity Emergency Planning: Experience of March 27 and 28' 1972, Ibid.

⁵⁵ Memo on Electricity situation marked SECRET, 23 August 1971. Com 58/3/1, PRONI.

⁵⁶ Gerry Kelly had a very junior position as a 17 year old in the Belfast Corporation Electricity Department. Although in August 1971 Kelly was arrested in the Republic for possession of 'Fianna weapons' <http://www.anphoblacht.com/news/detail/22590> Interview with Gerry Kelly in *An Phoblacht*, 20 December 2007.

⁵⁷ 'Mr Faulkner fails to gain full party support at meeting', *The Times* 9 October 1971.

earmarked for the southern shores of Lough Neagh or at St John's Point near Ardglass, Co Down⁵⁸ and the acceptance of the need for an additional, large conventional power station to ensure the security of supply to Belfast.⁵⁹ Thus, in real terms, 1971 represents the most successful IRA infrastructural campaign, one that seriously shook the Stormont government's grip on power, although not the last and certainly not the most ambitious of the IRA's infrastructural campaigns.

London: 1996

Although after 1971 and indeed throughout the Troubles the IRA used sporadic bomb attacks on electricity pylons and substations to spread the security forces as widely possible, not until 1996 did they return to the idea of launching a concerted campaign again, this time, not against Northern Ireland, but, like in 1939, London was to be the target.

Like in 1971, the campaign seems to have been designed as a short-sharp-shock, mixing a variety of different tactics but with the centre-piece being attacks on London's electricity infrastructure, just like in 1939. Several Active Service Units were involved in Britain at the time and their operations included the February 1996 Docklands bomb and the June 1996 Manchester truck bomb – which, at over 3,000 lbs, was the largest IRA bomb ever detonated in Britain. The Docklands bomb had a huge impact on the way in which the capital was policed. Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Paul Condon warned Londoners, 'We do our very best to minimise the risk of terrorism, but we can only ever minimise it, you can never in a large, open, democratic city guarantee that there will never be a terrorist incident.'⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the so-called 'Ring of Steel'

⁵⁸ Cabinet Minutes 24 November 1970, 'The St John's Point site should be acquired as soon as the need for nuclear plant can be determined; it is expected that this can be done in 1971.' CAB 9F/227/3, PRONI.

⁵⁹ NI Government Information Service, Press release, 'New power station announced. Kilroot, Co Antrim, Oil Fired, 12,000MW to be commissioned 1978', 6 September 1971, Ibid.

⁶⁰ Docklands bomb ends IRA ceasefire, BBC News, 10 February 1996.

placed around the city of London in the wake of the Bishopsgate bomb in 1993, was reinstated within hours and a similar system was announced for the Isle of Dogs within weeks of the Docklands bomb.⁶¹

Minimising the risk of further IRA actions in the capital was, by 1996, also the responsibility of MI5 who had been given responsibility for countering IRA operations in Britain in 1992 following the IRA's near miss on Downing Street's Cabinet Room during the Gulf War in 1991. MI5, while it had overall responsibility for 'terrorism' generally, when it came to Northern Ireland, it had only overall responsibility for loyalist activity outside the province, and Republican activity outside the UK. It was traditionally the London Metropolitan Police Special Branch, who had the lead role when it came to the IRA in Britain.⁶² Within months of the Dockland's bomb, two IRA Active Service Units had been arrested in the capital, using MI5 led investigations. One had been planning a repeat of the Manchester bombing in London, the other an S-Plan style concerted attack on London's electricity infrastructure.

The sabotage group, a five or six man Active Service Unit was brought together in Ireland at the start of the summer of 1996 and given a fairly detailed plan for the operation they were to carry out. The group consisted of experienced IRA men some with long and fairly distinguished IRA careers. Gerard Hanratty, for example, had been an IRA member since 1979, and alleged in court that while in prison for a separate offence he had been in contact on behalf of the IRA with Patrick Mayhew, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. John Crawley was another member of the group

http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/february/10/newsid_2539000/2539265.stm

⁶¹ 'Ring of Steel clangs back in to position', *The Times*, 11 February 1996; 'Ring of steel will be built to protect the Isle of Dogs', *The Times*, 11 March 1996.

⁶² Stella Rimington, *Open Secret: The autobiography of the Former Director General of MI5* (London: Hutchinson, 2001); 218.

with a long career in the IRA. A former US Marine, Crawley had been an instructor in explosives at Quantico before joining the IRA in the early 1980s and in 1984 participating in the *Valhalla/Marita Ann* IRA gun-running plot between Boston and Kerry, intercepted by the Irish Navy using intelligence from the FBI and SIS. Crawley was sentenced to ten years by an Irish court.⁶³ Donal Gannon, was also in the group, he was the bomb maker suspected to have been involved in the earlier Manchester attack. The group was understandably described by one police officer as 'the A-team', and by another as, 'some of the most important and experienced players they have sent over here for some years.'⁶⁴

Conscious of the increased security in London following the Docklands bomb the group had moved quietly into London on false passports, rented houses without outgoing telephone lines, and lived only in areas they could blend in unnoticed. They were shown initial plans and carried out dry-runs of the attacks in Ireland, taking elaborate precautions to ensure they were not followed.⁶⁵ But further reconnaissance was required, and the group, while in London, borrowed the Electricity Supply Handbook from Battersea Library – removing from it the map of the National Grid – and conducted additional dry-runs against the six targeted facilities themselves.

Unbeknownst to the group their actions had already made them open to MI5 and Metropolitan Police Special Branch surveillance and they were already being tracked down and followed. Peter Rose and David Williams suggested during the trial that MI5 were alerted exactly *because* the IRA had chosen such an experienced team well known among the IRA and its RUC informants alike. When they disappeared from their usual locations, British Intelligence got wind that something

⁶³ 'Terrorists jailed for Marita Ann Arms Cache', *The Times*, 12 December 1984.

⁶⁴ 'IRA blitz on gas and water plants foiled', *The Times*, 16 July 1997.

⁶⁵ 'IRA man tells court how unit set up London base', *The Times*, 4 June 1997.

major was being planned.⁶⁶ MI5 acted quickly to mount what became one of the largest surveillance operations of its history, involving 300 detectives and agents under the name Operation Airlines.⁶⁷

The carefully chosen locations for the bomb attacks were six electricity switching stations located around the greater London area, roughly encircling the M25.⁶⁸ According to the prosecution, the group planned to plant 37 devices in total, each packed with 2.5kg of Semtex, that, had they exploded, would have blacked out London completely for two days, and led to further disruption for an additional 35. Obviously this would have caused major disruption for Londoners, and possibly chaotic scenes creating an energy crisis on a national scale. Politically the timing was also perfect, the Major government was not popular (hovering at between 25% and 33% in opinion polls throughout the year)⁶⁹ and this would have been a distinct challenge to its authority. Hanratty, the leader of the group, claimed the boxes were to be filled with icing sugar rather than Semtex, though he did not deny the plan was to disrupt electricity supplies and embarrass the government. Whether explosives were present or not, the plot would have had roughly the same effect, closing off substations for many hours while bomb-disposal teams dealt with the numerous suspect devices. In his defence, Hanratty argued, 'If the IRA was capable of closing down London without going into London, it made the Ring of Steel null and void.'⁷⁰ Certainly no explosives were actually found in the group's possession. The group were sentenced to 35 years each, the judge considering the dangers posed by electricity shortages to the thousands of sick and infirm living in the capital and those who would have died in accidents caused by the blackout told them 'You'll

⁶⁶ 'Blackout Bombers sent down for 210 years', Peter Rose and David Williams, *Daily Mail*, 3 July 1997.

⁶⁷ Tony Geraghty, *The Irish War: The hidden conflict between the IRA and British Intelligence*, (London: Harper Collins, 1998); 240.

⁶⁸ Ibid. Canterbury-North, West Weybridge, Amersham Main, Waltham Cross, Elstree and Rayleigh

⁶⁹ MORI Poll Archive, all published opinion polls, 1996, <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/polls/trends/voting-allpub-trends.shtml#1996>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

find no mercy here!⁷¹

In many ways the 1996 operation, despite its interception by Britain's security services, showed a practical and professional approach to IRA operations planning that had been missing in both the idealistic approach of the 1939 and the seemingly accidental approach of 1971; the 1996 campaign in Britain (that included bombs at Canary Wharf, Hammersmith Bridge and the Arndale Centre in Manchester) arguably demonstrated the maturity and discipline of the Provisional IRA as a group by the late 1990s. As, while due to the critical nature of electricity in the 1990s as opposed to the 1930s, their attacks would have caused far greater disruption to ordinary life. So too did they realise that, in and of itself, such bomb attacks, timed between the 1994 and 1997 ceasefires, were not designed any longer to rid Ireland of the British occupation overnight. The 1996 attacks must be seen as part of a process and thus we see continuity in the development of the S-Plan mixed with a lowering of ambitions as to its possible political effect. The IRA, while they had undoubtedly planned their 1996 attacks while technically on ceasefire, were also planning their next ceasefire (enacted 19 July 1997) while carrying out their 1996 attacks.⁷²

Conclusions

While attacks against infrastructure are not the monopoly of the IRA – not even in these islands – their use by Irish republicans since 1939 shows remarkably little change in their *modus operandi*.

While their substance might not have changed, their proficiency in tactical planning did. Irish republicans often express great interest in their own past, often justifying their very existence by

⁷¹ Ibid. (Although all of the group were released by 2000 under the Good Friday Agreement), Tony Geraghty, *The Irish War*, (London: Harper Collins, 1998); 240.

⁷² For Richard English, citing a statement in *An Phoblacht*, 27 March 1997, 'The IRA were prepared to face their responsibilities 'in facilitating a process aimed at securing a lasting resolution' to the conflict'', Richard English, *Armed Struggle: The History of the IRA*, (London: Pan Macmillan, 2004); 293.

the blood sacrifice made by previous generations. Learning from, and being conscious of both their mistakes and their successes in the past is crucial to understanding not only how such a sophisticated plot could come together in 1996, but also in understanding the movement of the IRA away from violence. It is doubtful that the IRA's Army Council in 1996 knew precisely how close their infrastructural campaign had come to success in 1971 (although at this stage, contingencies for the collapse of Stormont and its replacement by Direct Rule along the lines established in March 1972 were already clearly defined)⁷³ but they had also become far more realistic in their ambitions for any campaign mounted in Britain and no longer expected these attacks to magically reunite Northern Ireland harmoniously within some new Republic as in 1939 and 1971. By 1996, bombs in Britain were about political pressure both within the republican movement itself (between the Army Council and Sinn Féin) and externally between the Major Government (its majority hinging on the votes of Unionist MPs) and broader Irish nationalism. In both cases they were timely reminders of the cold ability of the IRA in the 1990s, a professionalism clearly juxtaposed by the amateurish image of the young Brendan Behan being arrested off the Liverpool boat with a suitcase full of dynamite. Despite this, as with Behan, the 1996 IRA unit were captured and arrested before being able to carry out their planned attacks. The increased technical ability of the IRA was therefore being at least matched by that of British Intelligence and Special Branch for them to have staved off so decisively the IRA's own 'A-Team'.

While the IRA have never been the only guerrilla movement to have used sabotage, their avoidance of casualties on a truly mass scale do separate them categorically from groups both preceding and subsequent who have actively targeted civilians to a much greater extent than the Provisional IRA ever did. Tellingly for the post 9/11 world, in O'Donovan's S-Plan, besides the ban

⁷³ Anthony Craig, *Intergovernmental relations between Britain, Ireland and Northern Ireland 1966-1974*, (unpublished PhD Thesis, Cambridge, 2008); 207-209.

on poisoning of public water supplies so too prohibited were attacks on the fire services, 'for humanitarian reasons' and against flying aircraft, lest 'delay action [bombs]... occur during flight'⁷⁴ options that Al Qaeda, for example, have never ruled out.

⁷⁴ Copy of IRA S-Plan, HO 144/21357, TNA.