

BBC reveals how Britain's spies monitored Omagh bombers

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According to a BBC *Panorama* programme, "Omagh--What the Police Were Never Told," the British government's intelligence monitoring service, Government Communication Headquarters (GCHQ), was actively monitoring mobile phones used in the 1998 car bombing of Omagh, Northern Ireland, in which 29 people died.

The allegations are made by John Ware, an investigative journalist who has written on Northern Ireland since 1974, and who has closely followed the Omagh atrocity.

Ware reports that in 1998, GCHQ in Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, were handed a mobile phone number by the then Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch (SB), with a request for "live monitoring" of the number along with information that the number related to active bombing operations by the dissident Irish republican group, the Real IRA. This was prior to an August 2, 1998 bomb attack on Banbridge, Northern Ireland, which was also monitored by GCHQ.

The request came as part of SB's own efforts to create a telephone monitoring system against the Real IRA. SB was unable to monitor phones in the Irish Republic and had therefore requested GCHQ assistance. Ware interviewed a former RUC assistant chief constable, Ray White, who claimed that SB had a unit on standby to intercept any bombing operation discovered by the telephone monitoring.

The *Panorama* report suggests that GCHQ agents would have been able to monitor, on-screen and in real time, the geographical progress of the mobiles involved in the Omagh attack, as the vehicles involved moved from the reception area of one mobile phone mast to the next. One phone, whose encryption had been cracked, could have been followed from the republic. The other would have been picked up as it crossed the border into Northern Ireland, when both mobiles would have been transferred from Irish mobile operator Eircom to British-based Vodafone's mobile network.

GCHQ was also recording transmissions from the mobiles--transcripts are reported to exist--which make clear that the callers' identities, and the code phrasing used to indicate the intent to explode a bomb, were the same as those involved in the previous Banbridge attack.

At 1.30 p.m. on August 15, 1998, for example, phone logs

reportedly show GCHQ picking up "We're crossing the line" from the scout car. At 2.20 p.m. the message "the bricks are in the wall" was heard. The same phrase had been used in Banbridge. It meant that the Omagh car bomb was parked and primed. A series of phone calls were also tracked after the blast. Ware again named a Seamus Daly, a local builder, as the caller and as having been actively involved in the attack. Daly is the subject of a civil legal action brought by relatives of the Omagh victims.

Ware makes several points. Firstly, the attack could have prevented. If GCHQ were actively tracking the attack, why was an interception not launched? Phone logs apparently show that ample time existed for roadblocks to be prepared on the few possible roads leading to Omagh and Dungannon--the likely targets given the crossing point.

Secondly, the investigation was hampered from the beginning. Ware reported GCHQ as claiming that "we missed it," referring to the phone messages indicating that an attack was imminent. Even if this, unlikely, comment is true it does not explain what subsequently happened to the tracking information. GCHQ say it was passed to SB in five or six hours but SB say they heard nothing for 24 hours.

In addition, the RUC's Criminal Investigation Department (CID) detectives who actually carried out the murder investigation into the attack say they only received "sanitised" names from SB. Detectives trawled through millions of mobile phone records, a process which took months, to glean just some of the information which had been in the hands of GCHQ before the attack took place.

Ware also notes that GCHQ would hardly stop listening the moment the attack occurred. Rather, a "matrix of co-conspirators" could have been revealed from the phone calls made during the post-attack investigation by the bombers into what went wrong.

In the programme, the journalist avoids any reference to the range of very serious allegations already surrounding Omagh.

In 2001, the then Northern Ireland Ombudsman Nuala O'Loan published a report based on investigations prompted by British agent Kevin Fulton's allegations to the Stevens Inquiry into British collusion with paramilitary killings.

Fulton alleged, and O'Loan agreed, that a number of

individuals had been actively involved in preparations for an attack. Fulton warned his handlers of these individuals' activities. One of those was later named in Parliament, under privilege, as a Joseph Patrick Blair. Fulton claimed that Blair had been his mentor in infiltrating the IRA and that he was the man responsible for making the Omagh bomb. Other warnings were made prior to the attack, correctly identifying the date and target of the bomb.

Fulton was effectively silenced in 2006 during a court case against Sean Hoey. Fulton was called to give evidence in Hoey's defence about British and Irish informants working inside the Real IRA. During the trial, however, he was arrested and legally gagged by the serious crimes unit of the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The case against Hoey was thrown out, with the judge making serious criticisms of the quality of evidence used against him.

Ware's own investigation simply refers to Fulton, quoting MI5, as "an intelligence nuisance."

O'Loan's report also noted allegations made by an Irish police officer, Garda John White, who claimed insight into Real IRA activities prior to the bombing.

In 2003, these surfaced in the *Observer* regarding the activities of a Paddy Dixon--a Dublin car thief and informant who stole cars to order for the Real IRA. According to White, Dixon also passed details of the cars to the Irish authorities, allowing a number of Real IRA operations to be stopped. White told the *Observer* that, shortly before Omagh and following another aborted car theft, he had discussions with a superior officer in a Dublin pub. White claimed he was told, "John, we are going to let this one go through."

White claimed his concerns over the consequences were ignored.

According to Ware, however, White was simply trying to cover up a feud with a superior officer, Detective Chief Superintendent Dermot Jennings. White has subsequently been accused of corruption and faking evidence as part of the Morris Tribunal into Garda malpractice in Donegal. One of the accusations, among many, was that explosives were attached to a telephone mast that was claimed as evidence of IRA activity. Based on PSNI reports of an interview with Paddy Dixon, Ware suggests that White manipulated dates in his dealings with Jennings to give credibility to his claims. Another tribunal chaired by a former Irish cabinet secretary, Dermot Nally, found White's allegations relating to Omagh to be "without foundation."

Ware, who has previously written extensively on British state collusion with loyalist paramilitary assassinations including the role of British agent Brian Nelson, lamely concludes that "there are times when Britain can still seem quite a preposterous country." But his allegations, if confirmed, cannot have a viable explanation other than that the Real IRA operation against Omagh was allowed to go ahead.

Certainly the widespread revulsion in Ireland and internationally over the mass murder of innocent civilians at Omagh had the effect of encouraging support for the power-sharing Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland and discrediting those who were opposed to it. It also gave the recently installed Labour government a pretext for implementing sweeping anti-terror measures.

The families of the Omagh victims have called for all the tape transcripts to be released to assist in their civil action against individuals accused of involvement in Omagh. Michael Gallagher, whose son Aidan was killed in the blast, told the *Belfast Telegraph*, "This news is simply earth shattering for us. Putting aside the need for a public inquiry--were the recordings being monitored in real time in which case could the bomb have been stopped--if not in real time, why were the tapes not provided as intelligence to the investigators to advance their investigations?"

Gallagher also told the BBC, "We have been demanding a public inquiry since 2002 into the abysmal failure of the police inquiries. In all conscience the government can no longer resist this."

However, the Brown government intends to do exactly that. Instead of a full public inquiry, the government announced an internal review by Intelligence Services Commissioner Peter Gibson, a former High Court judge, results of which will be announced in the House of Commons within three months.

Support for the government's position came from David McKittrick of the *Independent*. Making clear the political concerns of the ruling elite, he wrote a column on September 19, entitled, "When digging up the past only harms the future."

In it he declares that "the Omagh families have no absolute right to have the final say on what should happen in the justice system."

Acknowledging that Brown's review may well have been intended to fend off a public inquiry, McKittrick warns that calls for an Omagh inquiry hold enormous political dangers for the "fledgling power sharing government in Belfast ... which is struggling to achieve stability."

"Omagh may well hold more secrets that could undermine the new political system," he continues. "The Omagh people want their rights and few would want to deny them these. But the challenge is how to reconcile these with the rights of a wider society which longs for political equilibrium and lasting peace. Given the agonising choice, it would probably prefer to protect its future rather than unearth more of its troubled, and troubling, past."



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