

# Documents prove British state organised murders in Northern Ireland

Chris Talbot  
10 April 1998

Leaked Military Intelligence documents give conclusive evidence that the Ulster Defence Association (UDA), a paramilitary group in the north of Ireland which supports union with Britain, carried out assassinations under the direct control of the British army.

The documents were given to journalists from the right-wing *Sunday Telegraph*, presumably to embarrass the British government during the last stage of the “peace process.” They are proof that the British army’s role in Ireland over the last 28 years, far from preventing conflict, has been to stir up sectarian divisions.

The March 29 *Sunday Telegraph* reported, “We have seen secret files that, for the first time, provide evidence that the British Army’s Force Research Unit (FRU), a branch of Military Intelligence responsible for running agents in Northern Ireland, was complicit in a series of murders carried out by the UDA between 1987 and 1990.”

Probably the most important agent of the FRU was Brian Nelson. His role as a British agent who became the UDA’s intelligence officer was revealed when he was arrested in 1990 and then brought to trial for murder in 1992. In a deal struck with the Attorney General at the time, Patrick Mayhew, Nelson agreed to plead guilty to lesser charges and the trial was dropped. Nelson served six years in jail and, according the *Sunday Telegraph*, is still on the army payroll.

The present documents show that Nelson was involved in 15 murders, 15 attempted murders and 62 conspiracies to murder. They also show that the FRU was made up of 50 officers and soldiers who ran more than 100 agents. Whilst it was formally wound up in 1990, the FRU was then reconstituted and still operates.

It was revealed in 1992 that Nelson was passing on names, photographs and addresses of suspected IRA members from Army Intelligence records to UDA gunmen. Records of Nelson’s meetings with his handlers quoted in the *Telegraph* confirm this, and also show Nelson himself carrying out assassinations under army direction.

In 1989, UDA men released official Army Intelligence documents to the media. Altogether 250 names, photographs

and addresses of IRA suspects were handed over, including a document claiming that a man they had killed, Loughlin Maginn, was on army files as an IRA Intelligence Officer. An official inquiry was set up by the British government headed by John Stevens, Deputy Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire. The Stevens investigation led to the exposure of Nelson: his fingerprint was found on one of the documents.

The *Telegraph* report details how Army Intelligence obstructed the Stevens inquiry. All the evidence collected by the police was destroyed when an office was set on fire. Fire alarms failed to work and police who found their office ablaze were unable to phone the fire brigade because the telephones were disconnected. Other documents obtained by the *Telegraph* reveal Nelson’s handlers instructing him “never to mention his work for this office.”

Only when the Stevens team threatened to arrest senior army officers for obstruction were documents handed over to them. A Colonel “J,” head of the FRU, told the Stevens inquiry that the operation with Nelson had helped to save lives. Nelson would tell them who the UDA were planning to assassinate and they would pass the information on to the police Special Branch.

FRU documents obtained by the *Telegraph* show that on at least 92 occasions Army Intelligence knew whom the UDA were planning to assassinate, with details of how the killings would be carried out. Only in two cases (one of them an assassination attempt against Gerry Adams) was this information passed on and used to stop a killing.

A top-level cover-up was organised, suppressing the Stevens report and making sure the Nelson court case revealed as little as possible. In the week before the court case John Major, then prime minister, paid an unscheduled visit to Northern Ireland and met the trial judge and the Lord Chief Justice. In court, Colonel “J” appeared behind a screen, claiming again that Nelson had saved lives. Nelson was praised as a “valuable agent” and a “brave man” by the Minister of Defence, Tom King. Colonel “J” has received the Order of the British Empire for his services.

The official rationale behind the Nelson operation was that it directed the UDA to kill IRA men, rather than “random killings” of Catholics. The documents state that “proper targeting of Provisional IRA members [took] place prior to any shooting.”

In fact, dozens of killings of Catholics with no connection to the IRA were carried out by loyalist paramilitaries. In two cases cited by the *Telegraph* the information supplied by the army was completely unreliable.

Nelson drew up dozens of “P” (or Personality) cards on potential UDA targets, using information passed on by the army. Gerard Slane was shot because his photograph resembled that of a wanted IRA man, and Terence McDaid was shot by mistake instead of his brother Declan, who was an IRA activist, because a wrong address was given. Two weeks after Slane’s murder the FRU report cynically stated, “The level of targeting information is already of a high quality and recent attacks have proven this accurate.”

The *Telegraph* writes of the McDaid killing: “Nelson had called his British Army handler as soon as he knew the wrong man had been shot. Terence McDaid was innocent, yet Nelson’s handler was neither angry nor upset about his murder. Indeed, the handler seems not even to have been alarmed. His reaction was simply to placate Nelson by telling him that Terence McDaid had been ‘traced as Provisional IRA.’ The clear implication was that this consideration justified his death. Nelson’s handler even reported that he was quite ‘content.’ In fact, the ‘reassurance’ that the handler gave Nelson was totally bogus. Terence McDaid had no connection at all with the Provisional IRA or any other terrorist group.”

Nelson spoke to his handler after a failed assassination attempt on Sinn Fein Belfast City Councillor Alex Maskey. The telephone transcript reported, “He [Maskey] just missed death by 20 seconds. I was involved up to my neck with a Mr. Heckler [Heckler and Koch machine gun]. I’m mad. We only missed him by 20 seconds.”

Besides the *Telegraph* leak, a recent United Nations Human Rights Commission Report has indicted the police in Northern Ireland for the treatment of lawyers who specialise in defending republican and loyalist suspects. The UN report says police “engaged in activities which constitute intimidation, hindrance, harassment or improper concern.”

The report also calls for a judicial inquiry into the killing of lawyer Pat Finucane, murdered in 1989 after he successfully defended an IRA man. An interview given by Nelson while still in prison showed that he passed information on Finucane to UDA members who carried out the killing. The FRU were informed but either took no action to prevent the assassination or, more likely, actively supported it.

Finucane was shot immediately after British Cabinet Minister Douglas Hogg stated in the House of Commons: “There are in Northern Ireland a number of solicitors who are unduly sympathetic to the cause of the IRA.... I state this on the basis of advice that I have received, guidance that I have been given by people who are dealing with these matters.”

Sinn Fein now claim that the Nelson affair went even further than the British army directing UDA assassinations. They say Nelson was already an agent for 10 years before 1987, the date reported by the *Telegraph* as the start of his undercover operations.

*An Phoblacht/Republican News*, the official journal of Sinn Fein, report that Nelson visited South Africa in 1985 with another British agent, Charles Simpson, to arrange an arms deal with representatives of the apartheid regime. Sinn Fein have detailed lists of hundreds of weapons shipped into Ireland in 1987 as a result of this deal, pointing out that while loyalist paramilitaries killed 71 people between 1982 and 1987, they killed 229 between 1988 and 1994.

They cite a 1992 article in *Private Eye* magazine which claimed Nelson’s arms deal was cleared not only by the Ministry of Defence, but by an unnamed government minister. The deal struck with Nelson at his trial was to stop this information from becoming public.

British Army Intelligence operations continue in Northern Ireland with the unit which was reconstituted from the FRU. A report in the *Irish Times* on March 30 suggests that members of this unit were involved in an incident in January when a policeman in Belfast was shot and seriously wounded. Police tried to stop two unmarked cars that drove off at high speed. When one of the cars crashed and was approached by a policeman, the woman driver shot him. It was subsequently confirmed that she was an undercover soldier. Sinn Fein members reported that the woman’s car had been seen outside their homes.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**