The “Steak Knife” affair and Britain’s dirty war in Northern Ireland

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After months of claims, counterclaims, denials and fresh accusations, it now seems highly likely that the one-time second in command of the Provisional Irish Republican Army’s (IRA’s) internal security was for many years an agent of British intelligence.

The possible identity of a top-level British agent in the IRA, code name “Stakeknife” or “Steak Knife,” had previously been hinted at in an article in the Belfast *Sunday People*, on June 23, 2002, by journalist Greg Harkin. Although he did not name the individual, Harkin stated that Steak Knife’s existence surfaced during investigations into the British Army’s Force Research Unit’s (FRU’s) dealings with the pro-British Ulster Defence Association’s (UDA’s) intelligence officer and British spy, Brian Nelson.

According to Harkin, Nelson told his FRU handlers that Steak Knife was going to be killed by the UDA’s assassination wing, which considered him to be a significant IRA figure. Nelson was told by the FRU to organise the killing of another former IRA associate instead. The eventual victim was Francisco Notarantonio, shot October 9, 1987.

On May 11, 2003, three Irish newspapers finally named Alfredo Scappaticci as Steak Knife, pointing to disgruntled ex-British agents as their sources. Scappaticci, they said, had been responsible for tracking down and interrogating alleged British informers in the IRA—often torturing and killing them in isolated farmhouses—while himself an agent for the FRU. Scappaticci had reportedly offered his services to the British security forces in 1978, following a brutal beating from a senior IRA member.

Following the allegations against him, however, Scappaticci denied ever having worked for British intelligence, appearing on television to claim he was “an ordinary working man living in West Belfast and as such has no means at his disposal to combat this onslaught of false allegations.” He agreed that he had once been involved in the republican movement but that he had had no role for 13 years. Scappaticci subsequently offered to meet his journalistic accusers and continued to protest his innocence. He opened legal action against the British minister responsible for Northern Ireland, Jane Kennedy, to confirm or deny his identity as Steak Knife.

Similarly, Sinn Fein, the IRA’s political wing, initially maintained that the allegations against Scappaticci were merely black propaganda against the republican movement planted by British intelligence. The Steak Knife affair was being used, it said, to divert attention from an avalanche of revelations about the extent of British collusion in numerous assassinations conducted by pro-British unionist paramilitaries during the 30 year “dirty war” in defence of UK rule in Northern Ireland. The furore over Steak Knife came a few weeks after London’s metropolitan police commissioner Sir John Stevens admitted, in a tiny synopsis of 14 years investigation, that there had been collusion between the FRU and loyalist gangs.

Sinn Fein’s policing spokesman Gerry Kelly pointed out that Scappaticci had immediately contacted Sinn Fein for advice when the scandal broke, whilst Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams stated that he accepted Scappaticci’s statements of innocence at “face value.”

On July 13, however, the BBC’s “Panorama” programme broadcast material from a 1993 interview between a man later identified as Scappaticci and journalists for another TV programme, the “Cook Report.” In this interview, Scappaticci accused Sinn Fein leader Martin McGuinness of arranging the killing of another British informer in the IRA, Kevin Hegarty, by assuring Hegarty’s mother that he would not be killed if he returned to Ireland following his exposure as an agent. Hegarty believed McGuinness, returned, and was duly murdered.

Scappaticci also gave the reporters information about the IRA’s command structure, its Army Council and details of numerous individual operations—bomb attacks, arms smuggling and knee-cappings.

The *Sunday People* published the full transcripts of Scappaticci’s allegations and claimed that the interviews were set up with the approval of Scappaticci’s FRU handlers. The newspaper also alleged that the 1993 interview was intended to undermine efforts then underway to organise an agreement between the British government and the IRA for a cease-fire and a new power-sharing settlement.

On July 27, the *Observer* confirmed that Scappaticci was to be questioned by police working for the Stevens Inquiry on the circumstances surrounding some 40 murders. The newspaper quoted a “senior security source” as saying that both the IRA and the Special Branch of the Police Service of Northern

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Ireland (PSNI), the former Royal Ulster Constabulary, were panicking over what Scappaticci was likely to reveal. The same source suggested that ex-members of the Special Branch had left the country to avoid prosecutions.

The *Observer* also stated that, internally, the IRA was changing its line on Scappaticci, after pressure from the organisation's membership, and that the leadership now conceded that reports of Scappaticci's treachery were accurate. Sinn Fein councillor Mairtin O'Muilleoir, writing in the republican newspaper, the *Anderstown News*, noted that "there's no getting away from the fact that the majority of our readers, who have been given the full story, are starting to reach their own sad conclusion."

Much more will come out, but already a more revealing lesson in the filthy means employed by British occupying forces northern Ireland could scarcely be imagined.

Infiltration of the IRA was a key component of the Britain's dirty war against resistance to its occupation of the north. For 30 years, British military intelligence and the pro-British Ulster Unionist hierarchy, as well as the Irish Republic in the south, maintained a significant number of informers within the IRA—this in addition to up to 25,000 regular British Army troops, a paramilitary police force, British-directed loyalist gangs, a pliant media, and juryless trials.

From relatively ham-fisted beginnings in the early 1970s, when British intelligence set up a bogus laundry company to allow free access to nationalist areas, British and unionist spying in Northern Ireland grew into an all-pervasive bugging, snooping and informing apparatus. Numerous agencies sought to entrap or intimidate republican members and supporters, their families and friends, and ordinary people in nationalist areas into becoming informants for the British occupying forces.

Journalist Ed Moloney's recent book *A Secret History of the IRA* details the permanent fear within the IRA of British informers, particularly in the late 1980s, following its bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton, hosting leading Conservative Party members, and the near-assassination of the entire British cabinet.

On numerous occasions, IRA members suspected, but were rarely able to prove, that advance warning had been given for botched operations. In 1987, a shipload of Libyan weaponry was captured. The IRA suffered a series of ambushes in the late 1980s in which the British Special Air Service slaughtered IRA active service units—most famously in Gibraltar in 1988, but also in Loughgall, in Armagh, where the IRA's East Tyrone brigade was destroyed. Less high-profile operations became nearly impossible—weapons caches were raided and trackers were planted on guns, while numerous active and inactive IRA members were assassinated by loyalists.

The Steak Knife allegations directly implicate the British government and its intelligence services in torture and extra-judicial murder. While the British, and the Northern Irish press, have pointed to the fate of British agents who fell into Scappaticci's hands, it is possible, likely even, that others killed were entirely innocent of spying for the British, perhaps even being republicans suspicious of Scappaticci, or considered particularly troublesome by the intelligence services.

The affair is also a disaster for the IRA and Sinn Fein. The same security department that Scappaticci has allegedly subverted was set up by Adams precisely to prevent infiltration.

This failure is not accidental, but stems directly from the organisation's perspective of a military campaign run by small, clandestine groups aimed at pressuring British imperialism into a settlement over the north. This was partially achieved with the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, which sought to integrate Sinn Fein into the government and the policing of Northern Ireland.

Hostile to the revolutionary mobilisation of the working class, north and south of the border, and against the British occupation, the IRA and Sinn Fein's perspective has centred on manoeuvres between themselves, the UK government, the Ulster Unionists, and the intelligence services, along with the Irish and US governments.

The continuing revelations over the Steak Knife affair raise fundamental issues of civil liberties. Yet, rather than pursue the fullest account of the extent of intelligence penetration of the republican movement, including the naming of those individuals involved, Sinn Fein is seeking to contain the issue.

Announcing a demonstration against collusion in Belfast on August 10, Martin McGuinness denounced British use of loyalist gangs, and pointed out that even now, "no member of Special Branch or British Military intelligence has been indicted for these crimes." McGuinness noted that the FRU had been renamed as the Joint Services Group and was still active, as was MI5. He said nothing, however, about Steak Knife.

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