

British Army found to have massacred unarmed civilians in Ballymurphy, Northern Ireland, in August 1971

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A long-delayed inquest into the shooting deaths of 10 people in the Ballymurphy estate in Belfast, Northern Ireland has concluded that all were civilians, posed no threat to anyone, were unarmed and that nine of them were shot by the British Army. Coroner Mrs Justice Keegan could not definitively identify the origin of the bullet that shot the tenth person.

The verdict was welcomed by relatives and supporters of those killed. John Teggart, whose father Daniel was among those shot dead, addressed a press conference.

“We, the Ballymurphy families welcome the coroner's historic verdict today. Justice Keegan concluded that unjustified force was used in the killing of our loved ones who are entirely innocent. After 50 years, they have finally had their names cleared and their innocence put beyond doubt.”

Teggart condemned the media falsifications used from day one to conceal the massacre.

“General Mike Jackson is considered a hero in Britain, but he was the one who told you that our loved ones were gunmen and gunwomen. The inquest confirmed that the soldiers who came to the North, supposedly to protect us... turned their guns on us. The British government now wants to deny us the chance for justice by introducing an amnesty for these murders.”

Jackson went on to become the Chief of General Staff of the British Army until his retirement in 2006.

Teggart continued, “I want to speak directly to the people of Britain at this moment. Can you imagine what would have happened if soldiers murdered 10 unarmed civilians on the streets of London, Liverpool or Birmingham? What would you expect of an investigation? Would you expect justice? Or would you be happy for them to get an amnesty?”

Events in Ballymurphy following August 9, 1971 are less well known than the Bloody Sunday massacre of January 30, 1972 when 14 people were gunned down by members of the Parachute Regiment. At Ballymurphy no TV cameras were present to counteract the blatant army lies, recycled by the media, to cover its actions. The shootings went on for two days.

The Ballymurphy massacre took place 50 years after British imperialism's violent partition of Ireland. Northern Ireland, established by the partition of Ireland 100 years ago, was founded on sectarian violence primarily directed against the Catholic section of the working class. Its purpose was to maintain the rule of Ulster capitalists as a proxy for continued British imperialist presence on the island. Based on six of the historic nine counties of Ulster with a Protestant majority, the border and all subsequent state and local authority arrangements, including gerrymandered election boundaries, the provision of jobs and housing, were based on upholding sectarian divisions and a truncated form of the Protestant ascendancy.

Mass opposition to these arrangements, predominantly, but not exclusively, from Irish nationalists and Catholics, emerged in the late 1960s as a civil rights movement mobilising broad layers of the working class seeking to redress the historic wrongs on which the entire state was based.

The Ulster state fought back with police and paramilitary violence, including loyalist pogroms during which entire Catholic streets were burnt out. The previously declining Irish Republican Army (IRA) began to achieve prominence through involvement in working class Catholics' efforts to defend their neighbourhoods. In August 1969, the British Labour government dispatched thousands of troops to prop up the Ulster authorities, under the pretext of defending Catholic communities.

On August 9, 1971, the British Army launched Operation Demetrius, a mass operation to intern, or imprison without trial, anyone suspected of being an IRA supporter. 342 people were arrested, with most having no links to the IRA. One of the army's target areas was Ballymurphy, a working class largely Catholic and nationalist estate on the outskirts of Belfast, where residents had already raised barricades and whose streets were the target of loyalist mob violence.

Warnings of the approach of soldiers were made by hundreds of residents banging dustbin lids on the streets. What followed was a British Army rampage, ultimately involving as many as 600 soldiers, resulting in sustained gunfire, gunfights, numerous shootings, 10 deaths, angry counter protests, whole families arrested, one man chained to the back of an army vehicle, houses trashed and shot up as families escaped across the fields.

The coroner's inquest opened in 2018 after decades of campaigning by family members who only fully realised the scale of what took place in 1971 when they attended an event for victims of Northern Ireland's “Troubles”.

The inquest dealt in detail with five separate incidents, spread over two days, and sought evidence from relatives, witnesses, medical and ballistics experts. Former soldiers gave evidence anonymously, some refused. Two ignored subpoenas to attend. Names of some individual soldiers appear not to be known to the coroner because of the destruction of a “cipher” listing soldiers' names at previous, token, inquests held in 1972.

Incident One:

Father Hugh Mullan and 19-year-old Frank Quinn, a window cleaner, were both shot in the evening of August 9. The inquest found that Quinn was shot dead when going to help someone lying injured in a field, in the

midst of a gun battle. Soldiers from the Parachute Regiment fired at targets that may have been a small number of IRA gunmen, but different groups of soldiers also appear to have been inadvertently shooting at each other. Father Mullan, crouching while going across the same field, waving a white object like a t-shirt, was shot at least three times. The bullet that killed Quinn may have passed through Father Mullan. Neither Quinn nor Mullan were armed. The injured man was not a gunman.

The coroner found that even if there were IRA gunmen in the area it was "very clear from the evidence that there were quite a lot of civilians in the area, including women and children who have been evacuated from the Springfield Rd area." She found the Father Mullan's death was caused by army gunfire, that there was no justification for it, the use of force was disproportionate, no proper investigation had been carried out, the killing was in violation of Article 2 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) and that the army's own rules of engagement were not followed.

Incident Two:

On August 9, Joan Connolly, a mother of eight children in her mid-40s, Noel Phillips (19), a single man who worked as a window cleaner, Daniel Teggart (44), a labourer with 10 children and Joseph Murphy (41) who worked on bin lorries, were killed during protests directed against soldiers in the nearby Henry Taggart Hall. The coroner considered that some shots may have been fired at the hall during the evening, but there was no evidence to link any of those killed with this, or for them to have been in "direct proximity to IRA activity". She noted the deceased were all unarmed, none were IRA members, none had paramilitary funerals.

Mrs. Connolly's death is particularly shocking. She was angry at the soldiers, was said to be carrying a stick at certain points and was participating in protests. She was shot two or three times, including in the face, by what appears to have been soldiers in the Henry Taggart Hall. One child was injured. Mrs. Connolly was not armed and no gunshot residue was found on her body. She was left dying for hours. The coroner noted a "basic inhumanity associated with leaving Mrs. Connolly in the field for so long". Swift medical attention might have saved her life.

Noel Phillips was shot at least three times. Joseph Murphy was shot once in the leg. The bullet shattered his femur. He died 13 days later. Daniel Teggart was shot between eight and eleven times. The coroner rejected assertions from the Ministry of Defence that Teggart, whose body was dragged into the Henry Taggart Hall, had been found with .22 ammunition in his pockets. Soldier N who claimed this at the time did not give evidence. The coroner found the Parachute Regiment responsible for all four deaths, all of which breached the EHCR, were disproportionate and outside the army's rules of engagement.

Incident Three:

Edward Doherty (30) was a father of four and worked as a builder's labourer. He was shot August 10 in the early evening by a soldier in the Royal Engineers, driving a bulldozer while clearing a barricade, who claimed Doherty was about to throw a petrol bomb. There was a crowd of about 50 people near the barricade.

The soldier, who gave evidence, appears to have wildly fired his submachine gun several times with one hand in the direction of the barricade while maneuvering the bulldozer with the other. Doherty was hit

once in the chest. The coroner found, on the basis of where he was shot and witness evidence, that Doherty "was not a petrol bomber and he was not acting in any other way that would justify a violent attack on him." The killing breached the EHCR, was disproportionate and broke the rules of engagement.

Incident Four:

Joseph Corr was a 43-year-old machinist at the famous Shorts aircraft factory in Belfast. He had also worked at the Harland and Wolff shipyard. He was shot with a high velocity bullet to the back, which lacerated internal organs. He died of his injuries and complications about 13 days later. John Lavery was a 20-year-old road sweeper shot twice with high velocity ammunition.

The circumstances of their deaths are confused. Both appear to have responded to early morning dustbin lid warnings of army and loyalist attacks on their area on August 11, as did a large number of Ballymurphy residents. There were angry and fearful crowds on the streets, shots were being fired. Soldiers were arresting and attacking people. Both men appear to have been prone, lying on the ground possibly taking cover and crawling away from the soldiers when they were shot in the back. No weapons were found near them. The coroner rejected claims by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) that both were shot by other, unknown, gunmen, finding that both were shot by soldiers from the Parachute Regiment. She found that no valid justification was provided for the soldiers opening fire, the circumstances of both deaths were not adequately investigated, and both breached the EHCR.

Incident Five:

John McKerr was a 49-year-old former soldier and father of eight, who worked as a joiner. He was killed by a single gunshot to his head on the morning of August 11 outside a church where he had been repairing a door. Ballistics experts were unclear as to what sort of bullet killed McKerr, or which direction it came from. There are suggestions his prosthetic arm might have been mistaken for a weapon. There was a lot of army activity, general chaos in the area and conflicting reports of soldiers' possible involvement in the shooting. The coroner listed as a core finding the striking failure of the authorities to mount any adequate investigation and described this as "an abdication of responsibility" and "of grave concern". As a result, the inquest verdict was unable to state who fired the fatal shot.



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