

THE SMU

an outfit for institutionalised VIOLENCE



It was a special police force, an elite squad of 30 men who were trained to suppress nuisance crowds and rioters. Within years of

its creation, it soon became an outfit for institutionalised violence, which has given the eighties its historical blood-red tinge



IT APPEARS that it was violence postponed. Curious arguments abound on how, the violence that characterised the eighties had been inevitable.

The country managed to bypass civil strife post-independence, then that strife had to resurface at one point or another.

But the violence of the age was also the result of rule by the uncouth. Promoting class struggle, the Labour government fraternised with and came to depend on people like *Il-Qahbu*, *L-Indjan*, *Il-Qattus*, *Id-Dadu* and *Il-Pupa*. Mintoff's Labour government's hegemony left little room for autonomy in the island's institutions.

The police force had become not only the government's enforcing arm, but also the party's, where favours were dispensed according to allegiance. The instantly recognisable phalanx that marched along the above-mentioned thugs down Tal-Barrani Road in Zejtun, is today captured in one of the most enduring of images of the bloody, civil feud of the eighties. And the legacy of the SMU's brutality had yet to be sealed, when in 2000, former SMU sergeant Joseph John Grech, was cleared of attempting to murder three Nationalist Party supporters in Rabat in 1987.



The SMU was the progeny of an anti-terrorist unit. The massacre of the Israeli contingent at the 1972 Munich Olympics by the Black September had instilled a new fear of terrorist groups infiltrating countries and bringing bloodshed.

Countries responded by equipping their police units with special squads, trained to suppress any sort of extraordinary disturbance and to counter any eventual terrorist attack. Malta's anti-terrorist unit, the Skwadra Kontra Attakki Terroristici, would later be re-christened into the Special Mobile Unit, created by ex-Police Superintendent Charles Cassar in 1981.

The 1981 elections had brought with it signs of disappointment with the Labour government. A curious mix of political sentiments had delivered the Nationalists a greater share of the national vote, but Labour had won more parliamentary seats. The electoral law gave power to the party with more seats, and the MLP took its seat

in power for the third time running, democratically. The fluke fuelled brash reactions. Fenech Adami, the new PN leader, called foul and withdrew his party from Parliament, in a boycott lasting several months. The political divide had just grown wider. That the SMU was created in the wake of growing antipathy towards Labour, remains part of the aesthetic of Labour's repressive hold. The thirty officers of the police force enjoyed dangerous anonymity and special regard. Their actions were only answerable to two people – Inspector Charles Cassar, who would later become Superintendent and also commander of the Special Assignment Group; and Police Commissioner Lawrence Pullicino, who following Nationalist re-election, would be brought to court and imprisoned for the murder of Nardu Debono.

The SMU was a regular presence during mass meetings, ready to react to any tension between Nationalist and Labour supporters. Prior to these meetings, the SMU officers would engage in mock fighting among themselves in their headquarters, while preparing for their despatch. The unit had been first stationed in Hal Luqa. It was later transferred to Floriana.

The arms in the SMU armoury included 16 SPAS, 30 Berettas, 30 Brownings, 30 FAL rifles, around 10 Webley Scott flare guns and around 14 Smith & Wesson handguns.

During mass meetings, every SMU officer would be armed with a Browning sub-machine gun and a Beretta handgun. Two of the police sergeants would also be armed with a SPAS, a special purpose automatic shotgun that could shoot tear gas and gas grenades.

The SMU was involved in many incidents, including the raid on the PN headquarters, during the 1981 and 1987 elections at the vote counting halls, the Tal-Barrani Road incident, and the frame-up of Pietru Pawl Busuttill.



The following recounts the events that happened on 5 April, 1987 in Rabat, in the weeks preceding the 1987 elections.

The incident concerns the attempted murder of three Nationalist

supporters - Mario Pavia, Joe Cassar and Joe Vella, who had been seriously wounded by shots that had allegedly been fired by the SMU, after a PN activity had ended at around 6 p.m. In the same incident, the Rabat PN club was set on fire. The events had been preceded by earlier fighting in Haz Zebbug between Labour and Nationalist supporters.

The inquest into the alleged attempted murder of Mario Pavia and Joe Vella started after Nationalist re-election on 4 April, 1988 and was conducted by Magistrate Jeffrey Valenzia. The results of the inquest resulted in the accusation of a former SMU member of attempting to murder three people and of slightly injuring other people.

The accused was Police Sergeant Joseph John Grech, who was charged with the attempted murder of the three PN supporters in Rabat on 5 April, 1987. He was also charged with slightly injuring other PN supporters, including Lawrence Zammit, John Calleja, Mario Camilleri, Stephen Tanti, Joseph Farrugia, Anthony Busuttill and Jerry Rapinett when he shot in their direction. The SMU sergeant Joseph John Grech, was cleared of attempting to murder three Nationalist Party supporters in Rabat in 1987.

The court proceedings reported that towards the end of the meeting, around 20 to 30 Nationalist supporters started throwing objects at the police who had been stationed next to the Rabat MLP club. As the situation worsened, the SMU were despatched and ordered to control the crowds. The unit was led by then-Inspector Charles Cassar, who headed two units of 13 constables each. One of the units was led by Joseph John Grech. As soon as the SMU arrived on the scene, the unit made its way towards the church square. On arrival, the order was given to fire tear gas into the crowd in front of the PN club.

According to the allegations, a gun was pointed directly at Pavia, one of the supporters who had been throwing objects at the police. In an image catching the minutes before the shooting, Pavia is frozen in action as he is throwing objects at the police underneath the arch in front of the church. Pavia was shot and hit in his chest and stomach, causing injuries to his lungs, diaphragm, liver and the major vena cava.

After having directly shot at Pavia, it was reported that Joseph Cassar and Joe Vella were shot. Vella, was standing alone in the middle of the street when he was shot hitting in the head, thorax and abdomen. Seriously injured, Vella was rushed to hospital. In the inquest following the incident, it resulted that Architect Richard Aquilina had collected eight tear gas canisters and one shotgun shell. He also made note of the presence of around 60 bullet marks on the ceiling of the PN club. Ballistic experts concluded that shotgun shells and other bullets had been fired from the same guns that had been used earlier in the day at Haz-Zebbug.

The inquest concluded that Mario Pavia and Joe Vella had been wounded by shotguns. The police force denied the accusations. Others argued the shots had been fired from above, noting there were PN supporters who were throwing objects from the PN club's roof.

The Magistrate concluded that the fighting between supporters was under control until tension started mounting as more bottles and stones began to be thrown. He noted Assistant Commissioner Anthony Mifsud Tommasi, who was co-ordinating the operation, had ordered the police to retreat. His orders were however ignored by the Riot Squad, whereupon the SMU was called in to rectify the situation, increasing the police contingent to 140.

Soon after being despatched, SMU officers fired tear gas canisters at the PN club, at which point the premises started catching fire whilst people were still inside. Traces of petrol and alcohol, along with the tear gas canisters, were found in the building during the inquest. The inquest also concluded that four SMU officers were in fact armed. These were Inspector Charles Cassar and Police Sergeant Joseph John Grech, Joseph Brincat and Victor Pace. All of them were armed with a Beretta. Grech and Pace also had SPAS. The investigations revealed that the shots had apparently been fired from the direction where the SMU were in fact stationed.

It was also revealed that when the crowds had dispersed, police officers were ordered to collect any evidence of fired bullets.

Continues next week