

UK: Behind the release of former soldier and war criminal Alexander Blackman

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Former soldier Alexander Blackman, jailed in 2013 for the murder of an injured Afghan Taliban prisoner of war, emerged from prison last Friday having served just three and a half years of an original 10-year sentence.

A seasoned soldier in the Royal Marines—he had performed six tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan—Blackman admitted to breaking the Geneva Conventions and was filmed by another soldier as he committed the crime.

Nevertheless, in March, five senior judges at London's Court Martial Appeal Court downgraded the original finding from murder to manslaughter, accepting a plea of diminished responsibility.

The entire media—led by its most right-wing sections—have dealt with the case on the supposed basis of Blackman's mindset and mental health. His war crime, for which he should have served the full prison term, was ultimately the product of much bigger war crimes: the illegal invasion and wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, whose main perpetrators, former US President George W. Bush and former UK prime minister Tony Blair, have never been called to account. These wars resulted in over a million deaths, and brought about an unprecedented refugee crisis.

The killing, which took place in 2011, was captured on the helmet video camera of one of Blackman's regiment, and was discovered by chance a year later by military intelligence. Blackman was involved in an operation searching for the Taliban fighter, who had been shot by an Apache helicopter.

The victim is seen being mocked and verbally abused, then as the Apache moved on and had no visuals of the ground, he was shot in the chest by Blackman at close range as he lay convulsing.

The video evidence recorded Blackman saying, "There you are. Shuffle off this mortal coil, you c**t. It's nothing you wouldn't do to us." He then addressed his companions: "Obviously this doesn't go anywhere... fellas. I've just broken the Geneva Convention."

The Geneva Conventions, incorporated into UK law as the

Geneva Convention Act 57, determine that captured or wounded prisoners of war shall not be mistreated or subject to summary execution.

The Geneva Conventions have been repeatedly flouted since the so-called "war on terror" began in 2001, and the reclassification of enemy soldiers by the US government as "terrorists" and "illegal combatants".

The wars that followed were in breach of the Conventions and international law from their outset.

In November 2001, US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared, "terrorists do not deserve to be treated as prisoners of war." Bush later signed an executive order saying the US would not honour the Geneva Conventions with regard to the treatment of captured Al Qaeda and Taliban fighters.

It is well documented that both the US and UK military have tortured prisoners as a matter of course during their years of occupation of Afghanistan and Iraq. The British perfected their torture techniques during imperialist counterinsurgency operations in Borneo, Malaya, South Arabia, Palestine, Cyprus and Northern Ireland.

The vast majority of such abuses and war crimes have never reached a courtroom. An exception was the horrific murder of Baha Mousa, an Iraqi receptionist, who died in September 2003 from asphyxia after being hooded, bound, severely beaten and forced into a stress position. A single low-ranking soldier, Corporal Donald Payne, shouldered the blame and was jailed for a year—the only conviction of a British soldier by the International Criminal Court established after the Nuremberg Trials.

The Nuremberg Trials were organised after World War Two by the Allied powers. Prominent Nazi leaders such as Hermann Göring, Rudolf Hess and Joachim von Ribbentrop, were charged with war crimes, including genocide against the Jews and waging aggressive or pre-emptive war. Twelve were hung for these crimes.

In 2003, despite massive anti-war protests, Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair took Britain into the Iraq war on the basis of the fraudulent claim Iraq possessed "Weapons of

Mass Destruction” (WMD). According to the Chilcot Inquiry into the war, which reported its findings last year, the invasion took place before “peaceful options for disarmament” had been exhausted. It also found that Iraqi President Saddam Hussein did not represent an “imminent threat”; claims that Iraq possessed WMD were “not justified”; and that “[i]ntelligence and facts were fixed around the policy” of Bush for regime change.

This was clearly a war crime of immense proportions.

The release of Blackman must be seen in the context of the drive to militarism and war by the British ruling elite.

To this end, the conference of the ruling Conservative Party in October last year agreed to take Britain out of the European Convention on Human Rights in order to exempt the military from prosecution for crimes committed while on duty. In future, not only will soldiers like Blackman be able to carry out war crimes with impunity, such barbarous acts are tacitly encouraged.

This is in line with government plans for more UK military interventions, wherever the US and its own predatory interests dictate, be it Syria, Afghanistan, the Korean peninsula or even military conflict with nuclear-armed Russia and China.

When asked during the debate on the renewal of the Trident nuclear missile system last year if she was prepared to press the nuclear button and incinerate 100,000 men, women and children, Prime Minister Theresa May replied with gusto, “Yes”.

The Chilcot Report into the Iraq war, finally published last year, provided devastating confirmation of the illegal character of the war and the criminal role of those officials, both British and American, who organised and led it. It has since been buried to facilitate such barbaric war crimes in future.

Strenuous efforts are being made to sweep the crimes of the Iraq War under the table and ensure its perpetrators remain unaccountable. The UK government’s top legal official—the Attorney General Jeremy Wright QC—is going to court to oppose the bringing of a private prosecution of Blair, former foreign secretary Jack Straw, and former Attorney General Lord Goldsmith over the Iraq war. The prosecution, based on the findings of the Chilcot Report, accuses Blair of the crime of “aggression”.

In this noxious atmosphere, sections of the right-wing media—the *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Daily Express*—in alliance with the Royal Marines and prominent military figures—campaigning for Blackman’s release on the basis of glorifying the military. Blackman also had the vocal backing of several Labour and Conservative Members of Parliament as well as former UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage.

Daily Mail launched After“campaign the just raising £800,000, the first appeal in May 2014 reduced Blackman’s sentence to eight years on the grounds he had suffered combat stress.

On October 28, 2016, an unprecedented demonstration of more than 2,000 former and serving Royal Marines, the majority wearing regimental berets, was held in Parliament Square outside the House of Commons to demand a further appeal. The police turned a blind eye on what was an illegal, but increasingly common, venture into politics by the armed forces.

At the final appeal, the judges made explicit their main concern in this case was the need to defend the reputation of the army and the *raison d’être* for past, present and future military interventions abroad—the so-called war on terror.

“There can be no doubt that the way in which the appellant acted, knowingly in contravention of the Geneva Conventions ... has had a material adverse effect on the views that many hold about the conduct of HM Armed Forces...”

Their ruling went on to praise the “courage and sacrifice of Marine A [Blackman], without whom we would all be at the mercy of the new barbarians.”

The judges falsely claimed the “vast majority of right-thinking ordinary men and women recognise that our way of life and our values, and even perhaps our civilization, is today under threat as rarely before by dark forces.”

On the contrary, the majority are opposed to the predatory wars of the past 25 years, which have brought untold misery to tens of millions. “Dark forces” is an epithet that more aptly describes the imperialist leaders responsible for the death and destruction wrought on Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Yemen and Somalia.

On the release of the Chilcot report, the WSWS wrote, “The verdict should be clear enough: Blair, Bush, et al are war criminals. They, along with their co-conspirators, should face immediate trial.” We reiterate that today.



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