Lieutenant-General Sir Michael Jackson no stranger to ethnic warfare

Head of NATO force in Kosovo was second-in-command at "Bloody Sunday" massacre in Ireland

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Lieutenant-General Sir Michael Jackson is the British K-For commander in Kosovo. This is a position of strategic importance for the UK government. The commanding officer is expected to be someone tried and tested who is held in high regard by the establishment. What are Jackson's qualifications for this position?

In the rash of official biographies that greeted his appointment, he is variously referred to as “Macho Jacko”, “Darth Vader” or the “Prince of Darkness”; the latter two epithets are attributed to him by his own troops. Yet little in his official biography would account for such sinister nicknames. Jackson is described as an intelligent and sophisticated man, fluent in Russian; someone who would have been able to rise to the top in any career he had chosen.

This biography details his university degree and early work for the intelligence corps, before noting his transfer into the Parachute Regiment (the “Paras”) in 1970. His career in the regiment was so illustrious that he became commander of its First Battalion between 1984 and 1986. He also served tours of duty in Berlin and Northern Ireland.

All this indicates that Jackson is an able soldier, but does not, in itself, account for his rise up the military hierarchy to the point where he has been placed in charge of some of the most sensitive operations of the last years. Before K-For he commanded the United Nations implementation force in Bosnia-Herzegovina between 1995 and 1996.

It is only because of a political crisis which has now erupted in the Northern Ireland “peace process” that the blank spaces on Jackson's biography can be filled in. This involves the notorious “Bloody Sunday” massacre of January 30, 1972 in Derry, Northern Ireland, when 14 soldiers of the Parachute Regiment opened fire on a peaceful protest by the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association opposing discrimination against Catholics. In just 30 minutes, 13 people were shot dead and a further 13 injured. Those who died were killed by a single bullet to the head or body, indicating that they had been deliberately targeted. No weapons were found on any of the deceased.

Bloody Sunday became a watershed in Britain's occupation of Ireland. In 1969, British troops were sent into the north of Ireland, ostensibly to defend the Catholic minority, but they very quickly revealed themselves as its main oppressors. From then on, the British army carried out systematic beatings, torture and murder, all designed to exacerbate sectarian divisions. Bloody Sunday was also to pave the way for direct rule from London, as it precipitated the collapse of the local Stormont parliament.

As part of the present and ongoing “peace process” in Northern Ireland, the British Labour government last year agreed to hold an inquiry into the shootings. The convening of the new inquiry acknowledged the spurious character of the original Widgery Tribunal, which had exonerated the Paras, and had kept the identity of the soldiers involved a secret.

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Lord Saville, who was placed in charge of the new inquiry, ruled in May that the 17 members of the Paras who fired live rounds at the demonstrators should be named and publicly questioned. Only two have ever admitted discharging their weapons on the day. But amongst those accused of having done so was the then Captain Jackson.

Immediately, challenges were made to the High Court, protesting that this would open up the 17 to retribution by the IRA. This is despite the fact that nationalist groups have circulated their names for years. Amongst those arguing on the soldiers' behalf were Defence Minister George Robertson and Prime Minister Blair. “What would be odd, would be if we were not supporting our own troops in front of an inquiry and arguing their case”, Blair said.

On Thursday, the High Court ruled that Lord Saville's tribunal had reached a “flawed” decision when it failed to give precedence to the “fundamental human rights of the soldiers”, and upheld their right to anonymity. This has not stopped the widespread circulation of their names on the Internet, and even in the press. The *Irish News* published a partial list with surnames blacked out. The only exceptions were those of Lieutenant-Colonel Derek Wilford and his second-in-command Captain Mike Jackson, who had joint responsibility for the operation.

Jackson's role in Bloody Sunday did not hinder his advancement up the military ladder—it earned him his spurs. It proved he was a man who could be relied upon to ruthlessly suppress social and political unrest. This is his real remit in Kosovo. His record contradicts the official hypocrisy surrounding “Operation Joint Guardian”. Someone involved at the highest level in one of the most notorious episodes in recent history, whose career is bound up with British imperialism's deliberate cultivation of sectarian and religious conflict, has now been charged with preventing “ethnic cleansing”. It is no surprise, therefore, that the forcible removal of the Serb minority is taking place under his very nose and with his tacit approval.

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