

Northern Ireland: Loyalist killer was a police agent

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Amid the May government's declarations of outrage—based on claims that Russia attempted to kill Sergei Skripal and his daughter Yulia on British soil—it is worth considering the case of Gary Haggarty.

Unlike the Skripal case, where no evidence has been provided to prove Russian involvement and no one has died, a seven-year investigation followed by a criminal trial found Haggarty guilty of five murders, five attempted murders, 23 conspiracies to murder, as well as kidnapping, false imprisonment, arson, hijacking and hundreds of lesser violent crimes, many involving firearms and explosives.

Haggarty was duly sentenced to 35 years in jail, but his incarceration received little attention in the national news. Questions were not asked in the House of Commons. Prime Minister Theresa May issued no statement and neither did her Labour opponents. NATO said not a word and neither did any member of any government in the European Union. The hysteria sirens of the British press and political establishment were silent because Haggarty was working as a British agent when he killed five people on what the government still insists is the “British soil” of Northern Ireland.

He was a paid informer for the Royal Ulster Constabulary Special Branch, while leading the pro-British loyalist Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF) in the Mount Vernon area of Belfast. His victims included Sean McParland, a 55-year-old Catholic grandfather shot in front of his grandchildren; Protestant John Harbinson, beaten to death with a hammer; Catholic building workers Eamon Fax and Gary Convie, both shot; and Catholic Sean McDermott, also shot dead. Haggarty admitted a role in the murder of Peter McTasney. All were killed between 1991 and 1997.

After his eventual arrest in 2009, over a decade after his crimes were committed, Haggarty agreed to become an “assisting offender.” He confessed to his crimes and

alleged a number of loyalists participated in murders he had committed. He also accused two of his RUC handlers.

In October 2017, Northern Ireland's Public Prosecution Service (PPS) dropped 13 cases arising from Haggarty's evidence, including two against the former police officers, leaving only one ongoing murder case. The 13 cases were dropped because, according to the PPS, they rested solely on Haggarty's evidence and lacked corroboration. Press commentary speculated that this was likely to protect former Special Branch members.

Due to reductions in his sentence for co-operation, Haggarty is likely to walk free within months, although this is currently being appealed.

His case sheds light on the activities of a vast network of the British state intelligence services during and after Northern Ireland's “Troubles,” in which “informers” effectively functioned as protected assets as they carried out murder and other brutal crimes.

The Labour government's deployment of troops to Northern Ireland in 1969 drew on lessons from British imperialism's long experience of colonial wars. Faced with a growing movement in the working class against discrimination and poverty, “low intensity” techniques refined in Malaya, Kenya and Aden were adapted for use in the six counties of Northern Ireland.

British forces fought a vicious military campaign, principally against the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA). Mass internment, raids, assassinations, along with saturation troop levels, at one point made Northern Ireland the most militarised area of the planet. Enflaming sectarian division between Catholics and Protestants by piling sectarian murders and reprisals on top of each other was central to the entire operation. Its purpose was to maintain and deepen divisions in the working class.

Throughout the Troubles, the British government relied heavily on loyalist paramilitaries, of which the UVF and the Ulster Defence Association (UDA) were the largest.

They functioned as willing adjuncts of the British state. Under successive Labour and Conservative governments, and directed by the police, army and intelligence services, loyalist gangs carried out countless sectarian killings, shootings and brutal beatings.

Haggarty's case provides an insight into the paramilitary operations sponsored by the British state. The sprawling network of paid informers run by RUC Special Branch was not engaged in crime prevention, as widely depicted by the British media. Rather, Haggarty and his colleagues ran loyalist death squads. Their sectarian crimes were not the unfortunate byproduct of police operations gone awry, they were its direct purpose.

Haggarty's reign of sectarian terror and mayhem was typical of many that were rubber stamped by the British government and its unionist allies. Among the most notorious loyalist agents was Brian Nelson, a former soldier who joined the UDA in 1972. Nelson became an agent for the British Army's Force Research Unit in 1985. In return for a house and a salary, Nelson helped the UDA target republicans. He played a key role in the assassination of human rights lawyer Pat Finucane, gunned down inside his home in 1989.

This type of operation was not restricted to the loyalists. From the earliest days of the Troubles, multiple British and Northern Ireland intelligence forces attempted to bribe, threaten, blackmail and manipulate individuals into working as agents inside the IRA.

In 2003, Frederick Scappaticci was accused of having been a British agent between 1978 and 1992. For much of this period, he was head of the IRA's internal security unit, put in place ostensibly to combat informers.

Scappaticci is implicated in at least 30 deaths, many of them of IRA members. Some were killed because they had become suspicious of Scappaticci. He and hundreds of other informers are thought to have contributed to a succession of operational disasters in the mid to late 1980s. This includes the infamous "Death on the Rock" assassination of three unarmed IRA volunteers who were gunned down in Gibraltar, in 1988, by the British Special Air Service (SAS). Many IRA operations, which posed no real threat to British forces, were doubtless allowed to proceed unhindered because they served to keep the sectarian pot boiling.

Scappaticci was briefly arrested earlier this year, questioned regarding numerous killings... then released on bail, 15 years after his name first emerged in public.

In 2005, long standing Sinn Fein official Denis Donaldson was also exposed as a British agent.

Donaldson, like Scappaticci, was able to intervene in the internal political life of Sinn Fein, the IRA and its support network. He organised US-based fundraising operations and trips for Sinn Fein and travelled throughout Latin America and the Middle East.

Although Donaldson claimed to have been recruited in the 1980s, he and another unnamed IRA informer have been linked to one of the filthiest sectarian atrocities of the entire Troubles—the firebombing of the La Mon restaurant on the outskirts of Belfast in 1978. Twelve protestants, members of the Irish Collie Club and the Northern Ireland Junior Motor Cycle Club, were killed, with many more injured. In 2012, a *Sunday Mirror* article said the attack was a mistake and intended for an RUC dinner the previous week.

To this day, the British government has refused any investigation into the Donaldson affair or the still unexplained circumstances of his killing in 2006. A 2012 investigation by the Police Service of Northern Ireland's Historical Enquiries Team into the La Mon bombing found that key documents, police interviews and other exhibits had disappeared. In 2016, the PSNI's ombudsman service eventually agreed to review the La Mon case, but nothing has yet been published.

A Belfast High Court judge recently ruled that former Northern Ireland First Minister and Democratic Unionist Party leader Arlene Foster was responsible for a "systemic delay" in resolving Troubles-related cases during the current suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly. All of which is in stark contrast with the speed with which the British government has rushed to unsubstantiated judgments over recent events in Salisbury, England.



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