

Twenty years since the Air India bombings

Part 1: Why is the Canadian government resisting a public inquiry?

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The following is the first of a two-part article. The concluding part was posted on July 30.

Twenty years after the Air India bombings—the mostly deadly terrorist acts in North America up until the 2001 attack on the World Trade Center—the Canadian government continues to stubbornly resist demands for a public inquiry into the failure of the authorities to apprehend and convict those responsible.

In June, Prime Minister Paul Martin made a demonstrative journey to Cork, Ireland, to attend the ceremony that has been held by the families of the victims every year since the bombings. At the 20th anniversary ceremony, the first ever to be “blessed” with the presence of a Canadian Prime Minister, Martin announced the construction of a new memorial and the inauguration of an annual day of remembrance for “the victims of terrorism.”

The transparent aim of this photo opportunity was to deflect demands for a public inquiry that had been much revived by the March 2005 conclusion of the long-awaited Air India trial. Not only did the trial result in the acquittal of both accused, it also revealed that the Canadian Security Intelligence Service (CSIS) had erased massive amounts of evidence and very likely had an agent working within the group responsible for the bombings.

The CSIS revelations provide the key to understanding the government’s tenacity in opposing a public inquiry. To the Canadian ruling class—which like its counterpart to the south has used the events of September 11th 2001 to press forward with an expansion of police powers and an assault on democratic rights—any public scrutiny of its security and intelligence apparatus is anathema. They would much prefer that the Air India disaster, situated at the confluence of a separatist war in south Asia and a major reorganization of Canada’s spy and state security agencies, be buried in the past.

On the 23rd of June 1985, Air India flight 182 from Montréal to London’s Heathrow airport was destroyed by a bomb shortly after entering Irish airspace. All 329 passengers were killed. 54 minutes prior an explosion at Japan’s Narita airport killed two baggage handlers. Both bombings were traced back to unaccompanied luggage that had been checked in at Vancouver, and were the work of Sikh separatists then waging a reactionary campaign to create an independent Sikh state, Khalistan, in the Punjab region of north-western India.

In the period leading up to the Air India bombings, the conflict between the separatists and the Indian government had intensified dramatically. In June 1984, the Indian government ordered the army to strike at the separatist leadership then occupying the Golden Temple at Amritsar. The invasion of the Golden Temple, the most important Sikh holy site, was a massacre in which 1000 people were killed and numerous historically significant buildings and documents were damaged.

This consciously provocative and highly destructive operation fanned the flames of communal strife, and at the end of October 1984, Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her own Sikh bodyguards. In the days immediately following her assassination, officials of the governing Indian National Congress (INC) party actively fomented anti-Sikh riots that killed almost 3000 people.

On November 1st, 1984, as the INC-led anti-Sikh pogrom was just beginning, in distant British Columbia the Babbar Khalsa Sikh Society of Canada was incorporated, with the promotion of an independent Sikh state as its stated aim. The society’s chairman was Talwinder Singh Parmar, now generally accepted as having been the prime mover behind the Air India attacks. The RCMP arrested Parmar some months after the attacks, but then released him on account of lack of evidence.

Parmar returned to India, where he was killed by Indian police in 1992. Only one other figure has been definitively linked to the bombings. In 1991, Inderjit Singh Reyat was convicted of manslaughter for his role in constructing the bomb which exploded at the Narita airport, and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Upon his release in 2001, Reyat was charged with constructing the bomb that destroyed flight 182. He pled guilty in March 2003, receiving a five-year prison sentence.

It is highly likely that Reyat’s short sentence was negotiated in exchange for testimony against two other individuals then facing charges in connection with the bombing conspiracy. Ripudaman Singh Malik and Ajaib Singh Bagri had been arrested and charged in October 2002.

Although their trial was preceded by 18 years of investigation and involved a total expenditure of more than \$100 million, the presiding judge found both men not guilty of all charges against them.

The prosecution's case had rested entirely on the testimony of various individuals purporting to have directly witnessed Malik and Bagri claim responsibility for the bombings. The judge concluded that each of these witnesses lacked credibility, whether because they harboured personal grudges against the accused, because they had some ulterior motive for testifying, or because of manifest contradictions in their statements.

Why had the prosecution brought forward such a flimsy case?

In the immediate aftermath of the trial, some hastened to blame the bungled investigation on racism. Certainly it is true that the government of the time painted the Air India attacks as an Indian rather than a Canadian issue. Nonetheless, the racism argument obscures the more fundamental issue raised by the trial and acquittal.

There are strong indications that the investigation was fatally compromised by the Canadian security and intelligence establishment's efforts to cover up its own tracks.

CSIS had the Babbar Khalsa group under surveillance in the months immediately prior to the Air India attack. The activities of Talwinder Singh Parmar, the principal conspirator, were monitored especially closely, and some 300 of Parmar's phone calls were intercepted and recorded. But, shortly *after* the Air India bombings took place, CSIS erased no less than 246 of these tapes!

Early in June 1985, CSIS followed Parmar, Reyat and a third unidentified man to a remote part of Vancouver Island where they carried out a test of an explosive device. But CSIS claims that its agents misinterpreted the sound of the test explosion as that of a mere gunshot. This extensive surveillance of the principal conspirators, up to and including a test explosion, by itself raises the possibility that CSIS may have had foreknowledge of the attacks.

However, transcripts of Bagri's RCMP interrogations (released by the RCMP during the trial) raise an even more alarming possibility. During Bagri's interrogation, several RCMP officers make the claim that Surjan Singh Gill, a member of Babbar Khalsa and a close associate of Parmar, was in fact an agent working for CSIS at the time of the bombing conspiracy.

The published transcripts are censored in places. Nonetheless, they contain three references connecting Gill with CSIS. The first occurs on page 65, where RCMP Inspector Lorne Schwartz asserts that, "Mr. Surjan Singh Gill was involved in this right from the start and was probably directed by certain people to stay involved and to learn what was going on."

Later in the interrogation, Sergeant Jim Hunter directly contradicts CSIS' later assertion that they misinterpreted the Vancouver Island test explosion as gunfire. Hunter implies instead that CSIS knew ahead of time that the purpose of the trip to Vancouver Island was to carry out a test explosion. On page 132 Hunter remarks: "So now we have Surjan Singh Gill right in there again. Now, why doesn't he go to the Island? I would suspect he was told not to go. By his handlers. Probably

told not to get involved in that test blast."

Later, on page 150, Hunter explicitly names CSIS in connection with Gill: "Surjan [is] trying to back out. Now, why is he trying to back out? Cold feet? There's been some damage control already because Talwinder knows that he's trying to back out. And, of course, why's he trying to back out? Well, because his C.S.I.S. agents have told him to back out. They told him to get out of there."

It is conceivable that the RCMP made these claims falsely in an attempt to intimidate their detainee or otherwise influence the outcome of the interrogation. That said, the facts about Gill's role in the bombing conspiracy do lend credence to the theory that he was a CSIS mole. It was Gill who drove Parmar, Reyat and Mr. X to the ferry terminal on their way to the test explosion. Suddenly, the day before the Air India bombings, Gill abandoned the Babbar Khalsa group, claiming that he did not believe in the use of violence. Despite his established connection to the bombing conspiracy, he was never charged, and disappeared after leaving Canada for the United Kingdom.

Significantly, the verdict in the Air India trial singled out CSIS' erasure of the tapes as an instance of "unacceptable negligence" while making no mention whatsoever of the possibility that a CSIS mole had been intimately involved in the bombing conspiracy.

Certainly much remains unclear about the precise nature of CSIS' role. If the Canadian government would prefer things stay that way, this is not only because of the specifics of CSIS' conduct in the Air India case. As we will see, the Air India case took place shortly after CSIS' creation out of the ashes of an RCMP Security Service publicly discredited by the exposure of its decades-long practice of breaking the law while spying on and organizing provocations against left-wing opponents of the Canadian state, including socialists, trade unionists, student groups, and anti-war activists.

A selection of documents from the Air India trial, including transcripts of Bagri's interrogation are available at:

http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/airindia/files_investigation.html

To be continued



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