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Irish priest Patrick Ryan saw no contradiction between his faith and violence.
Staatsarchiv Aargau / RBA

The IRA priest and his Swiss connection

Bombs in Brighton, timers from Switzerland and secret bank accounts in Geneva. The Irish Republican Army (IRA) was highly active in the United Kingdom and Europe during the 1980s. Patrick Ryan, one of the terror group's leading members, was also a priest.

Jonas Hirschi →
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In the early hours of 12 October 1984, a ten-kilogramme time bomb exploded at the Grand Hotel in Brighton in the south of England, killing five people. There were many Conservative party members staying in the hotel at the time for their party conference. The IRA claimed responsibility for the bomb the following morning. Their main target had been British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher because she had refused to grant the Irish hunger strikers special status as political prisoners in 1981. Thatcher survived the attack. Nonetheless, as the IRA said in its statement the following morning: "Today we were unlucky, but remember we have only to be lucky once, you will have to be lucky always." In other words, besides claiming responsibility for the bombing, the terror group also indicated that it could strike again and that it was impossible to guarantee Thatcher's complete safety.

TV report on the Brighton attack.
YouTube / British Pathé

The Brighton bombing caused global consternation. The Federal Council sent a telegram to Thatcher that very day to express its "disgust and dismay" at the attack. The Federal Council didn't realise at the time that funds and components of the bomb used in the attack came from Switzerland. That was due to the involvement of a leading IRA member: Catholic priest Patrick Ryan.

Im Schatten des IRA-Terroranschlags

IRA-Priester Patrick Ryan wollte mit seinem Bombenanschlag auf Thatcher Rache nehmen

Von Hans Ulrich Kempski

Hermann Kuhn

Die Attentäterin mit verstümmelten Gesichtszügen, die Ehefrau des Bombenattentäters Patrick Ryan, Kathleen Ryan, wurde gestern in ihrer Wohnung in Dublin von Journalisten umzingelt. Sie hatte ihren Mann, der wegen Mordversuchs an der Premierministerin Mrs. Thatcher, Sprengstoffanschlägen und Terrorismus gesucht wird, seit Jahren nicht mehr gesehen. Ihre Tochter Mairéad Ryan, die mit ihrem Vater zusammenlebte, ist in Haft. Sie wird zusammen mit ihrem Vater, Patrick Ryan, und weiteren Personen des Verbrechens beschuldigt.

Die Polizeibehörden haben bisher keine Hinweise auf den Aufenthaltsort des Priesters gefunden. Die Polizeiaktionen, die in ganz Irland und Nordirland ausgelöst wurden, haben bisher keine Ergebnisse gezeitigt. Die Polizei hat Fahndungsplakate mit Fotos von Ryan und seiner Frau Kathleen an alle Polizeistationen verschickt.

Ryan, der Sohn eines Bauern aus Tipperary, ist Mitglied der Provisorischen Irischen Republikanischen Armee (IRA) und gilt als Mitglied des Führungsstabs der Terrorgruppe. Er soll zusammen mit einem Mann namens Gerard Tuite die Bombe im Hotel Grand Brighton am Morgen des Attentats am 12. Oktober 1984 gelegt haben. Tuite, der wegen Mordversuchs an Premierministerin Mrs. Thatcher, Sprengstoffanschlägen und Terrorismus gesucht wird, ist seit Jahren nicht mehr gesehen worden. Die Polizeibehörden haben bisher keine Hinweise auf den Aufenthaltsort des Priesters gefunden. Die Polizeiaktionen, die in ganz Irland und Nordirland ausgelöst wurden, haben bisher keine Ergebnisse gezeitigt. Die Polizei hat Fahndungsplakate mit Fotos von Ryan und seiner Frau Kathleen an alle Polizeistationen verschickt.

Ryan, der Sohn eines Bauern aus Tipperary, ist Mitglied der Provisorischen Irischen Republikanischen Armee (IRA) und gilt als Mitglied des Führungsstabs der Terrorgruppe. Er, Tuite, Kathleen Ryan und weitere Personen sollen das Attentat auf Premierministerin Mrs. Thatcher, Sprengstoffanschläge und Terrorismus vorbereitet haben.

Iron Lady: Margaret Thatcher narrowly escaped the attempt on her life but insisted on continuing as normal the following morning, which earned her considerable respect in the United Kingdom.
Article from *Der Bund* newspaper of 13 October 1984.
e-newspaperarchives

Patrick Ryan was born in 1930 into a farming family in County Tipperary, Republic of Ireland. He entered the seminary at the age of 18 and was sent to do missionary work in Tanzania shortly after being ordained. On his return to Ireland, Ryan was made responsible for receiving donations for the Palottine Order. His aim had initially been to return to east Africa. But that changed when the conflict known as the Troubles broke out in the late 1960s. A civil rights movement by the disadvantaged Catholic minority in Northern Ireland ran into sustained and violent opposition from the British Unionist majority. Irish nationalists and Republicans responded with attacks of their own.

TV report on unrest in Londonderry, 1969.
YouTube / British Pathé

Ryan read the newspaper daily following the outbreak of the Troubles and his attention shifted from Africa to Northern Ireland. He started surreptitiously diverting funds from missionary projects in Africa to the IRA. Shortly thereafter, Ryan was given a new assignment on the strength of his experience in Africa: he was to travel to Libya to meet Muammar Gaddafi who had republican sympathies. Gaddafi saw the Irish struggle against the British empire as similar to the many anticolonial campaigns in Africa. On that basis, he was prepared to deliver weapons to the IRA and contribute to financing the organisation. The funds were to be transferred to Swiss bank accounts managed by Ryan, hence his frequent visits to Geneva.

Geneva – city of watches

On a cold winter morning in 1975, Patrick Ryan strolled through the streets of Geneva enjoying a spot of window shopping. The priest halted outside a shop selling watches. It wasn't the luxury timepieces that caught his eye but a tiny device known as a Swiss MemoTimer. This portable device as big as a keying worked like an egg timer. Once activated, it would signal when a certain amount of time had elapsed: it was most often used as a reminder of when a parking meter had run out. However, its potential applications were boundless. As the advertising slogan announced: "Everyone you know can use this Swiss MemoTimer". Ryan was not interested in parking meters. He saw the user-friendly gadgets as being ideal for IRA bombs.

Advert for the Swiss *MemoTimer* in US magazine Look, 1968.
provided

So, Ryan returned to the Emerald Isle from his visit to Switzerland with more than just money; he brought dozens of timers, which could be added to bombs as time fuses. He showed his discovery to the IRA and convinced the leadership that the user-friendly MemoTimers were well suited for working under stressful conditions and would help keep the bombers safe. The IRA's engineering department adapted the MemoTimers to make them run for up to several days. All the bombers had to do was set the Swiss *MemoTimer* in the bomb and then retreat to safety. The IRA was so enthused by Ryan's novel idea that he imported another 950 timers to Ireland from Switzerland over the following six months.

This unusual activity brought Ryan to the attention of the Office of the Attorney General in Switzerland and he was arrested on 26 July 1976. Under questioning, Ryan threatened that his detention could lead to acts of violence against third parties. The Swiss Embassy in London was informed of the threat and introduced security measures for embassy staff on 31 July 1976 in cooperation with Scotland Yard.

Patrick Ryan was arrested in Switzerland in July 1976, although he was released from prison a mere ten days later.
Staatsarchiv Aargau / RBA

Ryan was released shortly afterwards but the Office of the Attorney General banned the IRA priest from entering Switzerland. Ryan appealed against the decision, arguing that he had to visit Switzerland to finance humanitarian activities in Africa. The Federal Council rejected his appeal.

However, the damage had already been done by then. Hundreds of fragments of the Swiss MemoTimer were found following the Warrenpoint ambush of 1979, which caused the death of 18 British soldiers. The Brighton hotel bombing in 1984 was also activated by a Swiss timing device. And that is how Switzerland, albeit indirectly, played a part in the Northern Irish conflict. The emphasis in this instance is on the word "indirect", i.e. unintentional. The delivery of war materiel and use of Swiss bank accounts flew under the radar and not even the Federal Act on War Materiel could have been applied to prevent the export of the small timers, which were entirely harmless as a standalone product.

Patrick Ryan died on 15 June 2025 in Dublin after a short illness. The IRA priest spent his twilight years in a nursing home. He never expressed regret for his actions.

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