

# List of Suspected Civilian Spies Killed by the IRA, 1920-21

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*Note about the form of entries in this database: Each of the entries in the Cork Spy Files follows the same format: (1) the name of the suspected spy, including certain variations in the forename or surname that appear in the sources; (2) the victim's age (if known, and usually as derived from the 1911 census); (3) the victim's residence if known and given without parentheses; (4) the place of death, given within parentheses; (5) the exact date of the incident, i.e., the date on which the suspected spy was killed or mortally wounded, or the date on which the victim was abducted or otherwise disappeared, though death took place on a later date; (6) the full range of our sources for each death, with abbreviations as needed, and for which a full list will soon be supplied on the website as part of a comprehensive bibliography; and (7) a note providing all valuable information about the victim available to us and considered relevant.*

**5. Civilian John Coughlan** (aged about 46) of [Barry's Lane], Cobh/Queenstown (Aghada near Midleton)

Date of incident: 14 Aug. 1920 (abducted and committed suicide in IRA custody)

Sources: *CC*, 7 Sept. 1920; *CCE*, 11 Sept. 1920; *IT*, 22 Aug. 1921; Interview with Mick Leahy, Ernie O'Malley Notebooks, P17b/108 (UCDA); Murphy (2010), 35, 41, 389 (note 19); O'Halpin (2013), 339.

Note: Coughlan allegedly hanged himself while being held in IRA custody for having allowed his daughters to be used as 'prostitutes' by members of the British forces. His body was tied to a cart axle and thrown into the sea. The IRA claimed later to have obtained evidence that Coughlan was a spy. Coughlan appeared on the list of 'missing persons' published in the *Irish Times* of 22 August 1921. There the date of his kidnapping was given as 14 August 1920. He died in IRA custody at Aghada near Midleton. It must have been Coughlan's body that washed ashore at Ballybranagan Strand, 8 miles south of Midleton, on 3 September 1920. Although the body was reportedly too decomposed for identification, the fact that it was tied to a cart axle pointed strongly to Coughlan. See *CC*, 7 Sept. 1920. His remains were buried in Knockgriffin Cemetery. The only John Coughlan listed in the 1911 census as resident in Queenstown (apart from a one-year-old baby) resided in Barry's Lane with his wife Anne, a son, and three daughters whose ages in 1920 would have been about 24, 19, and 14. Coughlan was a Catholic and a 'general labourer'.

This bizarre and ghoulish story finds its most extended explanation in an interview given by former Volunteer Michael (Mick) Leahy to Ernie O'Malley sometime in the early 1950s: 'The strangest thing about the first spy who met his death through us was that we didn't shoot him. In Cobh we arrested this fellow [John Coughlan] for using his two daughters as prostitutes for the British and we took him to Aghada and we wanted to [illegible] for a while. He was kept in May Higgins [house] in a loft and there was a girl there. She was bringing him up his breakfast when she found him hanging to a

rafter, dead. We were in a [illegible] then, for he had been arrested in broad daylight, so I got 4 lads to bury him. Paddy Sullivan from Cobh, who was later executed in Cork gaol after he had been caught in [the Battle of] Clonmult, [was one of the 4 lads.] Later on, he asked me, did we see "The Examiner." And when I read it, I found that a body, which had been tied to an axle, had washed ashore on Inch Strand. The lads had not buried him. They had tied him to an old car axle and had flung him out into the sea. He was in the morgue in Midleton, I was told, in the workhouse. "Did you search his clothes," I asked. "No, but we knew his face." We visited the morgue, but at the time the bad flu was raging and the morgue was full of corpses. We went along from corpse to corpse with a flash lamp, pulling up the clothes to look for our man. At last we came to a corpse and when we pulled back the cloth, we found that the crabs had got hold of his face and that there was nothing of it left. A month later, we got evidence that this man had been a spy and that's why he hanged himself!?' See Interview with Mick Leahy, Ernie O'Malley Notebooks, P17b/108 (UCDA).