Shankill revelations expose British state informants' role in mass killings in Ireland

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On October 23, 1993, 22-year-old Thomas Begley and 21-year-old Sean Kelly walked into Frizzel's Fish Shop on the Shankill Road in Belfast carrying a bomb on behalf of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA).

Designed to direct the force of the blast upwards, where a meeting of the loyalist Ulster Defence Association (UDA) was supposed to be taking place, the bomb exploded prematurely as soon as Begley reached the shop counter. Begley was killed, along with nine others including a young couple and their seven-year-old daughter, the shop's owner and a 13-year-old girl. 50 passers-by were injured, as was Sean Kelly. The blast was heard across Belfast.

The bloody fiasco triggered a wave of sectarian reprisals by loyalist paramilitary groups. Fourteen people were killed in the following weeks, including six Catholics and two Protestants murdered at the Rising Sun bar at Greysteel, County Derry.

Last month, an article appeared in the Belfast-based *Irish News* stating that the paper had seen evidence that the commander of the Ardoyne IRA unit that carried out the Shankill attack was a "top level" informant for the security forces. The paper also claimed that, prior to the attack, information had been passed to the informant's handlers that an assault on the UDA office was in preparation. The plan to "walk" a bomb into the fish shop came from the compromised commander, named only as "AA". The *Independent* reported former IRA members as suggesting that the bomb might also have been sabotaged to explode prematurely. The planned UDA meeting did not take place.

The prospect emerges that the Shankill attack was planned and allowed to take place with the full consent of whichever Northern Ireland or British intelligence unit was working with AA. Should the allegations against AA be confirmed, the episode can be added to the ever lengthening list of killings in Britain's "dirty war" in which mass murders were carried out by British agents, or were allowed to happen to protect British agents seeking to intensify sectarian tensions by manipulating heavily-infiltrated paramilitary organisations on both sides.

The *Irish News* revealed that AA's role in 1993 was exposed following the IRA's theft of a cache of documents from the offices of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) Special Branch in the notorious Castlereagh base in 2002. The IRA is said to have been able to identify AA by cross referencing AA's statements to his handlers, as revealed in the documents, with the IRA's intelligence of its own activity. AA is said to have been quietly stood down and removed from his position, and until the allegations emerged continued to live in the Ardoyne. He denies the charges.

During the Castlereagh robbery, three unmasked men were able to flash security passes, walk straight into the RUC's high-security former interrogation centre, find their way straight to the offices of the Special Branch, tie up the on-duty officer, go through files for 30 minutes, then walk out unchallenged. Items identified and stolen were quickly reported by the authorities to be the names and address of serving and retired police and of the network of informers maintained by Special Branch.

At the time, the raid was compared to the 1990 break-in and fire at the offices of Sir John Stevens, the Metropolitan Police commissioner, which destroyed vital records of collusion between security forces and loyalist assassins, and which was attributed to the British Army's Force Research Unit.

The ease with which the 2002 raid was carried out

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suggested a level of compliance or direct assistance to the robbers by elements within the security forces, perhaps reflecting differences between British and Northern Ireland spy agencies over Sinn Fein's position in power sharing, then in the midst of successive suspensions. Years of IRA silence on the contents of their document haul have done nothing to clarify this.

Some of the stolen files have now been shown to *Irish News* reporter Allison Morris. The Castlereagh cache clearly includes vital data on the network of informers maintained by the British state, including those in the IRA and Sinn Fein. Exposure is vital for workers internationally, given that the tactics used against Sinn Fein and the IRA have been used repeatedly against opponents of British imperialism worldwide.

In 2005/6, the Socialist Equality Party called for Sinn Fein to do all in its power, without compromising its own security, to make everything it knows publicly available.

Those previously exposed include Freddie Scappatici, who for years was head of the IRA's internal security department while working as an agent for British intelligence. Scappatici, whose military codename was "Stakeknife," is said to have been responsible for as many as 50 murders, including innocent people accused by Scappatici of being informers. In 2008, Roy McShane, Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams' driver, was taken into protective custody by UK intelligence agency MI5. McShane had previously worked in the IRA's security department alongside Scappatici. In 2005, Denis Donaldson, for many years a leading Sinn Fein official and international emissary, was exposed as a British agent. Donaldson was assassinated in 2006.

To the extent former IRA members (the organisation officially no longer exists) belatedly drip feed carefully selected data on previously unknown informers, whom it has thus far protected, into the public domain, it is undoubtedly bound up with manoeuvres around the Fresh Start Agreement, reached between Sinn Fein, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and the British government last November.

The new agreement sets out terms for a cut in corporation tax to 12.5 percent by 2018, new cross-border infrastructure and institutions and a subsidy to pay for the removal of "peace walls" in Belfast as part of the imposition of the British government's austerity measures. The agreement is essential to maintaining Northern Ireland as a viable competitor to the Republic of Ireland as a low wage, low tax, investment location.

No agreement was reached on establishing a Historical Investigations Unit to continue the work of the former Historical Enquiries Team (HET). Set up in 2005 to investigate over 3,000 killings, the HET was wound down in 2014 following budget cuts imposed by Westminster and passed on by the DUP and Sinn Fein administration. The HET had already been condemned by the UK's Inspectorate of Constabulary for an approach which, the inspectorate conceded, "led to state involvement cases being reviewed with less rigour in some areas than non-state cases."

By way of example, one of the numerous HET investigations was into case of the hugely popular non-sectarian musicians of the Miami Show Band, three of whose members were murdered in a botched loyalist attack in 1975.

The HET found that allegations that loyalist killer Robin Jackson, someone to whom as many as 100 murders are attributed, was an RUC Special Branch agent could not be rebutted and "that is a deeply troubling matter." Surviving band member Stephen Travers told the *Belfast Telegraph* last year that his HET testimony regarding British Army involvement in the massacre was not fully reflected in the final report. "I'm absolutely certain, without a shadow of a doubt that there was a British Army officer there," said Travers.

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