

Northern Ireland: Police collusion established in 1994 Loughinisland massacre

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In the last months, further substantial information has surfaced regarding the massive extent of British state collusion with loyalist paramilitary gangs during its decades-long dirty war in Northern Ireland.

The latest information surrounds the so-called Loughinisland “World Cup massacre,” one of the most repulsive mass killings of the civil war. On June 18, 1994, 15 football supporters crammed into the Heights Bar in Loughinisland, Northern Ireland, were watching Ireland in the opening match of the soccer World Cup when 11 of them were gunned down. Six died and five were injured in three bursts of automatic fire from two members of the loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF).

The tiny village was not a republican stronghold. The pub appears to have been targeted because the farm workers amongst its clientele were Catholics.

Twenty-two years after the slaughter, not a single person has been charged with having any role at all. Instead, families and supporters of those killed and injured have been struggling for decades to get justice for their loved ones. The case became one of an extensive list of so-called “historical” cases, most every one of which is characterised by allegations of “collusion” by British and Northern Ireland security services.

A new report by Northern Ireland’s police ombudsman, Michael Maguire, is a case in point. Maguire’s report issues damning conclusions particularly on the role of the Special Branch of the now reformed Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC). However it only emerged because the families rejected a previous ombudsman’s report, delivered in 2011, which concluded merely that the police had not properly investigated the killings. The 2011 report was eventually quashed in Belfast High Court following a legal fight by the families, for which they were initially denied legal aid.

Maguire’s 165-page document reviews the police role over nearly a decade, from a botched 1985 UVF operation

to acquire South African arms to countless failings prior to and in the aftermath of the 1994 shootings.

The gun used in the Loughinisland attack was a Czech made VZ58 assault rifle, an AK47 copy. The weapon was found in a holdall some miles from Loughinisland, along with a revolver, a pistol, boiler suits and gloves. A Triumph Acclaim car used in the getaway was found nearby. All the guns had been used in previous loyalist attacks.

Maguire makes clear that the rifle came into loyalist hands following efforts by an agent of the British Army’s Force Research Unit, the notorious Brian Nelson, to set up an arms deal in 1985. Nelson’s deal fell through, but parallel plans continued into 1987 by a number of loyalist gangs.

The entire process was closely followed by the RUC Special Branch and the British Army. An attempt to import a large consignment of arms was finally successfully made in late 1987, early 1988, with the weapons coming from South African sources. Maguire confirmed that the rifle used in the Loughinisland slaughter was part of a huge consignment of arms brought into Northern Ireland by loyalist paramilitaries in the late 1980s. He confirms that the weapons from the shipment were used in a least 70 murders and attempted murders.

Maguire documents that the RUC “had informants in senior positions of some of the Loyalist Paramilitary Organisations involved” and were aware of the funding being in place for the arms deal, following a bank robbery.

Arrangements for the arms to be transferred appear to have centred on a farm owned by a James Mitchell, said, by Maguire, to be a member of the so-called “Glenanne Gang” of loyalists and their police collaborators. Mitchell was himself an RUC reservist and later admitted to police that his farm was a UVF arms dump.

In early 1988, the farm was the centre of a series of

manoeuvres and arms transfers all of which appear to have been benignly overseen by the RUC and the British Army. Although three carloads of arms were stopped, a much larger consignment appears to have been successfully distributed. The Loughinisland rifle serial number was consecutive with similar weapons found during an RUC search. RUC records concerning this are not available.

Paragraph 4.200 Maguire notes, “Despite being implicated by intelligence in the importation of these weapons, senior members of the UVF, UDA and Ulster Resistance were not subject of police investigation. This can be attributed to a decision by Special Branch not to disseminate the intelligence implicating these individuals, amongst whom, as I have observed, there were informants.”

Maguire makes clear that, in addition to supervising the arms imports, the RUC Special Branch were unconcerned over the increasingly murderous activities of a UVF gang within the area of its Newcastle subdivision, near Loughinisland. Despite a series of brutal killings, intelligence related to the UVF unit generated “little by way of a sustained policing response.” Special Branch intelligence “was not always disseminated to investigators.”

One batch of intelligence relating to a murder and attempted murder was marked “NDD/Slow Waltz” (NDD = No Downward Dissemination). This shooting, at the Theirafurth Inn in East Belfast in 1992, was strikingly similar to the Loughinisland shooting 20 months later.

In paragraph 5.79, Maguire writes that according to evidence from one police officer, the entire “Newcastle subdivision had been compromised ... either through direct involvement with loyalist paramilitaries, associations or sympathies.” He warns that as a result the UVF unit “may well have been encouraged by the absence of a concerted effort against them.”

In the immediate aftermath of the shooting, Maguire concludes that the police investigation of the crime scene itself was competent enough. However, he identifies a host of later failings. The getaway car broke down and appears to have been pushed into a field, close to the home of two individuals who would later be suspects, but the area around the car was never searched. The ownership chain of the vehicle was tardily investigated. The home of a man who sold the car for cash one week before the shooting was never searched for forensic evidence. Although searched initially, the vehicle was subsequently stored outdoors and destroyed after only a

few months.

Even then, within days, investigating police had a clear idea of who carried out the attack. Maguire says that Special Branch had a “sound intelligence case” as early as June 19, 1994, and had a “compelling case for early arrests, enabling the exploitation of a range of forensic and other evidential opportunities, including securing evidence through questioning.”

According to Maguire, the failure of an unnamed police officer “Police Officer 8” to act on this was “catastrophic for the investigation.” When suspects were eventually arrested, they were given a day’s warning via an uninvestigated police leak. Police Officer 8 refused to be interviewed by Maguire and refused to provide records of his activity.

In his conclusion, Maguire explains, “[T]he desire to protect informants may have influenced policing activity and undermined the police investigation into those who ordered and carried out the attack.” He warns of “a corrupting involvement, tacitly or otherwise, in serious criminal acts.” Finally, he states, “I have no hesitation in unambiguously determining that ‘collusion’ is a significant feature of the Loughinisland murders.”

Maguire still pulls his punches, however, insisting, “The protection of police informants is not a sinister act but one which is entirely reasonable in order to protect the life of an informant.”

This presentation of the British state’s security operations in Northern Ireland is unsustainable, as the evidence in Maguire’s own report makes clear. Rather than corruption, the use of hundreds if not thousands of state informants in atrocities such as the 1974 Birmingham pub bombings, the 1976 Kingsmill massacre of Protestant workers, the Kincora boys’ home abuses, murders by the British “Stakeknife” agent in the Irish Republican Army, to name only a few, points to a sustained and systematic policy.



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